Article 1 - "God will Glorify Your Marriage": Marital Satisfaction and Relational Spirituality in Religious Black Couples Article 2 - "A Godly Man": A Qualitative Exploration of the Influence of Religion on Black Masculinity and Fatherhood

Travis James Moore
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“God Will Glorify Your Marriage”: Marital Satisfaction and Relational Spirituality in Religious Black Couples

and

“A Godly Man”: A Qualitative Exploration of the Influence of Religion on Black Masculinity and Fatherhood

Travis James Moore

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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“God Will Glorify Your Marriage”: Marital Satisfaction and Relational Spirituality in Religious Black Couples

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Research suggests that Black couples tend to marry later, with less frequency, have marriages that do not last as long, and are more prone to divorce than other racial categories. However, religion may play an important role to counteract the negative marriage trends among Black heterosexual couples. As a growing subfield of family psychology this study examines the influence of religion on marital sanctification and relational spirituality among 33 Black married couples ($N = 66$). In-depth qualitative interviews with Black married couples were analyzed to see how religion informed and shaped perceptions of marital sanctification as well as unique relational domains of relational spirituality. Major findings indicate that religious and spiritual beliefs, practices, and communities helped to form a perceptual framework that marriage was holy and sacred. Findings about marital sanctification suggested that religious couples may view their marriage as sacred or holy in four distinct ways: a) God-given; b) God-ordained; c) God-created; and, d) God-inspired. When marriage was perceived as sacred institution, it seemed to influence four relational domains of relational spirituality by: a) creating a religiously-inspired goal-oriented perspective for partner or mate selection; b) encouraging a sense of sacred permanence to the relationship; c) fostering a willingness to sacrifice for one’s relationship; and, d) evoking a pattern of religious and spiritual relational maintenance within the context of marriage. Marital sanctification was associated with increase in relational spirituality. Likewise, relational spirituality seemed to perpetuate an increase in marital sanctification. Thus, suggesting the potential for positive bi-directionality between marital sanctification and relational spirituality that may foster increased marital satisfaction, quality, and commitment and may also serve as a potential buffer against divorce among Black religious couples. Additional subthemes of marital sanctification and relational spirituality were also discussed as well as limitations of this study and suggestions for future research.

This dissertation contains two complete studies.

Keywords: marital sanctification, relational spirituality, qualitative, Black, African American, marriage, religion, spirituality
ABSTRACT #2

“A Godly Man”: A Qualitative Exploration of the Influence of Religion on Black Masculinity and Fatherhood

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Doctor of Philosophy

Contemporary societal and media portrayals of Black masculinity and fatherhood often give a limited, or potentially negative view of manhood, and/or parenthood among Black males. Black American males are often represented and lauded as sports stars and rappers or marginalized as gangsters and deadbeat dads. The present study seeks to expand the paradigm of Black masculinity and fatherhood and provide a potentially positive, more expansive view of Black males in the success frame of religion and family life. In depth qualitative interview data was analyzed from a subsection of the American Families of Faith Dataset involving 33 religious Black couples (N = 66) from different religious backgrounds (Muslim and Christian) across the United States. Major findings identified two psychological processes that seemed to suggest a religious and family-oriented success frame for defining masculinity and manliness. Participants described undergoing a process of personal spiritual growth and maturity in which individuals left behind the “street life” mentality, in favor of becoming a “Godly man.” This process was positively connected with the process of religious or spiritual masculine-identity transformation in which manhood was defined in terms of being relational with God and family, rather than the “bachelor mindset” or “single life” which suggested a relationally isolated view of masculinity. Implications, applications, limitations, and future directions for research were also discussed.

This dissertation contains two complete studies.
Keywords: masculinity, fatherhood, Black, African American, religion, spirituality, masculine identities and transformation, success frames
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“God Will Glorify Your Marriage.”: Marital Satisfaction and Relational Spirituality in Religious Black Couples.

Extant research on Black families and Black marriages in the United States tend to focus on the negative trends of Black marriages (Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012). Despite the increasing data suggesting that racial and ethnic minority families are increasing in America, and will become a predominant family system by 2050 (estimated 42%), little research has explored positive family functioning within minority marriages. This is true especially with Black marriages and families. On the whole, Black couples tend to marry later than White couples, with less frequency, have higher levels of divorce, and have marriages that do not last as long as Whites, or other racial minorities (Dixon, 2008; Phillips et al., 2012). Social, cultural, and systemic trends within Black communities also provide challenges to, and barriers toward marriage.

These barriers include, but are not limited to, individual, interpersonal, societal, and economic challenges. These challenges are often exacerbated within Black family systems due, at least in part to long standing racial oppression, racism, and the lingering tragic effects of Black plunder, rape, and enslavement (Coates, 2015; Marks et al., 2008; Patterson, 1999; Phillips et al., 2012; Pinderhughes, 2002). Black heterosexual couples often have to actively manage their individual and relationship choices to choose marriage and then to choose to stay in their marriages in a culture that does not support marriage as readily. This is especially true with increased acceptance of and prevalence toward alternative romantic relationships such as non-marital childbearing, cohabitation, and homosexual marriages (Blackmon, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Chaney, Stamps Mitchell, & Barker, 2014; Dixon, 2008).

Even as marriage rates continue to decline in Black communities, divorce rates continue
to rise, creating what some scholars have called the “African American Marriage Crisis” (Dixon, 2008; Kilbride & Page, 2012; Oliver, 2016). This marriage crisis among American Blacks is further exacerbated by systemic and structural racism as well as social, political, racial, and cultural challenges that affect the perception of Black men’s marriageability in the eyes of many Black women (Blackmon et al., 2005; Dixon, 2008; Edelman, 2007; Perry, 2013).

Black men are particular targets of systemic and localized racism, and as such, experience higher rates of racial profiling, poorer quality education, reduced economic advantages, scarce or depleted material resources, as well as an increased likelihood of arrest and incarceration, above that of whites and other minorities (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Edelman, 2007; Perry, 2013; Pinderhughes, 2002). All of these barriers directed at Blacks in general, and Black males in particular, leads to an unequal sex-ratio with less “marriageable” or “eligible” Black men in comparison to Black women (Edelman, 2007; Pinderhughes, 2002).

Despite these persistent and pervasive challenges and barriers, many Black Americans look to religion as a bulwark against the pernicious attacks on the formation and success of Black marriages and families (Blackmon et al., 2005; Marks & Chaney, 2006; Marks et al., 2008; Marks, Tanner, Nesteruk, Chaney, & Baumgartner, 2012; Perry, 2013; Phillips et al., 2012). For example, in a study of 142 married Black women and men with enduring marriages (i.e., 15-60 years) 51% of those surveyed attributed the longevity of their marriage to their deep belief in God/Christ, and religion (Phillips et al., 2012). Additionally, many Black families in the US tend to live in urban areas and report higher levels of religious belief and behavior than non-Hispanic Whites and other minority families (Chatters, Taylor, & Lincoln, 1999; Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010; Taylor, Chatters, & Leven, 2004). Yet less is known about how or why religion and spirituality may influence positive family relationships within Black marriages.
This study seeks to take an in-depth, qualitative, look into the lived experiences of 33 predominately Christian exemplary religious Black couples (Damon & Colby, 2013) (N = 66) from five geographical areas in the United States. This study further seeks to examine the processes and meaning-making strategies that may serve to help strengthen and enrich strong Black marriages and, and seeks to explore the “whys” and “hows” of relational spirituality and religious sanctification within the context of Black marriages.

**Literature Review**

As an emerging sub-field in the field of family psychology, relational spirituality, provides a framework for understanding and examining how religion may influence interpersonal family relationships (i.e., marriage) in positive and protective ways (Mahoney & Cano, 2014). The potential positive and protective factors of religion and spirituality, include marital sanctification and relational spirituality and may have profound implications for increasing marital commitment, satisfaction, and quality as well as decreasing marital disintegration within Black marriages (Chaney, 2008; Chaney, Shirisia, & Skogrand, 2016; Dixon, 2008; Marks et al., 2008, 2012; Marks, Dollahite, & Baumgartner, 2010).

Research suggests that families and individuals who rate themselves higher on spirituality and religiosity scales, as well as those who engage in more private and public religious activities such as frequent church attendance and prayer, are also more likely to have higher rating of sanctified family and interpersonal relationships (DeMaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2010; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 1999; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2008). However, little is known regarding how relational spirituality and sanctification may influence religious marriages, especially in Black marriages, in particular. Moreover, little is known about how or why relational spirituality and sanctification may serve as
an influential buffer against adverse social, racial, cultural, psychological, and health related challenges, that often negatively influence marital solidarity, relationship quality, and marital commitment, and overall family functioning, in Black families (Dixon, 2008; Marks et al., 2008, 2010, 2012; Phillips et al., 2012; Skipper, Moore, & Marks, 2018).

Although, some research addresses the positive and protective influence of religion on Black marriages and families (Blackmon et al., 2005; Chaney, 2008; Chaney et al., 2016; Marks et al., 2008, 2010, 2012; Phillips et al., 2012), much is still to be explored. Little is known concerning the role of religion in shaping and defining that which is sacred within Black marital relationships (Boyd-Franklin, 2013; Fincham, Ajayi, & Beach, 2011). Likewise, little is known about how a perception of the sacred may enhance positive marital functioning and relational spirituality, as well as serve as a potential buffer against divorce and separation in Black couples.

**Religion In Black Families**

Religion has been the life blood of many Black Americans since the earliest days of slavery in the United States (Du Bois, & Marable, 2015; Hill, 2003; McAdoo & Younge, 2009; Pyke, 2010), and can be traced back to religious traditions and African spiritualism (Horton, 1997; Pyke, 2010). Several studies show that religion is a significant part of the lives of Black individuals, couples, and families (Blackmon et al., 2005; Boyd-Franklin, 2013; Dixon, 2008; Marks & Chaney, 2006, Marks et al., 2008, 2010, Taylor et al., 2004).

The early American enslavement of the Black body took a disastrous toll on the women, men, and children who were put under the heavy yoke of White bondage and servitude, which still have profound negative impacts on many Blacks today (Chaney, 2016; Coates, 2015; Moore, in preparation; Moore & Chaney, in preparation). For nearly all Black Americans, that heavy yoke is still born today. In the wake of mass human rape and plundering, many Black
people turned to religion, and particularly Christianity, for a desperate need for solace, communion, comfort, and understanding in the midst of immense suffering often referred to as internalized racism (Pyke, 2010; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). For many Blacks, in the time of slavery and even now, religion was more than a way of life; it was survival. In a review of Robert Hill’s 1972 book, *The Strengths of Black Families*, Katz (1973) states, “Since slavery, [Blacks] have utilized religion as a shield, a haven, a source of rebellion, but above all as a survival mechanism” (p. 3).

Blacks, in particular, live under the nearly constant crushing wake of social, political, cultural, systemic, and institutional racism, as part of the tragic legacy of over 250 years of enslavement (Chaney, 2016; Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Coates, 2015). Many contemporary Blacks see a belief in God and religion as a profound form of temporal salvation as it were, “a very present help in times of trouble.” (Psalms 46:1) For the religious Blacks, religion is often still seen as “a shield,” “a haven,” and “a survival mechanism,” not only from the cruelty of the whip and the certainty of perpetual shackles and chains of slavery, but as a contemporary bulwark against racism and racial oppression (Chaney, 2016; Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Pyke, 2010; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Although the prevalence of higher levels of religious beliefs and religious involvement among Black Americans have been documented for many years, scholarly work studying the implications of religion in Black families and marriages has surfaced more recently.

Research indicates that religion often has salience for many Black families, despite reports of higher levels of substance abuse, poverty, racism, violence, sexual promiscuity, and racial oppression (Taylor et al., 2004; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016).
According to a Pew Research survey (2014), Black families and individuals as a racial category, were more likely than any other racial group to: hold an absolutely certain belief in God (83%); feel that religion is very important (75%); attend religious services at least once a week (47%); pray at least daily (73%); participate in religious education at least once a week (39%); report feelings of spiritual peace and wellbeing at least once a week (69%); to look to religion and religious beliefs as source of moral guidance (43%); and to study scripture at least once a week (54%). These findings indicate a significant belief in, and a reliance on, religious beliefs and practices among Black individuals and families. Yet little is known about how or why religious beliefs and practices may influence Black families or influence the specific roles and role identities of wife and husband, within the family context.

Wilcox and Wolfinger (2008) suggest that religion offers three distinct advantages to Black families and other urban minority families, including: a) providing a moral code of ethics and relationship-based norms that strengthen marriages and families; b) fostering religious social networks that fortify religious norms and relationships by offering positive role models and social support for marriage and parenting; and c) encouraging a “nomos—a sacred canopy of beliefs and rituals that influence relationships and the behaviors that affect relationships” (p. 830). The authors also note that many Christian religions and other religious beliefs (i.e., Muslim):

[Provide] rituals and beliefs that endow marriage with transcendent significance.

Religious institutions can sanctify relationships in ways that encourage partners to stay committed and to view their relationship in a more favorable light. Religious rituals such as prayer may also encourage urban parents to be more reflexive about their relationships, and to pursue positive behaviors (i.e., affection for one’s partner), and avoid negative
behaviors (i.e., ignoring one’s partner’s needs). In addition, religious beliefs and rituals may afford parents with a sense of purpose that helps them negotiate the challenges of urban life and serve as a buffer against the negative psychological consequences of stress. This, in turn, may make urban parents more likely to resist street behaviors—drug use, criminal activity, and promiscuity—that can harm their relationships. (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008, p. 830)

Despite the salience and intensity of religious moorings, and the prevalence of religious involvement among African Americans, studies specifically regarding religion and Black marriages and positive family functioning are limited—and qualitative work is especially rare (Marks et al., 2010, 2012).

**Religion And Black Marriages**

Black marriages have been the subject of an increasing amount of scholarly work in the past two decades, but the extant literature on the subject still represents a very small part of the social science examination of marriages, in general (McAdoo & Younge, 2009). In a survey of African American single adolescents, Simpkins (2013) found that nearly 80% hoped to be married one day. Additionally, African Americans were also significantly more likely than their White counterparts to say that marriage was “very important” to them (Newport, 2007). Despite these persistent pro-marital attitudes, Black marriage rates are the lowest, and single parenthood and cohabitation rates are the highest, compared to non-Hispanic Whites and Latinos (Chaney et al., 2016; Dixon, 2008). In addition, although declining Black marriage rates have tapered off slightly in recent years, Blacks have the lowest marriage rate of any major racial category in the United States (Chaney et al., 2016; Dixon, 2008; Phillips et al., 2012). Blacks also tend to marry later, have marriages that don’t last as long, and report the highest levels of divorce, are more
likely to cohabitate than marry, and to bear children out of wedlock than Latinos and Whites (Blackmon et al., 2005; Chaney et al., 2016; Dixon, 2008; Phillips et al., 2012).

However, for Blacks who attend religious services frequently, marriage rates are higher and single parenthood and cohabitation rates are lower than those who do not attend or attend infrequently, suggesting that religious involvement is positively associated with marriage formation and stability among Blacks (Chaney et al., 2016; Dixon, 2008; Marks et al., 2008, 2010; Phillips et al., 2012; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016).

Studies highlighting the advantages to Blacks who are married exist (Blackmon et al., 2005; Curran, Utley, & Muraco, 2010; Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2007). Studies indicate that many Black individuals highly value marriage and that marriage as an institution significantly benefits Blacks. For example, several studies suggest that Black individuals who marry and stay married, fare better in multiple economic indicators, compared with those who cohabit, are single, or divorced (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009; Mincy & Pouncy, 2003).

Musick and Mare (2004) found that children of married Black families were more likely to marry, and among a sample of low-income families, be more financially stable in the future. In addition, Lichter and Carmalt (2009) found that religious faith and religious engagement were connected with increased marital commitment and marital quality, with increased willingness to sacrifice for each other and for the marriage.

Some research suggests that sanctification in Black marriages is also associated with lower levels of negative interactions and decreased marital conflict and marital violence (Fincham et al., 2011). These findings suggest that religion may play an important role in helping to define and maintain certain relationships as sacred.
Religious institutions and traditions often offer beliefs, practices, and communities that help adherents to see their relationships with sacred significance, or to create a sacred space for meaningful and important family relationships (Burr, Marks, & Day, 2012; Mahoney, 2013; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, A., & Murray-Swank, N., 2003; Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005). Thus, for many religious individuals, their religious beliefs, practices, norms, and rituals provide a unique paradigm, or framework, by which they see not only relationships in a different light, but their whole world differently, including trials, challenges, work, sexual relationships, their physical body, and the natural world (Mahoney, Pargament, & Hernandez, 2013; Moore et al., 2018). These religious norms, rituals, and beliefs help form the basis for what sociologist Elijah Anderson (1999) referred to as the code of decency.

Anderson (1999) argued that this code of decency (which involves norms of temperance, industry, lawful behavior, honesty, and respect) establishes an ethos, or philosophy that is often in stark contrast to the ethos of the street life which promotes drug use, sexual promiscuity, anti-social behavior, and criminal activity. Additional research suggests that many religions promote a code of decency that is particularly salient for minority women and men from urban settings (Edin & Kefalas, 2011). In addition to promoting a code of decency, religious beliefs, practices and communities may have a profound influence on positive marital constructs such as marital sanctification and relational spirituality.

Marital Sanctification And Relational Spirituality

Although research on the role, or influence of religion, in Black family relationships as it relates to marital sanctification and relational spirituality is currently very limited, there is a budding body of research suggesting potentially positive connections for predominately White
and European demographics. In a study of 83 newlywed couples (married 4-18 months), religious beliefs about the sacredness of marriage and sexuality, were linked with increased marital satisfaction, increased sexual satisfaction, as well as increased sexual and spiritual intimacy within a couple’s relationship (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011). Several studies have shown positive relational outcomes from relational spirituality and sanctification within marriages. Brelsford (2013) found the sanctification within marriage was associated with increased spiritual disclosure, open communication, and relational satisfaction and quality among couples.

These findings suggest that couples may benefit from creating sanctified relationships, or believing that their marriage is sacred. A study of 164 heterosexual couples, found that increased feelings of, or a belief in a sanctified marriage were associated with more observed positivity, as well as more positive spiritual intimacy, and less negative interactions among both spouses (Kusner, Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2014).

Despite several studies suggesting positive links of relational spirituality and sanctification, to positive psychological and relational outcomes, other studies suggest the opposite. Research suggests that a heightened sense or belief that ones’ relationship is sacred, can increase the likelihood for negative psychological adjustment related to sacred loss and desecration, if and when one’s marriage dissolves, ends in divorce, or when one’s partner fails to live up to religious and/or marital expectations (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Thus, relational spirituality and sanctification can increase the potential rewards, as well as risks associated with sanctified marital relationships. In addition, such risks and rewards may be uniquely influenced by the presence and persistence of relational
stressors and challenges associated with many Black marriages (i.e., poverty, lack of education, racism, and poorer health) (Fincham et al., 2011).

Although some research has been done on potential mechanisms and processes associated with relational spirituality and sanctification within marriage, the specific mechanisms and processes for how or why these correlations exist are still very limited. Sabey, Rauer, and Jensen (2014) suggested that additional research is needed to continue to push the field and explore the specific relational and psychological mechanisms and processes that foster better relational quality, such as the role of compassionate love, partner communication, and spousal support. In a quantitative study of 215 Romanian couples, Rusu and colleagues (2015) found that a belief that one’s marriage was sacred was tied to increased partner support, which in turn, was associated with increased marital satisfaction and relational well-being (Rusu, Hilpert, Beach, Turliuc, & Bodenmann, 2015).

These findings suggest that religious couples may employ and utilize myriad of mechanisms and processes that enhance, or enable religious beliefs, practices, rituals, and communities, to shape and influence marital functioning and marital relationship quality. However, as stated before, little is known about how or why such personal processes and mechanisms are established, maintained, and potentially inform or transform marital relationships, particularly in Black married couples.

The Present Study

The present study seeks to take a strengths-based approach and explore how exemplary (Damon & Colby, 2013) Black couples who are predominantly Christian sanctify their marital relationships through religious beliefs, practices, and communities. Further, this study seeks to identify, what Psychologist Frank Fincham and others, have called “a specific mechanism” by
which religion enhances relational commitment and quality (Fincham et al., 2011, p. 265; Mahoney, 2010, 2013; Mahoney et al., 2013; Mahoney & Cano, 2014; Sabey et al., 2014).

