What keeps unhappy couples together?: a qualitative and theoretical exploration

Bingham Page Wall
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What keeps unhappy couples together? 
A qualitative and theoretical exploration

by

Bingham Page Wall

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Human Development and Family Studies (Marriage and Family Therapy)

Major Professor: Charles Lee Cole

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

1999

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Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Doctoral dissertation of

Bingham Page Wall

has met the dissertation requirements of Iowa State University

Signature was redacted for privacy.

Major Professor

Signature was redacted for privacy.

For the Major Program

Signature was redacted for privacy.

For the Graduate College
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ABSTRACT

Research on marriage has centered on either what happy couples are doing right or what unhappy couples are doing wrong. As a result, researchers have ignored low-quality, high-stability (LQHS) couples, those couples that choose to stay together even though they may be unhappy with each other. This dissertation investigates what keeps couples who are unhappy in their relationships together. A theory was developed based on the marital literature. The transcripts of semi-structured interviews with 9 couples married 5 years or longer, who scored the lowest on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) out of a sample of 99 Midwestern, American couples, were investigated to see what they said were the keys in keeping them together.

The study reveals five domains. These couples demonstrated 1) an ability to survive early challenges to the marriage that bound them together as a couple; 2) a philosophy of marriage that emphasized the bigger picture, such as elevating the relationship over individuality and for some, elevating their faith over the relationship is a hierarchy; 3) a sense of reciprocity in most of the areas of the relationship such as an emphasis on the good things in the relationship and meeting each other's needs; 4) an ability to adjust to each other and their circumstances through growth and changing how they interacted as couples; and 5) a generally positive attitude toward the limitations of each other by dealing effectively with shattered expectations.

The investigation uncovers three types of low-quality couples: those who stay married only because of factors outside the relationship such as children, called "Enduring Couples," those who seek to make an effort to moderate their behavior for the over-all improvement in
the relationship, called "Striving Couples," and those who divorce.

A synthesized theory about LQHS couples that takes the research literature and the results of this qualitative study into account is presented. The paper concludes with a discussion about the clinical implications of the findings in therapy with low-stability couples, the limits of qualitative research, and directions for future study.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

In 1979 Lewis and Spanier developed a typology of marriage that has been used extensively in research about couples during these last 20 years. This typology broke couples into four categories: high-quality, high-stability; high-quality, low-stability; high-quality, high-stability; and low-quality, low-stability. Marital quality referred to positive factors that built up the marriage while stability was a dichotomous variable that referred to divorcing or staying married. High-quality, high-stability (HQHS) couples were those who were pleased with their marriage and had no intention of divorcing. Low-quality, low-stability couples (LQLS) had few positive factors and were on the verge of divorce. High-quality, low stability couples (HQLS) were those who were happy with their marriage yet were nearing divorce. Low-quality, high-stability couples (LQHS) were those who stayed married despite various problems with the marriage. Most research on marriage before and since this typology has concentrated on the two extremes of LQLS and HQHS. This paper will investigate LQHS couples: those couples with various problems, who have chosen to stay together.

This study seeks to use proven qualitative research techniques to develop a well-rounded theory. It lays the groundwork for future study, assessment, intervention, and education that should be relevant for couples of all types (see “Significance of the Study” later in this chapter). The investigation concentrates on positive reasons LQHS couples stay together. An effort is maintained to understand the couples under study the way they see
themselves and to let them speak for themselves. Uncovering their phenomenological experience from their point of view, to get into their world, is a major goal of this research (Creswell, 1994).

A grounded theory is based upon new subject material without coming to the material with preconceived ideas, letting the subject material speak for itself (Creswell, 1994). No research, however, is conducted in a vacuum. A researcher's own values and points of view as well as a thorough understanding of what the voices of research are saying about a particular subject are critical in theory development, whether qualitative or quantitative.

Because this research is about marriage, one of the most commonly researched subjects in the social sciences and family research, a thorough survey of the literature and major concepts was conducted. This preliminary theory (see Chapter Two) was brought before two doctoral level classes in human development and family studies at a Midwestern university. In an advanced doctoral level theory class, 21 students read the paper and critiqued it in an open 2-hour format. It was also critiqued at the Theory Construction and Research Workshop at the Annual Meeting of the National Council on Family Relations (Wall & Cole, 1997b) by Dr. Ganong and Sherif (1997). Dr. Ganong (1997), a professor at the University of Missouri-Columbia, Missouri, is a sociologist and an expert in divorce and stepfamily relations. Dr. Sherif (1997), a professor at the University of Delaware from the Department of Individual and Family Studies, is an anthropologist and an expert in cross-cultural marriages in the Middle East. In a second doctoral level qualitative class, 10 Ph.D. level students read a synopsis of the theory and dialogued with the researcher. In addition,
Dr. Cole, an expert in the field of marriage for 25 years and this researcher’s major professor and mentor in this theory development, went over the manuscript and the aforementioned critiques, then offered suggestions for over-all improvement of the theory. This input from these various sources was taken into consideration in the final draft of the theory chapter.

Although theory helps researchers systematize discovered knowledge, theory can also limit the scope of an investigation. Weiss (1994) gives an illustration of this. He writes that as a graduate student he went to work for a firm that advised manufacturers about why people did or did not buy the manufacturer’s products (prunes). The firm he worked for used interviews with customers and potential customers asking them their perception of prunes. In one instance they found that people believed prunes were for old people. As a result, the firm Weiss worked for advised the prune packager to “put their products in a ‘sunshine jar’ and, in their advertising, to link prunes with children (Weiss, 1994, p. vii).” By asking open ended questions the researchers discovered new areas of perception (prunes are for old people) that had escaped the prune manufacturers before. This led the researchers to a new theory (try bright packaging linked to children).

The same technique is used in this paper. Once the literature review was finished and a theory of why unhappy couples stay together was developed, this theory was set aside. An effort was made to read and listen to the transcripts of the interviewees on their own terms. Patterns, connectors and commonalities in the data were noted. After the data were analyzed and collated (see Chapter Three), the marital literature and theory were reviewed to see if there were differences and significant comparisons. The theory was then examined in
light of new discoveries (see Chapter Four).

The intent was to proceed inductively, to let the data speak for themselves and then compare the data with the literature on marriage so that a well-rounded theory might result. This is in keeping with the criticism of Ambert, Adler, Adler, and Detzner (1995), who write that the major objection to qualitative research is researchers themselves, who often ignore the wider body of literature at their peril. Indeed, Strauss writes that grounded theory must take into consideration the theoretical background of the field of study and the researcher in order to deal adequately with researcher bias (1987).

Ambert et al. (1995) and Weiss (1994) suggest that a main objection to qualitative research is that often researchers will ask leading questions to uncover a particular bias. The research for this paper utilized semi-structured interviews (see below), with particular questions written out for each field worker. This guarded against bias in the sampling.

**Researcher as Instrument**

Moon, Dillon, and Sprenkle (1990) write that a researcher’s theory informs the project regardless of whether it is qualitative or quantitative. Qualitative researchers seek to inform their readers of their assumptions so that the reader may judge for himself or herself the veracity of the report. The following assumptions are guiding this research:

1. Most marriages are worth saving. As noted below in the literature review (see “Creating a Model” section), many divorces could be prevented if people had waited long enough to mature or for the dust to settle. This research is intended to uncover some ways that a distressed couple might persevere, even
if the marriage gets difficult. Those that persevere have gone against the
cultural norm of divorcing when things get rough. Their voices deserve to be heard.

2. Not all marriages should be saved. While this researcher holds the institution of marriage in the highest esteem, he also recognizes that some marriages are irreconcilable, particularly when safety for partners and/or children is a concern. Clearly there are those who engage in domestic violence without a twinge of conscience or who have no desire or ability to learn other ways of relating.

3. The end result of research should be practical. By uncovering strengths of low-quality, yet highly stable marriages we may be able to expand the applicability of current intervention programs based upon what high-quality couples are doing right and what low-quality couples are doing wrong. For example, PREP (Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program), developed at the University of Denver, is based upon over 20 years of university research on what factors predict divorce (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994). Perhaps subject areas uncovered in this research may inform PREP and other prevention programs.

4. Suffering is not necessarily a bad thing. Suffering is a theme in many faiths. For example, the New Testament records “Through much tribulation do we enter the kingdom of heaven.” One of Job’s friends in the Hebrew scriptures
said, “We’re born to trouble as sparks fly upwards.” This goes counter to the pursuit of happiness and the American Dream. The words “marriage” and “suffering” don’t sound like they belong in the same sentence. Americans prefer words like “happiness” or “satisfaction” and “marriage” together. Our romantic ideal is that partners should be happy if married. If a person is not happy in a marriage, for too many, the marriage becomes expendable, but this researcher believes that marriage has its own dignity, beyond personal fulfillment. By definition, unhappy couples who stay married are going to suffer in some way. This research will seek to uncover what is good in that suffering and hopefully honor that type of commitment.

5. The world that we research is socially constructed. Each person’s point of view is unique and offers a slice of the world that others might not see. We learn and share this world with others in language around us. This is commonly referred to a social constructionist point of view (Anderson, 1997). The point here is that LQHS couples may see reality differently than other couples who have given up and broken up or couples who are positive about their relationship. Because of their particular slant on things, LQHS couples may have things to teach all of us that we haven’t considered before.

The reader may also note that this researcher was a pastor in evangelical churches in the Midwest for 15 years and has now started his own private marital therapy practice in Ames, Iowa (Heart to Heart Communication) with the express purpose of helping couples
the areas of marriage preparation, marriage preservation and divorce prevention. He leads couples workshops in churches and continues research in the area of marital relations. He is a licensed Marital and Family Therapist.

**Theoretical Review**

One of the strengths of family studies is the wide diversity of theoretical orientations offered to explain the complex phenomena of family and marital interaction (e.g. Boss, Coherty, LaRossa, Schumn, & Steinmetz, 1993). Although no research was found in a literature search on LQHS couples per se, several theories from family studies offer possible explanations of the social forces that keep the LQHS group small today in our society. The theory chapter in this paper inquires how family-therapy theories (like systems and solution focus), a family theory (social exchange with its accompanying concepts like commitment, expectations and reciprocity) and life-span developmental theory might apply to unhappily married couples.

**Methodology**

**Sample selection**

A problem facing this type of research is subject selection. While studying LQHS couples seems a worthy task, individual couples may not want to be “typed” into a category with potential negative connotations. Couples need to be investigated without jeopardizing their integrity as a couple.

This research uses the data set of 99 couples developed by Cole and Wall (1997a), Wall & Cole (1997a), and Wall (1996) from 1995-1997. Each couple was asked to fill out 14
Table 1. Questions used in initial interviews, adapted from Gottman (1994)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Describe your relationship history together:</td>
<td>- How you met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How you courted and married (including how the decision to marry was made and who initiated the discussion, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How you told each family of origin you were planning to marry and your families of origin members’ reactions to learning of the marriage (were they happy, supportive, encouraging, cautious, tentative, negative, etc.? And)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- How did you react to each of your families’ reactions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Describe the ups and downs of your marriage by year—and how you dealt with each; the impacts each had on your marriage, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Describe a particularly bad or hard time during your marriage and describe how you got through it (what adjustment and adaptation strategies did you use to cope with the bad times, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Describe and discuss a particularly good time in your marriage and discuss how you got to this point to make this a good and happy time for you, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Describe and discuss a current problem you are working on and how you are dealing with it (adjustment strategies and tactics of problem solving you have worked out as a couple).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Describe and discuss your philosophy of marriage and how it evolved for you.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Describe what a good marriage and a bad marriage mean to you and discuss the differences as well as how your marriage is similar and different to these two marriages.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Describe and discuss your parents’ marriages and how these two (or more) marriages are similar and different as well as how they have impacted your own marriage. Then, compare your own marriage to your parents’ marriages. How have you changed your marriage from theirs and how and by what means were you able to do this?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Plan an event together (such as a vacation, evening out, etc., or making a major purchase together such as a major appliance, TV, automobile, house, etc.).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Discuss how you think your marriage will change and be different in one year, in 5 years [as you listen to their story, probe for how they will adjust to the changes and what actions they will do to prepare for making the changes].</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Individually discuss the most difficult adjustments and changes each of you has already made since getting married [probe for how they coped and adapted to the demands of the change]. What role do you think your partner played in making the adjustment easier or more difficult [probe to see if they openly discussed these difficulties at the time and did they specifically ask each other for help and if so how did the partner respond?]?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. (For each spouse separately) If you could magically change anything about your marriage you wanted to, what would it be and why would you change it?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Discuss what you hope never changes about your marriage and why you would miss it if it did change.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Describe how you see your future together as a couple. What do you imagine it will be like as you grow older? What about growing older do you look forward to and what about growing older do you dread?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paper and pencil instruments as well as being given a background questionnaire and a 1 1/2 to 2 hour taped interview. The interviews were based on Gottman’s (1994b) “ethnographic interview.” “Ethnographic,” however, is really the wrong word for it (Creswell, 1994). Ethnographic implies a more open-ended interview within the context of the subject’s life.
The interviews in this research were semi-structured. An open-ended first question was used ("Tell me about your relationship."). A series of follow-up questions (see Table 1) were asked to make sure certain that areas were covered. Often the couples would talk about most of the issues on Gottman's question list without having to be asked. Toward the end of the time together, the researcher would glance through the list to see if there were some they had not covered. If so, these questions would be asked at that point while making an effort to keep the continuity in the interviewing process. Students in several graduate-level family studies and family therapy classes helped collect the data. These were either masters or doctoral level students taking coursework under the direction of Dr. Cole (Cole & Wall, 1997a; Wall & Cole, 1997a, 1997b; Wall, 1996). Either Dr. Cole or this researcher went over the questionnaires and surveys and how to conduct them with the students in an effort to assure continuity and inter-rater reliability. The students selected couples they knew or who were referred to them by others. The students spent two sessions with each couple: one to complete the background questionnaire and the semi-structured interview and one to have the couple complete the paper and pencil instruments. This researcher interviewed 14 couples. One other student interested in the project completed 20 interviews and another completed 6 interviews. Most of the other students did two or three interviews.

This researcher entered the data of the background questionnaire and the surveys into the computer. One of his sons helped go over the data after it was entered the first time in order to check for errors. Dr. Cole cross-checked the data in an audit fashion to make sure it was entered correctly.
One of the instruments used for this research was the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976; Appendix A). This instrument has been one of the main standards in marital research over the last twenty-three years (Wall, 1996). It has been used in hundreds of studies and its reliability and validity have been tested time and time again. This instrument has 32 items and a mean score of 114.8 for married people and a mean score of 70.7 for divorced. The divorced score was calculated with recent divorcees who were asked to take the instrument based upon their perceptions of their relationship during their last year of marriage.

All the couples in the 99 couple data set took the DAS. Lewis and Spanier (1979) originally suggested that about 15% of the population of married people would fall into the LQHS category. For purposes of this dissertation, the lower 10% were chosen. While 10% is lower than 15%, the over-all population of 99 couples had a higher DAS score, so a smaller sample seems warranted. It could also be that since the Lewis and Spanier article appeared in 1979 that the number of LQHS couples has dropped.

Initially 15 couples in the population of 99 couples who had scores with at least one partner with a score of a 106 or less on the DAS were identified. Two of these, however, were not married, 2 were married 3 years or less, and 2 couples’ transcripts could not be located. This left 9 couples married 5 or more years (2 were married for 5 years, 1 each for 7, 9, 10, 14, 22, 27, and 31 years), who were chosen for the research project. The couples chosen had a range on the DAS for low partner: 80-106; range for high partner: 89-110; mean low partner: 95.1; mean for high partner: 102.6; and husbands’ mean 97.4 and wives’ mean
110.3 (See Table 2). Five years of marriage gave the couple a long enough time to show their stability and to have had enough time to make some adjustments in their marriage.

The over-all mean of the 9-couple sample on the DAS was 100.4, compared with the over-all mean of the entire data set of 124.4 for husbands and 122.3 for wives. Five wives in the data set scored higher than their husbands; four husbands scored higher than their wives. A glance at Table 2 will reveal that most spouses had fairly close scores to each other.

The entire population of 99 couples had a higher over-all mean for the DAS than did those in Spanier’s population, probably due to graduate students picking couples they knew

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple #</th>
<th>Years Married</th>
<th>Husband DAS</th>
<th>Wife DAS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population of 99 couples</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>124.4</td>
<td>122.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>range 0-58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample of 9 couples</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>100.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>range 5-31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Couple profile summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple #</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>yrs married</th>
<th>Age at Marriage</th>
<th>Age at interview</th>
<th>Previous marriage?</th>
<th># Kids</th>
<th>Jobs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jim &amp; Debbie</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>J-22 D-20</td>
<td>J-49 D-47</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>4; one still at home</td>
<td>J-farmer; business owner D-secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mike &amp; Kelly</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>M-30 K-24</td>
<td>M-40 K-34</td>
<td>Yes for Mike</td>
<td>Mike-1 Both-2</td>
<td>M-Draftsman K-Homemaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bruce &amp; Wendy</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>B-21 W-23</td>
<td>B-26 W-28</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>B-Ph.D. student; W-medical technician</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Frank &amp; Shelly</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>F-28 S-26</td>
<td>F-43 S-41</td>
<td>No, but divorced &amp; remarried each other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>F-Sales; S-Secretary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Nick &amp; Angie</td>
<td>07</td>
<td>N-24 A-30</td>
<td>N-31 A-37</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>N-Student A-Secretarial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>George &amp; Vi</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>G-39 V-37</td>
<td>G-70 V-69</td>
<td>G-yes</td>
<td>G-3; both-1</td>
<td>G-retired V-retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tom &amp; Yvonne</td>
<td>05</td>
<td>T-34 Y-27</td>
<td>T-39 Y-32</td>
<td>Y-yes</td>
<td>Y-1; both-2</td>
<td>T-plumber Y-night hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Carl &amp; Eve</td>
<td>09</td>
<td>C-28 E-32</td>
<td>C-37 E-41</td>
<td>E-Yes, 2 times</td>
<td>E-2; both-1</td>
<td>C-travels with his job, gone months at a time E-teachers assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Harry &amp; Lora</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>H-22 L-20</td>
<td>H-45 L-43</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>H-builder L-social worker</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
who were more often than not satisfied with their relationship. In addition, in entering the
data from this data set a scoring of 1 to 6 was used instead of the 0 to 5 used by Spanier in his
original testing. This led to inflated scores of points on this data set compared with Spanier’s.

Sample description

An awareness of the background of the participants is critical to understand the
interpretation of the data in qualitative research. A brief description of each of the couples
follows as well as a table summary (Table 3: Couple Profile Summary). A more detailed
description of each couple relative to the research question is included in the Results Chapter.

Couple 1: Jim and Debbie were married 27 years at the time of their interview. All
their children were grown and out of the home except for one college age daughter. Jim’s
career choices had been a source of conflict for the couple throughout their marriage. Debbie
felt that Jim overworked on his farm and side business to the neglect of their relationship and
home life. Jim felt that Debbie worried enough for the both of them. He wished she would
lighten up and enjoy life. Despite their conflict, they resolved to "hang in there."

Couple 2: Mike and Kelly (married 10 years) struggled with disagreements on
children throughout their relationship beginning 10 days before the wedding when Kelly found
out that she was pregnant. Although she was excited and thought Mike would be, too, Mike
insisted that Kelly have an abortion. He wanted to get to know Kelly early in their marriage
and did not want a child to interfere. He already had a son from a previous marriage. Kelly
went through with the abortion, which ended up creating many doubts about the sincerity of
Mike’s love for her. Kelly felt that Mike resented the other two children they had since then
and by the time of the interview this issue still seemed to be divisive.
Couple 3: Bruce and Wendy (married 5 years) were both professionals with advanced degrees. Bruce was working on his Ph.D. at the time of the interview. The couple's early relationship was marred by conflict between them that got out of control. Bruce physically abused Wendy during that first year. Fortunately, Wendy sought help and the couple ended up in therapy. Since that first year, they had been making many adjustments in learning to get along and settle their differences. This couple was interviewed a second time at year eight by which time they had their first child and Wendy was expecting child number two. They felt they had overcome their obstacles and were moving ahead in their relationship.

Couple 4: Frank and Shelly said they were married 14 years, but because they cohabited prior to marriage, were divorced from each other at year 4 and then remarried each other a year later, counting their years together seemed a bit confusing. Frank lived a rough life before meeting Shelly, a quiet, Catholic farm girl, and trying to settle down. He admitted most of his discontent with the marriage and eventual divorce had to do with his own immaturity. When he made peace with that, they were remarried and their relationship began to improve. Shelly's health was also a stressor and constant concern. Frank was interviewed a second time 3 years after the first interview. Unfortunately, his wife, Shelly, had passed away the previous year.

Couple 5: Nick and Angie (married 7 years) struggled because of Nick's physical and mental health problems which began 3 months after their wedding. Nick ended up pursuing different career options due to his new limitations, and for some time was even unable to work. This abrupt change in Nick so early in their relationship was a blow to Angie's expectations of who she thought Nick was. It immobilized her so that she was not able to be
supportive of Nick, leaving him to feel he was suffering alone. The couple reported that they were able to overcome this the year before the interview, but reported that they were still trying to establish trust in each other.

Couple 6: George and Vi (married 31 years) were retired at the time of the interview as they married later in life after the death of George’s first wife. Vi immediately became the mother of 3 children and never seemed to be able to move beyond that role in her relationship with George. Their differences with each other led to extreme distancing; each lived in a separate house! They had separate lives, checkbooks, and made their own individual decisions. The only thing that kept them together was their children and the idea that they were still married and faithful to each other.

Couple 7: Tom and Yvonne (married 5 years; second for Yvonne with one girl from her first marriage) said their biggest issue was their work schedules, which prevented them from spending time together from the beginning of the relationship to the time of the interview. Although they enjoyed their time together and did not doubt their love for each other, they were forced to develop their own individual lives with the children and described the situation as two families: one with Tom and the kids and one with Yvonne and the kids. There was not time for them to develop one between Tom and Yvonne.

Couple 8: Carl and Eve (married 9 years) met when Eve was rebounding from her second marriage. Eve was the only person of the 18 people in the sample who indicated that she would consider divorce if the marital quality was not what she needed. She qualified this when she said the marriage was fine enough now and that she didn’t anticipate the quality of the marriage dropping or that she would divorce Carl. She, however, reminded her husband
often enough about the conditional nature of her relationship with him to the point where he entertained his own doubts about the future security of the relationship. An added stress was that Carl’s job took him overseas sometimes for several months at a time, leading Eve to say that even though they had been married 9 years they had only been together for 1 year.

Couple 9: Harry and Lora (married 22 years) were faced with setback after setback in terms of their career situations from moving due to the military to being literally robbed by a business partner, to Harry being on the road for extended times with his work. By the time of the interview, the couple was still struggling with their lack of financial security and contemplating a move to another part of the country to begin their careers yet again. In spite of these obstacles, the couple felt they really loved and cared for each other.

Data analysis

Each of these couples was interviewed using the semi-structured interview questions developed by Gottman (1994b). Seven of these interviews were transcribed by the students who interviewed the couples. One of interviews had hand-written transcripts, which were converted to computer text in WordPerfect (version 8). One other couple’s interview was on tape only and needed to be transcribed. The transcribed interviews were scanned into the computer and converted to WordPerfect for analysis. Each were edited for corrections in spelling and formatted and then combined into one large file. The pages were numbered (346 pages of single-spaced text). This researcher listened to the tapes while reading the interviews to make sure they were transcribed correctly and to get a better feel for the nuance (Guba, 1981).

A new document was created to leave an audit trail of research results as the text was
analyzed. The order in which couples were chosen to be analyzed was at random, starting initially with a couple that had been married for a longer time followed by a couple that had been married a shorter time. The researcher read through the text of a selected couple. As he came upon sections pertinent to the subject of the research, he copied these sections into a separate document titled "running commentary." After completing this process for each couple, the researcher went over the freshly saved section, organized the text by subject matter and made comments and observations that came to mind. This newly created section was then compared with the unedited transcripts to double-check for accuracy in presenting the couple's point of view. This process was done for all nine couples. More detail was utilized for the first six couples as at that point redundancy was reached. The final three couples were summarized with fewer quotes unless their view was different from that expressed by the previous couples.

After completing this document, names were changed and geographical and occupational identifiers were modified to protect confidentiality. The document, also, was edited for clarity. For example, most "you know's" were removed as were other repeated statements that sound fine in conversation, but make clumsy reading. Words were added in parentheses in an effort to clarify the subject's intent. Incomplete sentences were edited. When this document was completed, it was 95 pages of single-spaced text with a 1 and 1/2 inch right margin. To give the reader an idea of this process, a sample of one couple's running commentary is included in Appendix B.

Once this document was created the researcher went over it several times, underlining key words and phrases and writing in the margins topics that came to mind. An effort was
made to let the text speak for itself. No prearranged categories were used. As the document was marked for various topics, however, themes began to emerge. While reading through the running commentary words and phrases that were emphasized or repeated were marked in the margins. Important quotes or illustrative material were highlighted. Synthesis statements were made for raw text to comprehend the meaning of the narrative. These items became the foundation upon which the analysis was built.

The items were reviewed and then clumped together into separate and similar categories and given a cover term. Thus, patterns began to emerge from the various interviews. Joanning and Keoughan (1997, p. 7) describe categories as "named collections of keys words and initial data analysis." They illustrate the concept by suggesting various items in the category "fruit" might be "apples, peaches, and bananas".

Once the initial interviews were analyzed as described, the categories were examined to see which clustered together across interviews and which were individually derived. Categories with common themes were clustered together in what Joanning and Keoughan (1997) call "a higher order of abstraction." These also were labeled. Thus, returning to their example, although food may be a type of category, like "fruit," clusters would be at a higher order like "food" (such as "fruit, bread, and meats" p. 7). Finally, clusters were observed to find common links between them in order to discover larger "Domains of Meaning." This is the highest order of abstraction and is at a more symbolic level (Spradley, 1979, referred to by Joanning & Keoughan, 1997). Following the same example through, the domains might be "the necessities of life" and include such broad domains as "food, clothing, and shelter" (p. 8). These separate ways of understanding the data were then continually edited as the rest of the
interviews were examined. The end result is the following schematic:

"Domains of Meaning

which include all

Clusters

which include all

Categories" (p. 8)

The categories, clusters and domains were used to understand and analyze the phenomenological experiences of the couples in the investigation. As such they showed which were common among all couples or several couples and those that were unique to individual couples (Joanning & Keoughan, 1997; Strauss, 1987).

A final tally of topics created in this manner revealed 76 altogether. Note cards were then utilized, with one card for each of the 76 topics. The page number on the running commentary and pertinent quotes were written on each card. After completing this process, the cards were organized in an effort to determine the categories, clusters and emergent domains. At this point, 5 qualitative dissertations completed at Iowa State University, were consulted to see how fellow researchers organized their domains. A tentative list of domains, clusters, and categories were tallied and shown to a member of this researcher's dissertation committee. The member had previously viewed the running commentary and had noted the topics in the margins and then helped the researcher organize the domains, clusters and categories for the results chapter. The researcher then rewrote these and consulted with his major professor. These were edited again in the process of writing the Results Chapter.

In an effort to assure that the results adequately represented the phenomenological
experience of the couples, two couples from the sample (#'s 3 and 4) were consulted and shown a summary statement of the major domains. These comments were taped, transcribed, and integrated as appropriate in the Results Chapter.

In addition, to check to be sure the results were based upon sound research methodology, three outside observers with training and experience in qualitative methodology were asked to listen to one interview tape while reading the corresponding transcription. They also read over the related running commentary, and the Results chapter on the summary of the domains in an effort to cross-check the original researcher’s findings. They also examined a summary of the methodology used in the research.

A final list of the completed domains, clusters, and categories can be viewed in summary form in the Table of Contents of this dissertation.

The Results chapter was written in two sections. The first was a summary of each of the participating couples. The second was a discussion on each domain and their corresponding clusters and categories. This was followed by a discussion of the emergent domains.

After these findings were summarized in Chapter 3 the results were compared with recent research literature and with the theory chapter (Chapter 2) in Chapter 4: Conclusions. The Conclusions chapter also includes a discussion of the limitations of qualitative research, the limitations of the research conclusions, the implications for marital therapy practice, the need for further research and a summary of the over-all findings.

Thus, this work employs the three methods delineated by Wolcott (1994): description, analysis, and interpretation. Description is that process to uncover "What is going on here?"
(p. 12). This was be done by reading, listening, and rereading the transcripts. *Analysis* looks at how all the different parts fit together (domains, clusters, categories). This was done in running commentary (see Appendix B) and Results chapter. *Interpretation* asks "what does it all mean?" which was addressed in the Conclusion chapter.

Prior to conducting the study appropriate approval was received from Iowa State University's Human Subjects Review Committee. A copy of their approval is provided in Appendix C. A summary of the qualitative techniques used in this study and their relation to the trustworthiness of the research can be found in Appendix D

**Delimitations and Limitations**

This study was confined to the 9 lowest couples on the DAS scale in the original Cole & Wall (1997a) data set. The advantage of this type of research is being able to investigate a phenomena of human experience in detail. This will enable us to uncover some of the driving forces that keep LQHS couples together.

At the same time, qualitative research's strength is its weakness. By its nature, qualitative research cannot be applied beyond its contextual setting (Creswell, 1994; Ambert et al., 1995). Of special significance in this study is the context of Midwestern, white America. Sherif (1997), an anthropologist, who reviewed the theory section of this dissertation (Wall & Cole, 1997b), suggests that the reasons for keeping a marriage together may vary from culture to culture. Indeed, when the theory section of this paper was presented before 21 doctoral-level students in an advanced family theory class, an African student, Hispanic student, and Asian student all concurred that unhappy couples in one culture may stay together for different reasons than the same type of couple in another culture. Those
reasons may even vary from couple to couple, not just from culture to culture.

Significance of the Study

Because LQHS couples have been ignored in research, studying them may help us uncover certain couple strategies that can be applied to other couples. This is important for us because the divorce rate does not seem to be waning. Lewis and Spanier (1979) suggested that couples shift around in their relationship quality and stability depending upon developmental and environmental factors. They would suggest that most couples in America start out as high-quality, high-stability couples. By definition, couples who divorce have to come out of either the high-quality, low-stability quadrant or the low-quality, low-stability quadrant. Although there certainly are couples high in quality who choose to divorce (see Ganong, 1997, who writes he’s seen some in his research), yet, it would seem that most divorces occur among those who are low-quality and low-stability. But, how do they get to the low-quality, low-stability quadrant? It is doubtful they will go from HQHS directly to LQLS. Most will go through the LQHS quadrant first, before they reach LQLS (see Figure 1). Thus, if determinants of stability for LQHS couples can be found, this information may be used to arrest the trajectory of couples who are headed for divorce. The information may take three forms: 1) to help in the development of an assessment tool that may be used by clinicians to weigh strengths and weaknesses in the couple around stability; 2) to design interventions appropriate to the couple, and 3) to be used as the basis of preventive material designed to address the needs of couples headed toward instability who want to stay married.
Figure 1. Lewis & Spanier’s (1979) couple typology
Assessment, intervention, and education, may arise out of this study, but more results may be seen. Taking Sherif’s (1997) cue, this research strategy could be applied to other cultures and more extensively across the life-span, to further our awareness of LQHS couples. A result of this research may be that there are two types of LQHS couples: those who are that way and don’t mind it or want to improve their marriages and those who want to divorce, but are unable to because of cultural mores against it.
CHAPTER 2. TOWARD A THEORY OF LOW-QUALITY, HIGH-STABILITY COUPLES

Ever since Terman’s studies on what makes marital happiness (Terman, Buttenwieser, Ferguson, Johnson, & Wilson, 1938) and what factors predict divorce (Terman, 1952), research in marriage has surrounded these two questions. But looking only at what makes happy couples happy and what factors cause unhappy couples to break up avoids looking at couples who may be unhappy in their relationship and yet choose to stay together. These couples have been largely viewed as dysfunctional (Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974) or even as a form of male domination over women (Yllo, 1993). This dissertation suggests that couples who are stable in their relationship, yet are not happy with it, may have something positive to teach us about the dynamics of marriage that has been previously overlooked.

Research in marriage has centered upon two main constructs: marriage quality and marital stability. *Marriage quality* has been understood primarily as the independent variable, the variable of process that leads to an end state of stability or instability. Such variables as adjustment, happiness, satisfaction, and commitment have been studied as examples of high quality and are often used interchangeably. *Stability*, on the other hand, has typically been the dependent variable and has usually been viewed as dichotomous: unstable or stable. A stable marriage is one that is intact until the death of one spouse. An unstable marriage is one that ends in divorce, desertion or annulment or has been interrupted by separation (Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Spanier & Lewis, 1980). This point of view posits that if the marital quality is low enough, the stability of the marriage will be threatened, making...
Typologies are common in marital research (For a review, see Fitzpatrick, 1987). Typologies are a way of trying to understand patterns and trends so that predictions can be made about other couples in other settings beyond the ones under study. One that has stood the test of time was articulated by Lewis and Spanier (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). They researched 300 articles on marriage quality and stability and analyzed their contents, research variables, and conclusions. Their theory, based upon social exchange, suggests four possible “types” of marriages: 1) high-quality, high-stability (HQHS), 2) high-quality, low-stability (HQLS), 3) low-quality, high-stability (LQHS), and 4) low-quality, low-stability (LQLS). The first type is those couples that are happy and satisfied with their relationship (high quality). They tend to rarely divorce (high stability). The second type are those couples high in relational satisfaction, but who divorce anyway. This category is understandably small. The third type has low satisfaction with their relationship but still stays together. The last type is those who are both unhappy with their relationship and separate or divorce (low stability or unstable). When Lewis and Spanier wrote their summary article about this proposal they stated that in America roughly 25% of the marriages were of the HQHS category with 50% of the marriages in the LQLS category. The latter category is often calculated from the divorce rate. That leaves about 25% of the couples who are in stable but low-quality marriages. Lewis and Spanier believed that this latter category would decrease in the years toward 2000, whereas the categories of HQHS and LQLS would increase. They seemed to base this conclusion on an assumption that the divorce rate would increase in the
intervening years.

But recently the dynamics of Lewis and Spanier's typology have been called into question. Cole, Williams, Wall, Moorman, and Cole (1998) and Cole and Wall (1997b) theorized that many couples who divorce may start out HQLS and then rapidly degenerate into LQLS. It may be that for some of these couples the relationship was never stable. This contention is also supported by recent research conducted by Stanley and Markman (1997) with 947 engaged, cohabiting, and married couples in which 92.5 percent of the sample said they were “happy” to “perfectly happy” with their marriage! This result was astounding and caused Stanley and Markman (1997) to explain:

This kind of result is puzzling though not uncommon in surveys on marital happiness. With a divorce rate hovering in the 40 to 55% range, how can so many couples be so happy yet so many couples be at risk for marital failure? First, we would suggest that most of those older couples in the survey who are happy together are probably at very low risk for divorce. They have made it through hurdles in life that many younger couples will not survive.

Our interpretation of this finding is that, on any given day, most people are in fact happy in their marriages. However, for couples who are greater risk of divorce, there is a steady erosion of the foundation of their marriage for years that culminates in what appears to be a fairly rapid process of disintegration. In other words, a marriage failing underneath the surface of the hill that does not become apparent until a big enough rainstorm hits (stress in a marriage) to bring the whole hill sliding down. This interpretation would be consistent with other research on what erodes a marital bond over time. (P. 7-8)

This still leaves the dynamics of the third type: LQHS. These couples are able to weather disruptions to their marital quality yet remain stable. While it could be that many of these couples are also experiencing a “steady erosion of the foundation of their marriage for years” (quote from Stanley and Markman above), others may plateau or even improve in their marital quality over time. Stability for these couples may be a prerequisite for marital
Individual Attempts to Solve the “Unhappy Marriage” Syndrome

Divorce trends have at least followed the prediction regarding low-quality, low-stability marriages. This is the type that typically divorces. Recent statistics indicate that although the divorce rate leveled in the late eighties, in the nineties it is on the way up again, with estimates of 60% to as high at 75% (Gottman, 1994b; Irving & Benjamin, 1995; Kitson & Morgan, 1991; White, 1991b). As expectations for a “happy” marriage continue to be propagated as the ideal, being in an “unhappy” marriage is increasingly being seen as dispensable. The cultural norm, which used to be “better to remain married even if you are unhappy,” has been switched to “if you are unhappy in your marriage, divorce. You deserve better.”

This value system, that marriage is expendable if one isn’t happy, is propagated not only in the popular culture, but by the research community itself. For example, some advocates for victims of domestic violence see divorce as the solution of choice to deal with this issue (Barnett & LaViolette, 1993; Campbell, Soler, Koss, & Browne, 1995; Pagelow, 1981; Yllo, 1993). Remaining in an abusive relationship is viewed as an abdication of a woman’s dignity as a person and dangerous as well. While few would argue that a person should stay in the same household in threatening circumstances, these researchers suggest that the only way for the woman to get back on her feet again is to divorce and start over. They deny that intervention for male batterers is of benefit or that battering relationships should be saved. This view is held despite the evidence of other researchers that suggests most family
violence is committed by young men in their teens and twenties and that it vastly decreases in the thirties and by the fifties virtually disappears (Dutton, 1995; O'Leary, Warshaw, Tolman, & Arias, 1995; O'Leary, 1993; Plummer, 1993). Thus, by not looking at the entire lifespan, many people are cashing in their relational chips, when many of these relationships might have been safe over time. This does not even take into consideration that much research shows that many batterers can be helped not only to quit battering but also to change their patterns of psychological abuse as well (Dutton, 1995; Neidig & Friedman, 1984; O'Leary et al., 1995; O'Leary, 1993; Sonkin, 1995; Stosny 1993; 1995).

The idea that if you are unhappy you should divorce has not borne very much fruit. Studies continue to show the long term negative effects of divorce. These effects reach into all corners of our society. Even advocates of divorce have a hard time concluding that divorce is a positive thing (Amato, 1996, 1993; Booth & Amato, 1994; Demo, 1993). There are too many people involved. Divorce is not just a dyadic situation. Many divorces involve children. Longitudinal studies of children of divorce over time have not been encouraging. They suffer more difficult obstacles in school, future relationships and in self-worth (Allen, 1993; Amato, 1996, 1993; Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1977; Irving & Benjamin, 1995; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Divorced fathers have much higher incidences of suicide, accidents, and psychological breakdown (Blankenhorn, 1995; Jacobs, 1982). Women suffer primarily in terms of economics, as their incomes typically are lower and often support from their former spouse is not forthcoming (Morgan, 1991; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). The economic impact of divorce is staggering as couples that could barely survive on their

A common solution to this economic nightmare is to remarry, so that again there can be two wage earners in the house. This is not always a positive solution as the divorce rate for second marriages (often called “rebound marriages” due to the remarriage happening too soon after the divorce) is even higher than for first marriages (Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984; Glick & Norton, 1976; Gottman, 1994b; Irving & Benjamin, 1995; Kitson & Morgan, 1991). The problems of stepfamilies are complex (Berman, 1986; Carter & McGoldrick, 1989; Crosbie-Burnett, 1989; Visher & Visher, 1979). It is just not a matter of different people living together. Children from the respective families have divided loyalties, as children usually love both their parents. To see mother or father sleeping with someone other than their own parent may be an unsettling experience. That incidents of child sexual and physical abuse and incest are higher in stepfamilies because of the lack of a filial bond and the mores attending to that tie is often ignored (Blankenhorn, 1995).

Another commonly accepted solution to divorce is to cohabit (Schoen, 1992; White, 1991a). With divorce so high in our culture, it is easy to understand why young people would choose this option. The argument is that they should see if the two of them are compatible before getting married. What they end up testing is to see if they will be happy. Since the majority of couples in our society are not happy and many are seeking divorce, can we expect that couples who cohabit will be happier without commitment? Commitment has
been found to be a high correlate in stable marriages (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Markman, et al., 1994; Rusbult, 1983; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Stanley, 1986; Stanley & Markman, 1992). Yet our culture views commitment as the culprit. Couples say, if we do away with the "license" and build on altruistic love, isn’t that all we need?” Studies have suggested otherwise. Love, or dedication, as Stanley and Markman (Markman et al., 1994; Stanley, & Markman, 1992) write, is only one type of commitment. Without the commitment to the community, the trend toward breakup is even stronger. Both dedication commitment (love) and social commitment (marriage, the support of relatives and friends, government, community, and religious approval) are necessary. While it is true that social commitment used to be enough to keep couples together, today the role of dedication commitment is growing due to the fragmentation of modern society. Perhaps an explanation of why the divorce rate has skyrocketed in the last thirty years is the wholesale abdication of social commitment as a viable glue to hold people together and the adoption of the idealistic “love” or “happiness” as its replacement.

**Are Marriages Worth Saving?**

Forgotten in this debate are the time-tested benefits of marriage. Westermarck theorized that marriage is instinctual. He suggested that habit brought forth custom that resulted in marriage becoming a social institution with corresponding laws (Westermarck, 1922). While marriage may differ from culture to culture, the basic union of a man and woman together sharing sexual intimacy, protection, economic resources, nurturance, and procreation and bound by cultural traditions is the general rule. Indeed, commitment to one
person of the opposite sex beyond the procreation period is widely found in lower primates (Goodsell, 1934). There must be a reason that marriage has withstood the test of time.

The benefits of marriage are far reaching. Over and over again, those in marriage fare better than those who divorced or remained single. For example, suicides and homicides are lower for married people than for single, divorced or widowed people (Lester, 1987). Married people smoke less, drink less, and have lower levels of mortality than do single people (Lillard & Waite, 1995). "When compared to married men, divorced males are twice as likely to die prematurely from hypertension, four times as likely to die prematurely from throat cancer, twice as likely to die prematurely from cardiovascular disease, and seven times as likely to die prematurely from pneumonia" (Mattox, 1996, p. 45). In a review of the benefits of marriage, Waite (1995) found that married people had fewer problems with alcohol, were more satisfied, had higher incomes, had fewer children dropping out of school, had less poverty, and had a higher hourly wage than either cohabiting people or those in one parent families, separated, or divorced. Although both sexes who were married live longer, the benefit for men was proportionately higher than for women. It has been suggested that single or divorced men may be prone to more risky behavior than are married men and that unmarried men are more detached from familial responsibility than are corresponding unmarried or divorced females.

Lillard and Waite (1995) also suggested the lower mortality rate for both married sexes may be due to the higher financial resources available to married people versus those who are single or divorced. These findings are strengthened further when it is realized that these
effects are true for both African-Americans and whites and that mortality rates drop for both races the longer the marriage. Note that widowed women have lower mortality rates than single or divorced women, even when controlling for income.