Fincham has likewise issued a call for further research to examine the role of sanctification in Black marriages and has stated:

> Given the association between marital quality, and both mental and physical health, future research that takes an in-depth look into how spirituality can impact other important outcome variables for African Americans (i.e., parenting practices, communication, physical health) would also make a valuable contribution to this body of literature. In any event, a greater focus on African American couples is needed, especially in regard to strength-based processes. (Fincham et al., 2011, p. 266)

Some studies have suggested that religion has little or weak influence on marital quality (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995), and can even have a potentially negative influence on family functioning and family happiness (Schnabel, 2016). However, scores of other studies suggest that religion plays a unique role in the sanctification of marital relationships, and typically seems to add value for both women and men in terms of relationship quality, stability, commitment and sacredness (Call & Heaton, 1997; Fincham et al., 2011; Mahoney, 2010, 2013; Mahoney et al., 2003; Myers, 2006).

Using qualitative interview data from religiously diverse African Americans in the US from predominately urban settings, the present study seeks to provide an “in depth” look into the lives of religious African American women and men. Further, the present study seeks to examine how religion and spirituality “impact other important variables” of family life, to “make a valuable contribution to the literature” using a “strengths-based” approach to the family
psychological and relational “processes” and mechanisms of religious Black women and men—as Fincham et al. (2011) suggested.

**Methods**

In compliance with the newly updated APA standards for qualitative research (Levitt, Bamberg, Creswell, Frost, & Suárez-orozco, 2017), this study seeks to use in-depth interviews and qualitative scientific analysis to examine the lived experience of 33 exemplary highly religious Black American married couples (Damon & Colby, 2013). To provide an alternative narrative to much of the extant research on Black marriages, a strengths-based approach was used to examine how and why religion may influence Black marital relationships. Recent empirical quantitative data suggests that there is a relationship between relational spirituality and sanctification for potential improved marital relationship satisfaction, quality, and commitment within religious couples (Brelsford, 2013; Hernandez et al., 2011; Kusner et al., 2014; Sabey et al., 2014). These findings are consistent with increased relational quality relating to marriages among Black religious families as well (Ellison et al., 2010; Fincham et al., 2011; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016). Thus, this study seeks to “mine the meanings” of the specific relational and psychological mechanisms and processes underlying the correlations and associations of relational spirituality and sanctification in the lives of religiously diverse Black couples from across the United States (Marks & Dollahite, 2011).

**Sample**

Using the *African American Families of Faith* Data Set, a smaller subsection of the national *American Families of Faith Project* ($N = 200$ families), this sample consisted of in-depth interviews with 2 Muslim families and 31 multi-denominational Christian heterosexual married couples who self-identified as Black or African American (33 families, $N = 66$). Due to
the difficulty in accessing Black Muslim families, most of the participant couples were from various Christian faith backgrounds and affiliations including Catholic, Protestant, LDS, and Non-Denominational. Participants were purposely sampled (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) from across the United States including respondents from California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Ohio, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin.

On average, couples in this study had been married an average of 20 years, and had an average of 3.3 children, with all couples having at least one child. Husbands mean age was 56 and wives mean age was 54. Educational attainment varied from no high school diploma to advanced graduate degrees. Individual salience of religiosity was based on both spouses’ responses to the following question being at an “8” or higher, “On a scale of 1–10 with one being ‘unimportant’ and ten being ‘very important,’ how significant is your religious faith in your personal family life?” Similarly, marital happiness was measured by a self-reported, single-item measure asking, “On a scale of 1–10 with one being ‘not at all’ and ten being ‘very,’ how happily married are you?” Again, spouses that both responded with scores of “8” or higher were considered.

A further criterion sought for couples that had been married or remarried for at least seven years. Kulu (2014) suggests that marriages within the first seven years are at an increased likelihood for divorce, whereas, after the first seven years, divorce likelihood declines gradually but significantly. Other studies suggest that risk of dissolution and divorce may be higher for African American couples than other racial couples (Amato, 2001; Blackmon et al., 2005). Thus, the seven-year marriage criterion to again provide a different narrative for a strengths-based approach to Black marriages. The sample is characterized by (a) a generally high level of religious commitment (as reported by referring clergy and the participants), (b) religious
diversity (particularly among Christianity), (c) a wide range of socioeconomic and educational levels, and (d) geographical diversity.

**Data Collection**

Clergy were contacted and asked to identify Black, marriage-based families with children who were committed to and involved in their faith and that manifested happiness and commitment in their marriage and family relationships. Participants for this study included self-reported highly religious couples that were in happy marriages or remarriages where both spouses self-identified as Black or African American. Recommended families were contacted to determine willingness to participate.

After informed consent was acquired and basic demographic information was gathered, “intensive interviewing” was employed with each couple in their home to better “triangulate or obtain various types of data on the same [issues], combining interview with observation” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 27). Interviews were conducted in the presence of both the husband and the wife and each participant was asked to respond to the same question in turn. Preferential order of husband and wife was alternated to allow each spouse to have the first response to different questions, sometimes with the wife leading out on a question, and others times the husband. Some research suggests that interviewing couples together may limit the authenticity of individual respondents, particularly on sensitive or potentially charged family topics and issues (Seymour, Dix, & Eardley, 1995). However, additional research suggests that interviewing couples together provides a richness and depth about the interactive processes of couples that may not be viewed or analyzed in any other way (Marks et al., 2008). Further, Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) suggest that in-home interviews with both partners and the interviewer may serve to build trust and appropriate vulnerability to see people in their own environment and
natural setting, thus potentially producing a more natural experience of family life and functioning. Additionally, interview responses reflect both divergent and convergent examples and counterexamples and experiences from the couples on the same questions. The presence of divergent responses from each spouse on the same topic further suggests that while some may have felt inhibited to give authentic responses, most apparently did not.

Interviews typically lasted between one and a half to two and a half hours. Questions focused on connections between religion, marriage, and family life. All interviews followed a 30-question semi-structured interview style with occasional follow-up questions that provided clarifying information or redirection to the intent of the question. Care was taken to ensure, to the extent possible, interview reliability and validity across the multiple interviews.

A narrative-style approach was used in each interview to elicit responses that provided more context and experience than just simple one or two sentence answers. Such a focus on lived experience in context can “create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in lived moments of struggle” and experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2003, p. 217). Each interview was transcribed verbatim and saved in a Word document format. In total, there were nearly 1000 double-spaced pages of interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

After each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim, the data were made available to multiple coders to look for connections, patterns, and themes that emerged from the material using grounded theory and open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013). For this study, coding and analysis were done almost exclusively by the first author as part of requirements for advanced doctoral degree. Open coding and grounded theory allow themes and concepts to emerge from the data by looking for salient ideas that are repeated within each
interview as well as across interviews. In addition, multiple layers of coding and exposure to the data further increased qualitative validity and reliability (Daly & Dienhart, 1998). Multiple layered coding followed Marks’ (2015) Numeric Content Analysis (NCA) coding strategy in which rigorous, systematic, and replicable coding consisting of four major phases with multiple steps in each phase.

**Open coding.** Phases 1 and 2 include employing an open coding analysis of the data after an extensive review of literature, defining the appropriate sample and conducting in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol. Phase 3 consists of sifting through all the data to separate what Marks (2015) calls “rocks” from “gems.” In other words, Phase 3 of the coding process distinguishes valuable, specific, content-rich information from vague, superficial, or disconnected data. This phase was employed to create a systematic audit trail of the data and to establish a system of replicable and transferable themes and ideas.

**Axial coding.** Phase 3, also included axial coding where 14-20 recurring themes were identified. Themes were then crosschecked and examined between interviews to establish a coherent web of inter-related themes and core ideas across the data set. According to Marks (2015) themes, patterns, and connections must be identified multiple times and found across multiple interviews at various time points and iterations to be reported as “core themes.”

**Selective coding.** Phase 4 involved selective coding. This means that only those themes that were the most salient and the most frequently coded were used in the final analysis and write up. Phase 4 also included arranging and presenting the core themes from the data in meaningful ways to contextualize how and why processes and mechanisms are utilized within the context of participants’ lived experiences.
The collective process revealed four perceptions or constructs regarding how participants viewed or made sense of sanctified married relationships. Those perceptual constructs related to seeing marriage as a sacred union. Marital sanctification also seemed to influence four main relationship domains that manifested, as well as maintained, the belief about sanctified marriage relationships within the Black married couples among our sample. The four constructs of perceiving marriage as a sanctified union as well as the four relationship domains will be discussed and illustrated by participants’ actual words. The words and lived experiences of participants will serve as examples and will be used to provide context and content that is rich and insightful regarding the processes and meaning-making of sanctification in Black families in the findings section.

**Findings**

Using a grounded theory approach, the data revealed four perceptual constructs that shaped and influenced the way participants viewed marriage as sanctified or sacred. Those four constructs about the sanctity of married relationship seemed to have a strong influence on the relational spirituality of four relationship-centered domains. We will discuss the perceptual construct of sanctified marriages first and then turn to findings related to the relational spirituality of sanctified unions.

**Marital Sanctification: Perceptual Constructs Of Sanctified Marriages**

Because of the significant structural and interpersonal challenges to long-lasting Black marriages addressed in the extant literature, having a sanctified view of marriage seemed to have a positive and protective influence on Black married couples in our sample (Chaney et al., 2016; Dixon, 2008; Phillips et al., 2012; Rusu et al., 2015). The sanctified view of marriage came out of different individuals’ beliefs about God and the purpose(s) of marriage. These beliefs were
maintained and crystalized by religious teachings and practices such as praise and worship, church attendance and participation, prayer, and scripture study. Participants who held sanctified views of marriage believed that marriage was sacred and holy because it was perceived as being a) God-given, b) God-ordained, c) God-created and/or d) God-inspired. Some brief but poignant examples of each perceptual construct of a sanctified marriage will be identified and illustrated below.

**God-given.** (6 of 33, 18%) Participants who believed in the idea of a God-given sanctified relationship seemed to suggest a belief in an active God, a being who “gives” or “puts” into hearts and minds of individuals specific requirements or standards. God-given sanctified marriages were also characterized by a God who demands or “calls” individuals “to do” certain things. This belief was connected with a further belief that if God “put” something inside you, your moral obligation as believer, was to “do” something about it. Often this belief was seen in context of relationships and marriage or ways of being and serving as noted in the following examples of this type of belief.

**Husband-(Muslim, Ohio):** [God created man.] and our purpose is to worship Him. He put in His creation for man, marriage [as] an institution. He gave us many stories in the Koran, from different prophets [and] examples . . . how families should be. And it is for all eternal purposes. And it doesn’t matter if you live in 2002 [or] now. . . . This institution is always human, [it] always revolves around humans. [So] if you say that you are Muslim, it means that you will submit to the will of God. You will follow, and place within you the laws of God. . . . It’s [a form of] submission [to believe] that [the] family is the bedrock of human society.
**Husband**-(LDS, Louisiana): I think that Lord gave me the talent that I have to be able to support my family with what I do in life, and then when he calls you to do something, like [the] work that I do at the church, [God will] provide whatever you need regardless of what it is.

**Wife**-(Christian, Oregon): We each [are] given (by God) our different roles [and] how we each complemented one another in terms of the decision making in the home and with financial decisions, [or] decisions around our sons, even though they are adults now. There still comes a time where you still have to have that communication back and forth with each other and just knowing that’s it is okay to disagree without any repercussion. But, because of the manner in which God sees our roles, [we have] a better understanding, which has really helped the communication process.

**Husband**-(Christian, Louisiana): In marriage . . . my wife knows this and I tell people this all the time, [who] get mad and [are] yelling back and forth. See we’ve never done that all the years we’ve been married, none of [those] little sharp things that you throw at each other that hurts. That’s bad. We’ve never done that. But to me, that is what the Lord has given us or He’s put in us, that we’re going to treat each other the way were supposed to treat [each other, which] is the way we’d want to be treated.

The proceeding examples highlight some of the expressions of those who held a God-given perceptual construct of sanctified marriages. Such a perspective, that marriage is “given by God” may be uniquely helpful for Black heterosexual individuals who are looking for justification to marry. Such a belief often goes counter to the prevailing culture which exerts higher levels of negative societal and cultural pressure to accept or embrace alternative options for romantic relationships such as cohabitating as a viable union at times over and above
marriage (Chaney et al., 2016; Dixon, 2008). We now move to examples of those who held a God-ordained perceptual view of marital sanctification.

**God-ordained.** (6 of 33, 18%) For religious couples in our sample, the idea of God-ordained seemed to revolve around the idea that God dictates what is holy or consecrated to Him and then He places an order or specific priority to things that should come first. Participants, who held this belief, seemed to believe that God establishes a divine priority for intimate partner relationships. Consistent with that perception is the related belief that if individuals will align themselves with the priority or order that God has established, everything else that follows afterwards is blessed, strengthened, influenced, and improved by putting first things first. This idea was exemplified by the following statements in the data.

**Wife-(Methodist, Delaware):** Once we got into our spirituality and our religion, we understood that God meant for man to have this thing (marriage) and it influences everything we do. Being together, what we do in our leisure time, everything we do. We always say, "Do we want to go to this place? Do we want God to catch us there?" Even if we want to go see a movie, it has to be the kind of movie we want to be caught in [by God].

**Husband-(LDS, Louisiana):** We believe that the highest level of degree (of salvation) that you can attain is the Celestial Kingdom. [This] means husband and wife have to be married for time and all eternity. It takes two to get there. I can’t go without her, [and] she couldn’t go without me.

**Wife-(Christian, Louisiana):** I remember one minister said, “Why does the husband come and then the wife come later and then the children come in separate?” . . . First of all, some things is not right there because you not giving [God] the unity that [He] has
blessed you with. . . . When [my husband] decided to give his life over to Christ and then he decided to do whatever God wanted him to do in the church. [We changed.] We didn’t leave separately [anymore], we stayed. We came as one, we leave as one. Because when God [and] the Holy Spirit come [into you] He [doesn’t come in] bits and pieces, He comes as one. [God will] enter into your body as one whole source, and then we give him back one whole source.

The God-ordained views that we have highlighted above seemed to focus on a sense of relational order or priority from which certain perceived blessings or relational benefits seemed to flow. This belief that God provided a specific order to relationships may contribute to the preferential treatment that religious individuals give to marriage. Research suggests that religious Black singles are more likely to marry, marry sooner, and stay married than are less religious Black singles, especially if potential mates also hold strong religious beliefs (Chaney et al., 2014, 2016; Chaney & Francis, 2013; Dixon, 2008; Waite & Lehrer, 2003; Wilcox & Wolfinger 2008, 2016). We now highlight the perceptual construct of God-created sanctified relationships.

**God-created.** (7 of 33, 21%) Similar to the idea of a “God-given” view of marital sanctification, participants with a God-created view, seemed to believe that God acted in intentional ways for a divine purpose or “plan.” Participants spoke about how God “created” or “made” marriage and relationships a certain way, because that is how He “wanted” it to be or how he “assigned” it to be. This idea was characterized by a belief in the intentionality of God, participants seemed to reflect a sense of trying to find out what God wanted for them and their marriage and then tried to live out in their actions and relationships what they perceived God intended for them.
Several participants also either quoted from the Bible or other holy scripture or referred to it as evidence of the reason why God wanted something done a certain way. This finding seems to suggest, that at least for some religious Blacks, their belief that God does things for a purpose is connected to their belief that God has provided at least part of his rationale in scripture and holy writings. This finding may also have implications for how religious Black couples use scripture to guide or inform their relationships within the context of sanctified unions (Chaney et al., 2016; Marks et al., 2008).

**Husband-(Christian, Washington):** Again going back to the commitment and to the covenant [of marriage]. Really [knowing] what was God’s plan [helps your relationship, and] knowing that up front. Having again been fathered and mothered in spirit, and with wise godly counsel up front. Then knowing if this were to be the case, you [could ask,] “What are you going to do from here? What is God’s plan for our relationship?”

**Husband-(Christian, Louisiana):** When you read the Bible, the Bible tells you that the way [Christ] compared himself with the church is how He wanted a marriage to be, and how a man should treat his wife. If you love your wife, you should love the church also. . . How can I say I love my wife and don’t love the church? Or, how can I say I love the church and don’t love my wife?

**Wife-(Christian, Oregon):** I’ve always believed I’m a helpmate to [my husband]. And that’s always been my thing when people say well what about [your husband], I said, “You know, you’re not going to get me to say anything about him because I’m assigned to him.” I’m assigned to be his helpmate. So for me to say words against him would be saying words against my assignment [and against God].
God-created marriages seemed to focus on a belief in an active God who “makes,” or “creates” or “assigns” certain qualities and characteristics for women and men. Additionally, a God-created perception of marital relationships was characterized by a God who “calls” or invites people “to do” certain things for the express benefit of the marital relationship. This is distinct from the view of God-ordained marriages. God-ordained perception of marriage seemed to focus on the purposeful placement or specified priority of the marital relationship in the context of religious beliefs and one’s relationship with God. However, in the context of God-created marriage view, order and priority were not seemingly as salient or significant, but God’s perceived intent to bless a couple with a marital relationship was still maintained. We now move to the perceptual construct of God-inspired marriages.

**God-inspired.** (8 of 33, 24%) Central to the idea of God-inspired sanctified relationships is the definition of inspired or inspiring. The word inspire comes from the Latin word “inspirare” meaning to breathe or blow into. The original use of the word suggested that God or some divine or supernatural being or force, blew into the heart of man desires for good, and a longing for better things. Participants themselves did not use the phrase “God-inspired” to connote such a sanctified relationship. However, findings suggested a belief in some, of what God “wants” for them in their marriage and family. This idea was further animated or infused with a desire to try to do “good things” or the “right thing” and to be “better” in one’s marital and family relationships. A few examples will provide context for how this idea emerged from the data.

**Husband-(Methodist, Delaware):** We both feel that marriage is a bonding thing. . . . The Bible says that when a man marries a woman, it is a good thing. I tell my wife all the time, she is the diamond of my eye. I have people tell me, “You’re always with her.” I say, “Why should I not be?” And my kids, I want to show that I love my kids. No matter
what. So that when you’re an old man, . . . they’ll always know, “My Daddy loved me.” And then they can pass that on to their kids and to their husbands.

**Husband-(Christian, Louisiana):** You think about the things that God wants you to do. He said what God has joined together let no man put asunder. That means what He puts together, if it’s pleasing in His sight, you stay together.

**Wife-(Baptist, Louisiana):** God is foremost in my life. I heard an example once of seeing marriage as a triangle, with God at the top, and the closer you get to Him, the closer you get to each other. I really like that example. I think that once you start to drift away from God you start to drift away from each other.

**Husband-(Christian, Oregon):** Being committed to the institution of marriage . . . the whole ideal of marriage gives a marriage staying power. If you believe that is the right thing to do, and a good thing to do, then you’ll be able to do it. . . . The trust and the fidelity, being sold on the concept of one mate, makes marriage happen and makes marriage livable. And if you believe that that’s right, and it feels right to you, being convinced in your mind that it’s the right thing to do, is a major portion of a strong marriage.

It is noteworthy that those participants who held a God-inspired view of marital sanctification seemed to focus on the why they acted in their relations as they did, seeking to “please God” or to do the “right thing.” Because participants seemed to perceive God as having a specific intent or reason for marital relationships. They likewise sought to fulfill those perceived intents in their own relationship attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Of particular note, the Christian husband from Oregon who held the perception that marriage is God-inspired, talked about how his belief gave him “staying power” in his marriage relationship. He also spoke of increased
feelings of “trust” and “fidelity” and “being sold out to the concept of one mate.” Such beliefs may have particular salience for Black couples to counteract the negative trend in some Black marriages toward divorce (Dixon, 2008) and/or sexual infidelity (Whisman, Gordon, & Chatav, 2007; Whisman & Synder, 2007). This can lead to a lack of trust in the relationship, or in the stability of the marriage relationships, particularly for Black women and perhaps less so for Black men (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Edin, 2000; Edin, Kefalas, & Reed, 2004). We now move to a summary of the aforementioned perceptual constructs or views of a sanctified marital union or relationship.

Summary Of Perceptual Constructs Of Sanctified Marriages

For many of the religious Black couples in our study, having a relationship with or belief in God, reportedly shaped the way they experienced and processed their marriages and family relationships. Theistic sanctification—the idea that God is an active part of one’s relationship, or the author of it—seemed to fall into one of four perceptions of how God interacted with participants’ beliefs about the sanctity of married relationships. Those four distinct perceptions of marriage as a sacred union were identified as being either: a) God-given, b) God-ordained, c) God-created, and/or d) God-inspired. Each of the beliefs capitalized on a different perceptual frame, in which, participants believed God to be an active force in their lives as well as in their relationships.

Participants, who manifested a God-given perceptual construct, seemed to express that God “gave” or “put” certain things in their relationship for the purpose of sanctification or to make it holy. Participants expressed that God “gave” them certain talents or “put” into their hearts, minds, or relationships, certain skills or attributes. These skills and attributes were often seen as distinct between women and men, but complimentary as well. Such a belief may increase
the likelihood of religious Blacks to choose marriage over other alternatives such as cohabiting or “shacking up” (Chaney et al., 2014, 2016; Dixon, 2008; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2016). Whereas, participants who viewed their relationship as sanctified from a God-ordained perceptual construct, described God as giving “order” or priority to certain relationships. In this view, God and the things of God, were reportedly placed first and “above all other things” in the relationship, with the belief that all other relational considerations will “fall in line” after that. Individuals and couples who viewed their marriage as sanctified and holy in this way, often described how they perceived that when they put God in their marriage first, “everything else” about their relationship seemed to be in order or improve. This idea may contribute to the preferential treatment religious Black singles give to marriage in terms of marrying earlier, and choosing to marry (Chaney et al., 2014, 2016; Dixon, 2008; Waite & Lehrer, 2003). It may also have profound impacts to buffer against divorce or perpetual challenges in marriage as couples put God and their marriages first (Marks et al., 2008, 2010, 2012; Phillips et al., 2012).

Participants with a God-created perceptual construct, viewed God as both active and intentional. This was distinct from the God-given view of an active God, because participants who viewed their relationships from a God-created view seemed to focus more on why God was perceived to have acted in the way He did, for what purpose or “plan.” Further, participants from this view seemed to look to the Bible and other holy scripture as rationale for God’s purposes and intent. This belief may add to the way Black couples utilize the Bible and other holy scripture as an aid to strengthen and enhance their marital relationships (Marks et al., 2008) and may also help to increase a pathway toward longer-lasting enduring marriages among Black couples (Chaney, 2008; Chaney et al., 2016; Marks et al., 2008, 2010; Phillips et al., 2012).
Finally, participants who viewed their relationship from a God-inspired sanctification standpoint, felt that God “wanted” them to have important and meaningful relationships. The focus for many participants from this view was on the “right”-ness or “good”-ness of their relationships. There was also a strong belief that a “better” or closer relationship with God, led to a “better,” more improved, and closer relationship with their spouse. Or as one Methodist husband from Delaware stated:

My faith has shown me how to be a better husband to my wife. It’s shown me how to be a better father to my kids. When I look at my wife, my faith walk [has] taught me that she is more than just my companion, she’s not only my right hand, but we walk through this life together. The Lord showed me how I should cherish my lady, because He’s given me the opportunity to walk this faith walk with [her]. Not only has He blessed me with a Savior [Jesus Christ], but He’s blessed me with a woman that loves her faith too. My faith taught me to cherish my wife as something that is precious.

It is noteworthy that this husband perceived that his religious faith provided the tools, beliefs, and context necessary for him to become a “better” husband and father, stating that “the Lord showed me how I should cherish my lady” and “how to be a better father to his children.”

Taken together these findings may suggest why religion has been shown to have mostly positive relational outcomes for married Blacks, and perhaps particularly for Black men (Moore, in preparation; Perry, 2013; Petts, Shafer, & Essig, 2018; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016).

It is also noteworthy, that the specific view or perception that participants held about their relationship seemed to matter less in terms of relational outcomes than whether or not participants held the view that their relationship was something sacred or divine, a gift from God. Belief in, and a perception that their relationship was sacred and holy, as a “whole source” before
God, seemed to have relational implications that reinforced and strengthened individual aspects of one’s commitment, satisfaction, and marital quality, as well as improve the spirituality within a marital relationship. Such perceptions may be linked to Black couple’s religious beliefs about the importance and sanctity of marriage and the potentially positive and protective influence of religion, as well as the potential negative effects of divorce among Black religious couples (Dixon, 2008; Fincham et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 1999, 2008; Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005). We now turn to findings related to how a belief in marital sanctification seemed to have an influence on multiple relationships domains within a couple’s relational spirituality.

**Relational Spirituality And Relationship Domains**

Despite the varied perceptual constructs of a sanctified relationship that participants seemed to adopt or endorse (i.e., God-given, God-Ordained, God-Created, and/or God-inspired), these beliefs seemed to influence the relational spirituality of the couple. That is—the spiritual relationship mechanisms, stages, and constructs, that were part of the couple’s interactions and relationship, were influenced by their belief that their marriage union was sacred, holy, or a gift from God (Mahoney & Cano, 2014). Taken together these findings suggest that how or why a couple perceives their relationship as being sacred, influences what a couple does in relation to their individual and shared spirituality within a relationship.

This sanctified belief in marriage seemed to have a profound influence on four main themes or relationship domains within the context of such marriage relationships. The four main relationship domains identified in data were each associated with the belief that a sanctified view of marriage provided a) a religiously-inspired perspective for a goal-oriented mate/partner selection; b) a sense of sacred permanence and “drive” for staying together despite differences,
difficulties, and challenges; c) an increased willingness to sacrifice for the relationship or a belief that sacrifice made marriage more sacred; and d) a commitment to religiously-inspired relational maintenance. Each of these four main themes or relationship domains were associated with and seemed to be influenced by a sanctified view of marriage within Black couples. Identifications and descriptions of key examples of each relationship domain will follow.

Religiously-inspired goal-oriented partner/mate selection. (8 of 33, 24%) From the data, the belief that one’s relationship is sacred or holy and that marriage is a sacred union, not only influenced the married relationship of the married couples, but also provided direction and standards in mate and partner selection prior to marriage. Participants who viewed their own relationship in a sanctified fashion, also seemed to be more careful and thoughtful about the relational processes they used for partner selection, as well as the individual characteristics they sought prior to marriage (Chaney & Francis, 2013; Chaney et al., 2014). This attention to specific psychological relational processes and character traits by participants, seemed to be part of a goal-oriented perspective in mate selection.

Relational processes. Processes for partner selection seemed to focus more on relational principles or approaches to dating and pre-marital selection. These psychological relational processes seemed to allow participants a way of viewing the overall courting and pre-marriage mate selection experience as well as providing them with increased autonomy for individual preference and application.

In addition, participants discussed the expectations they have for marriage and marriage partners and how they pursued such personal processes (Chaney & Francis, 2013; King & Allen, 2009; Vaterlaus, Skogrand, Chaney, & Gahagan, 2017). These findings may also serve as a catalyst for improving marriage rates among Blacks (Chaney & Francis, 2013; Chaney et al.,
2014), as well as aid couples in choosing a spouse that has similar goals and spiritual desires. Such choices may in turn enhance marital longevity, quality, and commitment and again serve as a potential for increased rates of divorce among Black couples (Blackmon et al., 2005; Chaney et al., 2016; Dixon, 2008; Marks et al., 2008, 2010, 2012; Phillips et al., 2012).

Goal-oriented relational processes involved such things as praying for the kind of spouse a participant wanted to marry, as well as praying for the kind of spouse a participant individually wanted to be. Other goal-oriented processes influenced the kind of people participants dated before marriage, informed standards for pre-mate selection, and often gave them a vision of having a specific end or goal in mind as they began the partner selection process. A few examples of these relational processes follow.

**Husband & Wife-(LDS, Louisiana):** *Prayer and dating standards.*

I prayed about [choosing my wife.]. And when I prayed about [her] being my wife, it came to me [so] clear, [God] said to me “(Husband’s name), your life would [be] just fine if that happened, if you ask [her] to be your wife.” I wanted to know, I was making the right decision about stuff, I never really prayed about an answer to something other than playing basketball all my life. . . . But this was big decision, she [already had] her two kids.

W: So, we dated for a year, we took some classes at the church, to be prepared to be married in a temple. . . . When you become a member of the church and you try to follow the things that you say, [such as], there is no sexual activity [before marriage]. You don’t do that. . . . [But] we both [had] been married before, [so] we were just trying to figure out how we [were going to] handle that.
H: We handled it pretty well because the dates that we went on, and the time we spent together, was just [a] good time. I always want to be true to my wife. So, I always feel good about [waiting for marriage before having sex.] So that was a good [choice, even though] I knew that she was going to be my wife.

**Husband-(Christian, Oregon):** I prayed for a beautiful and wonderful wife when I was about in 8th grade. I can remember very well going to King school and that’s why I know God answers prayers. I can remember praying for a very special person in my life that would love me for who I am, my faults, my idiosyncrasies, my anal personality and things like that.

It is significant that this husband from Oregon prayed for the kind of wife he sought for since he was in the 8th grade. This kind of religiously inspired goal-oriented behavior may have important implications particularly for Black men in giving them greater relational goals and desires that have the potential to provide guidance and direction towards a life away from the negative relationship struggles often associated with the “street life” (e.g., drug use, crime, and risky sexual behavior) (Anderson, 1999; Chaney, 2009; Ellison et al., 2010; Moore, in preparation; Petts et al., 2018; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016).

*Beginning with a specific end in mind.* An additional goal-oriented processes in partner selection included participants beginning with a specific end in mind or having a clear definable goal or vision of their relationship before they began to approach potential marriage relationships seriously.

**Husband & Wife-(Christian, Oregon):** W: I was determined that this house was going to have some fun. We were going to laugh and we were going to be happy. Not only I
was going to be happy but [my marriage was] going to be happy. Everyone was going to be happy. At the beginning I had to make [my husband] be happy. (Turning to her husband) Cause you weren’t used to being happy. Do you think?


W: He wasn’t used to being happy.

H: [But,] I consciously made a decision she’s going to bring joy into my life. I can’t let her get away.

For this couple from Oregon, beginning with the end in mind meant consciously choosing a specific desired outcome or goal such as choosing “joy” in marrying a specific person. Some couples in our sample focused on having a specific end-goal or vision for their relationship with a spouse. Whereas, others focused on having a specific end-goal in mind in their relationship with God before seeking such a goal from their spouse.

Wife-(Christian, Washington): When you start feeling as if [the problem is with] the other person. Check yourself first. Because a lot of times it is not them. A lot of times, it’s a void in you. And you’re trying to make them fill that void. And they can’t, because they’re human beings. They can’t do that. Don’t try to put them in the place of God. They can’t. They can’t be God in you. And they can’t tell you what you need. [Only] God can read you. So, if you want to be read and have your needs met right away and just the way you need it, [God] is the one to do it.

The individual pre-marriage partner selection processes identified above (i.e., praying for future spouse, informing dating standards, and beginning with a specific goal in mind) suggest that religious beliefs may have a strong influence on, not only, who Black couples choose to date, but also on and how Black couples choose to date and eventually marry. Chaney and
Francis (2013) qualitatively noted that many religious Black singles, particularly Black females sought for men who held religious convictions and commitments in seeking out potential marriage partners.

This may be important for Black couples choosing marriage rather than alternative forms of romantic relationships because religion often runs counter to the prevailing culture and seems to have a positive effect on encouraging marriage, marital commitment, longevity, happiness, satisfaction, and quality (Chaney et al., 2016; Marks et al., 2008, 2010; Phillips et al., 2012). Which in turn, have all been shown to have a protective and positive influence particularly for Black women and men’s mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and financial health and wellbeing (Cokley, Garcia, Hall-Clark, Tran, & Rangel, 2012; Lincoln & Chae, 2010; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wilcox et al., 2011).

As noted earlier, some participants seemed to focus on the psychological relational processes that informed the principles and approaches they took to mate selection, while other participants seemed to focus on personal characteristics that they viewed as important to look for in individual mate selection (Chaney & Francis, 2013). A discussion of personal characteristics will follow.

**Personal characteristics.** Often times, mate selection includes seeking out individuals with personal characteristics that the other person finds attractive or relationally beneficial (Chaney & Francis, 2013; King & Allen, 2009). These qualities and characteristic may be internal qualities such as character traits like honest or helpful or may include external physical traits such as attractiveness or a pleasing physiology (Boxer, Noonan, & Whelan, 2015; Chaney & Francis, 2013). Having a sanctified view of relationships seems to influence the personal characteristics participants sought for prior to mate selection. Several participants spoke about...
internal characteristic that centered on a deep commitment to God or being equally yoked. That is possessing a similar or complimentary commitment to a religious and spiritual life as one’s spouse (Chaney & Francis, 2013; Chaney et al., 2016; King & Allen, 2009). Examples of these types of personal characteristic criteria follow.

**Wife-(Christian, Washington):** I remember saying this to God, “I don’t care if it takes twenty years, I just want to marry the man you have for me and these are the things I like about a man . . .” and [then] I start[ed] naming these [spiritual] thing to God, [and added], “If my husband could cook that would be so nice.”

**Husband & Wife-(Christian, Florida):** W: Realizing that you both want a marriage that lasts and you want your marriage to glorify god. You want it to be an example of Christian principles and biblical principles. [Thus,] you make up your mind that my marriage is going to testify of Christ. And when you both say you are going to do that you don’t let the little things interrupt that. That is a paramount thing you want to do.

H: Marriage is for life, [until] death us do part. I married her for life, I didn’t marry her for [just] a season. I married her for life. Sometimes you have to work it out and you have to realize that [requires] a very strong commitment. You find ways to make it work [and] you don’t find ways to get out [of it]. That’s the way you do it you have to look at it from that stand point. . . . The scripture talks about not being unequally yoked with an unbeliever. That could be unequally yoked with someone that has a different belief—to the degree that you can’t raise your children the same as your conscience is dictating according to the word of God. Because they have a different slant on what [God and scripture] means. And it could cause a lot of dissension in the marriage a lot of
disharmony. When you could be at peace in the marriage if you were yoked equally in how you believed in your faith was the same.

The husband’s comments in the proceeding example, about seeking after a spouse to which you can be “equally yoked” with is noteworthy. Many couples in our sample felt it was important to find a spouse of faith. Several shared a desire to find a spouse of the same faith (religious denomination), or at least, possessing a similar faith commitment level or voluntary dedication to God, religious and spiritual principles, and teachings. These findings are consistent with other studies suggesting that often Black women and men seek for a spouse who is religious engaged and similar to them in religious commitment and participation (Chaney & Francis, 2013; Chaney et al., 2014, 2016; Ellison et al., 2010; Phillips et al., 2012).

Having a religiously inspired goal-oriented view of partner selection also seemed to be linked with couples’ feelings about who their children and others should seek after, in their selection of a spouse. Thus, the sanctified view of marriage seemed to influence not only their only feelings and standards for mate/partner selection, but also had an influence on the kind of spouses they sought for others to pursue as well.

This finding suggests some level of intergenerational influence of religion on partner and mate selection among Black religious families (Wolfinger, 2003). These findings may have meaning for Black families toward bringing together generational ties and strengthen family solidarity across multiple generations (Bengston, 2001; Wolfinger, 2003). This may of particular significance to Black families when so much of the social, political, cultural, and racial environment and contemporary media portrayals of Black families suggests anything but strong, connected, and possessing multigenerational family solidarity (Adams-Bass, Bentley-Edwards, & Stevenson, 2014; Clawson & Trice, 2000; Greenberg, Mastro, & Brand, 2002; Mastro &
Greenberg, 2000). However, as one Christian husband from Massachusetts stated, “The most important thing for me to do is to help [my daughter] find a guy better than me to marry.” We move now to a second domain in couple’s relational spirituality, that of sacred permanence.

**Sacred permanence.** (15 of 33, 45%) Sacred permanence was displayed by couples who expressed their relationship in terms of a sanctified union. Couples who perceived their marriage to be sacred or holy also manifested a deep commitment to each other, their relationship, and their families. We choose to use the expression “sacred permanence” because many of the couples in the sample spoke of their relationship commitment or durability in the sense of being connected to the divine or sacred in their marital relationships. These manifestations of sacred permanence were expressed in both beliefs and behaviors that signified profound commitment to stay with each other despite difficult challenges and relational obstacles. We will first discuss unique beliefs couples held that seemed to be linked to their desire for a sense of sacred permanence in their relationship.

**Beliefs.** (5 of 15, 33%) Beliefs were categorized by two sides of the same idea. On the one side, participants expressed the belief that God established the marriage and therefore, people should stay together or not put marriage “asunder.” This idea was accentuated on the other side, by a negative or stigmatized view of divorce (Chaney et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2012).

**Wife-(Methodist, Delaware):** “What God hath put together, let no man put asunder.” I don’t believe in divorce. Even if my husband left me, even if he divorced me, it would be legal to the world, but it wouldn’t be legal to me spiritually. I know that I would never marry again, because not men but God has engrained my marriage in me so deeply. . . . It’s so prevalent in the world, marry a couple of years, divorce, move on, with no kind of
reconciliation period or anything. . . . It’s engrained in me so deep spiritually, that even though he might have went out and did whatever, I’ll still take him back. That’s just one of my beliefs.

**HUSBAND-(Christian, Oregon):** My parents stayed together all of my life, however when they got to the 9th kid after she turned 18, that’s when they split up. That’s been a drain on the family since. Over the last 25 years or whatever it was, it’s been horrible. . . . [It] was a catastrophe mentally, especially for my sisters. You never want to put kids through that. . . [My parents] splitting up had a profound effect on me wanting to maintain my family here. [Marriage] means something. . . . So I can’t leave. My Dad [left my mom], but . . . I just hated to see her alone. I hated it. I just couldn’t do that no matter what. . . . I realize things happen, but for me that just was not in the picture [nor] in the cards.

Participants’ beliefs about the sacred nature of marriage or that “marriage means something,” seemed to be connected to why they reportedly felt strongly about keeping the marriage together. Sometimes this commitment came because of the positive example of parents’ marriages and sometimes despite their parents’ marriages (See Bengston, 2001; Wolfinger, 2003). These beliefs were also buffered by an adversarial view of divorce. These findings are significant, considering that Black marriages, in general tend to be more likely to start later, last for a shorter time, and have an increased likelihood of divorce (Chaney & Francis, 2013; Chaney et al., 2014, 2016; Dixon, 2008). We turn now to specific behaviors that couples reportedly employed to strengthen or maintain their sense of sacred permanence in marriage.

**Behaviors.** Relational behaviors that manifested a sense of sacred permanence were divided in two separate patterns of behavior that seemed to show or reflect a view of religious
and spiritual durability or relational longevity. That is—participants seem to manifest behaviors suggesting a sense of sacred permanence in two distinct ways; a) enduring and overcoming challenges together; or b) having or showing an enduring quality or disposition towards exhibiting “active love” in the relationship.

*Enduring and overcoming challenges.* (6 of 15, 40 %) Most couples experience times of trials and testing, however Black families and Black married couples may experience a disproportionate amount of challenges and trials due in large part to social, personal, cultural, institutional, systemic, and internalized racism (Chaney et al., 2014; Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989; Moore & Chaney, in preparation; Pyke, 2010; St. Jean & Feagin, 2015). These challenges and difficulties can put strain and stress on the marital relationship and can be a contributing factor in divorce and increased marital conflict, particularly within Black marital unions (Lincoln & Chae, 2010; Marks et al., 2008, 2010; Tatum, 2017). But for these couples in our sample, a willingness to fight through these challenges and difficulties together as a couple and in partnership with God, reportedly seemed to display feelings of increased permanence and relational durability.

**Wife-(Christian, Louisiana):** In marriage you have ups and downs. It’s something that is not all-day happy, but it’s a good thing. I always promise myself, when I got married, I wanted to stay with my husband to raise my kids so they could have a father at the house. Because I grew up without a father in the home. . . He left when I was 3 years old. . . I have seen my father [since], [but when] I was around my father, he wasn’t like a father. So, with marriage and [us] staying together, and praying, asking the Lord to help, it has done great for us.
Husband-(Christian, Louisiana): I think when two people are joined together in marriage, love, trust, patience and understanding, [it makes for] a strong family, [strong] father and mother. . . . My wife and I talked about this and prayed over this and worked with this and she was right there by my side [all of the time]. She didn’t turn her back on me and she very easily could have. Thank God [we] have overcome.

These proceeding examples showed how couples stayed together and worked at their relationships often in tandem with God to overcome the ups and downs of marital relationships. Again, this finding is significant in that religion and religious beliefs and behaviors seem to offer an additional resource to Black families to successfully manage their unique challenges and difficulties (Lincoln & Chae, 2010; Marks et al., 2008, 2010; Phillips et al., 2012; Wilcox et al., 2011). We turn now to a second type of behavior that helped to foster a sense of sacred permanence in relationships showing or exhibiting what one participant called, “active love.”