The benefits of marriage supersede those of living together. Mattox reports that data from the National Institute of Mental Health:

show that cohabiting women have rates of depression that are more than three times higher than married women, and more than twice as high as other single women. And married people each report significantly higher physical and emotional satisfaction with their sex lives than singles, including those who cohabit. (Mattox, 1996, p. 45)

Although some might argue that marriage is self-selective for the psychologically healthy, Waite quotes the findings of McLanahan and Handefur as concluding that:

The positive effect of marriage on well-being is strong and consistent, and the selection of the psychologically healthy into marriage or the psychologically unhealthy out of marriage cannot explain the effect. (McLanahan & Handefur, 1994, quoted in Waite, p. 497)

It may be that marriage itself produces certain qualities necessary for improving the quality of life. Lifelong commitments produce trust, sacrifice, relational skills, negotiation and compromise, and an obligation to others. These traits keep a rein on high-risk behaviors and promote the well-being of the family unit, which in turn has a positive impact upon the individual (Mattox, 1996). These benefits of marriage to the individual compound in positive effects upon society at large.

Deficit Models

A popular assumption in contemporary research is that low-quality couples have nothing to offer in terms of positive functioning that could be utilized by others (Raush et al.,
1974). Instead, it is assumed that if a couple or spouse is not satisfied with their marriage, something must be wrong either with the person or the relationship. If a couple experiences low-quality they have been called dysfunctional (Raush et al., 1974). If one of the spouses is abusive and they stay married, the abusive spouse is often viewed as controlling and power hungry, while the abused spouse is often referred to as dependent or a victim. Dependency in these settings is viewed as a negative trait. The dependent spouse is often encouraged to become independent instead. Unfortunately, much advice that uses this language leads to divorce in spite of the desire by many spouses to be able to work out the situation.

But the tendency to divorce as a solution for problems is not only seen in instances of abuse. In our culture almost any excuse can be given to justify divorce and most are accepted by peers and society as legitimate. For example, if a spouse has any kind of a personal problem, whether it be depression, gambling, drinking, or other so-called "addictive" behavior, the solution of choice for many has become divorce. The belief in these circumstances is that the person with the problem behavior deserves it. The person with the problem is preventing the self-actualization of others, so he or she becomes expendable. This view is supported even though there may often be a relational element that led to the problem in the first place. While this systemic view is often accused of casting blame upon innocent bystanders, it is instead a way to look at the problem holistically and to begin to bring healing to the whole family system, not just the injured parties (Jacobson & Gurman, 1995). Thus, divorce, with its lifespan stage-ending finality, also brings to an end the ability of the system to deal with the problem in a healthy way for all the family (Tomm, 1984). The divorced spouses go on
to other relationships, bringing with them the same issues that they did not deal with in the previous relationship. Abusers tend to abuse other women, abused women tend to pick other men who abuse them (Gelles, 1993). This hardly solves the problem of abuse or other hurtful behavior and only extends it beyond the original family system into yet other family systems!

Rather than pointing out the distressed couple’s vast deficits in comparison with happily married couples, one wonders if it wouldn’t be more profitable to explore with the couple their own reasons for staying together to date, the reasons they were initially attracted to each other, and things that they feel are going OK, even though they have perceived problems in certain areas. Perhaps what they would tell us would be rather sketchy or illusive. Perhaps with their negative view of the relationship it will be difficult to ferret out strengths or shared goals or any sort of mutual admiration. But we may learn something about why these couples are going against the cultural norm and staying married even though they are not happy. And maybe what they have to say will help us better understand the true meaning of commitment and sacrifice. Maybe, just maybe, happiness is not the measure of all things.

**Why Some Unhappy Couples Stay Together**

What constitutes a LQLS marriage? For the purposes of this dissertation, it is a marriage where one or both of the partners is unhappy with the marriage, yet the marriage is stable over time; that is, they have decided as a couple to remain married. The key word here is decided; staying in the marriage is a mutual choice of each partner. Research on domestic
violence (Barnett & LaViolette; Kirkwood, 1993; Pagelow, 1981) and recent studies on the physiology of male abusers (Gottman, Jacobson, Rushe, Shortt, Tailade, & Waltz, 1995) suggests that there may be a category of marriages low in quality and high in stability, but not stable by the choice of one partner. This would involve marriages where the situation is so explosive that the less powerful spouse, usually the wife, feels it would be dangerous to stay lest leaving create worse abuse or even murder. In these circumstances, the abused partner feels powerless and maybe even forced to remain in the marriage despite endangerment. As Gottman's research suggests, there are some habitual abusers who are unemotional in their abuse and unlikely, if ever, to change their lifestyle pattern. This is not the category of marriages referred to here in this research.

The research on why some low-quality couples stay together is sparse. Usually those reasons are couched in negative terms or must be implied from studies on why people divorce. A look at the literature on stability reveals that most studies assume that stable couples are happy. The assumption is made that certain factors predict stability and their opposites predict divorce.

Waite and Lillard (1991) examined the effect of children upon marital stability and found that younger children in the home tended to keep couples together while older children or children born before the marriage increased the chances of disruption. Couples who share the same religious convictions, go to church regularly, and believe in the Bible tend to have lower divorce rates (Bumpass, Martin, & Sweet, 1991; Heaton & Pratt, 1990). The issue of wives working and its effect upon stability is mixed. Tzeng and Mare (1995) found that it
depended upon whether or not the wife worked more than her husband or whether her employment status had improved during the course of the marriage. If so, this tended to have a negative impact upon stability (1995). Bumpass et al. (1991) found that male unemployment had a negative impact upon stability. Premarital factors affecting stability have often been cited. For example, Bumpass et al. (1991) wrote that parents' divorce, the age at marriage, and cohabitation are all predictive of divorce. Lower education of wives, religious heterogamy, and educational heterogamy also decreased marital stability.

Although these SES factors may explain some of the variance in why marriages remain stable, there are other personal factors to consider. Adams and Sprenkle (1990) suggested that commitment is a salient issue in the divorce-stability domain. If a partner is ambivalent about their relationship, divorce is more predictable. They found that if partners have come to the point where they recommit themselves to the relationship, stability is more likely (Adams & Sprenkle, 1990).

Gottman’s studies on marriage (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Gottman, 1994a, 1994b; Gottman & Levenson, 1992), while focusing primarily on what unstable couples are doing wrong , when looked at in reverse are highly suggestive about stability. Buehlman et al. (1992), found that couples low in fondness for their spouses, low in viewing their struggle as positive, low in seeing their marriage as a team, and high in negative emotions, had a high incidence of divorce 3 years later. Conversely, it might be concluded that couples who liked each other, saw each other as a team, worked together in their common struggle, and had positive interactions would have stable marriages. However, Gottman (1994b) is cautious
about making this conclusion, as he writes that instability is much easier to predict than stability. Although Gottman views divorce and instability as a process, he still must admit that a couple is either divorced or not. Even with Gottman's extensive research, what keeps stable couples stable is elusive.

An interesting source of information on the stability of low-quality marriages might come from research on long-term marriages. What do they perceive keeps them together so long? The common notion that marital quality is curvilinear (happy in the beginning, a struggle during the child-bearing years, and higher in quality in the empty nest years) may suggest that LQHS couples tend to work out their differences over time and end their years happier than they were earlier. The argument that studying long-term marriages biases the research sample since unhappy couples had previously divorced misses the point that not all long-term marriages were happy all the time! Indeed Lewis and Spanier's (1979) initial conception of this typology made room for couples moving from one type to another. It might be instead that this happiness in later years is in part developmental, as spouses' expectations of each other matches the reality of the situation closer. For example, Lauer, Lauer and Kerr (1990) studied 100 couples over 65 years of age who had been married 45 years or more and found remarkable similarity in world views, expectations, commitment to marriage and each other, use of humor, friends, and decision making. Indeed, these couples said they liked each other! Is it possible that all these couples were always HQHS? Is it not possible that there had been some who spent a major part of their married life at odds, yet finally found peace with each other?
Reconceptualizing Stability

Theoretical questions for consideration in conceptualizing stability emerge as one wrestles with the theoretical and conceptual meaning underlying the construct. This researcher questions the assumption made by most prior attempts at constructing theories of marital stability that stability is a static concept represented by the mere fact that a marriage is intact. It seems plausible that the construct of stability, like the construct of quality, is continuous rather than dichotomous in nature (Cole et al., 1998).

Also, stability is viewed in this dissertation as a dynamic construct, with an ebb and flow of movement along the continuum (Cole & Wall, 1997b). Clinically, marriage and family therapists (Napier & Whitaker, 1978) have long contended that every marriage has cycles of tranquillity and turbulence and that the degree to which an observer might attribute qualities of stability or instability simply reflect different vantage points of when and how the observer is gathering the data. Viewed systemically, relationships are calibrated by an internal governor that regulates the degree of change and continuity necessary for the survival of the marriage. The concept of stability represents a theoretically more primitive or basic construct that is a requisite condition for the endurance of the system.

The concept of quality, on the other hand, assumes a level of stability as a prerequisite condition for viability. Similar to Maslow's theory (Maslow, 1968) of the hierarchy of needs, stability is conceptualized as a basic need that forms the foundational structure and supports the emergence of the construct of quality, which can be assumed to develop as a higher-order level of need. Lewis and Spanier's (1979) theory of marital quality
and marital stability in part supports this notion since the only types of marriage that survive and sustain themselves over time are marriages with high stability.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

The approach taken in this paper borrows from several theoretical orientations to explain why some low-quality marriages are stable.

**Social exchange**

This theory posits that as long as rewards exceed costs in the relationship, it will remain stable (Sabatelli & Shehan, 1993). Four concepts common to social exchange theory relevant to the discussion are commitment, expectations, reciprocity, and choices.

**Commitment**

Stanley and Markman (1992) divide commitment into two constructs: constraint and dedication. *Constraint* means those aspects outside the relationship that encourage the stability of a relationship such as religious values, encouragement from family and friends to stay married, commonly shared financial investments, children, and grandchildren. *Dedication commitment*, on the other hand, includes internal aspects of the relationship that keep the commitment strong such as sacrificing for the good of the relationship. Thus, social exchange postulates that to the extent that the exchange of commitment (both constraint and dedication) is similar between marital partners, there will be stability.

Although constraint commitment and stability may appear on the surface to be similar or identical constructs (C. L. Cole, personal communication, July 18, 1999), as discussed in this dissertation, constraint commitment is viewed as a necessary condition for stability in
LQHS marriages to occur. However, it is only one of several conditions necessary (see “Theoretical Propositions” below). Stability would therefore be “a higher order of abstraction” (Keeney, 1982).

**Expectations**

Research on expectations has indicated that similar expectations promote stability (for a review, see Markman et al., 1994), but expectations are not static. Different stages in life affect the expectations one has for oneself and one’s mate. As time passes, the process of reappraisal of expectations finds new contextual anchors to establish meaning. In LQHS marriages, it is plausible that both partners shift their expectations (and share these shifts with each other both nonverbally and verbally) so that both expect few affective interactional rewards while, at the same time, both expect more rewards from extra-dyadic commitments, such as jobs, parenting, hobbies, and ties to friends and extended family. These extra-dyadic commitments may or may not be jointly pursued. For example, a couple may remain married because they don’t want to change their shared relationship with their children and grandchildren.

**Reciprocity**

Reciprocity has been applied commonly to dyadic relationships (Gouldner, 1960). *Reciprocity* is the notion that the more similar are the perceived exchanges between two people (in this discussion: husband and wife), the more harmony in the relationship. Reciprocity in long-term relationships does not have to be like for like and can include either *extrinsic* factors (e.g., helping) or *intrinsic* factors (e.g., faithfulness) (Blau, 1964).
Choice

Nye (1978) argued that choice is a major construct of social exchange. While social exchange would predict that people make choices based upon the highest reward for them personally, these personal choices do not always benefit dyadic relationships. Individual choices may affect long-term marital stability positively or negatively. Negatively, many relationships are on the verge of breakdown due to the choice of one partner to do such things as drink excessively, engage in domestic violence, or participate in an affair. Conversely, decisions to remain faithful, with no regard for personal sacrifice, may enhance marital stability.

Lifespan

Little attention has been given to the dynamics of marriage over the lifespan (Johnson & Yorkey, 1994; Minirth, Minirth, Newman, Newman, Hemfelt, & Hemfelt, 1991; Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Spanier, Lewis, & Cole, 1975; Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993). What little research there is suggests that there is a curvilinear relationship of satisfaction over the years of marriage with a dip in satisfaction occurring with the onset of children and going up again when the children leave the home. Lifespan typically has been conceived as the study of the change in individuals over a life time (Baltes, 1987). The marital relationship, however, is also developmental. Two concepts of life-span theory are suggestive: plasticity and multidirectionality (Baltes, 1987).
Plasticity

Plasticity is the ability of a person to adapt to changing circumstances and to make up for deficits, either through outside intervention or through compensating in other areas. Thus, a husband and wife may be unhappy with their relationship, but satisfied in other areas that make up for the relational deficits. Some other examples of dyadic plasticity include forgiveness, a refocusing of one's life or a common vision of a future life together.

Multidirectionality

Multidirectionality is the idea that throughout the lifespan people vary in the direction of their functioning. Baltes suggests a young person may be better at remembering short-term memory lists than is an older person, but an older person may be better at applying knowledge to life (wisdom). Applied to couples, multidirectionality suggests that needs and abilities of individuals in the marriage may change over time. Even though the individuals change, they may still function well as a couple. For example, early in marriage, couples may downplay individuality, yet in long-term marriages of low quality individuality may be a crucial element. One could theorize that there are other variations of multidirectionality over the lifespan, such as the amount and style of sexual involvement.

Ecological theory

The advocates of this theory hold that the systems one is a part of influence development (Bulboz & Sontag, 1993). Life circumstances such as health status, employment opportunities, economic resources, educational attainment and knowledge, race, social class, larger geopolitical forces such as war, economic recessions, and depressions or
prosperity, crime rates, and quality of environment, have an impact on marital quality and/or marital stability (Bahr, 1991; Spanier & Lewis, 1980; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Glenn, 1991). These life circumstance may be key factors that serve as contingency conditions for appraisal of marital quality and marital stability. Marriage and family therapists talk about reframing problems into challenges and opportunities for continued growth and change. Could it be that couples in LQLS marriages are applying this principle in their reappraisal of life circumstances that impact their marriage relationships?

Social construction

Although this researcher does not espouse social construction as an overall view of reality, there is a tenant of social construction that may be helpful in this discussion. The basic idea of social construction is that we all construct our own reality and it is real for us (Keeney, 1982). This is a helpful orientation in therapy as it gives the therapist a motivation to try to comprehend the reality of the client as he or she sees it. It also serves as a check for the therapist to be ethically aware of his or her own presuppositions and worldview and how this client-therapist relationship creates in and of itself another new reality.

While this theory has been a common view of therapists from Rogers on, it has been slow to find its way to marital research. As has been already mentioned, little research has been done on couples who are stable yet low in quality, because they have been viewed as less than ideal and not people to emulate. HQHS couples are propagated as the ideal, an ideal that many may not be able to ever reach. Or, maybe this ideal is something within reach, if the steps to get from LQLS to LQHS and eventually, even to HQHS, can be reached as a
process. Even if the study of LQHS couples creates little that is pragmatic for other couples, social construction would posit that their view of reality deserves to be heard in its own right. This respect for "outliers" or those on the fringe gives the researcher a positive stance and objectivity that this researcher wishes to maintain in this investigation.

**Solution-focus**

A particular therapeutic stance that grew out of "social construction" philosophy is solution-focused therapy. Deficit models abound in marital research when it comes to suggesting to low-quality couples how they might improve their marriage. Solution-focus (Walter & Peller, 1989), particularly with a cybernetic bent, suggests instead that rather than look at the problems, we ought to look at the strengths. The cybernetic angle (Becvar & Becvar, 1993; Keeney, 1982; Nichols & Schwartz, 1991) implies that trying to solve the problem is often part of the problem and that something out of the ordinary may be needed instead (or in cybernetic parlance: a more inclusive order of abstraction). The solution-focused approach asks couples to look at what they are doing right and to concentrate on those. The theory also suggests that little changes bring about big systemic changes. The cybernetic view suggests, also, that systems heal themselves.

This theory combined with lifespan, would seem to bear this out, that given enough time, most marriages can become "happy enough" to make it worth while to stick through the difficult times. Unfortunately, many marriages are self destructing before the cybernetic
forces can bring about resolution. But the cybernetician would assume that even the marriages that are both low in quality and low in stability have inherent strengths that be tapped as long as the intervention is not “more of the same”.

**Theoretical Propositions**

To assure precision in the development of this theory (Zetterberg, 1965), the following propositions are suggested regarding LQHS couples:

I. Stability is time dependent: the more time the couple is together, the greater the stability.

II. The longer the marriage, the more probable that the LQHS marriage will increase in quality. That is, the relationship between quality and stability in a LQHS marriage is stochastic in time and developmentally dependent.

III. As constraint commitment increases, the probability of marital stability increases. Marital stability for a LQHS couple is contingent upon constraint commitment, not dedication commitment.

IV. The greater the perceived equality in exchange between spouses (reciprocity), the greater the likelihood that a low-quality marriage will remain stable.

V. As the relationship changes and expectations of one or both spouses are not met, one or both will likely adjust their expectations and thus increase the likelihood that the marriage system will remain stabilized.

VI. The more the changes in expectations and choices of spouses are congruent, the greater the probability that marital stability will remain at the status quo level.
VII. The greater the individual plasticity in one or both spouses, the greater the likelihood a low-quality couple will remain stable.

VIII. As multidirectionality increases, stability increases. That is, to the extent that couples are able to replace areas of deficit with pluses in other areas, their stability will increase.

IX. The greater the life continuity in extra-familial sectors of life, such as employment, housing, and life style, the greater the probability that marital stability will increase over time.

Creating a Model

As stated earlier, traditionally marital quality has been the independent variable, and marital stability the dependent variable, in marital research (e.g., see Figure 1 above). The result with this stance is that if marital quality is perceived as too low, the stability of the marriage will be threatened. This makes stability dependent upon the level of perceived quality in the marriage. For LQHS couples, however, marital quality does not affect stability. These couples stay together regardless of their marital quality.

Figure 2 suggests, instead, that with enough time, marital stability is the independent variable, and marital quality the dependent variable. That is, those couples who weather life’s struggles together, even though some of those years were extremely rough, eventually
CHDP: Critical high divorcing period

2 trajectories for stability
MST: Marital stability trajectory
MIT: Marital instability trajectory

2 trajectories for marital quality
MQI: Marital quality increase
MQF: Marital quality flat or decreasing

Figure 2. A model for low-quality, high-stability marriages
come to a point of resolving that it is worth it to stay married. Those couples who are able to
maintain high constraint commitment levels and high plasticity with regard to adjusting to
life’s challenges and partners’ foibles may see the quality of their marriages improve over
time. For example, most couples begin their marriage being happy. Stability is low for all
couples in the early stage because constraint commitment, developmentally controlled, has
not had a chance to grow. As couples spend time together and make decisions together, their
constraint commitment grows (engagement, marriage, children, purchasing of first home).
Because of the high volatility in the early part of marriages, however, as these couples sort
each other out and adjust expectations, the first few years are a bit rocky. For some, the
trend toward instability and divorce follows a straight line along with a decline in marital
quality (Marital instability trajectory, Figure 2), as evidenced by the mean age of divorce in
the United States of 7.2 years (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995). During this
period (Critical high divorcing period or CHDP in Figure 2), many couples divorce. Those
who weather this period begin to build a solid stability, greatly lowering their odds of divorce
for each year they spend together. Marital quality lags behind for LQHS couples, but both
constraint commitment and stability continue their upward trend. The difference between
stability and marital quality is the area of discontent. As long as marital quality lags behind
marital stability, satisfaction in marriage will be low. As the propositions above explain, this
model suggests that over time some LQHS couples are able to close this gap. This would
occur for various reasons such as developmentally through maturity, adjusted expectations,
congruence on individual choices, and mutually enjoyable constraint commitment (like the
success of their children or grandchildren). Thus, this model proposes that some LQHS couples, if they can stay together for the course, will migrate toward higher quality marriages toward the end of the life cycle (Figure 2. Marital quality increase). The model shows also that some LQHS couples will not improve in marital quality over time (Figure 2. Marital quality flat or decreasing, yet still choose to stay married.

Summary

This dissertation investigates a new model of explaining why some LQHS couples remain married. The usual model in the research literature is to view marital quality as having a causal link with marital stability. That is, the happier the couple the more likely they will stay married (stable). This researcher theorizes, however, that the stability in LQHS couples is not affected by their level of marital quality. They stay married even though they are unhappy with each other. There must be other reasons to explain their stability.

Research on marital quality and marital stability tends to emphasize the positive aspects of marriages of high-quality and the detriments of marriages low in quality. This trend supports the popularly accepted myth that marital happiness is the epitome of measuring marital success. Happiness, however, is fleeting and slippery which makes it hard for people to understand what causes it. As Hicks and Platt (1970) suggest, are they just happy people, happy in themselves, their job, each other, or the relationship? And who is to decide that happiness is the final measure of marital success? Clearly another measure is needed if we are to lower the divorce rate. Before the public will accept another measure of marital success, the research community must find reasons other than happiness to stay
together. The trend in our culture is to be concerned with the here and now at the expense of the long-term view. More research on marriages over the long term is needed is to educate the public on what can be expected, so that couples will be equipped to weather their struggles together.