Active love. (8 of 15, 60%) Active love is a different type of relational behavior from enduring and overcoming challenges together. Active love was manifested by doing things with and for each other to build or foster increased feelings of love. Whereas, enduring and overcoming challenges together seemed to focus on the work of long-lasting relationships, active love seemed to focus on the feelings or expressions of love within a relationship that were used to communicate warmth, care, concern, loyalty, mutual support, and/or commitment overtime.

Wife-(Christian, Oregon): I appreciate the active love that he has shown me. He has always told me that he loved me. He’s always done things [for me] and he always gives me cards. Sometimes its five cards on my birthday. Or three cards on my birthday. [He] has always had a consistency of loving me. And I appreciate his strength with our kids. He has always, always, always been there for them [and for me]. Always.
**Husband-(Christian, Louisiana):** Marriage is a good thing, [a good] work. [You have to] keep it going. . . . I would like to be able to treat [my wife] better than I did the day before. So it doesn’t matter what the situation is, it’s a process and a goal. . . . I promise to do something to reach for that [every day, and] to keep going.

**Husband & Wife-(Christian, Louisiana):** H: This thing called love is something that is developed and earned [overtime].

W: It grows.

H: People quite often mistake infatuations for love. And maybe that’s why I love my wife more now, than I ever loved her. It’s because [love, not infatuation] is something that you work with and develop and you watch it grow. Boy after 50 years, I just say, “I’m glad I did it.”

Sacred permanence was illustrated by both the beliefs couples had about their marriages, as well as the action taken to show or manifest that kind of love. Beliefs seemed to center around the idea that “marriage means something.” Several couple felt that if God had a part in putting their union together, then it was not their place, or anyone else’s place, to divide up the marriage. This belief in the permanence of marriage was further reinforced by a religious belief that stigmatizes against divorce.

Such beliefs about marriage permanence can have both positive and negative outcomes on Black couples. For example, beliefs about the sanctity of marriage often contribute in a positive way towards an increased likelihood of exhibiting behaviors, such as, enduring and overcoming challenges together, or showing an increase of active marital love, support, and commitment overtime (Kusner et al., 2014; Sabey et al., 2014). These actions serve to strength
Black marriages and decrease the likelihood of divorce among Black couples (Chaney et al., 2016; Marks et al., 2008, 2010; Phillips et al., 2012).

On the other hand, such beliefs about the sacred permanence of marriage, can have negative relational outcomes. Cravens, Whiting, and Aamar, (2015) noted that religious views about the permanence of marital relationship can contribute to couples staying in a relationship that is potentially harmful, or even emotionally or psychologically destructive, for an extended period of time, or indefinitely, because of religious stigma often associated with divorce or separation. These findings may have significant implications for Black couples. Whereas, religious beliefs have been shown to have a positive influence on encouraging marriage among Black single and cohabitating couples (Chaney & Francis, 2013; Chaney et al., 2014, 2016; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016), rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) tend to be higher in cohabitating couples and among poorer couples (Birkley & Eckhardt, 2015; Field & Caetano, 2004). This may put additional strain on Black couples who choose to cohabit before marriage, because Black cohabitating couples tend to be at higher risks for IPV, while controlling for other risk factors (Field & Caetano, 2004). However, those levels of IPV were significantly lower for religious couples who attended religious services at least once a week (Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2002). Thus, suggesting that religious beliefs may both positive and potentially negative influences on Black couples depending on multiple factors (Dollahite & Marks, 2018; Dollahite, Marks, & Dalton, 2018; Griffith, 2010; Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2003, 2008; Pargament et al., 2005). We now move to another domain of relational spirituality that seemed to be associated with an increased view of marital sanctification, that of a willingness to sacrifice for one’s relationship.
**Willingness to sacrifice.** (16 of 33, 48%) Many couples who viewed their relationship as sacred not only expressed a religiously-inspired goal-oriented perspective to partner selection and a sense of sacred permanence, but also seemed to exhibit a willingness to sacrifice for each other and for their relationships. This willingness to sacrifice for their relationships and for their spouse’s happiness and wellbeing seemed to occur across a broad array of the participants, both in terms of religious affiliations (Christian and Muslim) as well as demographic markers such as education, SES, and geography.

One’s willingness to sacrifice seemed to come from a belief in God and in the sacredness of one’s perceived relationship with their spouse or family. Willingness to sacrifice was manifested across multiple relationship interactions and mechanisms. It is important to note that the examples that follow are not exhaustive but are representative of the different relational interactions of which may be of particular note to Black couples. As mentioned before, Black couples tend to experience a disproportionate amount of relational challenges because of the persistent negative influence of racism and societal marginalization and oppression on the Black family (Blackmon et al., 2005; Chaney et al., 2014; Dixon, 2008; Fincham et al., 2011; Lincoln & Chae, 2010; Logan, 2018; Marks et al., 2008, 2010). Several expressions of distinct ways that a willingness to sacrifice was manifested, will follow.

**Wife-(Muslim, Massachusetts): Success of the relationship and for the family**

I just think [marriage is a challenge and an opportunity]. We’ve been married 20 years, and I know for sure that, if we didn’t follow the rules of Islam, with our personalities, we are like night and day. But it’s been a blessing to have, [Islam]. It’s the key. Truly, I believe it’s the key to raising children, [and] keeping family in society.

**Husband-(Christian, Washington): Health challenges**
[Even after my serious health problems,] her concern for me is so great that she is not willing to let go. The fight is on and she not giving [up any] ground. The truth of the matter is it shows the fact that her love for me was so deep and so strong that nothing was going to interfere with me coming back to my wholeness. She nursed me back to health like [I was] a wounded child. I’m sitting here [because of her]. . . . Literally there were days that I just could not breathe. There were days I was in so much pain, [and] I asked God to take me, [to let me die]. . . . I couldn’t do it. And she stuck [with me].

**Wife-(Christian, Louisiana):** My husband came down with cancer. He had surgery. And he was very sick. I had to take off from work for 8 months to take care of him. I truly believe having the faith and taking care of [my husband, made a difference]. God knows how much I wanted to keep him here as my husband, and [as the] father of my children. [God] gave me the strength that I had, to do what I had to do, in order to be with him and take care of the household and [to] take that time off to just take care of him. And I found myself praying to God so much that I would say I prayed so hard that I feel sometimes that I could just turn around and touch God. That’s how strong I was with [God] and my faith.

**Husband & Wife-(Christian, Oregon):** *Relational conflict*

W: He would give me a hug and [we would] talk it through. He would say, “Let’s look at it like this, it’s really not that bad.” There were several instances of that. And I’d come in and I’d just be boo-hooing all over the place, and he would always find a way to make me feel better. Working together to insure that [we] would be able to weather the storm.

H: We still love each other. Even when things weren’t the best. Even when we’d fuss at each other and she’d turn on one side of the bed, [and] I’d stay on the other side of the
bed. [And one spouse would say,] “Now you don’t kick my feet. You don’t touch me. Don’t come on this side of the bed.” We still liked and still loved each other. We cried a lot, but then we always forgave each other. And we always laughed a lot [afterwards]. I think it was only the strength of our faith that allowed us to overcome a lot of it.

**Husband & Wife—(Christian, Louisiana):** Relational conflict and absenteeism due to incarceration

W: We’re just different!

H: We’re individuals. We battle, you know, and a lot of times, she don’t like the differences in me, and a lot of times, I don’t like the differences in her. But, you know, because, we both believe that marriage is a sacred vow, it’s a vow we took before the Lord, we’re [going to] honor that vow. We’re [going] go through with it. We said the same vows, “For better, for worse, in sickness and health, for rich, for poor. . . .” [But] me being incarcerated, I had to reflect on the vows I took . . . for marriage. I thought, “I [am going to] do something to make it right. I [got to] do something to let my wife know that I love her and that I’m [going] to be there for her, whatever it takes.” She might not trust me now, it might take years, and years, . . . and years before she ever trusts me again. “But, you know, whatever it takes. That’s what I’m [going to] do.”

**Husband—(Non-Denominational Christian, Louisiana):** Financial challenges

Now when everything is good, everybody is good, but when you’ve got them tough times, that’s when you know whether you’ve got a partner or not. See, the good times everybody can relax, but if you don’t have faith in them difficult times, you can’t move, and when anything becomes stagnant, it’s bad. The mind plays games, and most young people who are going up, they don’t yet understand where they need to be. So, somebody
got to say, “Listen, can we go together?” You’ve got to stay together, and it ain’t easy, but you’ve got to stay together.

**Husband-(Christian, Oregon):** (After a major financial setback caused by the husband losing his job.) I saw her fighting to be positive. Once she got a few basic questions answered. She realized that I was in a very vulnerable state at that point. She reeled in all of her rage and uncertainty, because we are in a very perilous situation right there. We [had] just bought a new home and I [was] the main source of income, [and now] one of the main sources of income was gone. . . . She was very instrumental in getting us through that whole situation and keeping what was left of my manhood. She left it intact. It was laying [there] raw and [vulnerable] and she could have of really made it a lot worse. I applaud her on how she handled that. . . . I was in bad shape right then. It was devastating. And she helped me make it through that.

**Wife-(Christian, Louisiana):** *Family life stress and child care*

W: I wouldn’t have made it if it had not been for [my husband]. Because he would get up in the middle of the night [and] he would put [the baby] to sleep on his chest. [Then] he would bring her to me so I could nurse [the baby.] It was just it was incredible. That was probably one of the most difficult things I’ve ever been through, being sleep deprived and just feeling overwhelmed. And he was right there [the whole time.]

**Wife-(Christian, Oregon):** I was raised in a home where my Mom and my Dad both were very active in their church. I saw them working together to provide for the kids and making sure that the children, were fed, clothed, and [had] the simple things in life. [They were] making sure we went to school, went to church, and learned about God. . . . They were an example of what family should be. Even with all the ups and downs, and
heartaches and sorrows, there was that unity, working together, and sacrificing. They were doing whatever [they could] do to pull the family together amongst hard times. . .

They both came from families who had that strong family bond and God was the center.

These examples highlight the multiplicity of challenge that many couples face, but are perhaps especially pertinent to Black couples and Black marriages (Blackmon et al., 2005; Dixon, 2008, 2017; Fincham et al., 2011; Lincoln & Chae, 2010; Marks et al., 2008, 2010). Participants expressed how their willingness to sacrifice for their marriage crossed over many different types of challenges and difficulties, but seemed to be for the common purpose or goal to encourage or strengthen marital and family “unity,” a “strong family bond” with “God as the center.” Sometimes participants seemed to draw an additional link between their beliefs about a sense of sacred permanence and their increased willingness to sacrifice for a marriage they perceived would last longer. We treat this overlapping finding next.

**Overlap between sacred permanence and willingness to sacrifice.** (6 of 33, 18%)

Because of one’s belief in a sanctified marriage relationship there seemed to be a profound influence on multiple relationship domains simultaneously. However, sometimes the line between two relational domains would become blurred and difficult to separate or distinguish the unique differences at play. One example of this was in the realm of sacred permanence and couple’s willingness to sacrifice for each other and for their marriages. These lines became especially blurred in times of intense interpersonal challenges or difficulties especially related with major physical and mental health challenges.

As a prime example of this type of overlap, we highlight the example of one couple who shared how they were not only still deeply committed to each other, but able to express profound
love for each other after the wife had been mal-figured following an accident with a drunk driver where the wife’s legs were completely removed.

**Husband & Wife-(LDS, Wisconsin):** H: (Referring to his wife) I still love her as [much] before she got hurt, and after she got hurt. I still love her the same.

W: (Turing to face her husband) I love you too!

H: We had good communication and good understanding [before the accident.] We have been together for a long time, going on fourteen years. But [since the accident] it’s been a challenge. [The challenge is] that she got hurt, not as far as [the] love, that has not changed.

W: Yeah, sometimes I think he does not love me, [because] I’m not whole.

H: That don’t change nothing. I don’t look at your body, I look at what’s inside of my heart and [I look] into your heart.

W: Okay. (Crying)

H: You [are] still whole to me. . . . We were married in [the] Temple, and sealed for time in all eternity, . . . so that’s sacred. . . . That’s what I want it to be, [not] ‘til death do us part.’ That’s where I want the relationship to be. I’m always going to have her back, and I want her to have mine.

In the proceeding examples (including the “Willingness to sacrifice” examples), note that each of the participants highlighted different challenges or obstacles such relational conflict, absenteeism related to incarceration, financial stress, family stress and child care concerns, as well as health related challenges. However, the common thread running through each experience is that couples seemed to be willing to make greater sacrifice for their marriages and or spouses when high levels of sacred permanence were also present.
This overall sense of sacred permanence increased the couples’ willingness to sacrifice for each other and for their relationship. This finding of mutual reciprocity between sacred permanence and spouses’ increased willingness to sacrifice was found in 6 out of the 33 couples. This further suggests that about 1:5 of the couples experienced an increase in both sacred permanence and willingness to sacrifice that went above and beyond the stated willingness to sacrifice previously mentioned in the findings (see “Willingness to sacrifice” percentages).

This finding suggests that greater marital stability and sacred relational permanence may be connected to and reciprocal of greater willingness to sacrifice for one’s relationship. That is—as one’s willingness and commitment to sacrifice for their relationship increases, this may also indicate an increase of perceived feelings of sacred permanence within black couples

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Participants who viewed their marriages as sacred not only seemed to show increase in their feeling of sacred permanence and their willingness to sacrifice for their relationships, but also sought to maintain and reinforce those beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors by consistently engaging in religiously enhanced relational maintenance or upkeep. We will address how nearly all of the couples in our sample sought to maintain and reinforce their perceptual views of a sanctified marital relationship by engaging in religious and spiritual relational maintenance.

**Religious relational maintenance.** (29 of 33, 88%) Religious relational maintenance was by far the most significant and frequent findings among the couples in our sample. Nearly 9 out 10 of the couples in the sample reportedly participated in some form of religious or spiritual

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1 These findings may be especially pertinent to couples with theological beliefs of heightened sacred permanence, such as the “time and all eternity” belief of LDS couples as well as other religious that perceive their relationships to last forever or “into the eternities. It is noteworthy that both LDS couples in the sample, independently expressed a greater willingness to sacrifice as well as mentioned their belief in a relationship permanence lasting longer than, “till death do you part.”
relational maintenance. Religious and spiritual relational maintenance was categorized by specific references to how religious or spiritual beliefs, practices and communities influenced and shaped how participants sought to strengthen, enhance, and reinforce their marital relationship as well as their beliefs about having a sanctified marital union (See Marks, 2005). This finding may be one of the most important of this study for Black religious couples, in that religious relational maintenance seemed to enhance marital satisfaction, stability, commitment, and quality (Fincham et al., 2007, 2011; Mahoney et al., 1999, 2008; Wilcox et al., 2011). And these factors have been shown to have positive and protective influence on financial, social, emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual health and wellbeing of Black individuals (Cokley et al., 2012; Lincoln & Chae, 2010; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wilcox et al., 2011). Taken together, these findings may suggest that religious Black couples who are married and practice religious and spiritual relational maintenance, may be better off relationally and in material wellbeing than other Black couples who may or may not be religious or married. Key examples of how religious beliefs, practices, and communities were employed to specifically strengthen married relations are presented next.

**Beliefs.** (13 of 29, 45%) Religious and spiritual relational beliefs seemed to center around the idea of having an upward, vertical relationship with God that also seemed to increase an outward horizontal relationship with one’s spouse (See Moore et al., 2018). This idea suggests that as a couple reportedly increases their relational intimacy with God, they perceive or experience in increase in the relational intimacy with their spouse and others. Some examples of this belief follow.

**Wife-(Christian, Washington):** I think faith in God is the most important thing to make a strong marriage. Because the covenant isn’t between you and your husband necessarily,
it’s between you and God. . . . Marriage is not a feeling, it is a covenant. . . . I think it is very important that each person not see themselves as half coming together to make a whole. But that it’s two wholes coming together to make a [better] whole. I can’t stress that enough that you know who you are in the marriage and that you be conscious of your marriage. In other words, don’t [just] move through your marriage, pay attention to your marriage. That is one of the things I can say that I made an effort in doing is paying attention to my marriage, and being conscious in everything. . . . Look for the importance, remain conscious, and remain whole [together].

**Husband-(Christian, Louisiana):** When one is a Christian and [you] believe in God, it strengthens any relationship that you might have, including your marriage. You’re going to do the right thing. You’re going to treat your fellow man right. You’re going to treat your wife right [and] you’re going to treat your children right. You’re going to [behave] as a Christian and as you learn about the Bible and what a marriage is meant to be according to the Bible, [it will change you]. If you believe that there’s a better place waiting for you after this life, then you are going to do the right things.

**Husband-(Christian, Washington):** I believe that marriage is sacred. That marriage is wonderful. That there is nothing better. You treasure your mate, and you get to know your mate. Don’t be selfish, don’t’ be in the world. Make God above all. God will glorify your marriage. Be forgiving. Be loving. Be tender and be strong. [Marriage] is pretty serious.

These beliefs seemed to center around the idea that God, religion, and spirituality provided a consistent context in which many participants viewed their marriage as “covenant” relationship, wherein God was perceived to be preeminent part of the marriage union, “above
all.” Participants also stated that because they believed marriage to be “sacred,” they also felt a moral and personal obligation to treat their spouse and others differently or to “treat them right.” It seems from our findings that individuals and couples reportedly believed that as they continued to honor their religious and spiritual beliefs that “God would glorify your marriage.” Thus, suggesting a bidirectional influence between perceived marital sanctification and relational spirituality (Mahoney & Cano, 2014; Moore et al., 2018).

Further each of these beliefs were consistently established and maintained by individual religious and spiritual practices that couples reportedly perceived to enhance their personal marital relationships. We will discuss religious and spiritual practices that participants viewed as being part of relational maintenance next.

**Practices-prayer.** (12 of 29, 41%) Spiritual and religious practice that participants seemed to employ to maintain and enhance their relationships tended to center on practices of private and couple prayer and private and couple study of holy or sacred texts such as the Bible or Koran. We will discuss prayer first.

**Husband & Wife-(LDS, Louisiana):** W: Me and my husband, we pray, and we did a lot of that. But we [also] read scriptures, and we fast, and we do a lot of that [too].

H: I pray [all of the time]. In my daily prayers, I have to really do that in order to be able to function. Not only is it about my family, about my work, my job, [and] everything else. There is something [to praying]. If you have it there in your life that will allow you to see certain things, and make sure you make right decisions.

**Wife-(Christian, Massachusetts):** I’m fairly certain that we would probably have drifted into different places [if not for prayer]. I really feel like it’s really made the difference for me. [Prayer] for me, makes a difference of life and death. What meaning does life
have without believing that we’re special, [that] we are created, and that we have relationships that are with God, and with [other] people and within ourselves? [These relationships] are just deeply, deeply meaningful and hopefully a lot of fun too. I know that [my husband] is praying for me. And I [pray for him.] [I will say.] “I was praying for you. How was your day?” He would say “Rough,” [and] I will say, “How could that be? I was praying for you.” He’ll say, “Well maybe it was better because you were praying for me.” We are both praying [for each other] and we both know that we’re praying [for each other]. And I think that that makes a big difference.

**Husband-(Methodist, Delaware):** I feel that a family that prays together stays together. You do things together that will enrich you. Faith makes a difference, it makes a strong difference. The scripture that says, “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.” Those things are central to our family.

Couples shared how prayer was used to “strengthen,” “enrich,” and “enhance” their relationships. These findings may have particular salience to Black couples because prayer had been associated with a strong positive influence on Black marriage quality as well as significant deterrent to divorce among Black couples (Beach et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2008; Taylor, 1986; Skipper et al., 2018).

**Practices-scripture study.** (11 of 29, 38%) Couples not only focused on the practice of private and couple prayers to enhance or maintain their relationships, but also reportedly employed other religious and spiritual practices as well. Just as the practice of “praying together” seemed to have an influence on maintaining and forging a stronger relationship, participants also shared that turning to the “Word of God” or holy, religious texts such as the Bible and the Koran seemed to have positive relational implications.
Husband & Wife-(Christian, Oregon): H: When you get into a marriage, there’s an expectation [to be more selfless], but my selfish-self came right on into my marriage. I had to learn how to be less selfish, and become selfless. I became more knowledgeable about what the word says about how I am to love my wife. [Scripture says to love your spouse] as God loves the church. Then you see how he loves the church and you see the sacrifices He made, and you say, “Dang, that’s hard.” But the process of becoming [like] that, is the thing that I’ve changed in the most. . . . [As] my word levels [have] increased, my capacity to love has increased. I’ve learned a lot of things just in going through life. My self-esteem, largely due to the affirmations of my wife, has increased exponentially. [And] in my happiness quotient, I’m happier now than I’ve ever been in my life. And that’s due largely in part to God, [His Word], and my wife.

W: I stuck with the things I learned. I applied them to the word [of God] and after that I just never changed. [Because of the Bible,] I understand that if I love, then I can correct. If I love, then I can expect. The greatest thing I can do is love [my husband] enough so that I have a right to make a demand on him. And I have to love the kids enough so that I have the right to make a demand on them. If you don’t think you have the right, [then] I think you have to earn that. [The Bible teach us that] God can make a demand on me because of how [much] He loves me.

Husband- (Christian, Oregon): By knowing God, and the both of us, [His word] completes us. To be able to know His word it puts us closer together and it strengthens us, we use Him in our everyday life.

Participants seemed to draw relational maintenance from religious or spiritual practices such as prayer or by studying Holy Scripture. That is—religious practices such as prayer and
scripture study seemed to provide relational skills, principles, perspectives, teachings, and attitudes that reportedly enhanced or maintained marital relationships. For example, one of the Christian husbands from Oregon spoke about how it was his belief in that as his knowledge of the Word of God increased so did capacity to love his wife. His wife talked about how her belief in scripture taught her not only to love more deeply her husband, but reportedly gave her the perspective that as she loved more intensely she could ask more of her relationship with her spouse. Finally, another Christian husband suggested that it was his belief that the “Word” or scripture enhanced their marital unity and likewise strengthened their marital bond. These findings are consistent with other findings related to religious practices such as prayer and scripture study, but may have particular application to Black couples (Marks et al., 2008; Phillips et al., 2012). Black couples tend to have a greater reliance on and propensity towards prayer and scripture study, not only as a means to strengthen and enhance relationships (Ellison et al., 2010; Lawson & Thompson, 1996; Marks & Chaney, 2006; Marks et al., 2008, 2010, 2012), but also as a means to cope with disproportionate struggles and challenges of life due to social, political, institutional, and structural racism (Chaney, 2016; Moore, in preparation; Moore & Chaney, in preparation; Skipper et al., 2018).

We turn now to participants’ perceptions of how their involvement with church or their religious community was viewed to also provide relational enrichment, reinforcement, and fortification.

**Religious communities-church.** (13 of 29, 45%) Nearly half of the participants that were coded as being involved in some form of religious or spiritual relational maintenance cited that their involvement in their church community. This is not surprising; because of the central role that church plays in the lives of many Black people (Pew Research, 2014; Taylor et al., 2004).
What is more interesting and insightful though is the role that church involvement and active participation in a religious community played in providing relational strengthening and enhancement for Black couples. Further, how church may provide both refuge for traditional Black marriages as well as a shield against the deleterious social and cultural influences of systemic racism in the United States (Call & Heaton, 1997; Dixon, 2008; Marks, 2005; Marks et al., 2008, 2010, 2012; Michael & Tuma, 1985; Mullins, 2016; Sullivan, 2001).

**Wife-(Methodist, Delaware):** I look for things to try to enhance the marriage. I look for things that I think would help us to become closer as a husband and wife. I’m always looking for a book or some seminar or some class that we can go to so that we can be closer [and] become more one. [I want to] be more intimate, [to] be more like Christ and the church. So I’m constantly looking for ways for that to happen, [to have a] new perspective.

**Husband-(Christian, Oregon):** Church has just always been my life. I’ve known church since birth. I don’t know anything else. I’m a church rat you could say. I tell people now, I am like a Samuel, just born in the temple. I just kind of feel like that’s who I am. I just think and breathe church. I guess we don’t connect sometimes with the [worldly] community like we should. We’re not a part of some events that happen in the [worldly] community. We’ve been accused at times of being different, or being kind of isolated. We do this intentionally, isolate ourselves from [the influence of the world.] [They] must think we are better than they are. It isn’t that. We just want [to] better ourselves and we want to put our children in a different environment and raise them in a different environment. Some of the stuff granted, we don’t want to be a part of, as there’s no health and there’s no strength in it as a married couple. To be truthful part of the reason we are
here today because we didn’t hang out with some of that back in the 80’s and 90's.

Because looking back at some of those [other relationship and marriages], they aren’t together themselves today . . . They [are] swinging, let’s just call it what it is. They are swinging.

**Husband & Wife-(Baptist, Louisiana):** W: [Church] brings us closer, closer to God, and [having a] closer relationship with Him, it basically brings the family closer together, too.

H: One benefit with the family, as far as the children are concerned, [church] has its impact upon their life. They learn the difference, early, between right and wrong. Whatever they have in their minds as children, they begin to grow up with it in adult life.

When I was a child, I went to church, and when I got about 18 years old, the same age [my son] is right now, I decided that I didn’t want to go, so I didn’t go. And I didn’t go back until I was about 30-something years old. So, that’s the, the impact that [church] had [initially, but] once you have something, you might leave it for a while, but you can always come back to it.

**Husband-(Christian, Louisiana):** A long time ago, and I was doing things that were not pleasing to the Lord. I was serving [man], and then trying to serve the Lord at the same time. It just didn’t work. So, I had to learn the hard way. I had to learn the hard way that I had to serve the Lord, and I had to work and be a servant to Him and not to man. I got involved in church. It changed my life, [and my marriage] . . . I got out of that [bad] relationship [and] I got involved in [Church].

For participants in our sample, church and their religious communities seemed to provide a place where they could go to have their relationships strengthened and enhanced by religious
and spiritual teachings, positive role models of successful relationships, and religious examples of people who exhibited positive relational virtues such as forgiveness, honesty, and compassion (Logan, 2018; Vaterlaus, Skogrand, & Chaney, 2015). This may be particularly important for Black couples who want to strengthen their marriages and may experience a lack of positive role models and enduring marriages outside religious communities (Ellison et al., 2010; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016).

The above examples seemed to focus on how church life changed or shaped Black couples in their daily relational life, such as providing a “new perspective” or bringing couples “closer together.” Still others focused on how their religious community or church helped them have a sense of place or being, that reportedly provided some sense of stability for them personally and for their relationships. Additional research suggests that church communities provide a pro-family, pro-marriage perspective that tends to be linked to greater marital satisfaction, enhanced marital quality, and increased marital commitment among married couples (Mahoney & Cano, 2014; Moore, in preparation; Rusu et al., 2015), as well as a buffer against racism (Chaney, 2008, 2016; Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Logan, 2018; Moore & Chaney, in preparation).

We conclude by summarizing how a sacred view of marriage influences and informs different aspects of relational spirituality and how a couple’s relational spirituality seems to enhance or influence their perceptions of marital sanctification.

**Summary Of Relational Spirituality And Relationship Domains**

Relational spirituality seemed to come out of and was strengthened and reinforced by a belief that one’s relationship was holy and sanctified. This belief seemed to have a strong influence on individual relationships and marriages in four major relational domains; a)
providing a religiously-inspired goal-oriented perspective in mate selection, b) giving couples a sense of sacred permanence, c) encouraging a willingness to sacrifice for one’s relationship, and d) fostering religiously-focused relational maintenance.

Findings suggest that one’s deeply held beliefs that their marriage or relationship was God-given, God-ordained, God created, or God-inspired seemed to have influence how and why couples lived out those beliefs and ideologies, as well as what couples did within their relationships. Similarly, relational spirituality seemed to exert a positive influence on increased feelings of believing and viewing one’s relationship as sanctified or holy, thus creating a positive reciprocal loop between religious sanctification and relational spirituality.

The seemingly bi-directionality and positive reciprocal nature of religious sanctification of marriage and relational spirituality is well represented in the comments of a husband and a wife from two different Christian couples.

**Wife-(Christian, Oregon):** Our relationship, our marriage relationship, is based upon God, and our belief in the Lord. We look to each other for strength, but we know that ultimately, God is the center of our relationship and we know that He provides everything that we need. And it’s Him that holds it together. We look to Him for direction, and for protection, for guidance. And we’ve raised our kids to believe in God, and to trust God, to have a relationship with God. Because of that, we are stronger people individually, and together, collectively. Just having that sound foundation that’s in God, and in God’s word, our family [and our marriage] is stronger.

**Husband-(Christian, Oregon):** My religious faith has really increased and enlarged in the [past few] years. The more that I study about my Creator, it really kind of outlines my role as the head of the family and what my responsibilities are. And what that means to
me, is to really embrace [my wife and family] with all the heart and all the love that I have. [Because] the [religious] life that I have, and the world that I live in, sometimes are opposing each other. Because this world tries to pull people apart, but through my religious faith, I’m able to hold my family and the people I love together.

The same husband and father later continued,

This world . . . has a way of testing if you mean what you said [when you got married]. Are you really going to live up to it? Are you going to hold [on to] your sacred vows? To me, “in sickness and in health” [requires] sanctity. . . . It [means] holding onto God’s eternal word and truth. [That] really gave me strength. Because in my own power, I could not. I did not, have the strength. But I know that I have a Creator that gives me strength, once I pray to him and let him know what help I need. [God] provides that for me.

These separate expressions from two different couples, seems to capture the feelings of many of our participants. There seemed to be a sense that the greater the perception of a marriage relationship being sanctified, the greater the desire to preserve and maintain such a belief by their actions and behavior became. Thus, marital sanctification seemed to spur a sense of greater relational spirituality—and greater relational spirituality seemed to enhance greater marital sanctification. In a contemporary world that often tries “to pull people apart,” Black couples may find particular strength “through [their] religious faith” to “hold [their] family and the people [they] love together.”

**Discussion**

This study sheds additional light on specific mechanisms and processes in religious couples regarding both psychological concepts of marital sanctification and relational spirituality. This study expands on concepts discussed in previous research, including, but not
limited to definitions and ideas discussed about the relational spirituality in a psychological framework (Mahoney & Cano, 2014; Tomlinson, Glenn, Paine, & Sandage, 2016). Previous research had called for exploration and identification of specific spiritual constructs and mechanisms that foster relationship quality (Mahoney, 2013; Sabey et al., 2014). Yet this area of study has been particularly lacking in better understanding the role and function of marital sanctification and relational spirituality in Black married couples (Fincham et al., 2011; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). This is where the current study adds to gap in existing literature and makes a contribution to expanding our knowledge of relational strengths of healthy Black marriages and couples. Mahoney and Cano (2014) suggest that relational spirituality and marital sanctification are “emerging subfields” in the realm of family science and family psychology (p. 585). The authors also encouraged the need for further research to explore and identify relational constructs and mechanisms related to marital sanctification and relational spirituality.

Our findings further expand upon current understandings and move beyond existing quantitative links and associations to provide in-depth, close, and nuanced understanding of the whys and hows of religious influence in the lives of Black married couples. We have sought to provide specific examples of individual and relational spiritual cognitions, processes, and relational practices that seemed to have a positive influence on relational quality, commitment, and longevity (Phillips et al., 2012; Rusu et al., 2015; Sabey et al., 2014). These findings may have unique salience to Black individuals who experience tremendous perpetual relational obstacles and challenges due in large part to the rape, plunder, and enslavement of the Black body and mind (Chaney, 2016; Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Coates, 2015; Moore in preparation; Moore & Chaney, in preparation; Pyke, 2010; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000).
Since the days of slavery, Black couples have experienced a disproportionate amount of relational challenges. In the wake of such challenges, many Blacks over time have turned to religion as a source of strength and something of a temporal or day to day salvation from the ravenous and lingering influence of institutional, cultural, and systemic racism (Chaney, 2016; Logan, 2018; Marks et al., 2010; Moore & Chaney, in preparation; Skipper et al., 2018). Religion, for many was simply a nicety but survival. Perhaps this is part of the why behind the most religious racial group in America (Pew Research 2009, 2014). Additionally, couples who tend to report higher levels of religious attendance, salience, and commitment are also more likely to view their relationships for an increasingly sanctified perspective (DeMaris et al., 2010; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009).

Marital sanctification has been linked with increased marital quality in both Black and other racial couples (Fincham et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2008). Despite expansive qualitative and quantitative work on marriages in general, Black marriages continue to be underrepresented in scholarly research (Dixon, 2008; Marks et al., 2008, 2010; Phillips et al., 2012). In addition, the influence of religion on married couples continues to be under researched and under studied (Mahoney et al., 2003). The lack of research studies focused on religion has been noted, and is particularly conspicuous in light of the self-reported religiosity of Americans in general (Parke, 2001, 2017) and Black Americans specifically (Fincham et al., 2011; McAdoo & Younge, 2009; Pew Research, 2014; Taylor et al., 2004).

Black Americans tend to report higher levels of religiosity than non-Hispanic Whites and other minorities (Pew Research, 2014; Taylor et al., 2004). Despite higher levels of religiosity among other Americans, Blacks have lower marriage rates, higher cohabitation rates, increased non-marital birth rates, higher levels of single parenthood and increased divorce rates over non-
Hispanic Whites and other minorities (Blackmon et al., 2005; Chaney & Francis, 2013; Dixon, 2008; Raley, Sweeney, & Wondra, 2015). These inverse relationships between higher levels of religiosity and decreased levels of family stability and sustainability may be influenced by several confounding factors.

Black Americans are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed than other racial groups (Seitz, 2009). When Blacks are employed, they often make less money, sometimes far less than non-Hispanic Whites with similar experience and job descriptions (Blau & Kahn, 2017). In addition, Blacks are more likely to be targets of racial discrimination and racism than are other minorities, and much more likely than non-Hispanic Whites (Fredrickson, 2015; Utsey, Chae, Brown, & Kelly, 2002). Black women and men are particularly disadvantaged when it comes to potential marriage opportunities (Simpkins, 2013). Pinderhughes (2002) notes an alarming unbalanced sex ratio between “marriageable” Black women and “marriageable” Black men. These disturbing trends of less available marriageable Black men compared to marriageable Black women are further exacerbated by additional confounding factors.

For example, Black men being perceived to be more likely to get in trouble at school, less likely to have good grades, and more far likely to get arrested for criminal activity at a younger age than other young men of different races (Alexander, 2012; Ferguson, 2010). Edelman (2007) suggest that from many Black males there seems to be a pipeline from the cradle to the cell, further reducing the marriageable pool of Black men. A full 60% of Black males who dropout of high school will spend time in jail (Coates, 2015). Interpersonal, structural, and systemic racism may also further isolate Black women and Black men from opportunities toward successful marriage relationships (Chaney, 2016; Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Johnson, & Loscocco, 2015).
Despite perpetual racism, and the consistent plunder of Black bodies, many Black single emerging adults have positive feelings toward marriage, desire marriage, and seek for successful, happy, thriving marital unions (Coates 2015, Curran et al., 2010; Dixon, 2008; Manning et al., 2007; Marks et al., 2008, 2010; Phillips et al., 2012; Simpkins, 2013). Research suggests that religion and religious commitment and engagement can provide a call away from attitudes and actions that can be potentially destructive to family life and marital success for many Black Americans (Moore, in preparation; Mullins, 2016; Sullivan, 2001; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016). Whereas much of contemporary culture and popular media points Blacks away from marriage and family life, religion and deep spirituality seem to run counter to the siren call of the “street life.” Religion offers instead a “code of decency” that provides would-be couples with beliefs, structures, and social support networks that encourage marriage and relational success (Anderson, 1999; Ellison et al., 2010; Moore, in preparation; Wilcox et al., 2011).

In addition, religion may provide a new pro-family, pro-God success frame—especially for Black men, which may serve to buffer some of anti-family mentality of the street life (Ellison et al., 2010; Moore, in preparation; Perry, 2013; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). Additionally, deeply held religious beliefs may provide teachings, skills, and relational examples and role models that further encourage positive relationship formation and maintenance (Burr et al., 2012; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007). The present study suggests that religious beliefs and behaviors that promote and encourage greater marital sanctification, and may also aid individuals in a) goal-oriented partner selection, b) increase positive feelings of sacred relational permanence, c) encourage a willingness to sacrifice for the relationship, and d) provide a structure that enhances and upholds religiously-inspired relational maintenance. A discussion of each of these relational domains within the context of marital sanctification and relational spirituality will follow.
Goal-oriented Partner Selection

Couples who perceived their relationship as sacred or holy seemed to be influenced by a religious or spiritual desire or goal in how or why they sought to select a potential marriage partner. The view that marriage is sacred seemed to not only influence the relationships couples pursued for themselves, but also the relationships individuals and couples sought for others, including their children. These beliefs about the sacredness of marriages seemed to have an influence on how and why couples pursued mate and partner selection (Chaney & Francis, 2013).

Couples who were pursuing marriage or remarriage with a sanctified view of relationships, seemed be endowed with a unique set of principles and standards, as well as a pre-marriage perspective that influenced the processes and personal characteristics couples utilized in their dating and courting experiences (Chaney & Francis, 2013; Collins & Perry, 2015; Perry, 2013; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994). This seems to be true for both Black women and men (Chaney & Francis, 2013; Collins & Perry, 2015; Perry, 2013). Additional empirical research suggests that effective partner selection may enhance the likelihood for happier successful relationships as well as decrease the likelihood of divorce (Braithwaite et al., 2015).

Creating A Sense Of Sacred Permanence Within Marital Relations

A sanctified view of marriage also seemed to shape the ways couples viewed the longevity or stability of their relationships, which may have particular salience to Black couples who are greater risk of marital failure, disillusionment, and divorce (Dixon, 2008, 2017; Glenn, 1998; Johnson & Loscocco, 2015; Logan, 2018). Couples who held strong religious views about the sacredness of their relationships seemed to enjoy a sense of sacred permanence to their relationship. These views about the sacred nature of marital relations served to reinforce positive
relational commitment through complimentary beliefs (e.g., “What God hath put together, let not man put asunder” (Matt 19:6) and a negative view of divorce), as well as supportive behaviors (e.g., enduring and overcoming challenges together and engaging in “active love” between spouses). This sense of sacred permanence has been shown to be linked with increased marital satisfaction and marital quality as well as encouraging couples to pursue marriage rather than temporary or transitory type relationships (Brelsford, 2013; Rusu et al., 2015).

Willingness To Sacrifice For The Success And Wellbeing Of The Relationship

Having a sense of sacred permanence or durability to one’s relationship may also serve to increase a spouse’s willingness to sacrifice for the success and wellbeing of the relationship (Fincham et al., 2007; Van Lange et al., 1997). This sense of willingness to sacrifice or invest in the success of the relationship, seemed to have positive and protective influence across many relationship experiences (e.g. family conflict, stress, and finances). These challenges often increase relational stress or exacerbate the likelihood of divorce and dissolution among couples (Mahoney et al., 2008). Thus, the present findings of religion’s influence on a willingness to sacrifice for one’s relationship, may be beneficial to Black couples hoping to marry. This may be especially important, because recent divorce statistics among African Americans often cite economic distress and financial challenges among the leading causes of divorce (Raley et al., 2015). Thus, this sense of a willingness to sacrifice may have profound positive implications for Black couples. Black couples are more likely to experience significant wage disparities as part of the cultural, social, political, and financial challenges due to personal, social, institutional, systemic and cultural racism among Black Americans (Chaney, 2016; Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Coates, 2015; Moore in preparation; Moore & Chaney, in preparation; Pyke, 2010; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000).
Further, findings from this study seem to suggest that individual and couples who have a deep, mutually-shared, religious commitment, as well as a sanctified view of one’s relationship, were more likely to exhibit a willingness to sacrifice for their relationship (Farrell et al., 2015; Fincham et al., 2007, 2011). Likewise, for some of the participants an increased willingness to sacrifice was tied to increased feelings of sacred permanence and relational durability.

Additional research suggests that an increased willingness to sacrifice for one’s relationship was also associated with increased marital sanctification, as well as increased marital happiness, commitment, and stability (Farrell et al., 2015; Lemay & Venaglia, 2016). Taken together with other supportive research, findings from this study suggests that a willingness to sacrifice for one’s marriage may serve as an additional buffer against divorce among African Americans, compared with less religious or non-religious couples (Wilcox & Dew, 2016).