This research suggests that LQHS couples may be quantitatively different than couples high in quality and stability or those low in quality who divorce. The dynamics that keep LQHS couples together have not been investigated. We cannot simply look at traditional causes of divorce in reverse or typical causes of marital quality. As has been delineated, previous marital research, while giving us a starting point, has taken the view that LQHS couples are substandard and do not have anything positive to contribute. This research bias must be overcome if we are to understand the world as LQHS couples construct it. Letting LQHS couples tell us what keeps them together may open our eyes to new possibilities not considered before in traditional marital research.

Perhaps the unsung heroes in this quest are those couples who stay together no matter what the personal cost to their happiness. They are pioneers going against a cultural norm. Perhaps it is time to view these persons, instead of dysfunctional persons in co-dependent relationships, as persons willing to sacrifice for others. Is their sacrifice worth it over the long haul? Is the short term pain worth it for long term gain? We cannot know unless we ask. And if we ask we might be pleasantly surprised at the result.
CHAPTER 3. RESULTS

Chapter Two, which presents the theoretical framework for this dissertation, was written before the investigation of the data. Once the analysis of the data had commenced, this researcher put aside the theoretical orientation and sought to let the couples speak for themselves. The goal was to determine what LQHS couples would say are the factors that they believe keep them together. This chapter describes the results. The first section of the present chapter describes the subject couples in more detail, including the issues they faced and the factors they described that affected their marital quality and marital stability. The second section of the chapter is an analysis of the domains, clusters, and categories that arose after an analysis of all 9 of the couple transcripts and a member check with two of the couples.

Couple Analysis

Coupel #1. Jim and Debbie, married 27 years. “Roll with the punches.” (Jim)

Each couple used in this research faced difficult circumstances at the beginning of their relationship. Some couples were able to overcome those obstacles. Unfortunately, the issues that Jim and Debbie had to grapple with at the beginning of their relationship continued to plague them throughout their marriage. This stemmed largely from Jim’s tendency to make decisions without consulting his wife. She disagreed with nearly every career decision Jim had made right from the beginning of their time together. The career decisions were dramatic and affected the entire family as they initially had to move. They did this a number of times until they finally settled on farming.
Yet the career issue was still confronting them at the time of the interview. Jim felt that they were not making the kind of money they needed to retire, so he was in the process of starting a side business that would be a corporation. His wife felt he was already overworked and underpaid in his work as a farmer. She barely saw him now. If he took on another side business she'd see him even less. He needed his wife's signature on the corporation papers and even though she vehemently disagreed with his new venture she reluctantly signed the papers.

Debbie was frustrated by the lack of partnership between them. She had hoped for a marriage where both of them would work together and share equally in the relationship. Her idea included such things as sharing decision making, sharing household duties, validating each other's feelings, connecting emotionally, spending time together, and sharing common goals. Over the years these aspirations were largely unfulfilled.

On the other hand, Jim retained his view, which he admitted he inherited from his parents, that the husband has the final say. He said, “Somebody has to be the boss.” He felt his wife should come home from her job at night and take care of the chores around the house. She should keep her nose out of his affairs: “She better not give me hell for the way I operate.”

These two conflicting ideas on roles kept the couple apart. They did not connect emotionally, they did not demonstrate much affection for each other nor did they spend time together or share much in common. So what kept this couple together?

Both of them had a wider purpose than their own personal happiness. Jim was
making his career decisions with the benefit of the entire family in mind. Both of them suggested that a major factor keeping them together was their children. Debbie admitted, however, that while this was a major factor earlier in their relationship, she was ready to spend time with Jim and enjoy life together, to build that partnership that had eluded them. Jim, however, still seemed preoccupied with their financial situation and was trying to recover from the farm crisis of the 1980’s that had been a major setback for them.

This wider purpose was also seen in their use of cliches, which had a particularly Midwestern feel. The idea of “rolling with the punches,” “just do it,” and “life goes on” reflected their belief that one’s responsibility is to make the best of what one has or has been given. Complaining does no good. Divorce is not an option. That wouldn’t be rolling with the punches. That wouldn’t be an optimistic view of life. Negative feelings are to be put in their right place. If feelings counter one’s responsibility, they are to be ignored. “There are no downs.” “It’s all between your ears.” “It all works out in the end.” “You forget the downs.” “You just kind of keep trying to do the best you can do and hope everything works out.” Endurance was a value in its own right that kept them going even when the chips were down, even when they faced incredible odds, even when they disagreed about the most fundamental issues.

However, cliches can prevent intimacy from occurring. In this instance, the cliches have worked better for Jim than for Debbie. It’s no surprise she used fewer of them than Jim did. She may have been able to “just do it” but she was unable to “roll with the punches” and pretend it didn’t bother her. Jim felt Debbie should just relax and enjoy life instead of letting
her different views of his choices bother her. As he said, “no sense both of us worrying.”

In spite of Jim’s seemingly rigid stance on “roles” he suggested that he was more open to Debbie’s suggestions and ideas than he was in earlier years. He said he listened to her thoughts on things more and if she had a good point he took that into consideration when making the final decision. That responsibility still fell with him. Debbie suggested that over the years she had become more assertive with Jim about her feelings.

In spite of the disparity this couple had in decision making and the resulting sense that they lacked a feeling of partnership, they did not feel they had a bad marriage. When asked his attitude toward marriage Jim said, “When it comes right down to it, it’s just a lot between your ears.” That is, what makes a good marriage depends upon one’s attitude. Keep a positive outlook, which he felt he had, and all will be fine. He said, “We didn’t have many rough times... It’s all been up; there aren’t any downs. You forget the downs.” Debbie said, “We love each other. We respect each other, most of the time. He probably disagrees with that. I guess I wouldn’t say we have a bad marriage. I wouldn’t say that. I think we could have a better marriage.”

Couple #2. Mike and Kelly, married 10 years. “Either deal with them (her husband’s resentments) or move on.” (Kelly)

While Jim and Debbie disagreed throughout their relationship on the issue of career choices, Mike and Kelly have struggled with different opinions on how many children they want. Because Mike had been married before and had a child from that marriage, he knew how time consuming children could be. He had an ideal in his head when he fell in love with
Kelly, that they would have some time together, just the two of them, to bond as a couple before having children. He was horrified when he found out that Kelly was pregnant 10 days before their wedding. As a result, he wanted Kelly to have an abortion.

When Kelly found out she was pregnant, she was thrilled and thought Mike would share her enthusiasm. Imagine her despair when she heard Mike’s request. While Mike interpreted the presence of children as a threat to the relationship, Debbie could not imagine anything else that could bind a couple together more than having children.

The couple did not discuss how they decided for Kelly to go through with the abortion, but it was apparent by the tone of the interview 10 years later that the effects of that situation were still being felt. Mike didn’t ever seem to warm up to the idea of having children, not just because of the competition for affection from his wife, but also because of the financial strain. They had decided that Kelly would stay home with the kids. Mike’s job was not enough for them to ever get ahead financially, so he felt under constant pressure to work longer hours to make ends meet.

As a result, when Kelly did get pregnant two times later in their marriage, he was not enthusiastic nor supportive of Kelly. This continued to be a blow to Kelly. What can be more invigorating than parents sharing the joy of having children? Indeed, the previous couple expressed that children were a major factor bringing them together. Jim had said, “Everybody’s happy when they have a baby and it’s healthy.” Not Mike. Kelly felt as if he wanted her to feel guilty for having children. She was reluctant to have another child because of the lack of support from Mike, but she desperately wanted to have a baby girl. Just one
more go around. Mike wouldn’t hear of it. She said she wanted Mike to donate his sperm to a sperm bank, so that if anything should ever happen to him and he died, she would go ahead and have her last child.

But this desperate thought was countered by a harsh reality. Her doctors had advised her to have a hysterectomy in the coming year, putting an end to her child bearing forever. This was hard for her to face. She had to contend with the idea that Mike might even be secretly happy she wouldn’t be able to have children anymore which for him would put an end to the issue that had caused so much strife between them. How could Mike empathize with her pain when he never wanted children in the first place?

These kinds of issues often divide couples to the point of divorce. But Mike and Kelly continue to stay married and shared no thoughts of divorce. How can this be?

Kelly said much of it came down to adjusting her expectations downward. She either had to “deal with them (Mike’s resentments over their having kids) or move on.” By “move on” she meant divorce. By “deal with it” she was referring to being able to accept the situation in spite of shattered ideals. Mike, too, felt that acceptance was a critical aspect of their continued relationship. By that he meant giving up the idea that one can change the other and appreciating who the other one was, both the good and the bad. Actually, Kelly suggested she had just come to terms with acceptance in the last few months, that she had struggled the previous 10 years of marriage.

Other things that the couple shared that kept them together as a couple were a sense of partnership and shared goals in the relationship, a determination to meet the other’s needs,
and a willingness to sacrifice for the other and their friendship for each other. While Kelly had changed recently in her attitude toward acceptance, Mike was changing in the way he dealt with conflict. Mike typically kept his feelings inside and did not express them. This kept Kelly guessing and made it hard for Mike to deal with his resentments. Kelly said they had an argument shortly before the interview where Mike actually yelled to get his point across. This both startled and pleased Kelly. She was startled because it was unusual for Mike to be so adamant. She was pleased because both of them were able to deal with the issue and put it behind them.

**Couple #3. Bruce and Wendy, married 5 years.** "Do what you’re supposed to do and hang in there." (Wendy’s feeling of what God was saying to her in her prayers)

Bruce and Wendy also faced a major difficulty in their early marriage, but unlike the two previous couples, they were better able to put the issue behind them and grow in the area of concern. Bruce and Wendy had a difficult time understanding the different ways that each dealt with conflict. Wendy grew up in an abusive family with lots of fighting. In Bruce’s family, everything was fine on the surface. No one argued. So when Wendy let Bruce know her wishes, he didn’t know quite how to react. His overly idealized image of marriage was that his wife would meet all his needs and that they would never fight. When his wife proved incapable of meeting all his needs and made demands of her own that countered his own desires, he ended up resorting to domestic violence. The couple was not specific on what type or how often that Bruce abused her, but it was a problem for them during their first year of marriage.
Fortunately, the couple found help. Bruce was in his graduate program at the time and Wendy was able to confide in one of Bruce's older classmates who had the wisdom to refer her to Bruce's major professor. The classmate said if Wendy didn't tell the professor about the abuse that he would. This intervention ended up with both Bruce and Wendy in couple therapy where they learned more helpful ways to resolve their differences. The couple indicated that after the first year Bruce was no longer abusive and after the second year he had learned to handle his anger in ways that were more appropriate.

For both of these partners adjusting their expectations to the reality they were facing was key to their relationship. Wendy said since her family of origin was not safe she had wanted a marriage that was. When it turned out her young marriage was also not safe she had a hard time facing this reality. How can a person accept that a person you love might intentionally hurt you? No doubt acceptance of this was largely due to both of them being able to make strides in how they treated each other so that the relationship could begin to be safe. Still, Wendy struggled with a loss of trust. It concerned her that even after 5 years she was still not able to trust completely.

But the couple was even more adamant that a key element for them in overcoming this difficulty was their faith. Wendy said she prayed and prayed about the situation with Bruce. She remarked that her prayers were not just to change Bruce, but to help her see where she had been shortsighted and what could she learn and change that would benefit the relationship. Her pouring her heart out to God gave her an objectivity that enabled her to make changes in her own attitudes and behavior.
Bruce suggested that his faith helped him see that as a husband he had a higher calling before God to demonstrate to the world that God was indeed real. If he was a child of God and he beat his wife, what kind of a message would that send about the God he worshipped? This gave him a responsibility not only to his wife, but to God and the wider community and as a result an additional reason to treat his wife kindly and to learn to work out their problems together.

This couple emphasized the hope they felt for the future, because they had overcome a major obstacle. This created for them a sense of working together. They made a special effort to spend time together and have fun. Bruce felt humor was a key factor that helped them cope. They believed in each other’s potential and made efforts to adapt their ways of interacting so that the other would benefit. Thus, Wendy was learning to moderate her confrontive style and Bruce was learning to be more forthcoming on things that bothered him. Wendy also had a tendency to be overly demanding about the way the house was organized. She was learning to accept Bruce's efforts to help around the house, even though he was not prone to pick up after himself. Because Bruce's father just expected his wife to take care of the home front, Bruce had a harder time taking responsibility for household duties. He felt he'd come along way, especially in light of his family background, but both he and Wendy agreed he had a ways to go. He attributed his "messy" style with the baggage that came with being in a research doctoral program. If he put his research away he'd have a tendency to have a harder time getting back to it later. When he graduated and had his own research office he envisioned he'd do a better job of picking up after himself at home. Wendy was a little
more skeptical that he'd make such a drastic change!

*Early intervention in this couple's relationship was key in helping them make the changes they need to in order to assure their relationship would be safe. Progress in this area gave them hope that they would be able to make whatever changes were necessary to meet the challenges of marriage in the years ahead. Applying their faith to their lives gave their relationship a higher meaning. Still, spending time together enjoying each other enhanced their relationship.*

Bruce and Wendy were interviewed a second time three years later. By that time they had been married 8 years, had their first child, and one other on the way. Each was working part-time with alternating schedules so they didn’t need day care for their child. Both said that their relationship had greatly improved since their fifth year of marriage.

**Couple #4. Frank and Shelly, married 14 years.** "*If you can put those responsibilities and obligations ahead of your own self interest, you will be a content, self-fulfilled person.*”

(Frank)

This couple, like Mike and Kelly, had to face the difficulty of an early pregnancy. The pregnancy was a surprise to them because Shelly had had previous medical problems and she had been told she probably would not be able to have children. When she found out she was pregnant, she saw her baby as a gift from God, a miracle. She was thrilled. Frank’s view was similar to Mike’s. He didn’t want the burden of child rearing so early in their relationship and told Shelly to get an abortion. Unlike Kelly, Shelly stood her ground against her husband’s wishes and said there was no way she would ever do that. It was non-
negotiable. As a Catholic, abortion for her was morally wrong. She could not understand how Frank could consider destroying a miracle when it was a gift from God in the first place. Frank was quite surprised at the strength of her conviction and decided to let her have her way, even though he disagreed. As it turned out, Shelly could not have any more children, a circumstance that deeply affected Frank. He had made quite a change in his view. He ended up sharing Shelly's enthusiasm. At the time of the interview they shared that their son Matthew was one of the key joys of their lives.

This couple faced another obstacle early in their marriage. Frank had chosen a career in mass media. This occupation is fraught with a multitude of moves. They moved many times in their first few years together. The moves at first were exciting, but then began to take a toll on all three of them. They particularly noticed their son starting to act differently. They decided that Frank should change careers to something a bit more stable as they noticed that many in the media were on their third and fourth marriages, something they wanted to avoid. They settled on a mid-sized city not far from their respective families and Frank started work in sales where he could be home each evening.

Frank and Shelly were unique in this sample as they were the only couple that divorced each other and then married each other again. Their interview was instructional about the process of separation and remarriage and why they decided to recommit to each other.

Frank said they separated and divorced because he listened to closely to the culture message of the 1980's that put emphasis on pursuing your own happiness. At that time he
noticed that he was beginning to be bored with the relationship. He’d been a thrill seeker in
the 1960’s and 70’s and was a bit put off when his marriage lost its zing. He felt confined in
the marriage and decided to go it alone. It was not a mutual decision. He moved out. Shelly
had to find a small apartment for her and Matthew. Neither Frank nor Shelly made a lot of
money (Shelly was a secretary) and they couldn’t afford two households. As a single
mother, Shelly struggled financially to provide for her and Matthew.

It is interesting to note that Shelly, who often saw herself as not being able to stand
up to other’s pressure, was being told by loved ones and friends to be tell Frank to leave her
alone and to learn to depend on herself. She did just the opposite. She still believed in Frank
and felt he would come to his senses. So when Frank would stop by to see Matthew, she
and Frank would begin to talk. Secretly, she wanted Frank to come back, but she never
pressured him to do so, nor did she chasten him for his actions. Frank said that if Shelly had
ever told him she wanted nothing to do with him, he would have been gone forever. He
secretly wanted to get back together with her, too. He also said that if Shelly had asked to get
back together he would have eagerly responded.

As time went on Frank’s conscience began to get the better of him. Frank saw Shelly
and Matthew in a tiny little apartment with no money to buy the things Matthew needed for
school. Frank began to realize he had put his own needs above his family’s at his family’s
expense. He wondered about the relationship between responsibility and personal
happiness. Maybe being faithful in fulfilling one’s commitments had its own rewards that
were longer lasting than emotional highs. He started interpreting his actions to divorce Shelly
as totally selfish on his part.

Another factor that was instrumental in their remarriage was that he began to attend church for the first time in his life. This was a major change for him, as he had always felt religion was for fools. He made an about face, joined a church and even began to teach Sunday school. He asked Shelly if Matthew could go with him to church and she said sure, and so could she. They ended up going to church together regularly. This involvement in community gave them an added sense of their higher calling as a couple and both decided to marry again.

Shelly said through this whole process she had re-evaluated how she treated Frank. In their early years she was more timid in how she shared her opinion, notwithstanding her strong stance on abortion. Usually she was quite uninvolved in discussing issues and decisions with Frank, something that Frank said used to drive him crazy. At first Frank was threatened by her new assertiveness and even initially used it as one of his excuses to divorce, but now that they are back together he likes her boldness. They both feel they are more in a partnership.

This couple saw themselves in two stages: before and after the divorce. Prior to the divorce their relationship was marred by immaturity and selfishness. Shelly said, “I’m not saying we didn’t support each other, but neither one of us knew how to pull the other one’s good out.” Afterwards it was characterized as compromise, personal and relational change, growth and teamwork. Frank said that at least for him, he had to come to the place where he realized that love was more than passion:
Frank: That’s what love is (feeling content like brother and sister). That’s another level of a marriage...That’s when your relationship is deepening when you know each other so well...Love is not about sex or heat or passion, but about something deeper...I had a spiritual awakening that God calls us to do things and he was calling me to be a man. And what that means is that men have certain responsibilities, I think...traditional responsibilities toward their women and their children, and they include financial support, spiritual support, all of those things...If you can put those responsibilities and obligations ahead of your own self interest, you will be a content, self-fulfilled person.”

Frank was interviewed 4 years later for this research project. Shelly had died the previous year to brain cancer, so he spoke retrospectively about their relationship. He commented that though they had trouble beyond their ability to comprehend, they still made it as a couple and counted their relationship a priority. He said, “When you have somebody by your side there that shares your dreams and desires and loves and accepts you for who you are, both the good and the bad, that’s a wonderful thing to have.”

Couple # 5. Nick and Angie, married 7 years. “He didn’t feel I was in his corner.”

Nick and Angie also suggested two stages to their marriage. The first six years they characterized their marriage as two individuals trying to get the other person to meet their needs. In the second stage they both began to make an effort to work together as a team, to sacrifice for the other and to consciously make an effort to meet each other’s needs.

Unfortunately, the first stage of their marriage lasted six years. They had a difficult time right from the beginning. On their way to Nick’s parent’s house to announce their engagement, they found out that Nick’s father had tried to commit suicide. Things just seemed to degenerate from there.

Nick had lived a pretty wild life before seeking to change his life around. He began
attending a church and went to the church single’s group. That’s where he met Angie who led the group. Angie’s family were strict fundamentalists who valued keeping everyone comfortable. Nick’s family was volatile and valued letting another know if a family member thought something was amiss. Not to do so would be betrayal. Imagine the conflict between these two styles! Angie interpreted Nick’s volatility as an outraged; Nick interpreted Angie’s passivity as outright rejection. It took them six years to sort out these different ways of looking at each other.

This problem would have been bad enough, but it was compounded by Nick’s physical and mental health. Three months after their marriage he found himself unable to get out of bed and go to work. Nick had been an ambitious and active construction worker for a number of years before he ever met Angie. It paid very well. He loved his job but now he couldn’t even go to work. What was wrong?

No one knew how to handle this, least of all Angie and Nick. Angie’s parents pretended on the outside to treat them normal, but soon it became apparent that they could not accept Nick’s not going to work. They doubted his faith and sincerity. In their view a faithful person would not stay home from work. Their church friends also rejected them. Their friends did not have a place in their arsenal for a person who claimed to be a Christian yet did not fulfill his responsibilities. While Angie struggled, she still thought the best of Nick. She said:

Angie: It was scary to me, but...it didn’t ever occur to me to abandon him or that getting married was a bad idea. I still wanted to be with him. I thought that...it would be better for him for me to be with him...I felt like it was temporary; that it could be fixed.
She did not doubt his motives but she was thoroughly confused and did not know what if anything she could do to help. So she did nothing, hoping the problem would just go away. Meanwhile, Nick was feeling his world was getting smaller and smaller. He felt there was no one to help him in his time of need. He began to feel resentment toward Angie for her passivity, believing she was “not in his corner.”

It took years before they finally figured out an answer to Nick’s lack of energy that was satisfactory enough for them to begin to treat each other as partners. Nick was finally diagnosed with a thyroid problem. When that was treated, his energy level increased. However, he was still not the same, strong, physical self with whom Angie first fell in love. They also concluded he had a long-term depressive disorder that apparently had some links to his father’s side of the family. Knowing what the enemy was enabled them to regroup and face it together.