**Religiously-focused Relational Maintenance**

Further, it is likely that couples who a) believe their marriages are sacred, b) utilize a religiously-focused goal-oriented pattern for partner selection, c) feel a greater sense of sacred relational permanence, and d) are willing to sacrifice for the success and wellbeing of their relationship; may also be more likely to engage in and reap the benefits of religious and spiritual relational maintenance in their own relationships and marriages. Religious relational maintenance, has the potential to connect individual spouses and couples to additional resources (i.e., belief, practices, and communities) that may serve to strengthen marriages and marital relationships (Mahoney, 2013; Mahoney et al., 2008; Marks, 2005; Marks et al., 2008, 2010; Phillips et al., 2012). These additional resources may have many positive implications for establishing, maintaining, and improving marital quality, stability, and commitment within
marital relationships as well. It may also be that marital sanctification further enhances and is enhanced by relational spirituality, whereas relational spirituality may deepen the perception of one’s marriage being sacred and, if sacred, worth maintaining, improving, and enhancing (Mahoney & Cano, 2014; Van Lange et al., 1997).

**Limitations And Future Directions**

Although this study highlights many key concepts and ideas that may clarify or provide insight into how religion may influence Black couples in the United States, this study also is limited in a few key ways. First, the sample is unique in that participants self-reported as being both highly religious as well as experiencing high levels of relational happiness prior to the study. Thus, the findings of this study emphasize positive relational outcomes of religious involvement. However, these findings cannot be generalized, especially not to less religious marriages or marriages that self-report lower levels of relational happiness. Second, it is possible that Black married couples may experience religious participation and commitment in different ways than Black cohabitating, single, divorced, or homosexual couples or other racial minority couples. Further research notes that although religious beliefs, practices, communities often foster positive outcomes for married couples or married couples with children, positive relational outcomes may or may not always transfer to dissimilar family structures and relationships (Bengston, Putney, & Harris, 2013; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2016). In addition, some individuals and/or family structures and relationships may receive little or no observable benefits from religious association (Booth et al., 1995), and some may experience negative associations and outcomes (Schnabel, 2016; Simonič, Mandelj, & Novsak, 2013).

Despite these limitations, this study provides unique insight into the lives of highly religious, married Black couples and expands upon previously studied concepts and processes.
Thus, providing an expanded lens for understanding the potentially positive role religion may play in the lives of Black women and men, as well as Black couples, marriages, and families. Further research should continue to expand upon the unique psychological mechanisms and processes identified in this study. Future research could examine the potential bi-directionality of marital sanctification and relational spirituality suggested by the findings in this study. Additionally, future research should examine psychological mechanisms and processes such as multiple perceptual constructs for marital sanctification, as well as the effective role such perceptions and constructs may play in enhancing or influencing religious goal-oriented partner selection, perceptions of relational permanence or durability, as well as individual and couple-level willingness to sacrifice for relational wellbeing and success. Finally, additional research should quantifiably examine the potentially influence of religious relational maintenance on marital outcomes such as marital satisfaction, marital quality, marital stability, and marital commitment, perhaps especially for Black couples who, while having positive feelings towards marriage (Simpkins, 2013) may feel like happy, committed, long-lasting marriages are simply out of their reach (Dixon, 2008; Perry, 2013).
References


MARITAL SANCTIFICATION AND RELATIONAL SPIRITUALITY


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Contemporary narratives, understandings, and media portrayals often depict Black men in a negative light (Chaney, 2009; Fujioka, 2005; McClure, 2006; Mincey, Alfonso, Hackney & Luque, 2014, 2015; Perry, Smith, & Brooms, 2014). Negative stereotypes and prevailing cultural norms often highlight only the deficiencies of the Black Male, with little or no mention of any positives, except their ability to perpetuate their seed, which too often comes with a pejorative connotation. Black men are often perceived as hyper-sexual, or as sexual conquest seekers, who come in, “shack up,” and at the first sign of commitment to a relationship, or children, they are off to another conquest (Slatton & Spates, 2016).


The Black male. A demographic. A sociological construct. A media caricature. A crime statistic. Aside from rage and lust, he is seldom seen as an emotionally embodied person. Rarely a father. Indeed, if one judged by popular and academic coverage, one might think the term “black fatherhood” is an oxymoron. In their parenting role, African American men are viewed as verbs not nouns; that is, it is frequently assumed that Black men father children but seldom are fathers. Black men have become the symbol of fatherlessness.

(p. 1)

In the context of family life and relationships, the Black male is often depicted as a fly-by-night sexual partner, or as a deadbeat father, who is not only physically absent, but emotionally and psychologically amiss from their children and/or their partners (Perry, 2013; Perry et al., 2014; Slatton & Spates, 2016). Few images and stories reveal or tell a different story. Although fatherlessness is a concern among African American scholars, and society, fatherlessness is a
larger American problem and not exclusively an African American challenge (Daniels, 2000; Gavanas, 2010). To date, few academic studies highlight the strengths of Black men who are committed, dedicated, and present as both husband and father. Seldom is the story, or the statistic, shared about Black men and fathers who are not only physically present, but provide dynamic, engaged, socially, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually salient leadership and parenthood.

The conspicuous dearth of positive narratives in literature, media, and research about the Black male, continues to perpetuate the danger of a single story—that of Black male pathology, deficiency, deviance, defiance, or as deadbeat dads (McClure, 2006; Slatton & Stapes, 2016). Nigerian novelist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) shares the danger of a single story, and suggests that all human beings are made of multiple stories, narratives, experiences, roles and identities. This is true of the contemporary and social-historical view of the Black Male, as well (Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Mincey et al., 2014).

The claim to nuanced and varied identities, roles, and narratives among Black males is substantiated by research as well. Several studies substantiate the idea of multiple roles and identities attributed to and by Black males about their own perceptions of masculinity and fatherhood (Chaney, 2009; Hammond & Mattis, 2005; Hunter & Davis, 1994; McClure, 2006; Mincey et al., 2014, 2015; Perry, 2013, Perry et al., 2014). Qualitative and quantitative research suggests that Black males have to learn to negotiate multiple identities and roles, depending on the amalgamation of three socially constructed domains—race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1989; McClure, 2006; Mullins, 2014; Rothenberg, 2004; Slatton & Spates, 2016).

However, one area of research that is still largely lacking is the role of religion in the life of Black men. As well as the potentially positive role of religion in defining and influencing Black masculinity and fatherhood. This “gap” in the literature is surprising, considering the role

The present study seeks to take an in-depth qualitative exploration into the lives of 33 married Black men and their wives ($N = 66$) and examines the processes and meanings of the role religion plays in influencing positive images and ideals of their own perceptions of masculinity and fatherhood. The present study employs a strengths-based approach to Black masculinity and fatherhood using an exemplary sample (Damon & Colby, 2013) and will primarily seek to explore the lived experiences of religious Black men and their wives, from around the United States. The study focuses on how religion may influence Black men and women’s conceptualizations of manhood and fatherhood. Despite the conspicuous lack of strength-based research regarding the Black male, even less is known about the specific role he plays within the context of marriage and family. As such, this present study seeks to provide balanced richness, texture, and nuances, by analyzing and supplementing the voices and experiences of Black men and their wives as well as an effort to understand a different side to Black masculinity and fatherhood.

**Literature Review**

Much has been said and written about the Black male. However, much of what has been presented, shows only a limited, or one-sided negative view, of the Black male (Chaney, 2009; Fujioka, 2005; McClure, 2006; Mincey et al., 2014, 2015; Perry, 2013; Perry et al., 2014). Across the lifespan, negative messages and stereotypes stymie the Black male. Negative messages about what it means to be a Black male, come from society at large, popular media, social media, public schools, and penitentiaries.

Research suggests that males in general, are more likely to get in trouble for anti-social behavior in schools, from grade school to high school, than are females (Ferguson, 2010).
However, Black males are particularly susceptible to be considered “trouble makers” and are much more likely to be disciplined and suspended, than non-Hispanic white males, and are more likely to be incarcerated than other minority males, even for similar offenses (Alexander, 2012; Ferguson, 2010; Kozol, 2012).

Additional research suggests that Black males are among the greatest target of racial attacks and overt racism, which further sells the psychologically dangerous one-sided message of the prison bound American Black male (Alexander, 2012; Bush, 2011; Chaney, 2009). Institutional, structural, and cultural racism further exacerbate the negative messages for Black males and often equate to socio-cultural disadvantages that hinder educational mobility; foster severe inequality in wealth and wage differentials; and offer limited, marginal, or no health care; as well as limit or prohibit political power and positions (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Chaney, 2009, 2016; Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Kozol, 2012). Black males also have disproportionate, and exorbitantly high likelihood of arrest, are less likely to be acquitted, and tend to receive harsher penalties for the same crime as Whites. They are also much more likely of getting the death penalty for violent crimes, as opposed to Whites, and even other minorities (Alexander, 2012).

Reinforced across time and from multiple sources, such experiences send a consistent negative message about what it means to be a Black male. When positive messages about Black masculinity are presented, they often come as a double-edged sword. For example, Ferber (2007) notes that while many media and societal message often highlight athletic prowess with a positive association for Black masculinity, praising the Black male body and skill, they negatively offer only one message for Black males.

Much of media, and particularly sports media, send the message to Black males that manliness is measured in muscles, might and speed, while saying nothing of his mind, heart, or spirit (Ferber, 2007; Ferguson, 2010; Sailes, 2017). Additionally sports media, including films
like *Blindside*, *Glory Road*, and *Blue Chip* suggests to Black males, that sports provide a legitimate escape or alternative from the life of the street. Regardless of the messages, each of these forms of media suggest a powerful consistent message about Black masculinity, most often in negative or limited ways (Chaney, 2009; Fujioka, 2005; McClure, 2006; Mincey et al., 2014, 2015; Perry, 2013; Perry et al., 2014; Sailes, 2017). We turn now, to a discussion of other aspects of masculinity, in general and Black masculinity, specifically.

**Masculinity And Black Masculinity**

Many of the negative views of the Black male, be they from media or society, come from a long history of social, political, institutional, cultural and systemic racism (Chaney, 2009, 2016; Harrell, 2000; Rogers & Bowman, 2003). Further exacerbation of the negative persona of Black masculinity and Black fatherhood, comes from interpersonal, social, and institutional racial oppression, stigmatization, and marginalization of the Black male. Negative views about Black males have also been perpetuated into contemporary society by the rape, plunder, and victimization of the Black body spurred on by police profiling and brutality, mass incarceration and other forms of institutional racism (Alexander, 2012; Barthelemy, Chaney, Maccio, & Church, 2016; Chaney, 2016; Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Coates 2015).

The tragic and onerous perpetual view of the Black male as a Brute—a dangerous, violent, and hypersexualized, sub-human, that needed to be controlled or subjugated, provided the single narrative that fueled the American economy for more than 250 years of Black slavery (Coates, 2015; Collins, 2004; Harrell, 2000; Rogers & Bowman, 2003; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). The supposed need for the shackles and chains of slavery still feeds much of contemporary understanding about Blacks in general, but Black males in particular (Harrell, 2000; Rogers & Bowman, 2003; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). Understanding the Brute mentality of the Black male helps situate and triangulate the socio-historical context for a discussion of where
Black masculinity fits with the larger discourse on masculinity in general (Rogers & Bowman, 2003; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016; Ward, 2005).

Traditional views of masculinity tend to focus on what Connell (2002) refers to as “hegemonic masculinity.” Essentially hegemonic masculinity refers to everything that is not female or feminine and is often categorized as being material successful, in control, emotionally distant, independent, domineering, competitive, heterosexual and White (Connell, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; McClure, 2006; Mincey et al., 2014, 2015; Speer, 2001). More traditional views of masculinity and Black masculinity, have often highlighted the more negative views of manhood (e.g., men being taught or socialized to emotionless or stoic or not conveying any emotion that could be perceived as male weakness or vulnerability (Wallace, D., 2007; Wallace, M., 2002).

Black males who hold more socially-forced views of hegemonic masculinity tend to have greater risk of mental health challenges, exhibit riskier sexual behavior, manifest an avoidance or unwillingness to receiving or seeking mental or physical health care, tend to have more stress, greater likelihood of depression and more likely to exhibit more expressions of anger and violence (Hammond, 2012; Levant, Wimer, Williams, Smalley & Noronha, 2009; Levant, Wimer, & Williams, 2011; Mahalik, Pierre, & Wan, 2006). Black masculinity researchers are careful to point out the institutional and societal marginalization of Black men and the desire of many Black males to distinguish themselves from the negative and predominately White view of the prototypical hegemonic masculinity (Chaney, 2009; Griffith & Cornish, 2018; McClure 2006; Mincey et al., 2014, 2015).

In contrast to White or hegemonic masculinity, Black masculinity tends to focus on the role of identity definitions and the impact or influence of those definitions on both private and public beliefs and behaviors. These beliefs and behaviors provide a means of making meaning in
one’s daily life and one’s identity (Chaney, 2009; Griffith & Cornish, 2018; Hammond, 2012, Hammond & Mattis 2005; McClure 2006).

Identity theory (McCall & Simmons, 1966) suggests that individuals, in this case men, receive positive and negative appraisals from both their own internal beliefs about who they are and their own perceptions and definitions of their identity as a male (Gough, Robertson, & Robinson, 2016; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Identity theory also suggests, in addition to internal beliefs and identities about manhood, individuals also receive positive and negative appraisals from the society and cultural in which they live (Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Griffith & Cornish, 2018; Stryker & Burke, 2000). These constant internal and external appraisals, help to shape and inform an individual’s views of masculinity, as well as reinforce and challenge personal and societal beliefs about what makes a man.

Additional research suggests that Black masculinity and perceptions of manhood come from personal, family, and structural relationships with others, institutions, and societal trends, conditions, and messages (Griffith & Cornish, 2018; Hammond & Mattis, 2005). For this paper, we will use a combination of Gough, Robertson, and others psychological definition of Black masculinity, to include a) the internal intrapersonal characteristics that one possess, internalizes, and then uses to inform their own perceptions of manhood (Gough et al., 2016; Griffith & Cornish, 2018; Robinson & Robertson, 2014); and b) the external local, regional, and global social and structural relationships that form perceptions of manhood and manliness (Griffith & Cornish, 2018; Robertson, Williams, & Oliffe, 2016).

We define manhood as the social status and aspirational identity of manhood—that is the personal characteristics, social manifestations, and fulfilment of gendered roles perceived as being part of being a contemporary male in a particular culture or setting. Because our research focus is, in part, on the role of men in a heterosexual religious family environment, we will
define manhood in that context and in fulling those type of roles (e.g., a father figure who is caring, nurturing, involved, as well seeking to provide for the material wellbeing of spouse and children) (Griffith & Cornish, 2018; Mincey et al., 2014; 2015; Perry, 2013; Petts, Shafer, & Essig, 2018).

**Religion And Black Masculinity**

Persistently, Black males are presented with two alternative places in society, the thug who will spend most of his time in prison, or the player who will spend most of his time in sports (Jeffries, 2009; May, 2009a, 2009b; Messner, 1992; Perry, 2013). Seldom is Black masculinity presented as anything other than within these limited domains. This is to say nothing of the Black male filling a potentially positive role in marriage or family contexts.

Media and cultural mores often send mixed messages to Black men about their masculinity in relation to marriage and fatherhood (McClure, 2006; Perry, 2013; Slatton & Spates, 2016). However, research suggests that there is an increased likelihood of marriage and engaged fatherhood for religious men (Petts et al., 2018). Black men, particularly and other minority men, in general, seem to benefit from the pro-family beliefs, practices, and social and community support of religious institutions and norms (Coley, 2001; Collins & Perry, 2015; Perry, 2013; Petts et al., 2018; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016). Despite, empirically established relationships and correlations, little is known about how, or why, religion influences men’s views of themselves and their own perceptions of their own masculinity, or how religion may influence their roles and identities as husbands and fathers.

Given the empirical evidence that African Americans rate higher than Non-Hispanic whites, and other minorities in nearly every category of religious involvement and belief (Pew Research, 2009; 2014; Taylor et al., 2004), and that religion seems to have a relatively strong influence for Black males in promoting “decency” (Anderson, 1999; Wilcox & Wolfinger 2007,
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2008), it is surprising that social science literature seems to have a conspicuous gap in research examining the role that religion may play in defining masculinity for Black men. Hopkins (2007) notes the significant lack of research focused on religious influences in most studies relating to masculinity in general, across different social science domains and makes a call to future research to explore the influence of religion on masculinity.

Other studies, involving predominately White participants, note that more conservative religions tend to promote more traditional roles for men and women (Alesina, Giuliano, & Nunn, 2013). This may have both positive and negative influences on religious adherents for both males and females. On one hand, religious belief may possibly give rise to more male domination and female subjection and abuse in some instances (Schnabel, 2016; Simonič, Mandelj, & Novsak, 2013). While, on the other hand, religion may promote men to give up the “street life” in favor of the family life (Ebstyne King, 2003; King, 2003; Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). In a similar and related vein, little is known about the role religion plays in shaping and forming masculine identities relating to fatherhood.

Religion And Black Fatherhood

For many men, the contemporary ideal of the “New Father” figure, includes being both a provider (i.e., financially) and a nurturer (i.e., “Daddy” and caregiver). McGill (2014) found that for many men, this idea of the “New Father” is important to them, and they work hard to both provide financially, and to have a positive relationship with their children at home. However, this may be more of a challenge for Black males than for White males. Black males experience much more social and economic disadvantages than White males because of prevailing social, cultural, systemic, and institutional racism (Chaney, 2009, 2016; Williams & Collins, 2001). However, more than any other institution, many religions seem to stress the importance of males playing the role of the “new Dad” ideal of provider, nurturer and spiritual leader, in the context of family
life (Ellison & George, 1994; Marks & Dollahite, 2001; Petts et al., 2018; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016). This seems to be true of Black fathers as well (Perry, 2013; Petts et al., 2018).

Despite the growing body of literature dedicated to fathers and fatherhood, one area that remains understudied, is the role of religion in the lives of men and particularly men who are fathers. Research indicates that most Black families live in urban areas in the United States and are often disproportionately negatively affected by lower income, poor quality education, substandard housing, and diminished opportunities for gainful employment (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Rugh & Massey, 2010). These factors, and many others, may contribute to Black and other minority families’ tendency to be more involved in religious beliefs, practices, and communities (Marks et al., 2005; Marks et al., 2010). Wilcox and Wolfinger (2007) suggest that Black families, particularly in urban environments, might be drawn to religion and religious beliefs because religious institutions provide a bulwark of communal and interpersonal resources and social networks that provide social, emotional, and relational help, as well as provide a significant source for both social and spiritual capital among religious individuals and families. Furthermore, research suggests that religious resources and institutions may be more influential for minority men than minority women (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008).

Specifically, Black men may benefit from the social, relational, cultural, and interpersonal aspects of religion. Whereas, there are more institutions, social networks, and societal stereotypes, that encourage women toward family and relational success and permanence (Strazdins & Broom, 2004). Religion is one of the only remaining institutions that provides such a message for men (Wilcox & Bartkowski, 2005). Wilcox and Wolfinger (2008) further stated, “Indeed, religious institutions appear to cultivate a distinctive form of masculinity, achieved through successful performance of spousal and parental roles, rather than through professional, athletic, or leisure roles” (p. 831). It seems that for Black men especially, religious socialization
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and religious beliefs are particularly important in forming a sense of success through family relationships and family responsibilities. Although many religious traditions consistently emphasize the importance of both men and women in religious family responsibilities (Boyatzis, Dollahite, & Marks, 2006), Black fathers may benefit even more from association and engagement in religious experiences, insofar as their religious experiences center them on behaviors and attitudes that promote positive family attitudes and behaviors (Edin & Kefalas, 2011; Skipper, Moore, & Marks, 2018).

However, despite both qualitative and quantitative findings suggesting a salient connection between many religious Black men and their families, little is known about how religion influences these connections, or how and why these connections are established, maintained, and personified. Similarly, little is known about how and why these ideals are conceptualized and reinforced by religious Black men and women. Additionally, little is known about the processes and mechanisms for formulating ideals and positive identities of pro-family life, within the context of Black masculinity and Black fatherhood. While several articles note the lack of literature surrounding Black families and religion overall (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010; Fincham, Ajayi, & Beach, 2011), others highlight the need to examine the role religion in the lives of black men in particular, especially in relation with his spouse and children (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008). Yet few studies to date have done so (Chaney, 2009; Marks et al., 2008, 2010, Perry, 2013; Perry, S., 2015; Wilcox & Wolfinger 2007, 2008). This is where the present study adds to the current body of research and seeks to partially fill the conspicuous gap in the literature and provide a unique and important perspective, by looking at Black masculinity and fatherhood from a strengths-based or capabilities-focused approach using the voices of Black men and women.
Methods

Using in-depth interviews and qualitative scientific analysis, this study will examine the role religion plays in the lives of 33 men and their wives \((N = 66)\) relating to perceptions of masculinity and fatherhood. The study examines the lived experience of exemplary, highly religious Black American men and their wives to provide a strengths-based approach regarding how and why religion may influence their masculinity and fatherhood within the context of family life. Damon and Colby (2013) suggest using an exemplary sample when trying to see how the phenomenon in question functions within a particular context. This maybe especially helpful when those who are most involved, invested, and interested (i.e., the sample) intersect with the construct in question. Empirical quantitative data suggest that there is a relationship between the role that religion may play in shaping and forming masculine ideals and responsibilities, as well as encouraging pro-family engagement for Black men, in particular (Ellison et al., 2010; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). This study seeks qualitatively explore associations and correlations to discover how and why those processes may function in the lives of highly religious Black men and their families from across the United States.

Sample

Using the *African American Families of Faith* Data Set, a smaller subsection of the national *American Families of Faith Project* \((N = 200\) families), the sample consisted of in-depth interviews with multi-denominational Christian and Muslim Blacks in the U.S. The sample consists of 33-heterosexual married couples who self-identified as Black or African American \((33\) couples, \(N = 66\)). Most of the participant couples were from various Christian faith backgrounds and affiliations, including Catholic, Protestant, LDS, and Non-Denominational \((N = 31)\). Due to the difficulty of accessing Black Muslim couples in the U.S., only 2 couples were from Muslim religious traditions. All participants were purposely sampled (Denzin & Lincoln,
1994) from across the United States, including respondents from California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Ohio, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin.

On average, couples in this study had been married an average of 20 years, and had an average of 3.3 children, with all couples having at least one child. Husbands mean age was 56 and wives mean age was 54. Educational attainment varied from no high school diploma, to advanced graduate degrees. Individuals were selected based on both spouses self-reporting high levels of belief in and commitment to religiosity, as well as self-reporting to be in happy marriages and family situations. Participants also had to be similarly rated high in both religious importance and commitment, and positive family functioning by clergy and institutional gatekeepers. It is noteworthy that although the sample was purposively sampled (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994), where both spouses were strongly committed each other and to the religious faith and beliefs, over 50% (17 of 33) of the couples did not come from such a home themselves. That is to say, that over half of the couples came from a home where either one, or both of their parents were either not committed to their marriage/family, or manifested weak or non-commitment to religious beliefs or behaviors. Further, the sample was characterized by a) religious diversity (particularly among Christianity) b) a wide range of socioeconomic and educational levels, c) a generally high level of religious commitment (as reported by referring clergy and the participants), and (d) geographical diversity.

Data Collection

After informed consent forms were acquired and basic demographic information was gathered, “intensive interviewing” was employed with each couple in their home to better “combine interview with observation” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 27). Interviews were conducted in the presence of both the husband and the wife and each participant was asked to respond to the same question in turn. Preferential order was consistently altered to allow each
spouse to have the first response to different questions. Some research suggests that interviewing couples together may limit the authenticity of individual respondents, particularly on sensitive or potentially charged family topics and issues (Seymour, Dix, & Eardley, 1995). However, additional research suggests that interviewing couples together provides a richness and depth about the interactive processes of couples that may not be viewed or analyzed in other ways (Marks et al., 2008). Additionally, the interviews reflect both divergent and convergent examples and counterexamples and experiences, from the couples on the same questions, further suggesting that while some may have felt inhibited to give authentic responses, most apparently did not.

Interviews typically lasted about one and half to two and a half hours. Questions focused on connections between religion, marriage, and family life. All interviews followed a 30-question semi-structured interview style, with occasional follow-up questions that provided clarifying information or redirection to the intent of the question. Care was taken to ensure, to the extent possible, interview reliability and validity across the multiple interviews. A narrative-style approach was used in each interview to elicit responses that provided more context and experiences than just simple one or two sentence answers. Each interview was transcribed verbatim and saved in a word document form containing more than 1,000 total, double-spaced pages of interview transcripts.

Data Analysis

After each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim, the data was made available for coding, to look for connections, patterns, and themes that emerged from the material using grounded theory and open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding and grounded theory allow themes and concepts to emerge from the data by looking for salient ideas that are repeated within each interview, as well as across interviews. Rigorous, systematic-coding, followed
Marks’ (2015) Numeric Content Analysis (NCA) coding strategy, in which four major phases were followed.

**Open coding.** Phases 1 and 2 employed open coding analysis of the transcribed data. These steps were preceded by an extensive review of literature, defining the appropriate sample and conducting in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol.

**Axial coding.** Phase 3 consists of axial coding which involved a process of sifting through all the coded data to separate what Marks calls “rocks” from “gems” (Marks, 2015). This means that valuable, specific, content-rich information was separated from vague, superficial, or disconnected data to reveal the most salient and relevant findings, or in other words, separating core themes from “pretender,” or insignificant themes. Care was taken to preserve important and related information within the context of the participants own words and experiences. “Core themes” were then identified and compiled by the prevalence and prominence of themes related to the present investigation. A core theme is a theme that is salient and repeated frequently both within and across multiple interviews. This systematic approach enhances validity and reliability by creating a data audit trail that is capable of being replicated with transferable themes and ideas.

**Selective coding.** Phase 4 involves selective coding. In this process specific quotes are selected based on their relevance and salience. Then quotes are arranged and presented so that the core themes from the data are preserved. The selective coding process also allows the processes and mechanisms, or the hows and whys, to be presented and in a meaningful and coherent way. This allows the data to be contextualized and utilized within the context of lived experiences of the participants and their own words.

The collective process revealed several important themes related to the how and why, religion shaped and formed participants’ views of masculinity and fatherhood. This provided the
context of lived experiences in establishing and maintaining the processes and mechanisms of the participants within their family and personal environments. These processes and mechanisms will be described and illustrated by participants’ own words in the findings section.

Findings

Data analysis revealed two complementary psychological processes that are particularly salient for men in our data set. These psychological processes were identified as a) the personal spiritual growth and maturity process and b) the religious masculine-identity transformation process.

The process of personal spiritual growth and maturity\(^2\) was categorized by private personal spiritual experiences that participants underwent over a period of time that reportedly shaped internal moral character and influenced external religious and spiritual participation. In short, this process was categorized by participants as becoming a “Godly man.” The religious masculine-identity transformation\(^3\) process focused on the changes in masculine identity, ideals, definitions, labels, and expectations, experienced by men as they underwent the spiritual growth and maturity process. These transformations in the religious masculine-identity process, were categorized by participants as becoming a “family man.” The spiritual growth process and religious indent process often seemed to occur in tandem with each other. Thus, participants seemed to view the experience of becoming a Godly man and a family man as a complimentary but distinct process with different relational outcomes and definitions. We will discuss each briefly and then provide context for each from participants’ own words.

The definition of a Godly man often came through the influence of personal the spiritual growth and maturity process. The spiritual growth process included leaving behind the

\(^2\) Referred to simply as the spiritual growth process throughout the paper.

\(^3\) Likewise, this process will be referred to as religious identity transformation process throughout.
psychological mindset of the street life and bachelor mindsets, as well as behavioral patterns often associated with the “street life” mentality and masculinity (i.e., selfishness, hedonism, withdrawal from family responsibility). At the same time, the spiritual growth process included embracing a change in internal moral character (i.e., honesty, openness, sexual fidelity to spouse and a selfless concern for others), as well as increased participation in religious and spiritual beliefs and practices (i.e., church attendance, prayer, and scripture study).

Closely tied to the spiritual growth process, the religious masculine-identity transformation process seemed to help participants embrace a family and relational-centered perception of manhood, as a “family man.” The family man ideal centered on a deeper commitment to, and greater physical, spiritual, and emotional availability towards spouse and children. The family man ideal also manifested itself in placing God and family above all other relationships.

Men, in particular, seemed to be drawn into both of these processes almost simultaneously, through personal spiritual experiences, or “come to Jesus” experiences. Many of these experiences of spiritual growth and religious masculine-identity transformation were described by participants themselves in firsthand accounts. Although the data yielded findings for both Black women and men, the central research question for this project relates to the influence of religion on Black masculinity and fatherhood, thus many of the examples will highlight the views and experiences, primarily of men. Examples of firsthand accounts, will come, primarily from men’s experiences and perceptions of spiritual growth and religious masculine-identity transformation.

**Theme 1: Personal Spiritual Growth And Maturity Process**

The personal spiritual growth and maturity process included the action of leaving behind an anti-family, anti-religious, “street-life” mentality, in favor of obtaining and maintaining a pro-
family, pro-religious mentality. Spiritual growth and maturity were referenced in what participants said about their own spiritual/religious changes across time and were substantiated by the perceptions of change witnessed by others such as children and spouses, which will be discussed extensively in future publications. However, for this study, we will focus mostly on men voices and what they say about themselves. We will also include supplementary voices of their wives in defining masculinity and fatherhood. As participants experienced this spiritual growth in themselves, there was often a sense of real change and individual growth that took place over time. This change included both an internal change of moral character and outward change in spiritual and religious behaviors.

Many participants were familiar with, and exposed to the “street-life mentality” that often was pervasive around them. Participants characterized the street life mentality and worldview, as being anti-family and anti-God. Some of the participants had experienced such lifestyles up close and in very personal ways.

Brian, a Non-Denominational Christian from Louisiana stated,

When I was in the world, I was hanging around negative people and I fed off that. I put friendship before family, and it had me out in that world. I was gone. I mean, I would put friends before my wife, my kids, but God had to switch that thing around. [I] thought [I was] chasing something. But [I realized] you really weren’t chasing anything. All I was chasing was [my family] life going away. I mean, misusing my family, treating the world like they were on top.

Kingston, a Christian from Washington shared a similar experience of how his street life attitude and behavior were destructive to his family life, and his marriage at the time.

My focus [was on the world]. I mean I was just overwhelmed by the marriage. “Can I really do this. Really, can I do this?” Cause I still had the bachelor mind set. [My wife]
was [always] chasing me down in the street. Telling me when to come home. I mean we went back and forth with that for five or six years. I mean, my thing was, “I’m a bachelor.” I couldn’t get that mindset, that I’m independent [out of my mind]. [I would say to my wife.] “What are you calling me for? Why do I got to come home? Why do I have to be there with you? Why do we have to eat together? I’m over here. I’m okay. I’m fine. I’ll be home when I get ready.” I couldn’t connect [my actions with my vows, but] I’m [fully] married now.

Notice that for both Brian and Kingston, being part of the street life had a negative impact on their family life and religious life. Both Brian and Kingston acknowledged that the street life altered their priorities away from God and family life. Behaviors in the street life mentality were more often viewed as more selfish and focused on hedonism and pleasure seeking, with little regard for religious or family responsibilities.

CJ, a Christian from Louisiana, further expressed how he wanted a family life, but could not understand how to navigate his street life lifestyle to be conducive to a family lifestyle, until he established a “relationship with Christ.”

I wanted a family really, really, really, desperately, because I was an only child, and not only was I an only child, I was an only child in a single parent household. So, I wanted a family. I wanted a lot of kids. Family was important to me, but I just didn’t understand the mechanism by which it could happen, until I came to know the Lord. So, having a relationship with Christ, and seeing from the word of God, that there’s not one situation that my family has encountered that it isn’t already written about. [I had to learn to] follow the road map, and it has meant everything.

For CJ and other men in our study, religion and a personal “relationship” with God, seemed to provide a “road map” of how to leave behind the street life paradigm, and adopt a new
family and God-focused paradigm more conducive to personal spiritual growth and maturity. It is also noteworthy that CJ specifically stated, that he “didn’t understand the mechanism by which [family life] could happen, until [he] came to know the Lord.” For CJ and other participants, spiritual growth and maturity, not only represented a change in his perception of the importance of family life, but also provided an internal change in his character.

John, a Christian man from Oregon expressed how leaving behind the old life of the street is a constant challenge. However, John noted that his religious beliefs and practices provide the needed road map for how to act and what to do.

I tend to agree with the Mrs. It’s a challenge every day. To follow God’s word, to be more like Him. We make mistakes daily and with that in mind, we have to somewhat stay focused on what God has you to do, to being loyal and faithful to His work. And you are challenged every day when you wake up to fulfill that obligation. It’s important, [but] that’s a tough challenge.

Several men in our study felt like the thing God, and a religious or spiritual lifestyle, wanted them “to do,” was to forsake the street and embrace the hearth. But the process of giving up the street life in favor of family life seemed to be a painful and persistent process for many men. These feelings of being stuck between two competing identities (e.g., a man of the world and being Godly man) is perhaps exacerbated by persistent media and cultural messages that focus on Black masculinity independent of family responsibilities (Chaney, 2009; Marks et al., 2008, 2010; Perry, 2013; Petts et al., 2018). For many, this process of choosing God involved a not only change of heart, but a psychological process of spiritual growth and seeing the world differently that often took time and great effort.
One wife, Tiffany, a Christian from Louisiana, described the process her husband undertook to become a new man and to define himself as a godly man and family man, rather than a “sinner man.”

He’s gone from being a very selfish, into himself-type individual, into more of a giving, supportive, loving individual. He has improved over the years but it’s been a constant change that has taken place. It’s not like it just happened all at once, it has been a constant growth, with each situation. With each life crisis that we’ve had to deal with, and even with the good things too. It has just been a slow process of growth.

For some participants, this psychological spiritual growth process of altering one’s world view of being “single”, or with a “bachelor mindset”, to a new view that included a relationship with God and family, often required both an internal moral change and external behavioral change. For many men living without God in the world or being caught up in the self-absorbed street life mindset, was filled with growing pains and setbacks. Often this process involved finding God, or in some cases, re-finding God, or rediscovering their religious roots. Gavin, a Christian from Oregon, explained his experience of living the street life that nearly cost him his family life.

I grew up Catholic like she did. So I’ve always had some type of religion. The priests had and influence on me. I always wanted to be like the priests, but I [went] other ways. Religion went out the door. Sex, drugs, rock and roll. I don’t know in what order. You name it, I was there. I’ve done it. I’ve tried it, [all] that kind of stuff. That didn’t fare so well [on my religious life]. That stunted my growth, religiously. I made a lot of mistakes. I say the first 15 years was pretty much a mistake. You always tell yourself that those things don’t affect you, but they do. They affect your marriage, they affect everything.
They stunt your marital growth, [and] not in a positive way. I thought I could handle both. I thought I was mature enough to handle both, [but] I wasn’t, I found out.

Notice that Gavin thought he was “mature” enough to handle both competing identities—the pervasive worldview of the street life, and the spiritual growth life required by his religious and spiritual beliefs. He mentioned how this belief that he could handle both worlds stunted his “growth religiously” as well as his “marital growth.” These findings support the notion that spiritual growth and the maturity process, run contrary to the street life, or “bachelor mindset”, and often requires the leaving behind the street life and embracing a new spiritual life (Anderson, 1999; Bartkowski, 2000; Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000; Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Collins & Perry, 2015; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). This new spiritual life often seems to reflect a greater sense of increased internal moral integrity, as well as external religious behavior and participation.

After this earlier narrative by Gavin, Gavin’s wife, Beth, shared some important additional insights into his process of spiritual growth and maturity. After expressing her feelings of what she perceived, she stated that it was her husband’s “spiritual growth” and “[spiritual] maturity”, that was the greatest personal change she saw in him over time:

He was extremely impulsive and selfish, very singularly absorbed. [He] just couldn’t even see anything beyond what he wanted for himself, [or] according to how he did it. So that has changed from that time. Being able to listen and support, because before, he just wasn’t even listening, period. [But after his spiritual growth,] then there was listening [and he] actually [gives] support. He understands the process. So, I think [that’s] all part of his growth and maturity, spiritually.

Beth’s narrative highlights several key components to the “process” of engaging in the psychological adjustment of the personal spiritual growth process. Beth shared that selfishness was replaced by supportiveness, as her husband underwent the process of spiritual growth and
maturity. Additionally, Beth noted, as her husband embraced his new role as both a Godly man and a family man, Beth perceived that his behavior reportedly matched more closely his understanding, noting that “he actually gives support” and “he understands the process.” This idea of behavior matching understanding, seemed to be a common theme in the data and would be analogous to other findings, such as Marks’ (2004) idea of belief-behavior congruence.

Lamon, a Non-Denominational Christian from Louisiana, shared how finding God, led him away from the life of the street, toward the life of a family man through both an internal change of character, as well as an external change of behavior. For Lamon, his behavior matched his beliefs only after he “found the Lord”.

The day I found the Lord, it changed my walk, my talk, and everything else. When I got into it, I didn’t realize what was happening at first. So, I got into the word and read the word. The word tells you that if you’re going to be a disciple of mine you’ve got to first deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Then you’ve got to do that. If you read in Romans, Romans tells you that when you know these things you’ve got to be transformed, you’re a new creature. So old things are passed away. Like if you were chasing women, [and] couldn’t nobody tell you nothing, [then] all that is [done] away with. You don’t like to do those things no more. It’s a new thing. Christ will change you. He’ll make you do what He says to do.

For Lamon and other men, coming to find the Lord, meant being born again in a sense. It seemed to be the metaphoric death of the old street life man, and the beginning of a new life as a Godly man, a spiritual man, “old things had passed away,” and “stunted” spiritual growth and maturity were left in the wake of this “new” psychological and behavioral awaking.
Summary Of Spiritual Growth Process

From the perceptions of both women and men, the process of spiritual growth and maturity often took place slowly and over time. However, change and growth were detected both individually, and by others, when there was a change in the moral character of the internal man, and a change in the behaviors and habits of the external man, such as in the case of Lamon, Gavin, CJ and others. These spiritual changes seemed to strongly influence individual behaviors, perceptions, and beliefs about a) the importance of God in your own life, b) the importance of maintaining and fostering increased family relationships, and relationship quality, and c) a change in personal behaviors. These behaviors moved participants away from being more selfish and hedonistic, toward more selfless and altruistic behaviors, particularly within a family and relationship context. We now turn to an examination of a second complementary psychological process that helped shape and inform a new masculine ideal for men and their wives, in our sample. This second psychological process will be referred to as the religious masculine-identity transformation process.

Theme 2: Religious Masculine-Identity Transformation Process

The religious masculine-identity transformation process was categorized by a psychological change in one’s identity and self-labeling. This process of religious masculine-identity transformation centered on a new definition of masculinity and new expectations for the masculine ideal. Religious masculine-identity transformation shifted the view of men, from a definition and worldview that promoted an isolated view of manhood, towards a more relational view of manhood. This transformation of identity altered the way men talked about their own masculinity, and shifted definitions, labels, and expectations for perceived manhood that were informed by religious beliefs, practices, and communities.
Despite persistent and pernicious messages about what it means to be a Black male, so often presented by popular media, participants from this study seemed to define their masculinity and maleness, not in terms of muscle mass or one-night stands, but in terms of relationships and connections to others, including God, family, friends, community, and church. For many in this study, the essence of manhood seemed to take on the shape of family life and fatherhood, reinforced by deep connections with God and others. Participants defined success and achievement as a male, not in terms of position, prominence, accolades, or power often associated with male success frames and White hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Ferber, 2007; McClure, 2006; Saint-Aubin, 2002; Wallace, M., 2002). Rather success as a male was defined in terms of a connection with God, and achieving a family-centered success frame (Allen & Connor, 1997; Bartkowski, 2000; Dollahite, 2003; Dollahite, Marks, & Olson, 1998, 2002; Marks et al., 2010; Wilcox & Bartkowski, 2005). For many of the participants, their success frame of the ultimate man came from being a godly man and a family man.

As noted previously, this period of growth and identity transformation often included new labels of perceived masculinity and identity. These new labels and self-descriptions often took on more traditional masculine titles and roles, but were usually viewed as positive changes by both men and women in this sample. New masculinity titles and labels included “provider,” “breadwinner,” “man of the house,” and “spiritual leader.” Each new title and label were indicative of the spiritual growth and religious masculine-identity transformation processes of becoming a “Godly man” or a “family man.”

Sam, a Seventh Day Adventist from Louisiana, explained how he felt like his religious beliefs provided an expectation for him as a man, or as a male, to be both the spiritual leader of his home, and also the financial provider.
Really [my wife] doesn’t encounter and deal with having to pay bills and focus on the
everyday circumstances of everyday life [the same way I do, as a man]. These are
problems that males [have to deal with more often.] I’m not just saying [only men]. . . .
[the] male, or [the] father, have to go through [this stress.] [Sometimes] you have single
parent homes with the mother having to deal with trying to provide for her kids. Those
are things [that] a [single-]parent deal[s] with too. But as a male, these are some of the
things as a spiritual head of the family, [or] the household, [that] we deal with. All we
need is support a lot of times to really make it through every day. And if the male would
have that [support] it would be a lot easier you know in everyday life. [My relationship
with God and my marriage] plays a [big] part [of who I am.] We do everything
[together]. (Referring to his wife.) We do everything [together] in one accord. She
supports me, I support her, and Christ supports both of us.