But not before a crisis. Nick reached the end of his patience a year prior to the interview and told Angie he wanted out. He was tired of feeling alone and felt like their marital problems were his fault. He told her if she couldn’t be supportive, than they might as well call it quits. They separated for three months, which turned out to be a wake-up call for Angie. Until that time she had taken her parents’ cue on how to build a marriage. In her family people don’t work on marriages. It just happens. The family rule also was to not tell others what one thinks because that might hurt them. It was of utmost importance to make sure everyone was comfortable. However, this approach was not working in her marriage. Nick needed more from her. She realized that she couldn’t sit by and let Nick handle his
demons alone if she was going to stay married. She was going to have to learn to be assertive, to say her opinion, to challenge Nick’s thinking and to work with him as a partner in solving their problems together. She could no longer sit by and let Nick make decisions without her input. He didn’t want to do that nor, in his state of mind, was he always capable of doing it. At the same time, Nick needed to learn to back off a bit. He stated his opinion with such force that often Angie shut down. He needed to be patient with Angie, to give her time to think so she’d be freer to express her opinion.

Angie: We’re trying to change the roles so that things that come up in our marriage that...need to be addressed are addressed by both of us and seen as a mutual problem, a mutual situation to work out rather than something that’s wrong with him...Taking equal responsibility for...the working out of things.

At the time of the research interview, Nick and Angie were just in the process of healing from their rough first six years together. They still struggled with the same issues, but there was no longer any doubt that they would be able to solve their problems together. They had been through a very trying time and had survived. Nick was trying to put his life together in spite of his lower energy level and had gone back to college to change careers to something a little more sedate than construction. Angie was having a hard time believing he’d be able to finish his schooling as Nick had had a difficult time finishing other things their first years together. Nick struggled with his trust level of Angie. Would she really be there for him?

Like the other couples in this sample, this couple was fraught with early problems, some of which were still not resolved after seven years of marriage. Certainly their lack of support from both sides of the family and the loss of emotional support from their church
friends isolated the couple and exacerbated their problems. They still have their own bitterness to attend to lest they end up isolating themselves from others for the rest of their lives. Yet despite not having an extended support system this couple had shown remarkable resolve. Because both of them were able to adjust their expectations and the way they dealt with conflict, both were confident about facing the future together.

**Couple # 6. George and Vi, married 31 years.** *"We're not in each other’s hair."

Of the nine couples in this sample this was the most “unmarried”. They had little in common with each other except for their children. They married at a late age (Vi was 37). George had lost his wife and had three children to tend to. He was looking for a mother to watch over his children. She was in the process of looking for a husband. They described their relationship in almost business-like terms.

Vi said she was an outgoing person who likes to talk to people and have lots of people around her. George liked the outdoors and being alone. That would be fine, except that Vi got lonely if she was out in the country too long. George felt Vi and her friends were nosey and he had no desire to be part of that. This preference extended to their own relationship. George felt Vi talked all the time. It drove him “crazy.” Vi could not endure George’s silence and took it as a personal affront.

They said the key to their relationship was that “We’re not in each other’s hair.” They meant that literally. George solved their differences by buying a cabin in the woods. He lived there and she lived in town. They rarely saw each other except for family affairs. They had separate checking accounts and made separate decisions for their different
households. As with most divorced couples, the only time they saw each other was when it involved the children.

Yet this couple refused to divorce. They didn't believe in it. They concluded the only way they could stay married was not to see each other. They both affected the other negatively and neither enjoyed being with the other. George seemed content in the situation although he said, "I wish I had a partner that is more to my way of thinking." Vi expressed hurt in that she would like to be able to go to church with somebody so others would not ask themselves where her husband is. She didn't like going to community functions or dinner alone as she didn't want others to think there was something wrong with her because her husband wasn't with her. Still, her comments didn't suggest that she wanted to be with George because she liked him, but only because of an image she wanted to portray to others that everything was OK. George didn't care what her needs on this matter were. He said if she insisted he go to church or out to eat with all her friends he would divorce her. And that was that. No compromise.

George: I go my way and she goes hers. Otherwise our marriage wouldn't work. I couldn't live her life and she couldn't live mine...It is either this or two people get a divorce.

So Vi swallowed her pride and put up with the personal disgrace of an absent husband in order to avoid the worse disgrace of divorce. She made the best of a bad situation and even saw some positive reasons to live the way they did:

Vi: At first I didn't like it, but then I got used to the fact that I can do whatever I want, whenever I want, and I don't have to stop and get a meal. If I want to eat at midnight, I can and nobody cares. If I want to go play bingo, I don't have to rush.
Indeed, they thought in some ways they had a good relationship. Vi said, "I wouldn’t think of going out with another man. I wouldn’t be interested in anybody else." And George said, "We tolerate each other's differences." When they were asked on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being none and 10 being complete, where he would rate his relationship with Vi in terms of happiness they said:

George: I would say about an eight, seven. It sure ain't perfect, but it ain't all that bad. The fact that we can compromise. It would be plain hell for either one of us if one party insisted this is the way we are going to live.

Vi: But when you get right down to it, like you say about the cabin, you really wouldn't want me there all the time. We are used to being apart and I'd drive you nuts.

George: You can wear a guy little thin.

Vi: And you can wear a guy thin by being uncooperative. We have learned to compromise. I guess about a seven or eight too.

George: It sure as hell ain't a perfect situation. It's damn expensive for one thing.

While on the surface George and Vi's relationship seems artificial and bordering on divorce, the couple still saw that they were being faithful to each other, compromising to accommodate each other's preferences and a both shared a commitment to their family. Not surprisingly, this couple had the lowest combined score on the DAS than any other couple in the sample. The couple did have some concerns how they would handle things when and if either of them became disabled due to old age and failing health. They both concurred they have a hard time being with each other for any length of time.

Couple #7. Tom and Yvonne, married 5 years. "As long as we have each other everything will be OK." (Tom)

Yvonne was married and had a daughter before divorcing and meeting Tom. As with
the other couples in the sample, there were early problems: financial, problems with her ex-
husband, and an early pregnancy prior to their marriage. Fortunately, Tom was excited about
Yvonne’s pregnancy so they did not run into the same problems as Mike and Kelly (#2) did
where Mike wanted his wife to get an abortion.

Later, Tom and Yvonne had problems due to Tom’s stress on the job. He’d take his
work problems home with him and as a result, Yvonne felt that he would shut down and
ignore her. In addition, they had moved to a different state where Yvonne didn’t know
anybody. It didn’t help that Tom worked for his brother and that he put in 60-70 hours per
week. This created some problems for them as a couple. What got them through that period
was their belief that the situation was only temporary. This hope turned out to be correct as
once they moved to a different location with different jobs, the stress level was reduced and
their relationship noticeably improved. Yvonne said it was difficult for her to initially trust
Tom, because she had some hurt left over from her first marriage. At the time she met Tom
she was not looking for a mate and in fact said that “all men were scum” in her mind at the
time. She was surprised to find out how kind Tom was—so surprised she couldn’t believe it
until they had been married some time. She indicated that her trust slowly built over time.
By the time of the interview, about 6 1/2 years after they met, Yvonne said the best thing
about their relationship is that they are best friends. She said, “I can tell him anything. Just
knowing he was there for me was a real up, because I never had that before.”

Tom said for him that the best thing about the relationship was their willingness
sacrifice, to go out of their way to meet each other’s needs. He described it this way:
Tom: I would do anything for her and she would do the same for me. That means a lot, especially when I had been single for 33 years.

By the time of the interview they still struggled with their busy schedules and the presence of kids in the family. While the idea of being their own “family” was a real important aspect of their relationship, it also produced a shortage of time together. When they are together they “cherish” the time. They said they used humor to get through stressful times, and tried to be frank with their children when they had disagreements with them.

They believed that they had the most essential element to make a successful marriage, namely, communication. Tom said that “Not being honest is the worst thing you can do.” They strove to keep their communication forthright. They said they have always moved ahead in their relationship by “being positive, having faith...In our relationship we haven’t ever taken steps back. We’ve always gone forward.” Other elements of their positive view of the relationship were that they both work hard in the relationship, have realistic goals, and both give to each other. Making peace with what they have has also contributed to their contentment.

Tom: We don’t have that many wants. I think that’s good for our relationship, too. Nice things would be nice to have, but they are not necessary. We always say as long as we have each other everything will be OK.

Tom and Yvonne were still new to their marriage and hope was a key element for them. Still, Yvonne indicated that their lack of time alone was a major contributor to her struggle in the relationship.

Beneath the surface, Yvonne said that they both have a steady love for each other.
When asked how Yvonne knew that Tom loved her she replied:

Yvonne: Because he cares. He listens to what I say. He cares about my feelings because he takes interest in them. If I’m feeling bad he will take efforts to make me feel better.

Scheduling has given them two lives apart. They each worked different schedules, so it’s like they have two different families in one:

Tom: It’s more like two small families. It is either me and the kids or her and the kids. I am with the kids at night and she is with them during the day.

As a result, they end up doing things as individuals and rarely together. They’ve made up for this deficit by highly valuing their time together. Another factor that contributes to this working for them is their being able to accept this situation:

Tom: I accept that with no major problems. It is not something we want, but we know that’s what we have to do.

Y: At this time. It’s not always going to be this way.

Acceptance for them was easier knowing that someday their schedules would change and they would be able to see each other. Knowing that each wants to be with the other and considering each other their best friend would also seem to be factors that would contribute to their acceptance of a potentially harmful schedule.

This couple is forced out of financial necessity to be separated. Because they each knew the other loved them, and they enjoyed each other’s company, the time apart created anticipation instead of resentment.

**Couple #8. Carl and Eve, married 9 years. Micro vs. macro management**

When Carl and Eve met, Eve was on the rebound from a second divorce and had 2 children. Carl was surprised that his parents accepted Eve and his decision to marry. Eve’s
parents were another matter. Because Eve had already divorced twice, they actually pulled Carl aside and asked him if he was sure he knew what he was doing given Eve's track record!

Shortly after they got married, Eve was pregnant again and her father became ill. She decided to go home to help with his care. Actually, she didn't call it going home to help. She called it a "move." During this time they were separated. As a result, Carl wasn't able to be there through her pregnancy. They were shortly to find out that this was a pattern for them. With two children in the relationship from the start, Carl and Eve had little time together. An added stress over the history of their relationship was that Carl was gone for long periods of time as his job took him overseas. Eve commented that in their 9 years of marriage, if all of their time together were condensed it would add up to only one year! During his absences, Eve and the children got into their own routine. Then when Carl returned things would get topsy-turvy for awhile. Plus, as the children aged and stayed up later, they noticed they had little time for themselves as a couple.

What got them through these long periods of time away from each other? Eve explained that while it was very difficult, she had faith in their relationship and believed it was going to work. Carl believed that their sharing a child right away sealed the relationship and that if it hadn't been for that he doubted they would have survived these early separations.

They indicated their best time in the relationship was time alone they spent in Jamaica. In their 9 years together, both said this was a highlight of their relationship. They had little conflict when they are alone together. They struggle more when they had kids to
Because of their lengthy times away from each other, they found that they had different needs. When Carl came home he was tired of being with his business associates and going out to eat and all he wanted to do was spend time with his wife and the kids. During Carl's absences, Eve was alone with the kids and so she longed to be alone or with adult friends when Carl came home. These different needs were not too compatible and created conflict between them.

They also differed on how they dealt with conflict. Carl was easy-going and tried to avoid conflict. Eve liked to get the issues on the table and then be done with it:

**Carl:** I think there's a recurring problem...I don't respond well to criticism or enjoy conflict and I just don't deal that well with it. Now from my vantage point at least, E. is real good from a macro sense about making adjustments and being accepting, but on a micro level I think she likes to control her surroundings and that brings us into conflict quite often...She likes to talk things through and I usually get upset...

**Eve:** I don't have a problem with conflict. It doesn't phase me in the least. I have two teenagers. We're in conflict...on a regular basis. It's forgiven and it's done...I don't question the love in the relationship. I don't question the viability of the relationship I have with my children....It's more difficult for him. He's very easy going...He's very calm and that's good because I definitely get off the wall. But it's not a serious thing. I could forgive it in five minutes. He finds that intimidating...

Carl described his philosophy of marriage as being able to give each other "a certain amount of personal freedom." Eve agree and said that Carl actually struggled with that because when he came home after a long absence, he wanted Eve to himself; whereas Eve was climbing the walls and ready to explore the world herself. Eve suggested that her philosophy of marriage included being able to "treat each other with respect and to recognize each other's
need for...personal space.” Carl went on to define what he meant by saying that in a mature marriage each partner would be given space to develop their own interests without threatening the relationship. Eve said it would embrace “the differences as opposed to shunning them or asking them to conform across the board.” They agreed that while this was a goal, they both had a tendency to be controlling of the other with Eve trying to control day-to-day issues and Carl more concerned with controlling the over-arching issues.

Eve emphasized that for her to stay in a marriage it had to be good. She wasn’t going to stay in a marriage just to stay in a marriage. Her mother and father were married for a long time. Eve didn’t view their marriage as being very rewarding personally:

Eve: I don’t believe in being with someone just because it is the right thing to do, or appears to be the right thing to do...When I address Carl on our relationship, I remind him I’m there because I really want to not because it just is.

Carl anticipated that as the children grow and leave the home that their relationship would improve because they would be able to spend more concentrated time with each other. Eve was skeptical:

Eve: It (the children growing up and leaving home) will enhance certain parts of our relationship, I would think, I would hope. On the other hand, it may be a do or die. We may have time to spend together and it won’t work...Who knows? I don’t know that.

Later in the interview, when asked about her view of them as a couple in the future, Carl said, “As far as expectations go, I don’t know if I have that many, or, any.” Eve said, “I just hope that we make it. That’s my thing.” When asked by the interviewer if she meant survival as a couple or survival in life, Eve replied, “as a couple.”
This comment and the one previous make two that Eve made about her uncertainty in the relationship. This is the only person in the entire study who suggested any doubt about the future of the relationship. For the rest, divorce was not an option. In spite of her sharing these thoughts, she said she’s secure in their relationship. What was a concern for her, however, was that her husband did not seem to her to be secure in the relationship. Her direct approach to conflict did not just threaten Carl emotionally. In her opinion, she believed that Carl thought her style threatened the relationship.

Couple #9. Harry and Lora, married 22 years. “I don’t know if there are really any major problems.”

Harry and Lora certainly had their share of early challenges to their relationship. Shortly after their marriage Lora got pregnant, Harry started in the military in South Carolina, and the family moved from the midwest to an entirely new culture. Not having support of their extended family during these tender times helped them develop a sense of self-reliance which was difficult, nevertheless. After Harry’s stint in the military (he saw no combat), they moved back to Minnesota to live with her folks. Four months was all they could take before they moved out on their own. After being by themselves across the country, living in the same house with in-laws was too close. Harry eventually went into business with an old high school buddy. They relocated to Wyoming and for several years Harry was on the road tending to the needs of their business. However, his partner took advantage of the situation and before long Harry was out of the business having lost the money he invested in it. This meant another move and finding new work. Thus, their first few years were filled with time
away from each other and frequent moves. After this last move Harry found work close to home and was now home on a regular basis. But because he had been gone so long it now became difficult for both of them and the children to adjust to Harry being home all the time. Now the problem became being too close! Another major setback for them was losing a baby at birth. The couple shared that of all the problems they’ve had, losing their baby was the most difficult for them. Fortunately, they had friends and family who were very supportive.

The hardships this couple faced in their early years seemed to have given them a resilience against letting day-to-day problems get them down. Harry interpreted their life together:

**Harry:** We’ve had our ups and downs, but our ups and downs and battles haven’t been major ones to cause any kind of concerns to even warrant wanting to break it up or anything like that.

Other than this resilience what was their glue? Harry said that they enjoyed each other’s company and they were pretty good about communicating with each other. Lora suggested they would do better if they didn’t assume what the other was thinking, even though Harry thought that was a possible strength: being able to anticipate where the other was heading. Harry believed, instead, a factor they needed more of was a sense of humor. Acceptance of the other helped them overcome their differences:

**Harry:** We get our own little problems and our own little quirks. Everybody has that. But we’ve learned to adjust and how to deal with it and accept or just plain try to forget everything.

When asked how they’ve changed over the years Lora said she’d become a more independent person due to Harry’s long absences. Lora also said she thought that Harry had
been able to take other people’s (Lora’s?) schedules into consideration instead of just making plans without consulting anyone.

When asked what they hoped never changed about their relationship they discussed their intimacy and faithfulness to each other:

Lora: Probably the closeness, the feeling of
Harry: Always being there.
Lora: Yeah, that’s it. We’ve always been able to rely on each other, support each other whatever...
Harry: That type of thing: just never having to worry, I guess. I’ve spent a lot of time away from home (and) there would have been more than enough opportunity for Lora and I cheating on both our parts...
Lora: (Did I ever) tell you that Chuck asked me that once, if I worried about (you) when you went out on the road?
Harry: Yeah.
Lora: Oh, did I tell you that?
Harry: Yeah. No, (it) never really enters the mind....More opportunities would have probably been there, you know, easily, easily, if somebody would have been looking for them.

The last statement is instructive. Faithfulness was something they did not worry about because neither of them were out looking for another partner. If they had, the opportunities would have been there. Because they weren’t looking they didn’t have to face the temptation, nor struggle with wondering if the other was faithful.

**Emergent Domains**

Qualitative research is like anthropological research in that an effort is made to allow the participants to speak for themselves. What do the participants say are the key characteristics of their relationship that encourage them to stay together? After investigating their interviews and categorizing the various issues the following domains emerged that encourage stability in low-quality couples:
Domain 1. An ability to survive early challenges to the marriage

Every couple faced early challenges to their relationship which they were able to survive. Only one couple faced just one major challenge. The rest were confronted with multiple challenges. These challenges occurred in three major areas: 1) in relation to the wider economic system; 2) in relation to others outside the marital dyad and 3) in relation to each other.

Relationship to the wider economic system

The nature of the economic challenges had to do with career choices that took partners away from each other, required the couple to move away from their families of origin or involved long hours of work for little pay. Two couples discussed their disagreement on career choices with the wives believing their husbands made poor choices while the husbands defended those early choices. Five couples moved immediately after getting married, one to start a graduate program, one with the military, and two to start new jobs. Several couples reported multiple moves and multiple jobs in those early years as the couple tried to establish themselves. Thus, these couples did not only have to face the difficulty in adjusting to the change in getting married, but they had to adjust to being way from their families and from a support system of friends, church and relatives, in a new part of the country, and/or new jobs or new school. This change in environment, while stressful, for some of the couples facilitated their own maturity and self-reliance as a couple, forcing them quickly to learn to cooperate and support each other.

Some of the couples were also separated from each other in the early years. One
couple was separated from each other right after they got married due to her father’s illness when she went home to care for him. A husband was separated from his wife because of his demanding work schedules and two husbands were on the road constantly and saw little of their wives. As one husband said: “We had some problems with my working several shifts straight and not sleeping at night and just being gone all day. It was a huge problem.”

**Relationship to others outside the marital dyad**

The second major challenge for these couples was in the area of relationships with others outside the dyadic relationship. Five of couples had a partner who had been previously married. Of these five couples, only one was a single parent due to a spousal death. The rest brought with them the resulting step-family problems of a former spouse and children from that marriage. In all of the previously married couples there were children involved. All of the couples with former spouses had only one partner who had been previously married. Thus, part of the adjustment difficulty was for the spouse who had never married. These partners tended to be more trusting of their previously married spouse than their spouses were of them. Those previously married due to divorce mentioned trust issues with their current spouse as a hang-over from being hurt in their first relationship. This lack of trust was difficult to understand for the spouses who were not married before. And because of the presence of step-children from the start, there was little time for the couples to bond.

Another relationship that affected these couples early on was that 5 of the 9 couples experienced early pregnancies. Three of these pregnancies were in couples who already had
the presence of step-children. Two were pregnant before their wedding, the rest were pregnant within the first year. Two husbands were adamantly opposed to the pregnancies and insisted their wives get abortions. One wife went through with the abortion against her own better judgment; the other wife refused and the child was later viewed by both the husband and wife as a miracle from God, as the wife could only have one child due to health limitations.

Another challenging relationship outside the couple dyad were in-laws. Two couples reported this was a particular problem for them. In both cases the wives’ parents were critical of the husband due to differences in life-style. In one of the cases it was exacerbated by the husband becoming depressed to the point of being unable to work just three months after the marriage. His in-laws interpreted his depression as a spiritual problem and cut him off from their support. Unfortunately, this couple was also cut off from their religious community as their church friends also had doubts about the couple’s faith.

**Relationship between partners**

A final area of early challenges was in the area of conflict between partners. All of the couples reported a different conflict style that was difficult to navigate during those early months together when ideals were high and differences were not anticipated. For one couple, this difference in conflict styles led to domestic abuse. A typical conflict pattern that was described by the couples was one partner pursuing issues and the other withdrawing from the issues. In two couples the husband was the pursuer and the wife was passive. Interestingly, these were the only two couples who experienced the crisis of separation. One of them
divorced over this issue (1 year) while the other only separated (3 months). Both couples reunited when they were both able change their conflict styles, with the husbands learning not to be so forceful in their demands and the wives learning to be more assertive.

In the rest of the couples, the passive person was the husband and the assertive one was the wife. These husbands reported viewing their wives’ assertiveness as attacks on them personally and had difficulty hearing what their wives were saying. As they withdrew to escape conflict or to keep it from escalating their wives saw this as abandoning the relationship and as invalidating what the wives felt were important issues. Thus, these wives often escalated the conflict in an effort to get some sort of a response out of their partner.

Health problems plagued two couples. One husband, mentioned above, had a depressive disorder attributed to thyroid problems and to his family of origin. Another wife had diabetes whose illness had been a struggle to both of them during their entire relationship. Still another couple reported they had a handicapped son who needed constant care. This son was in the relationship from the beginning, a child of a previous marriage.

One couple (#9) said their biggest challenge was losing a baby at birth. Yet they did not express that this had had a negative impact upon the relationship. It was a painful thing they both shared, but it was not the fault of anyone. Instead it gave them a common bond. Fortunately, this couple had a number family and friends who were supportive during this most difficult time.
Surviving the challenges

These couples demonstrated both positive and negative results from these issues. The biggest negative contribution of these problems was, for some, it tended to define their entire experience as couples and at times appeared to be overwhelming. For example, the couple who experienced health problems for the husband, also experienced a cut-off from their friends and family. They also struggled with conflict style differences. The inability to adequately address these issues in the early stages of their relationship led to the loss of trust the couple was still trying to gain when interviewed.

Another couple struggled with separation at the beginning of the relationship due to the husband overworking. Twenty-seven years later the husband’s tendency to be gone because of his work was still seen as a major roadblock to their building a quality relationship. While the wife still hoped for a time when they would actually spend together, the husband admitted he’d probably work himself into an early grave.

Yet, the majority of the couples reported that they had learned important lessons from the challenges and had even grown together and matured as individuals through them. For example, while Bruce and Wendy (#3) experienced domestic violence during the first year of their marriage, they were able with counseling, intervention, religious conviction and personal maturity, to re-pattern the way they dealt with conflict and had been violence-free for 4 years. Being able to change gave them encouragement as a couple and gave them resilience for later disagreements. Several couples reported that moving away from home so early gave them a chance to depend upon themselves and helped them formulate as a couple.
Most of these ended up moving back closer to their families where family support was again an important factor in their ongoing success as couples. The frequent moves for one couple helped them to see the danger for them as a couple and for their child. The husband ended up changing careers so that they wouldn’t have to move again and could build more stability in their relationship and family life.

Similar situations had different results, depending how the couple handled the problem and how they individually viewed the problem and each other. Mike’s insistence that Kelly (#2) get an abortion and the resulting abortion began a division between them over children that was still with them 10 years later at the time of their interview. The same situation brought Frank and Shelly together when Shelly refused to get an abortion because of the depth of her religious convictions. Though, at the time, Frank did not share her faith, he found that he did respect her. Over the years the birth of their only son became a unifying factor in their relationship.

While ex-spouses created havoc for those families with former relationships, they also provided an opportunity to unite against a common enemy and to formulate their own identity as a couple. Early problems with step-children seemed to dissipate over time with only one couple having complaints about that aspect at the time of the interview and that was largely due to the child’s health difficulties. Indeed, one couple (George and Vi, #6) even said it was the step-children that brought them together, both as a couple initially and during most of their marriage. George and Vi struggled after the children were grown to find common interests, but Vi felt very strongly about how important her role was to George’s three
children:

Vi: The youngest boy loved me to death. He would always sit next to me on the davenport, and he always put his hand on my leg or something and we would go to church and he was nestled up to me, and after he died we saw this thing he had written about his life story, and he said when his dad met me and got married, he thought that was his mother coming back, because he was only 2 years old when she died. He thought I was his mother who came back from the grave I guess.

Several couples reported it was the addition of children to the family that helped them formulate as a couple. One suggested that if they wouldn’t have had children, they wouldn’t have had anything to keep them together during those early years. It gave them a common goal, interest, and bond, something they could unite on together. Those couples that did not have children at the time of the interview looked forward with anticipation (and some fear!) to having children. For each of the couples married 20 or more years, children were a decisive factor in their relationship and now with the onset of grand children, family rituals around birthdays, etc., took on new meaning. Indeed, these family events were about the only thing George and Vi spoke fondly of together. These same older couples all struggled with reinventing their relationship with the onset of the “empty nest,” but despite disagreement on sometimes quite major issues, they all spoke with fondness of their mutual love and concern for the welfare of their children and their families.

While surviving outside challenges provided the opportunity to bring spouses together against a common foe, if the conflict was between them, the healing had to take a different form. Wendy described how working together on Bruce’s domestic abuse helped them recover, yet she was quick to point out forgetting was not an option:
Wendy: When we moved here it really started to feel like that was some part of another life. But as I've told Bruce, I don't know if in my mind I can honestly say it will ever be gone. It just leaves something. You know it's almost like your body, once you cut the skin you can heal over with scar tissue and can be stronger than it was before, but you see a scar. You notice a scar. It's kind of that way with our marriage. It's healed over and I think for the weakness that it was, it's turned into something very strong, but not unforgettable. So that's kind of how I see it. I don't know how to answer you as far as saying we've gone to another stage. I can say emotionally, I feel like I'm in a different marriage, but there's always going to be a little memory. I can't say that it's completely ever gone.

Domain 2. A philosophy of marriage that emphasizes the bigger picture

These couples discussed how they put their marriages first before their own individual preferences. With this hierarchy of priorities in their lives, divorce became less of an option. All of the couples discussed the elevation of their relationship over individuality. Two couples said their relationship was also subordinate to their faith.

The elevation of the relationship over individuality

How the couple demonstrated that the relationship was a priority verses their own individual preferences was seen in several ways: their attitude toward divorce, how the benefits of marriage we worth their sacrifice, a viewing of the relationship as primary, and the importance that fidelity and commitment played in protecting the marital bond.

Attitudes toward divorce. Of the 18 people interviewed for this research, only one hinted that divorce might be a possibility. Eve (#8) said that the marriage had to be good or she'd be out of the relationship. She indicated that the marriage was "good" and she felt secure in the relationship as it currently stood. But she felt that her refusal to say she'd always be in the relationship no matter what caused her husband to be a bit insecure in their relationship. He might have also been insecure because she had already gone through two
husbands. Would he be the next? Hanging marital quality over the relationship made him a bit uncertain. What if the couple has a downturn for a time due to health, mental health problems, a death in the family, a lost job, financial disaster, or whatever. Will the couple be able to survive?

But Eve’s attitude was remarkable in that it was a solitary voice. The others in the sample remarked instead that the relationship came first before individual whims or situational downturns. This is not to say that divorce or its threat was not on their minds at all. Several of the couples struggled with this question. For example, Kelly (#2) said she came to a point of decision in the relationship where she had to decide to either accept her husband’s foibles and limitations, including the hurt he had caused her, or “move on.” She decided to accept the limitations. Frank and Shelly (#4) did literally divorce at one point only to remarry each other later. At the time of the interview Frank attributed their original divorce to his own immaturity and selfishness. He believed he had put his own happiness before that of his family, to his own shame. When he got back together with Shelly, he did so because he had come to the point where he viewed his responsibility to his wife and son as something dignified in its own right. For Nick and Angie (#5) their relationship was at a deadening stalemate until Nick threatened divorce and the two actually separated for three months. This turned out to be a wake-up call for Angie and she began to take a more active role in the outcome of the relationship. Interestingly, prior to their separation, Nick had been unable to work due to health and mental health issues for a lengthy period. While others might be tempted to divorce in such circumstances, Angie said, “It didn’t ever occur to me to
abandon him or that marriage was a bad idea.”

One couple’s relationship seemed to this researcher to be a virtual divorce (#6). The couple lived in separate residences, had their own separate checking accounts, did not enjoy being together, did not look forward to spending time together and did not have anything in common except their children, much like a divorced couple. Yet this couple did not see themselves that way. They saw themselves as very much married and actually able to compromise. They were willing to not make any demands upon each other so that they could stay married. As George said, “it’s either this or 2 people get a divorce,” and “I couldn’t live her life and she couldn’t live mine.”

The rest of the couples rarely mentioned divorce. It seemed to be a non-issue. Harry expressed it well (#9): “We’ve had our ups and downs, but our ups and downs and battles haven’t been major ones to cause any kind of concerns to even warrant wanting to break it up or anything like that.” Wendy (#3) commented on her fluctuating emotions early in the relationship, during a time where she was being domestically abused:

Wendy: And you know it is amazing, through that all in spite of intensity of the emotions that were generated through all of the experiences, we still wanted to be with each other. And that was, I mean there were days like, I don’t want to be here. I’m scared- But it would last, if we were separated for just a day or two then that was totally gone, that feeling of need to have to leave or whatever. ...My theory even then, though, was I will never divorce this guy. Never.

Benefits of marriage. The couples focused on the priority of marriage instead of the benefits of leaving. Marriage had benefits to them that superseded their problems. For a person, like Frank (#4), who grew up in a home where partnership and belonging were not
encouraged, being a "normal couple" carried a high value. Frank commented that just doing mundane things like going to the grocery store together meant so much to him. He expressed appreciation for his wife helping him to "settle down." He said, "if there ever was a barbarian who needed to be civilized it was me." He also liked the idea of knowing someone really well and having the opportunity to be known:

Frank: I feel I can understand you and - God, I've been with you long enough if you talk at all (laughter), you know, I recognize your nuances. I recognize your body language. That's what I like. You have to be with somebody a long time before you can recognize those things, and I really don't think you can really know somebody really well unless you're married to them...I mean you know more about me than most people...I mean you can anticipate my moods.

At the second interview 4 years after the first interview, Frank reflected on the benefits of marriage retrospectively, as his wife, Shelly, had died the previous year to brain cancer:

Frank: If you can find somebody and you can tell them things about yourself that are not very attractive, if you can trust them enough to do that, and they love you and support you anyway and stand by you loyally anyway, you really have something. That's a tremendous thing. There's really nothing else like it in the world. You can't get it in therapy. You can't get it in a store or anywhere else. I (initially) thought it (marriage) was all about good sex. Kind of shallow, I know, but I was younger. It doesn't take long for that to wear off. We had sex and as time went on we actually made love, which was kind of a departure for me. Love making is better than sex. They are not even in the same universe.

Wendy (#3) suggested that another benefit of marriage is that it should be:

Wendy: a place where the real mean world doesn't have to exit, where there is some refuge. Some sense of rest and peace and a certain way of things operating that things aren't always chaotic, always cruel or insensitive.
Priority of the relationship. These couples expressed how important it was to view the relationship above personal goals. To Mike, this was a reason for him and Kelly to get together in the first place: together they made "more of person" than they did separately; that is, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. This attitude would have an impact upon decision making for the partners in the relationship. For example, Frank (#4) said:

Frank: I make a decision based on what's best for the family, and I can honestly say that's not always what's best for my own selfish pleasure. I think the minute you start making those decisions based on yourself rather than the higher concept of family, you're taking the first step away from each other. I really do. I think that.

For Frank this meant changing careers from work in the media where he excelled to sales so that they could settle as a family in one place and not have to move all of the time. This was a significant personal sacrifice for Frank on behalf of the others in the family.

Jim (#1) also made his career decisions based on what he thought was the overriding welfare of the family. Unfortunately, for him, his wife did not share his opinion on what exactly was the family's welfare. She would have gladly given up some creature comforts and financial security in order to spend more time with her husband.

Fidelity and commitment. If the marriage were to survive there needed to be a sense of protection around it from outside threats. None of the couples in this sample expressed problems with affairs. The two couples who separated for a time during their relationship did so for other reasons. Vi, who lived in a separate residence from her husband said, "I wouldn't think of going out with another man. I wouldn't be interested in anybody else." Harry and Lora (#9), who were separated for long times because of Harry's work said that neither of them were looking for opportunities. They suggested the opportunities for being unfaithful
were certainly there if they looked for them, but they actively chose to not put themselves in harm’s way, nor did they worry that if the other was looking or not. This act of faithfulness placed the relationship at their center, which they chose to protect instead of seeking out immediate and temporary sources of personal satisfaction that would have been a threat to the relationship.

The elevation of faith over the relationship

For all of the couples in the sample, the relationship was primary over individual wishes. For several couples this was extended to embrace the belief that God’s calling was primary over the relationship. Thus, for them, there was a kind of hierarchy.

Faith was not a major factor for all the couples. Indeed two couples had opposing religious values. Jim (#1) went to church for superstitious reasons (“That’s luck. That’s why you go to church every Sunday.” and “Why we go to church every Sunday and pray things work out and somehow they do.”), while his wife did so because of her faith. George (#6) wanted nothing to do with church, so Vi ended up going alone. Nick and Angie (#5) had been rejected by church people and while they didn’t indicate they had rejected their beliefs, their faith in religious people was certainly shattered.

Several couple indicated that their views of God affected how they saw the relationship. For example, Bruce (#3) said that he felt a higher calling from God in his marital relationship, that he was not only responsible to his wife, but also to God, to his religious community and to the wider world, to demonstrate a marriage that was worthy of that calling.

He also felt his relationship with God kept him accountable in his relationship with his wife. If Wendy was unlovable, and he had a hard time loving back, he would remember that God
had called him to love his wife. When asked about this concept 3 years and one child after his first interview Bruce said:

Bruce: The elevation of faith over the relationship takes pre-eminence, because there’s still a lot of selfishness in me. And I will subsume my interests to the relationship sometimes. There’s also a lot of self, there are good amounts of selfishness. That being married to Wendy is part of my living out of the truth and being obedient to the Lord and so that’s what makes me come back and apologize to Wendy so frequently and to even do other things that I don’t really enjoy, like doing dishes and being involved around the house, taking care of Wendy. We’re expecting another child in November and Wendy’s been really pretty worthless the last two weeks (because of the pregnancy). I don’t really want to take care of Wendy sometimes, when she’s not feeling well. I’m busy and tired as she is and so those things are important, but the elevation of faith...knowing that it is the right thing to do is even more important.

Frank (#4) agreed, suggesting that by being faithful to his wife by taking care of her and his son, he was fulfilling God’s call upon his life which had its own reward.

The wives of these two men viewed the things that happened to them as a couple as part of God’s larger plan. Shelly (#4) viewed her early pregnancy with wonder, believing it was a miracle. Even though they did not have the money for a new baby, she did not doubt that with God’s help, they would be able to work things out.

Shelly: I felt that God had actually given us this child. Because the odds were so against me...For so long that they had told (me) there was a good chance that I never would (have a child). I just felt that (even though)...it was a wrong time, I guess my belief always was, we’ll work it out. I don’t know how the money’s gonna come in, but it’ll come. And that was my belief that God had given us this child and that things would work out.

Wendy (#3) interpreted the domestic violence she was experiencing as NOT God’s will. She prayed to God to ask him to intervene, to change her, to change Bruce, to change their relationship. The couple viewed the changes they made to make the relationship safe as done
through God’s help, thus affirming their faith in God and in each other.

Two couples mentioned the impact of the church on their marriage. Frank (#4) attributed his embrace of faith as key to their remarriage. He began attending church during his separation in an effort to find a deeper meaning to his existence. He had rejected faith, God, and the church his entire life as being superstitious and irrelevant. Attending church as a family and being involved in a community of faith involved them in a regular ritual each week that gave them stability as a couple and the support of a larger community. They did not just go to church, they became involved in the church so that they were able to build relationships with others. It is also interesting that Shelly was able to sacrifice her own personal faith preference, having been raised a Catholic, to attend a Protestant Church with her husband, in an effort to save the marriage and for the benefit of her son.

For Bruce and Wendy the influence they have felt from the church was through personal relationships with others within the church. Early in their marriage, Bruce was studying in seminary. After his domestic abuse of his wife, a classmate intervened so that Bruce ended up being accountable to his major professor over the issue which led to counseling for him and for the couple. After graduation and a move to another new community and work in a doctoral program, Bruce had a close relationship with several other men in the church. They would meet for the express purpose of helping each other in their lives and they would consistently ask each other every week when they met how they were showing their wives that they cared. The example of these other men and a little chastening here and there were instrumental for Bruce to become a more caring husband.

Bruce: When I was meeting with some guys and we were talking about how we’re
accountable to one another for a lot of our behaviors and one of the areas as a group we sought to improve upon was how we related to our wives with respect to gentleness and that was good.

Wendy: I think that all really improved.

Bruce: We'd ask one another what we had done that week to let our wives know that they were special.

Wendy, his wife, suggested that Bruce quit living with her as if he were a bachelor! She felt it was as if he finally matured to the point where he began to act like a husband. For example, Bruce had started too many house projects that he was unable to finish while being so busy with his doctoral program. His men friends from church helped him on the projects and commented to Bruce that he was trying to do too much. This helped him see that he was going overboard and that his wife had been right in her comments all along. Wendy also reported receiving considerable support from a group of women in the church who helped her through some dark days.

Domain 3. A sense of reciprocity in most of the areas of the relationship

Reciprocity is used here in the formal way it is developed in the literature. *Reciprocity* is the perception that both partners believe that there is a relative balance between give and take in the relationship. Reciprocity does not have to be kind for kind. For example, if the husband earns 20,000 dollars and the wife earns 15,000, that does not mean there is not reciprocity. If both believe each other are giving of their time and energy for the relationship, that is what is important.

Interestingly, all of the wives in the study shared a feeling of a lack of reciprocity when it came to household duties and the husbands expressed a general lack of concern about needing to change the amount of time or energy they expended to keep the household
running. Despite this disparity, several wives noted their husbands were making progress in this area. For example Wendy (#3) said:

Wendy: But Bruce has started (in this last year) to be more responsive to my needs and the house and that's been a relief for me. I've tried to lay off pressuring him as much with certain things and I have been able to be more of a wife...We still have times where we just don't get along very well. My disposition isn't the kind that he wants and his disposition isn't the kind that I want. But it's like this is nothing compared to (laughter) you know, "we'll get through this, it's just a bad day" kind of a feeling. So everything's pretty good now. He's really trying to carry more weight in the house. His dad never did that. And he's getting used to the idea that helping in the house does not do me a favor. It is part of his life, living and stuff. That's hard for him. He thinks I should applaud every time he does anything and that's because (his) father is not an active person in caring for a home. So he's doing far beyond what his dad would do. And it seems very --- just like me my first year --- like he ought to be applauding me in everything I did. But we are learning about each other and I'm trying to applaud him some.

However, other than this one area, there was general agreement that partners perceived they had a general balance in most areas of the relationship.

An emphasis on encouraging the good things in the relationship

Friendship by definition is reciprocal. Without reciprocity, a relationship would be one-sided. Friendship was an important element for most of the couples. Two couples, who had been married over 20 years no longer spent time together and seemed to prefer it that way. However, for the rest of the couples, there was a desire to be together. For most, they were friends before they began to think about marriage. They shared a sense of enjoying spending time together and doing things together. Tom (#7) described friendship as including such elements as unity, trust and honesty. Nick and Angie (#5) suggested such things as liking each other, similar interests, fun, enjoyment, laughter, and doing silly things together:

Angie: We genuinely do like being with each other; we like a lot of the same things
and we have a good time, when things are good underneath; when we’re feeling good about each other.

Nick: And about ourselves.

Angie: We really...enjoy being with each other. We like each other’s sense of humor. We like each other. We have a lot of fun together. We have a good time together...

Mike: We do have a good time and we do have a positive outlook except for that brief period of time when we said it was going to be over. We’re very positive. We never stop...We love to do all kinds of crazy and new things. We do all kinds of junk. We have a good time.

When the couples were asked about their favorite time together most indicated a vacation. Vacations were a time when they could have uninterrupted time together:

Bruce: I really like when we travel together. When we have money and time to do that. And one of the happiest times that I remember was after working real hard for the better part of a year and not taking a lot of vacations, that we went up into the mountains and just rested and went whitewater rafting. That was fun. I liked having the daytime free and then being able to come back in the cool of the evening with all of the scents in the mountains and eat and then go to this huge family-type room---

Wendy: With a huge six-foot high fireplace---

Bruce: And just talking---

Wendy: Talking and resting.

Indeed, the biggest complaint of these couples was that they were unable to be together alone either due to the presence of children or the demands of work or both. One couple dealt with the lack of time by increasing their appreciation of the time they do have together. For example:

Int: What are some of the things that are stressful for you now?

Yvonne: We don’t see enough of each other.

Int: How do you deal with that?

Yvonne: Oh, we cherish our time together.

Another way of dealing with time constraints was expressed by a husband who said he called his wife twice a day from work. Still another couple, Eve and Carl (#8), said when they
were together they spent the time talking, unlike other couples they'd see in the restaurants
staring off into space in silence. Carl went on to note, however, that time together seemed to
be a rarer and rarer commodity as time went on:

Carl: One thing I've noticed the last year with our other children being older, we
used to have more time together. They used to be in bed at 9 O'clock, 9:30
and now it's 11:30, 12 O'clock and it really narrows the amount of time we
have together. And that very issue could be brought up. You know it makes
it very difficult to talk and go on to a more fun or romantic evening.

Other elements that respondents shared that were necessary to keep the feeling of
friendship were humor, fun and love. Several said a sense of humor was important to keep
things on a lighter side, in order to keep them from taking things too seriously. Most of the
interviews had times of levity with gentle teasing going both ways between partners. One
husband mentioned that in times of potential conflict he would try to be "playful" in an effort
to reduce tension. Another couple said they used humor to help them during stressful times.

Having times of fun was important to enhance friendship. One couple said they took
turns planning their anniversary. Each year one of them would pick a place to go, make the
necessary arrangements and keep it secret from the other partner. When it came time to go,
the other partner did not have any idea where they were going. The secrecy heightened the
excitement and helped each feel like they were engaged in the relationship. Another couple
celebrated every year on the anniversary of the day they met. One wife said her husband had
balloons on the wall and a cake on the table for her birthday the day before the interview.