Sam perceived that his role as a family man now included the responsibility to provide,
and to be a spiritual leader in his home. For Sam, and for other men in the sample, this was a
responsibility they felt keenly as “male.” Although, nearly all of the men in the sample
acknowledge their wives and God’s support in their role as a provider, and as spiritual leader.
Many men perceived those titles to fall squarely on their own shoulders as men, more so than
those titles falling to their wives.

For many of the men in our study, their greatest success as a man seemed to come in
connection to their relationships with God and family. Lester, a Christian father from Oregon,
spoke of how his own religious beliefs gave him a new perspective, a new paradigm, or standard,
to view the world and to judge his success as a man.

Yeah, [my faith] reinforces [my belief] that I have a greater role and responsibility than I
ever thought. There is a higher standard. There is a much higher standard I’ve learned
about. [My faith helps me understand] what that standard means. [I have come to understand] this life that I have. I must give my life for my family. And there’s no limit to what I should give to my family, [or] that I should be willing to give to my family. And I’ve been challenged by that. I’ve been tested by that [new standard]. And you know, through the strength of my creator, I’ve been able to keep my family together.

For several participants the idea of family man and godly man, were interrelated and deeply connected, with one relationship feeding off of and informing and strengthening the other, Lester continued;

My religious faith has really increased and enlarged in the last years. The more that I study about my creator, it really kind of outlines my role as the head of the family and what my responsibilities are. And what that means to me, is to really embrace them with all the heart and all the love that I have. And that the life that I have, and the world that I live in, sometimes are opposing each other. Because this world tries to pull people apart, but through my religious faith, I’m able to hold my family and the people I love together, because I know that there’s a force that’s working against love, peace, and harmony.

Although, Lester shared what had happened to him personally, his statement was echoed by many other participants. Coming to find Jesus, or having profound personal experiences with God motivated them away from the street life and toward a family life. Religious faith also seemed to provide specific direction and reinforcement for how a man can successfully navigate their new view of masculinity, as evidenced by Lester’s statement about how his faith “outlines [his] role as the head of the family and what [his] responsibilities are.”

Brent, a Non-Denomination Christian from Louisiana, explained how his actions dramatically changed, when he came to understand that God was in charge of him, and that reportedly God expected him to be in charge of his family.
[When I started] going to church, I could see [God working] through me. The Lord [also] went through her (*referring to his wife*), worked on her, to work on me. I had to come to reality. If you [are] in the world, that’s all you know, [the] things of the world. That’s all you know. That’s all you care about is what people in the world say. But once God changes your life, you don’t care what they say. When you please him, when a man, and his household please God, guess what, everything else will fall in place. Everything else will fall in line. That’s what I had to learn. I had to learn who was in charge. God was in charge of my life, [and] I was in charge of my family. From now until this day, that’s how things go.

For Brent, as for other men, the religious masculine-identity transformation came after he experienced personal spiritual growth. For Brent, this personal spiritual growth was facilitated when he started attending church and felt that God was working on him and through other people, such as his spouse, to help him see his world differently. Reportedly, Brent’s spiritual growth began to influence and change the way he viewed his own masculinity, and what defined success for him as a man, stating “When a man and his family please God, everything else fall[s] in line”.

Brent continued:

[It] was the challenge of my life, to give up the streets in order to come to where I needed to be. I thought it was a challenge, but it really wasn’t [a] challenge. God had to change my life, my priorities, and get it lined up right, and once God lined my priorities up, then everything started working the way it was supposed to be in my marriage.

Brent’s experience summed up the processes of spiritual growth and religious masculine-identity transformation, experienced personally, by many of the participants. Reportedly, it was their view that God corrected their lens, or worldview, and it was God that called them from the
street life to family life. Brent’s experience also highlighted the perception of many participants, that once God had corrected their view, He reportedly “worked” through them and others, to show them the way to be a better family man.

Gavin from Oregon shared a similar pattern in his own process of religious masculine-identity transformation.

I was basically a good guy. Fundamentally, [deep down, I was] a good guy, but I got caught up in outward things. I got in trouble. I single-handedly almost destroyed [my] whole marriage, years back. [I even] had outside things [with other women] going on. Then it all came falling down at once. I hit rock bottom and lost everything, my job, everything, all that stuff. [I] got exposed for what I really was. I had nowhere else to go. But I was fortunate that it was people who were Christian who saved me. They found me out there floating around out in the middle of the river, almost. That started the [change]. It’s like my whole world changed. It’s still not easy, but I can see where all that other stuff leads you. I can see where it’s leading a lot of men, even nice guys, young guys. It’s not easy, but you got to have that faith. The spiritual side has really helped to give me that strength to fight things. It’s still not easy. I still get influenced. [Becoming a godly man and a family man,] is a challenge, because it goes against the grain. Most religions go against the grain of outside society. That means giving up a lot of things. You can’t go both ways. Religion goes counter to everything I’ve grown up thinking guys should be able to do.

For many, the psychological process of seeing the world differently involved leaving one definition or identity of masculinity, for another. Participants described going from an identity of isolated manhood—the “bachelor mindset”—to another masculine identity categorized by relational manhood, which included a relationship with both God and others. Often, this change
in one’s masculine identity meant significant change and growth over time, initially facilitated by a religious, or spiritual transformation—a “coming to God”, or “coming to Jesus” experience.

It is noteworthy, that as a young man, Gavin was initially attracted to, and influenced by other religious men, in his case, Catholic priests, as he stated at an early part of the interview. He looked to them and wanted to be like them, but eventually succumbed to the siren call of the street life, and what he likely saw around him from peers and his environment. Upon his own reflection, he recognized that the way he was living his life, was destructive to both his religious life, as well as his family life.

With new perspective and insight, he could see the potential trap of the street life for himself and for other men, “good guys,” that could potentially also be lured in by the facade of independence and freedom presented in the street life. He then concluded that religion and spirituality provided a new way of seeing the world, and importantly, a new way of seeing and defining his own masculinity. “Religion goes counter to everything I’ve grown up thinking guys should be able to do.” Moreover, by implication, Gavin not only suggested that religion shifted his expectation for what “guys should be able to do,” but perhaps everything he thought a “guy” should be as well.

Similarly, women also shared that the street life mentality, put men at odds with their families and with God. Several women expressed how this “bachelor mindset” not only defined different expectations for men and women, but also created conflict and challenges between them and their men.

Reta, a Methodist from Delaware, expressed how her focus on God created conflict with her soon-to-be-husband, who at the time had a focus on the street life and being in the world.

I remember when we were talking about getting married and I told him that God is always first in my life, and he would have to be the second man. I don’t think that went
over that well. But over the years, he came to accept that fact. [But] it was really rocky [at first], we didn’t have that harmony in the beginning. Now we talk about everything. Before, we couldn’t, because he was living a life that I didn’t agree with, and that was a conflict between us. He would have to make me mad enough for me to let him go out with his boys. There was always a conflict between us. He had his life, and I had mine. Not an adulterous life, or anything like that, but not together. We were married but not together. He was still “single.” Once we got into our spirituality and our [shared] religion, we understood that God meant for man to have [marriage], and it influences everything we do.

Reta’s experience captures a common factor that we found repeated in the data. Living the “street life,” categorized by Reta as the “single” man label of masculinity, ran contrary to the religious and family life she sought for in marriage. However, when her husband transitioned to embracing the relational-manhood label of God and family, their marital conflict reportedly decreased, harmony and peace seemed to increase, and the acceptance of the new label seems to begin to influence “everything” the couple is and does. The movement from the single definition of manhood, to the relational definition of manhood seemed to influence one’s own identity and the way many men begin to define themselves as part of something bigger than themselves. For many men in our sample, the relational-manhood focus tends to be both upward to God, and outward to others, particularly to family and family relationships (Moore et al., 2018).

In this process, men reportedly began to define themselves in terms of two important and complementary relationships: a) a relationship to God; and b) a relationship with one’s spouse and children. These relationships were reportedly seen as salient to the formation of a “family man” ideal of masculinity. We will now move to summary of the seemingly complementary nature of both psychological processes
Summary Of Spiritual Growth And Maturity Process And Religious Masculine-Identity Transformation Process

For the men and their families in this study, acceptance of, and transformation towards the new masculine identity, seemed to be summed up in two participant inspired labels, “a Godly man” and “a family man.” Participants defined a “Godly man” by a commitment to religious principles and practices such as prayer, scripture study, church attendance, praise and worship, as well as a fidelity to religious standards and expectations, such as being honest, showing benevolence, having integrity, and otherwise maintaining a moral character. Whereas, a “family man” was defined by participants as a deep commitment to a monogamous marriage including sexual fidelity to one’s spouse. The perception of the family man masculinity paradigm also included being a spiritual leader in the home, as well as being, or becoming financial providers. This definition also included being physically, emotionally, and spiritually present in the unique roles of being husbands and fathers.

These two processes of spiritual growth and religious masculine-identity transformation reinforced and were complementary to each other. The data seems to suggest that as a man experienced personal spiritual growth and maturity in the inward man, there was likewise a change in the outer man in his relationship with his family. This inward change was reportedly characterized as a change in one’s internal moral character. Whereas, the outward change reportedly seemed to focus on label changes of masculinity that seemed to center men on family-centered roles and responsibilities. Men, who reportedly underwent this change in the inner man, seemed to become more religious and spiritual in their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Participants viewed themselves as becoming a “Godly man.” This inner change seemed to facilitate an outward change in men towards becoming family men. This new masculine ideal as a religious man seemed to transform the way men perceived their own roles and expectations as
men, as well as how their spouses and children seemed to perceive those changes. Each of these changes seemed to be tied directly to a change away from an isolated perception of manhood and masculinity, to a relational perception of manhood and masculinity.

Additionally, findings seem to suggest that an increased commitment to the quality of family relationships and responsibilities was complementary to an increased commitment to religious beliefs and behaviors. Likewise, increased religious and spiritual behaviors and beliefs seemed to be associated with increased marital and familial commitments. Thus, the process of personal spiritual growth and maturity seemed to be mutually compensatory with the process of religious masculine-identity transformation, suggesting a positive bi-directionality between becoming both a Godly man and a family man. The spiritual growth and maturity processes seemed to indicate a spiritual and behavioral change over time, whereas, the process of religious masculine-identity transformation seemed to have a strong influence on identity formation, identity transformation, and the new acceptance of a relationship-centered masculine ideals and labels.

Taken together, these findings seem to suggest that having a relationship with God and a relationship with one’s family, altered the expectations, label, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of men, in how they defined their own masculinity, as well as how others defined their masculinity. The common characteristic between men’s own perception of manhood and masculinity and what others viewed or defined their masculinity to be, seemed to be centered on the distinction participants placed on defining manhood, either in terms of relationships, rather than in isolation. The “street life” and “bachelor mindset” seemed to focus more on the formation of masculine ideals and labels that were seen as negative to a religious life, as well as healthy family life, and were often seen as a “single man” mindset. Whereas the Godly man, family man paradigm
seemed to focus more on establishing and maintaining relations both upward toward God, and then outward towards spouse and family (Moore et al., 2018).

**Discussion**

The findings from this study seem to suggest that religion may potentially provide a different success frame for Black men about their masculinity and manhood, than those lauded by popular media and contemporary culture (Chaney, 2009, 2016; Ellison et al., 2010; Perry, A., 2013; Perry, S., 2015; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016). This is to say, religion acted as a vehicle for forging a new masculine identity and definition from the competing masculine identities of being “of the world” and “of God” (Froese & Bader, 2007; Marti, 2009; Maslow, 2013). Furthermore, religion seemed to provide a “unique mechanism” by with internalized characteristics of the street life and bachelor mindset were set aside and new identity formations relating to faith and family were established and crystalized (Archer, 2001; Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Bartkowski, 2000; Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000; Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Fincham et al., 2011; Petts et al., 2018).

Additionally, consistent with other findings on relational masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), our findings suggest that religion and spirituality seem to highlight an ideal for maleness and manhood, not in isolation of others, but in union, or meaningful relationship with others, particularly God and family (Archer, 2001, Archer & Yamashita, 2003; Moore et al., 2018). Contrary to the success frame of modern culture, which often urges Black men to see themselves with a narrow or limited lens, religion seems to widen the view about what masculinity means, how manhood is established, maintained, and reinforced, and why a Black male might choose to define his success as man differently (Cooper, 2006; Griffith & Cornish, 2018).
In other domains, Black men are often marginalized and negatively stereotyped as a brute, muscle heads, sex animals, or as crime statistics (Coates, 2015; Collins, 2004; Ferber 2007; Rogers & Bowman, 2003; Saint-Aubin; 2002; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). These negative stereotypes and perceptions of the Black male often come from external sources of societal racism (Chaney, 2016; Chaney & Robertson, 2013; Miles, 2004), as well as manifestations of lingering influence of internalized racism (Miles, 2004; Pyke, 2010). However, this study sheds light on a positive view of Black men and Black masculinity, and expands other viable options for successful masculinity outside the bounds of muscles, sex, and sports stars. Likewise, contemporary “hip hop” culture, music, and messages, often exalt the “thug life” for Black males, suggesting a lifestyle that often runs counter to relational quality, commitment, or stability, not to mention marriage and children (Jeffries, 2009; May, 2009a, 2009b; McLeod, 1999; Messner, 1992; Perry, I., 2004; Perry, A., 2013).

These popular cultural markers and labels about Black masculinity often are contrary to the way religion defines masculinity. Religious beliefs, attitudes, and teachings tend to promote positive ideals of a spiritual life and a positive view of marriage and family (Marks et al., 2008, 2010). This is not to say that religion, or religious teaching, are consistently helpful to healthy family functioning, or all relationships. Some religious principles, particularly if taken to an extreme, can be detrimental to family life and meaningful family relationships. Research indicates that religious beliefs can be divisive to relationships with others, and be used to separate religious people from non-religious people by creating an idea of “us” versus “them”, believer versus non-believers, or the godly versus the ungodly (Lichterman, 2008; Makowsky, 2011). These divisions can heighten a perception among some, of moral superiority, or moral piety, over others who are perceived as less religious, or less religiously committed, and can be a
source of increased conflict and even violence (Woodruff, Van Tongeren, McElroy, Davis, & Hook, 2013).

Religion also been associated with negative effects on a more intimate family level. Schnabel (2016) noted that some religious beliefs and practices create gender inequalities in men and women, marriages and families, and may have implications for negative gender disparities among societal norms as well. Gender inequalities and unbalanced religious authority or power distribution can lead to other negative outcomes as well, such as abuse. Some religious beliefs can create power, or moral positions of authority, that in some cases, have been used to victimize and abuse women, children, and the elderly, physically, emotionally, sexually, and financially (Simonic et al., 2013; Stotland, 2000).

Although, some research suggest that religious beliefs and ideals may have negative influences on relational health and family functioning, a significant body of literature suggest that religious beliefs and principles are linked with positive outcomes (Petts, 2011, 2014), and particularly for Black, or other racial men (Logan, 2018; McClure, 2006; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016).

Furthermore, social science research suggests that pro-family life is often better for Black males, Black females, and Black children in multiple ways. These ways include, but not limited to economic enlargement, scholastic achievement, positive and preventative mental health, and increased relational and physical health, and wellbeing (Blackmon, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Dixon, 2008, Ellison & George, 1994; Ellison et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2008, 2010).

Several studies have highlighted that religion and religious beliefs and practices, run contrary to the “street life” (Anderson, 1999; Ellison et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2005; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016). Although these finding are supported in quantitative studies,
many studies do not offer many reasons for these associations, other than inverse or negative correlations between religiousness and street life behaviors, such as sexual promiscuity, or drug use (Clark, 2015; Marks et al., 2005). However, this study also reveals deeper psychological processes and mechanisms involved with why and how religion and spirituality have potential positive benefits. Findings from this study not only validate previous quantitative work, but also offer additional findings about specific processes and mechanism for psychological, spiritual, and behavioral changes, as well as implication for gender identity formation and transformation (Petts et al., 2018).

Additionally, previous studies have suggested that religion influences the psychological shift of paradigms, or worldviews away from the selfishness of the street life, and towards selflessness of relational interactions (Clark, 2015; Marks et al., 2008, 2010). Other studies have suggested the positive behavior modification aspects of spirituality or religiosity associated with decreasing negative internal and externalizing behaviors (Barber, 1996; Thurston et al., 2018). However, fewer studies have suggested the interdependencies of multiple processes (i.e., psychological, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual), perhaps simultaneously utilized (Hayes, 2016). Our findings suggest that as participants engage in the personal spiritual growth and maturity process, this process may have positive applications, implications, and connections to multiple processes that are simultaneously occurring.

Likewise, findings from our study highlight how the psychological change processes of personal spiritual growth and religious masculine-identity transformation, may influence and mutually support each other towards similar positive ends (Wallace, D., 2007; Wallace, M., 2002). Participants consistently shared how their increase in religious commitment, belief, and participation was often associated with increased relational commitment, stability and quality. Likewise, increases in relational quality, commitment, and stability were positively associated
with increases in spiritual and religious commitment, belief, and participation (Marks et al., 2005, 2010).

Findings also suggest that participants who embraced both aspects of the new masculine identity of the Godly man and the family man, were also more likely to maintain a lifestyle consistent with these ideals (Chaney, 2009; Wallace, D., 2007; Wallace, M., 2002; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2016). Such acceptance of religiously inspired masculine ideals seemed to come in connection with a host of positive relational outcomes such as increased moral integrity, honesty, humility and openness to change, sexual fidelity, compassion, concern, and increases relational commitment to spouse and children (Ellison et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2008, 2010; Petts et al., 2018; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008).

For several Christian men the complementary spiritual processes of “being born again”, and having personal experience and/or relationship with God or Jesus Christ, also reportedly related to the behavioral processes of decreasing internalizing and externalizing negative relational behaviors of the “street life.” Which life is often categorized by selfishness, drug use, sexual promiscuity, fatherlessness, and cohabitation (Chaney, 2009; Ellison et al., 2010; Petts et al., 2018; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, 2016).

Limitation And Future Directions

Due to the exceptional nature of the sample being both highly religious and deeply committed to family relationship, emerging patterns, themes and theoretical implications were almost certainly affected by sampling. It is not clear if similar patterns or processes would appear in other samples with lower levels of relationship commitment and/or religious commitment. It is also unclear if positive relational outcomes of the new masculine identity would be similar in strength and number, if only one part of the ideal was achieved. Likewise, it is unknown if an increase in positive relational outcomes and a decrease in internal and externalizing behaviors,
would be present, if either the qualities of the Godly man or family man ideal, were absence of each other.

Despite these potential limitations in the comparison of this sample with other related studies on the potential influence of religion on Black masculinity and fatherhood, this study does shed light on new ways of viewing the masculinity success frame. This study also provided unique qualitative insights into the psychological processes and mechanisms employed by religious believers in the context of lived experiences. Quantitative research plays a significant role in uncovering relationships, associations, and correlations between phenomena—the “whats” of human interaction and experience. Whereas, qualitative research tends to seek to understand the purposes and meaning behind the processes and mechanisms—the “whys” and “hows”, of human relationships (Daly, 2007). Such a qualitative approach to this topic may provide significant and important understandings of patterns, processes, and mechanisms of those that Miller and Thoresen (2003) refer to as the “substantial minority” of Americans who say that religion is “the single most important influence” in their lives (p. 5).

Similarly, William James, heralded as the father of empirical psychology, and the father of American psychology, noted:

*We learn most about a thing when we view it under a microscope, as it were, or in its most exaggerated form. This is true of religious phenomena, as of any other kind of fact. The only cases likely to be profitable enough to repay our attention will therefore be cases where the religious spirit is unmistakable. Its fainter manifestations we may tranquilly pass by.* (1902, p. 48)

Finally, this study further illustrates that for the highly religious, religion really seems to matter and make a difference in informing, shaping, and transforming perceptions of manhood and masculinity. In the spirit of Damon and Colby’s (2013) “Why a True Account of Human
Development Requires Exemplar Research,” we suggest that future quantitative and qualitative research is needed to validate and discern unique influences, processes, and directionality of the influence of religion on masculinity and fatherhood. We likewise, make a call for further research and exploration of other possible mechanisms and process that may be involved in defining a Godly man and a family man, particularly among highly religious minority populations, where the impact on such a man, may be distinctly felt and needed.
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