An emphasis on meeting the other person's needs

Nearly all of the couples (7 of 9) referred to their love for one another as one of their
strengths. Yvonne gave an articulate description of what marital love was for her. When
asked how she knew her husband loved her she said:

Yvonne: Because he cares. He listens to what I say. He cares about my feelings, because he takes interest in them. If I'm feeling bad he will take efforts to make me feel better.

Her definition included caring, listening, empathy, interest, validation, and encouragement. Other elements of love included accepting the other person’s physical changes over the years and making sacrifices on behalf of the other. And as mentioned in the description of Frank and Shelly above (#4), love is more than passion and includes sacrificial giving on behalf of one for the other regardless of one’s feeling. For these couples, love went beyond mere feeling to making conscious choices on behalf of the other partner.

The word "sacrifice" was not used by any of the participants in the initial interviews. However, the concept was expressed by most of the couples. Other words used were selflessness, giving, and self-denial. The description of it had to do with meeting the other person’s needs for the other person’s benefit. For example, Tom said, "I would do anything for her and she would do anything for me.” This sacrificial love is done by both partners for the other. Kelly and Mike described this as an ideal they both wanted and were striving for but knew they still fell short:

Kelly: A good marriage is selflessness and I think you need to just not think of yourself, that you need to be willing to maybe not always get what you want to make somebody else happy...

Mike: A good marriage is also meeting the other person’s needs. If each person could do that it would be a dynamite marriage. If both people were concerned about each other, that’s a perfect marriage...and that’s the way it should be, but you (we?) have so many stressful things going on and you (we?) get (so) tired and crabby and hungry it’s very difficult to put the other first all the time.

Wendy and Bruce discussed sacrificing in the present with the idea that there would be
Wendy: I'm not so sure that good reciprocity means that both are giving at the same time. Sometimes the reciprocity is one person at one time and then finally it happens down the road.

Bruce: It's important to recognize that. I've seen couples where there was not reciprocity and neither was there the sense that there ever would be reciprocity and I think that is pretty fatal.

Wendy said this attitude enabled her to keep sacrificing because she believed she would be rewarded sometime later. Her idea of sacrifice was tied directly to her faith:

Wendy: And I think once you have the view of life that what you know God is pleased with and what you know is best for you is what God wants, that naturally you start to put the relationship over the person because that pleases God to be a servant to the other person. In the end I truly do believe if you live life with His (God's) values you are happier than if you had worked on your own terms. It's just harder in the practice. You don't have that immediate sense of, "Oh, life is great!" when you just made a sacrifice for something. Down the road, when you see that is bearing out, then the happiness starts to increase. And I think that's what I've seen in my marriage. Initially, my success(?) factor was extremely low. I felt like I was putting out a lot of sacrifice and a lot of changes without so many changes necessarily on the other end, at least in my view. So I wasn't reaping any of the benefits yet from holding to the commitment and from how I felt God saw the situation. But now I have.

This idea of sacrifice extended into Wendy's spiritual life where she began to view her husband as an individual before God and believed God had a plan for his life. She said, "God has a plan for Bruce and Bruce will be achieving success in his life and that's more important, too, necessarily than what I want out of the marriage." This attitude had a profound effect upon how she viewed her husband relative to her own needs (see below under "Acceptance").

Another element of meeting the other's needs was the idea of helping the other to reach their potential. Shelly (#4) described it as being able to "bring the other's good out," a skill they both lacked in the first half of their marriage, but which they felt was part of the
second half of their marriage. When Nick (#5) was asked what was his view of marriage he replied:

Nick: I've always thought you should support one another, provide opportunities for the other person; help develop the other person, be who they want not who you want them to be, to celebrate your differences, be strong in your own individuality and hope that's accepted and encouraged by the other partner.

An emphasis on working together for the benefit of the relationship

The idea of partnership was a common one, usually defined as working together for commonly shared goals. Mike (#2) shared that while this was their goal, it wasn’t so easily achieved:

Mike: I think ideally we try to look at the partnership and come to an agreement of what direction we should be moving and I think we do that. There's certain issues in a marriage that you'll never agree on. You need to be a team together, but there are certain issues that you just don't see eye to eye and I think that's common in every marriage.

Diane (#1) suggested that early in their marriage they had a feeling of partnership, but after the children left, it was more difficult for them to feel like they shared the same goals:

Diane: The marriage was OK (in the beginning) because we were working together to move and to find a place and to make I our living...(Now) I would like a general feeling of being together and making decisions together.

Partnership took place day to day in the little things. Frank (#4) gave an example:

Frank: You (speaking to his wife) couldn't get away to get your registration so I went up and did it and I took time off work to do it because that's just the way it had to be done.

Reciprocity varied depending on the couple. Diane (#1) struggled with her perception that it wasn’t part of their relationship now, though she had noticed it early in their relationship when they worked together on the children. Vi (#6) wanted more of a
partnership in the sense of sharing time and activities together, but she recognized that they each reciprocally gave each other their space in order for the relationship to survive. Except for these two couples, the rest expressed a fondness for each other, a desire to be together and longing when they were not together.

**Domain 4. An ability to adapt to each other and their circumstances**

As expressed in the first domain about surviving early problems, marriage came with some unexpected surprises. But not only were the surprises having to do with challenges to the relationship like moving, losing family support, career changes, and financial struggles, but the couples were faced with the harsh reality of who they really ended up marrying. The couples generally came into marriage with an optimistic view, but often the freshness they saw within each other became an irritant later. Change, thus, became critical for them to survive. Partners were confronted with having to change themselves, and how they interacted with each other.

**The importance of growth**

**Perceived stages of the marriage.** Several couples saw their relationship in terms of before and after. They noted that their relationship was broken into qualitatively different stages. The first stage the relationship was marred by misunderstanding, resentment and conflict escalation. The latter stage was characterized by teamwork, camaraderie, better communication and problem solving, and a greater joy in being together. Angie (#5) described their stages:

Angie: We’ve torn down the bad things that we identified, the things that are wrong about the marriage building that we’ve built and are starting now from the bottom again...We have the materials, but we’ve go a lot of work to build
For all three couples who viewed their relationship in stages, it took a crisis to move them from one stage to the other. One couple experienced domestic violence. Confrontation of the wife with the husband’s major professor brought them the necessary counseling they needed to readjust their interaction patterns. The other two couples had to separate before each partner was willing to make the necessary change to make the relationship better.

For these three couples, the individual partners had to learn to adapt their conflict style. For the domestic abuse couple, the husband learned to report his feelings on a more immediate basis instead of letting things build up over time. He also said he needed to learn to listen to his wife’s hurts instead of taking her comments as personal attacks. His wife came from a confrontational home life and needed to learn a more gentle way of getting her points across so that her concerns would be heard. For the two couples who separated, both wives became more assertive in expressing their opinions. Both agreed that they had passively allowed their husbands to make decisions without their input. One husband expressed that he did not feel connected to his wife or even feel like she loved or cared for him due to his sense that his wife was not involved emotionally. The other husband was at first threatened when his wife learned to be more assertive, but soon realized the benefit of listening to her opinion for his own and the relationship’s sake. Both husbands learned to back off a bit and make a conscious effort to listen to their wives and not be so quick to make decisions. The change was dramatic, as Angie (#5) describes:

Angie:  We’re trying to change the roles so that things that come up in our marriage that...need to be addressed are addressed by both of us and seen as a mutual problem, a mutual situation to work out rather than something that’s wrong
with him...Taking equal responsibility for the working out of things.

Two other families expressed the idea of stages, but with little adaptation. One-viewed the relationship as before and after children in the home. While this affected their focus, it had little impact on their relationship except to accentuate the lack of affection the couple had for each other. Another couple noted their relationship as before and after retirement. Here the husband’s retirement exacerbated the couple’s differences. Now he had the time and they both still did not enjoy being together.

Attitude toward change. These two latter couples (#1, married 27 years; #6, married 31 years) expressed little anticipation for the future and seemed the most discontent with their current living situation. Life together demanded a certain resolve, but gave neither couple much personal satisfaction. Yet in spite of this view, Jim (#1) said he was adapting to how he viewed his wife’s input. He still felt the final decision rested with him, but in his later years he was putting more stock in his wife’s opinions on those decisions, whereas in previous years he would have made a decision regardless of her opinion. As he said it, he’s much more "cautious."

The other seven couples (married 5 - 22 years) in the sample had an optimistic view of their relationship and anticipated further advances together. Bruce (#3) addressed this when he said:

Bruce: Another thing (that makes a good marriage) is extending hope that the marriage will continue to get better and that change is always possible...And I think the idea that hope, that the best is yet to come, has been important for us...You have to believe that change can happen. You always have to have the optimism that change with your spouse isn’t always going to stay the same.
These couples had expressed each of the partners making certain changes over the course of the relationship, changes that improved the way the couple interacted and improved the personal rewards each received from the relationship. The younger couples looked forward to having children, career changes, and the continued development of themselves as a “family.” The couples with children already looked forward to the kids growing up and the two of them being able to spend time together as partners. However, this expression of hope was not without its doubt. Eve (#8) was the only one of the remaining seven couples that expressed uncertainty:

Eve: It (the children growing up and leaving home) will enhance certain parts of our relationship, I would hope. On the other hand, it may be a do or die. We may have time to spend together and it won’t work...Who knows? I don’t know that.

Another aspect of this view was an attitude that their current struggles had to do with job, time and financial constraints that come expectedly with raising a family. They saw the situation, however currently stressful, as a temporary situation. Tom and Yvonne (#7) explained:

Tom: I accept that (working long hours) with no major problems. It is not something we want, but we know that’s what we have to do.

Yvonne: At this time. It’s not always going to be this way.

Wendy (#3) explained that seeing changes in her husband (Bruce) enabled her to start to believe that the future was not doomed:

Wendy: Just to see a little change was so encouraging. When he started to make changes then I started to realize that I don’t have to condemn the future. I can keep it open and realize that the changes might come once every five years.
Areas of change. Areas of change experienced by these couples varied. One wife said prayer about their relationship helped her to change as she asked God to show her where she fell short. One husband learned anger management. One husband made a spiritual commitment and began attending church with his family. His wife changed denominations in order to be with her husband in worship. This same husband said he had to mature enough to come to the place where he placed priority of responsibility to the relationship over his own personal whims. One wife felt her husband was more available than he was earlier in the relationship. Several wives changed by becoming more independent, which both they and their husbands felt improved the relationship. At the same time the husbands of these women became less independent and more interdependent, making for more of a partnership. Four couples referred to changing patterns of interaction. This included having shorter arguments than they did earlier in the relationship. While two wives in the sample reported learning to be more assertive, two other husbands said they had to learn to be more expressive about their wishes or feelings about things that bothered them. Several mentioned the husbands becoming more involved in participating in household duties.

One couple said they had to experiment with how to handle the finances until they found a way that satisfied them both. Initially the wife did it alone, but she felt very stressed out about how tight finances were and found she spent way too much time fretting about it. Eventually, they switched roles with the husband taking most of the responsibility for the budget and bill paying. They would have a meeting each month to look at their upcoming bills and expected expenditures and then he would take care of the finances the rest of the month. They did not come to this arrangement, though, without a lot of trial and error.
The importance of interaction

Communication. Communication was identified by most of the couples as a necessary ingredient in any marriage and one area that they were working on to improve. For example, Bruce (#3) said:

Bruce: A good marriage includes lots of communication; includes equal time for each person to talk; includes the opportunity or the valuing of each other's perspectives. I think there is a decreased emphasis on a right way and a wrong way. There is room for both people to have valid ideas and thoughts around a given issue.

Openness in communication varied in this sample. Two couples (married 27 and 31 years) said that they didn't communicate. Both of the wives in these two couples expressed dissatisfaction in communication with their spouses and mourned that because communication wasn't a regular part of their relationship there seemed to be a lack of a feeling of partnership between them. For example, Diane (#1) recognized that her husband showed his love by what he did for her, not by what he said, but she longed for something more:

Diane: He measures his love a lot I think like, "I'm doing this for you," where I would rather have the, maybe not necessarily the companionship, but some extent of that and just a general feeling of being together and making decisions together.

Jim did communicate with her, but not in a way that validated her feelings. He would either ignore her complaints or make a joke about them:

Jim: My brain is only about so big. I've got a lot on my mind all the time and most of the time what I think she thinks I ought to be thinking about is trivia.
Diane: I don't think it is trivia
Jim: I just kind of have a tendency to smile and laugh and things like that about the things that she thinks is important. No sense of both of us remembering if she is going to.
Int: So did you expect Jim to think that way?
Diane: Yes.
While all the couples struggled to some extent in communication, all but the two
couples just mentioned, made a concerted effort to get their message across to their partner in
a way that could be heard and accepted. This was not always the case. One of the biggest
areas of adjustment by these couples was in the way they communicated. They had to
discover a way that worked for them via trial and error. As time went on most noted
improvement. Bruce and Wendy (#3) discuss their evolution in this area:

Bruce: The last couple of years there have been more good times where we just talk
and go for walks and talk about the future....We've learned how to manage
conflict better. I used to distance myself from Wendy a lot. We don't do
that so much. We communicate a little bit more about the process of what's
going on and I'll let her know I'm getting really stressed and I need to take a
break and talk about this for awhile. We do a lot more of that... The most
important thing has been letting go of previous expectations or trying to and
finding out how it is that we arrive at a decision where we both feel like we
have a voice and have been heard by the other in that decision. It is very
easy when people want to have a voice that one person not get heard or that
there be a lot of conflict because one person feels like they are not being
heard. So finding out how it is we trade off; how we make these decisions
and whose opinion we go with or how we arrive at a decision has been the
most important thing. How we have done that has been increasing our
listening to one another more and trying to hold our opinion while still
having an open enough attitude we can hear what the other person is saying.

Wendy: Yes, but how have I made that better or easier?

Bruce: Frankly you don't get as excited as you used to emotionally.

Wendy: I don't show the emotion?

Bruce: Right. Right. And then also I think increasingly you don't label things as right
or wrong or your way as being right but you acknowledge that I need to take
twenty minutes more to get to where we are headed, but I think it is scenic
and there are certain benefits to that, too. That there are, as mom would say,
lots of ways to skin a cat.

Conflict styles. Adaptation in how the couples navigated conflict was critical for all
but 2 of the couples (again, #1, married 27 years and #6, married 31 years). What made
communication a difficult area was that these partners found they had different styles in
dealing with conflict from the start, patterns they brought with them from their families of origin. While those styles may have served as an initial attraction to each other, with the confrontation of early problems in all of these couples' lives, these contrasting conflict preferences quickly became an issue in their own right. A typical pattern for a number of the couples was that the wives were more assertive in bringing up issues, while their husbands tended to not want to discuss those issues. Wendy (#3) described this by saying that Bruce was a baseline, while she was a wavelength. Carl and Eve (#8) explained how this style affected them:

Eve: I guess he doesn't like the confrontation. Of course, it's a pressure cooker thing. It comes out. That's just how it is with him, mostly. He has to unfortunately live with the consequences, which is that it eats away at him...

Carl: I think for me the major issue though is learning not to blow up and vent my anger and frustration in a more positive way on a regular basis.

Eve: (If he did it) more frequently, he would get over it, be done with it.

Carl and Eve shared that they had changed in their relationship over the years. Of primary importance had been Carl's willingness to share things on his mind with Eve. Early in the relationship he wasn't able to do that. She told him that "You have to tell me. I'm not going to start assuming in this relationship." Fortunately, for both, Carl was able to make the adjustment. This adaptation was extended by Bruce and Wendy in that they learned to anticipate each other's reaction and adjusted their own response accordingly to keep conflict to a minimum. This was not an easy lesson to learn and took much trial and error:

Wendy: I'd say our interaction style is very important because we've learned how we push each other's buttons and we work on trying not to do that as much. So I'd say we understand our communication styles better and we've tried to make effective changes in that.

Int: And also maybe not to take offense at the other person's style?

Wendy: Right. To understand it as more...not to take it personally.
Bruce: That if a person is shouting or whatever, that we understand communication a little bit differently. We don’t take things as personally.

Two couples had the style where the husband brought up issues and the wife tended to withdraw. Both of these couples (#4 & #5) were able to adjust their styles to make them more compatible. Both wives became more assertive while both husbands learned to be a bit more patient, taking more time to consciously listen to their partner.

Two couples had virtually no verbal communication on issues, choosing instead to go their own independent ways (#1 & #6). Neither of these couples indicated a willingness to adapt to each other and seemed to have reached a stalemate in this area. These two couples had husbands that were closed to their wives’ influence and the wives had stopped trying to make any improvements in the relationship by commenting on areas of concern. Both wives expressed sorrow on this arrangement. Both husbands were adamant that they did not want to hear any complaints from their wives. For example, Jim (#1) said, “She better not give me hell for the way I operate.” George and Vi explained their extreme positions as he was an “introvert” and she was an “extrovert.” Unlike most of the rest of the couples in this sample, neither expressed any hope that this interaction pattern between them would ever change:

Int: What do you think it is going to be like getting older?
Vi: Well, we are getting older.
George: Yea, we are old. If we are confined together all the time it’s going to be tough.
Int: What will make that tough?
George: I don’t like all the talking she does. It drives me crazy. Quit talking and relax.
Int: What would be difficult for you, Vi?
Vi: The fact that he wouldn’t talk and wouldn’t answer. Sometimes I talk about things and I say what do you think and he won’t say a darn thing, or he ignores me sometimes. And I am use to when people talk to me having them talk back.
One couple (#9) did not indicate a style, but said they did fairly well in the area of communication and really had no complaints this area.

**Decision making.** Adapting in the area of decision making was viewed by most as important, but varied in the sample. In two couples, the husband made all of the final decisions after taking their wives’ input into consideration. However, the two wives’ views on this arrangement differed. One wife (#1) felt her husband virtually ignored her input, while the other (#4) was pleased with her husband’s openness to her views. She was also relieved that the decision making role fell on her husband as it relieved her of a lot of pressure. Earlier in the relationship she was the one who made the financial decisions and paid the bills. She said she was the kind of person who fretted and worried about decisions and didn’t enjoy making them at all. They worked it out later that Frank would do the budget, but that they would meet to talk about it each month. It gave her a feeling of security knowing that her husband was taking her position and their general welfare as a couple and as a family into consideration. She trusted and valued his judgment. Perhaps this trust extended to early in the relationship when she wanted to have her child and Frank wanted her to have an abortion. In that instance, Frank gave in to his wife and rather than resent her decision, trusted her judgment on that issue. That one decision had a profound and positive effect upon the rest of their relationship for years to come.

Most of the couples tried to be egalitarian in decision making, but more often than not, if a decision needed to be made and both of them differed on how to solve it, the husband made the final call. For example, Mike insisted Kelly get an abortion when they found out she was pregnant 10 days before the wedding, even though Kelly did not want one. He also did
not want her to go to work, even though she was perfectly willing and they could use the
money. Two couples made decisions as individuals and discussed issues very little. George
and Vi (#6) had separate residences and separate checking accounts and had little interaction
on issues that faced them. The following is an example:

Int: How did you two decide on buying that hutch?
George: We don't decide, she just goes ahead and does it.
Vi: I was afraid if I ask him he would say "what's the matter with the one we've
got", but the difference is I use my own money so I didn't need his approval.
Int: Is that generally the way it is when it comes to making decisions about major
purchases?
George: Yea, I wanted a new car so I rounded up my money and went and got it. I
told her I was going to buy it.
Int: So decisions are made individually?
George: Yea. Whatever we can afford.
Vi: Yea, I was thinking of getting a new chair. Is that OK if I pay for it?
George: If you pay for it I am all for it.
Vi: OK.

Another couple used this the same technique earlier in their relationship and realized
that it wasn’t working for them. At the time of the interview, they were working to
communicate more completely about their decisions so that they were more mutual and so
that they could help each other think through their options to make the best choices.

Domain 5. Attitude toward the limitations of each other and the relationship

These couples struggled with the imperfections of their partner and the relationship.
Each person had to come to grips with the reality of how limited their influence was on
changing their partner and whether or not they could accept the difference. The couples had
a progression in how they dealt with expectations. First, there was the expectations the
partners brought to the relationship, then there was the realization that their partner didn’t
meet all of those expectations followed by disappointment and hurt. From that point there
was a diversion. Some couples went on from disappointment, to adjustment of expectations and to acceptance of the difference which led to contentment. Others were unable to adjust expectations and ended up at a continued state of disappointment.

**How they viewed each other and the relationship**

**Shattered expectations.** Mike (#2) explained the first part of this process, that of shattered expectations:

Mike: I think that together we made more of a person. That's what brought us together. And then after we're married for awhile maybe different things can get on your nerves and we don't think alike on a lot of things. We disagree pretty heartily on some things. I wasn't expecting that and it makes it difficult. It's different when you're dating, everyone has their good side out and (with marriage) reality hits home.

It wasn't just that Mike wasn't expecting to have a lot of conflict in the marriage. Either his own expectations about children changed or he was unable to communicate with Kelly what those expectations were. In any case, this issue was to have a profoundly negative impact on the relationship that affected their level of trust in each other:

Kelly: For me (the biggest adjustment in our marriage) was actually realizing that the things Mike said were more idealistic. If I look back now, I think they were things he was saying was that he knew that any woman would want to hear them and then (I?) realized they weren't truly coming from his heart.

Mike: Like what?

Kelly: Like you telling me that you didn't care that if I ever worked and telling me that you wanted me to have at least two of your kids and I did both of those things and you're still mad.

Mike: I didn't want the kids right away

Kelly: But you never said that. I thought I was going to make you happy (by being pregnant) then you said that. It's still really hard because there's still times when I know he still resents me....I had to either deal with them or move on.

What a sinking feeling Kelly had when she thought having children would excite her husband, only to find out that he wanted her to have an abortion! Wendy (#3) described a
similar response of how shattered expectations affected her when her husband abused her physically during their first year together:

Wendy: The most difficult thing for me has been two-part. One part (was) not being the cared for, protected, sheltered, supported person that I expected to be. And I don't mean that (as) bad. You know, what we ended up having the first two years we were married and what I was hoping for, because of what I didn’t have was real hard for me to accept. Hey, here's my shot to be in a safe world, safe environment and...it's just as treacherous as the one I left. But I did expect to feel safe and I expected to feel cared for and to be highly valued. It was just so important to me. I had to be highly valued. I just wanted one person to highly value me and I picked him (Laughter.). And those first few years did not communicate that to me. He does highly value me, but it was not communicated and I did not feel that and that kind of disappointment was tough for me.

Husbands also struggled with expectations not being met. When the intense feeling Frank felt earlier in the relationship faded, he took drastic action. At the time of the interview, Frank recalled seeing a rerun of a Barbara Walter’s interview with Sylvester Stallone. She asked him why he was divorcing the wife of his youth who had been with him when he wasn’t famous. Frank saw a lot of himself in Stallone’s comments:

Frank: Barbara asked him, "Why then, did you get a divorce?" And he said, "Well, it became passionless; it became like brother and sister; it became very content” and all this stuff, and "rather than be a brother and sister, why don’t we just part"...That’s the way I felt at the time. What Sylvester Stallone was saying is "I’m bored, so I’m gonna get a divorce and go chase this hot Bridgitte Nielsen babe”...That was my attitude. (I told myself ours is) a passionless relationship, and it’s grown more like brother and sister.

Adjusted expectations and acceptance. Frank ended up divorcing Shelly for a time before he adjusted his expectations. Later he came to view the drop in his emotional intensity as normal and a maturing part of any marital relationship:

Frank: What I didn’t realize at the time is that’s what love is, that’s another level of a marriage, that is just a degree of marriage, that’s when your relationship is
Once Frank's attitude changed he was able to view his wife in an entirely new way.

The very thing that caused him to divorce (the relationship was boring) was what attracted him to Shelly. The next time around he came to view losing his "passion" as a normal stage of marriage. It meant, instead, that he was connecting on a deeper level. This helped him move toward acceptance: being able to appreciate the differences one has with one's partner and to make peace with expectations that are not met.

This process of going from disappointment to acceptance was shared by several others. For example, Wendy (#3) discussed her journey of trying to decide what to do about Bruce's domestic violence:

Wendy: I was going to have to accept that I was going to be hurt in my lifetime by the person I thought might not hurt me very much. And I was going to have to own up to being hurt and to expect to be hurt and I was going—which sounds really terrible—that I wouldn't be as highly valued by Bruce as I had hoped to be. Those were very crushing for me...I don't feel so much any more that I am going to be painfully hurt all the time...in this relationship...(but) that was the hardest thing in the marriage... I had come to the fact where I was trying to accept him, but what I had a hard time with was trying to accept that I needed to find happiness without him changing. You know what I'm saying? It's not that I couldn't accept who he was. I was having a hard time accepting the future being that way.

Not having these expectations met also led Wendy to resent Bruce. She had a hard time dealing with unmet expectations, but resolved it by taking responsibility for her own feelings and seeking to not interpret Bruce's actions as reflecting on the whole relationship:

Wendy: I knew that whether I was justified in it or not, if I hung on to any resentment or bitterness it would just doom all the good things he was trying to do. So I just personally tried to work on it. Which helped me not to resent him and be angry all the time. And I tried very hard at that point to not see his choices as being a personal attack on me. And tried very hard to
see his choices as being just Bruce. It wouldn’t matter who I was, it would still be just Bruce.

How this was played out in her life was dramatized to this researcher during the second interview. Bruce spilled his coffee on their living room carpet after trying to balance his coffee cup on his knee. When he got up to get a towel to clean up his mess, Wendy said:

Wendy: See, this is a perfect example, because Bruce just spilled his coffee, but not because it was an accident in my opinion, but because he was balancing it on his knee which I don’t think is right. Now, I’ll tell you, five years ago, I would have gotten hoppin’ stormin’ mad that that was stupid to try and now I know he’ll clean it up and it’s just Bruce and he’ll clean it up and the carpet is not worth (a fight).

Wendy suggested that couple therapy helped her to see that she was who she was because of her family background and Bruce was who he was because of his family background. This understanding led to her acceptance of who Bruce was and who she was:

Wendy: In that counseling session, I developed a more accurate picture I think, of the family I came from and who I was because of that and then also doing that for Bruce and saying “Well, this is the family that he came from, this has been his life experience, so this is computed into how he is and then being able to see, in kind of a third person way how these two these two roles would clash, regardless of who the people were. If you take Betty Jo from a quiet household and no conflict and you mix her with Billy Bob where everything is open, arguing, loud discussion

Bruce: Bring your guns to the table
Wendy: and you bring those two people together you’ve got to expect a conflict, you got to expect a clash. You’re forcing people to be in places where they are not comfortable. Having that third person view, because you finally understand that connection about yourself, I think was pretty critical. That’s just part of that.

Int: I would think that would lend itself to being able to accept the other person.
Wendy: Yeah, it lends itself to all kinds of things. Because then you can more accept, you can be more respectful of the other person if you see their behavior as more part of their life reaction, as opposed to, “They don’t like you, so this is why they are doing this to you.” Which is a problem in marriage because I
Also influential in Wendy’s life regarding accepting Bruce’s limitations was the
counsel she received from some older women in her small group at church. She followed
their advice and noticed a profound change in the way she viewed her husband:

Wendy: I think probably the best thing to understand me in this context is just that for
me, I’m a very absolute kind of person. If someone is not nice to you, then
their intentions toward you probably aren’t very good.

Int: Globally.
Wendy: Global. So for me, if Bruce is disrespectful to me in anyway.
Int: Whether he means it or not.
Wendy: Whether he means it or not, then, I have a hard time accepting anything from
him as being good. So I had to absolutely change that. I think God did that.
A lot of prayer. Back in North Carolina, (I met with) a group of older
women who were Christians. I was really struggling. I came to them one
day with just my frustrations and their charge to me was that I wasn’t
fulfilling my job because I wasn’t seeing Bruce as a spiritual person who was
in process. I was seeing him as this person who is supposed to be doing this
thing in my life and he wasn’t doing it. And I needed to have a bigger
picture of Bruce. To understand that I am a big part of his life, but I’m just a
part of his life and I need to help him grow. It’s not just about me, getting
what I need. It’s about helping him get what he needs, too. They told me
that I needed to pray for him and if I wasn’t praying for him on a regular
basis, then I wasn’t committed to him anymore than I thought he wasn’t
committed to me.

Int: That’s pretty strong.
Wendy: It was very strong. And they were very unabashed about being very direct.
They were very loving. (They said that ) in order for me to expect any
change in Bruce, I had to be willing to change my attitude toward Bruce.
And I did. I prayed for him regularly about these things. I used to pray,
“Help me deal with this” so that I could be a little bit better, or I used to
pray, “Please change him because I’m really wearing out.” But then I started
to pray, “Help Bruce to see people in this light. Help Bruce to grow in his
understanding of this. I’d just pull out scriptures (and use those to pray
about Bruce).

Int: More broad.
Wendy: About his own welfare regardless of me. Actually, I just kind of
disassociated myself from the picture altogether and I just tried to pray for
Bruce like I’d pray for another person, like you’d pray for your friend, or
you’d pray for someone else. I tried to pray for his growth, to kind of take
me out of the picture. And that helped me too, to change that all or nothing kind of view of what he would do or say to me. I changed my attitude towards him by changing how I saw him and then making a deliberate attempt to when I heard something offensive to step back and take it apart and to not let myself color all of Bruce black.

The idea expressed in the last sentence above was also articulated by Bruce. He spoke about not generalizing as being helpful in the relationship. Wendy used the word "compartmentalize" to describe being able to take the other person’s behavior at face value, rather than assuming that because they did or said a particular thing, that meant that everything about the other or the relationship was bad:

Bruce: The recognition of the complexity of one’s spouse (is important). That would fall under acceptance of the other person. And what I mean by that is recognizing that just because a person has one blow out or they’re very disrespectful of the other person, it doesn’t mean the whole other spouse is bad, that it is not one dimensional, that people are more than that one particular incident, that they are complex and accepting that the other person is both good and bad at different times.

Kelly (#2) commented also that coming to the point of acceptance enabled her to finally find some peace in her relationship:

Kelly: I think the best time in my marriage has been the last three months.
Int: Right, good. Tell me about it.
Kelly: It’s just been good because I’ve just decided I can’t change him. He’s never going to be what I want him to be so I can either be happy with what I have or be miserable and I just decided to be happy. So for me, the last three months have been the best because I don’t expect anything from him anymore.
Int: Other than being who he is, right?
Marty: Exactly.
Kelly: Well, I don’t expect the things that I always wanted from you as far as you know compassion and I mean I went through the birth of two children without feeling like you cared and then I lost a baby and you went from "I love you and I’m going to be a good dad" to "Oh, God, never again." So I just decided that you’re never going to be what I want you to be so I’m gonna be happy with who you are
Int: Right. Well that's good.
Kelly: and it works. We've been getting along wonderfully and, I'm happy.

Fortunately, for this couple, they both were able to embrace acceptance. Mike agreed that coming to the point of acceptance greatly reduced the conflict between them and reduced his own anxiety about the relationship:

Mike: I think she realized that she's not going to change my mind and I realized I'm not going to change her mind about some things and finally I got to the point and I think she did too, that this is not worth fighting about, all these disagreements. I'm going to let her be as she is and then it's okay, then I don't have to make an issue out of it. That's who she is. She doesn't want onions on her hamburger and we have to wait 20 minutes while they make special hamburgers, well, that's who she is. There's no sense getting mad about it because that's who she is. And if I like sports and she doesn't, she'll watch a game, but, if I'm really interested in it, I'm sorry, that's who I am....It's OK for her to be different. That relieved a lot of stress for me.

Acquiescence. Those who accepted the shortcomings of the other did not interpret their partners' action as a personal affront. It no longer bothered them and the idiosyncracy may even have been a source of a feeling of fondness for the quirks of their spouses.

But not all of the couples were able to move as far as acceptance. Acquiescence was as far as they could go. If acceptance is defined as being able to appreciate the differences one has with one's partner and to make peace with expectations that are not met, acquiescence would be being able to endure the shortcomings, but still holding the shortcomings against their partner. Those who acquiesced were unable to let go of the differences they had with their spouses and were holding on to a baseless hope that their expectations would or should be met. As their expectations were continually not met this was felt as a personal attack, making it difficult for them to not feel hurt. Thus, they continually felt ongoing hurt in the relationship.
Acquiescence was often expressed as endurance. Jim and Debbie (#1) shared this endurance in the form of cliches, such as "roll with the punches," "just do it," "life goes on" or phrases that indicated they had reached a sort of impasse: "no sense arguing with her now," or "as long as you aren't beating each other or something like that, why it isn't really that bad," and "we wake up in the morning and life goes on." These statements were made by Jim, but Debbie also expressed her endurance when she said, "it all works out in the end," "I'd get mad and then I'd give in," and "just do it." When asked how it was she ended up signing the corporation form her husband wanted her to sign when she did not want to do so, she said she did it "very begrudgingly."

Vi (#6) also struggled with acquiescence, even though she uses the word "acceptance" to describe her view:

Vi:  For me the hardest is to go to church alone and do so many things alone because I feel like I am not like most married people who have their partner with them and I don't. That is the hardest thing for me.

Int: Did he make that easy or hard to adjust to?

Vi: Oh well it's hard and I hate it, but it is not going to change and you learn to accept it. I kinda feel like people look at me and think I am a failure because my husband isn’t with me...

How the individual received input from their partner

Influence. These couples reported early conflict over trying to change their partner. Most were able to reconcile the idea that that would only lead to frustration. They came to believe that a person really should not have an agenda to change the other person. As Eve (#8) said marriage should include being able to "treat each other with respect and to recognize each other’s need for...personal space." Thus, part of respect was appreciating who their partners were with all of their faults. She went on to say that an ideal marriage would
embrace the "differences as opposed to shunning them or asking them to conform across the board." While both Carl and Eve believed in this philosophy, they both confessed it was a goal for them and something they both still struggled to achieve.

While trying to change one’s partner would only lead to frustration, being open to the other person’s influence to change oneself was shared by all but two couples. Being open to the other’s influence enabled the influencing partner to feel validated in their views and created an atmosphere of respect. If a partner was not open to influence, the result was disrespect, a feeling of being invalidated and a hopelessness that the relationship could or would not change. For example, Frank said at first he totally disagreed with his wife’s faith, but because he respected her and the sincerity of her beliefs, he was able to go along with her decision to keep their baby instead of abort it as Frank had wished. This respect for Shelly enabled him to not resent her making that decision and eventually he came to hold her view himself.

This idea of influence was shared by several couples as being mutual. That is, they felt that one of the purposes of marriage was to "bring the other’s good out" (Shelly, #4). If a marriage was working the way it should, marriage should make an individual a better person. As Nick (#5) said, he thought partners should "help develop the other person to who they want, not who you want them to be." His wife Angie concurred and said that one of the most profound experiences of her marriage was realizing that partners can "pull each other." By that she meant that she could influence the outcome of the relationship and that she also should be willing to be influenced by her husband.

Frank commented at the second interview, a year after his wife’s death, that his wife
had profoundly affected him. He could still feel her influence in his life:

Frank: (When we got married) we expected trouble. We had no idea it was going to be as much trouble as we had. We had no idea that she was going to die. So now I sit here a year after she died and I have a boy to raise and I'm really not doing that bad at it. The house is reasonably clean. I'm sorting socks. I'm doing laundry. I'm doing all these things and I learned most of those things from her. And I learned how to be a man from being married. I wish it were the other way around, but it wasn't.

Respect. Being open to a partner's influence was not an option without respecting the other person. Believing in the other person's potential gave Wendy hope that the future would be better for them:

Wendy: I can be someone who sees things from the glass half empty sometimes and so it is hard for me to pinpoint something that I don't want to change. These are things I think that are good, I feel like they could be even better. You know, even if they never got better I'd be happy with them, but I feel like they can because I think Bruce has incredible potential still and (I've seen) the changing he has already done. I mean...I see that he has the ability to really develop areas in his life that maybe have never been touched. Which is part of why I married him was that he was a very different kind of person anyway.

Shelly (#4) could see Frank's potential way before he did. She indicated this was her view from the very beginning before they were ever married:

Shelly: I knew he (Frank) was wild and reckless and that drew me to him...He used to tell me after we started dating, "I don’t want to get married. I don’t wanna have kids." And yet I stuck in there 'cause I knew he’d change.”

Nick (#5) also expressed that his respect for his wife started when he first met her. In fact it was this respect that was fundamental to his desire to marry her in the first place:

Nick: I felt very comfortable with her and knowing intuitively what kind of a person she was. I had had many relationships. She was opposite and different from anything that I knew previously. I had lived with women, you know, the whole nine yards, that kind of stuff. But...I felt that this is someone that I love. I was intensely interested in her and
wanted to be with her.

But respect did not come automatically. While Wendy was striving to respect Bruce, she struggled with the feeling that Bruce didn’t respect her. She learned to “categorize” Bruce’s behavior instead of seeing his behavior as “all black” as she shared above in the "acceptance" section. But getting to that point took some readjusting on her part:

Wendy: Basically I felt like you couldn’t respect me and not respect the marriage. I was part of the marriage. I was the other half of the marriage and when I would see him make choices that put the marriage way down on the list, whether it be time or inattention, or his willingness to talk about something or responding to a concern I had, then to me it showed an utter disrespect for the marriage and me. He wasn’t seeing my input as important and I wasn’t being cherished or esteemed or respected, you know. When I would come in and say, “Please don’t do this, I really don’t like this,” and saying, “Wow, this is my wife, you know, I have a marriage and the other half of the person of the marriage and she’s not happy. Let’s take a look at this and see what we could do.” I got the opposite response. And it was more because he was putting so much into himself, into his program. Everyone was about ten years older than him. The youngest person in the whole class, practically no life experience, straight out of college and he was intimidated. He felt a lot of pressure from that, so that’s where the tension was. But I tried to establish the marriage. Now it was our first year of marriage and I’m trying to find out what the ground work is and I’m not finding it, so the respect is very important to me, so my expectations were shattered. I didn’t care about what the norm was. I cared about what I thought things should be. And what I had to do over time was to not be so offended to what I considered to be disrespect.

Int: How did you do that?
Wendy: How did I not be so offended by his disrespectfulfulness?
Int: There you go. It’s a key thing that couples struggle with and if they can’t get over that...
Wendy: It’s hard. I mean if I were to just think about it, it’s kind of like, OK, I’d have to be in la-la land to not know if someone is disrespectful to me they don’t quite understand love or they aren’t committed to you or something. You could go anywhere with that. You really could go any direction with that. But I clung to instead was that Bruce was not a perfect creature and while his love may work well in some areas in his life, it didn’t work so well in other areas of his life. That the disrespect didn’t have to color everything black. Does that make sense?
Int: In other words it wasn’t always disrespect. It was just the way he was? So you were interpreting him as disrespectful, when in actuality he wasn’t being disrespectful? You were interpreting things that way?

Wendy: There were moments where I had to accept the fact that Bruce did not think he was being disrespectful, even though I was offended. And to me, respect for a person means if they’re offended, you have to look at what you have done. Because that is the end point. If the person is offended, it means something is wrong. It doesn’t mean there is someone to blame, but it means that something needs to change. Because you shouldn’t be offending people. If they are getting offended, if they are not understanding you, you need to clarify yourself or something. But you can’t just say, “You’re offended? That’s your problem.” Which was happening. I’m sorry dear. I mean, I can honestly say that Bruce is a great person and I understand now that he hadn’t matured in his personhood to where all areas of our relationship he knew how to be respectful. And I had to accept that he showed disrespect for me in a conversation, or on a certain topic, or in front of certain people or in certain situations, it didn’t mean that he had no respect for me at all. OK. In his own way, his respect for me needed to grow and mature and change.

Bruce: I could slight you terribly and hurt your feelings badly, but that didn’t necessarily mean that I didn’t love her, that there were times when I did show her respect. And I also earlier thought I heard you say it didn’t necessarily, you learned to keep that from bleeding into other areas. If was rude to you or I interrupted you as I did a little while ago, then it didn’t necessarily mean that I wasn’t responsible around the house.

However, respect and influence was not universal in the sample. All four individuals in two couples (#1, married 27 years and #6, married 31 years) expressed that they were happy where they were individually, that they did not want to change personally. They also thought their partner needed to change and that they did not have a high view of their partner because of their unwillingness to change. They had given up trying to influence each other and had coped by enduring the relationship, not spending time together and by relieving their own blame by viewing the other as stubborn and as the root of the problem in their relationship.

How the couple viewed their place in the world

The couples differed in how they saw themselves in relation to others. One husband
(#1) felt they had a very poor financial position which motivated him to overwork, against his wife’s better judgment. He was also under the impression that his wife’s greatest disappointment was his not being able to provide a new house for his wife. His wife was quick to point out that that was not the case:

Diane: A house used to be a bigger deal than it is now. I guess I’ve learned the difference between a home (and) a house. A house is just a building and you make a home where you live, which I think I’ve done...We did used to talk about a house a lot and it did used to be a big thing.

Diane had progressed personally beyond thinking that material things were of utmost importance. Her husband was still struggling with feeling they weren’t where they needed to be. However, the rest of the couples were in agreement as to their financial and material position in society. Two couples said they believed that their financial situation was not where it should be. One of these couples was considering a move to another part of the country in order for both of them to find more rewarding and financially compatible jobs. Another couple disagreed with each other about how they should handle the problem: the wife thought she should go back to work while the husband believed all he needed was a higher paying, less stressful job.

Two couples expressed that contentment with their lot in life had given them an inner peace as a couple, particularly as it related to how they saw themselves in the wider community. For example, Frank and Shelly (#4) said:

Shelly: I think where Frank and I are at now is that we have finally come to the point where we're content where we're at.
Frank: Yeah.
Shelly: We've even talked about, you know, moving over to the North side of town (a side of town that had newer, more expensive homes) or whatever, but we're content here. Why not stay here? Why not better ourselves, but still
be content where we're at now, without losing us here while we're looking up (t)here? I think that's kind of where we're at right now.

Frank: I think that is a big part of it; Shelly's right.

Yvonne (#7) discussed how this idea has impacted their relationship:

Yvonne: We don't have that many wants. I think that’s good for our relationship, too. Nice things would be nice to have, but they are not necessary. We always say as long as we have each other everything will be OK.

Summary

Five domains were discovered in the data that were characteristics of these couples which contributed to their stability. These couples each faced early challenges to their marriage with which they were able to develop ways to navigate. They also viewed their relationship as primary above themselves as individuals. Some, but not all, of the couples also viewed their relationship as subordinate to their faith. That is, their marriage had a wider purpose in God’s call on their lives. These couples also believed that there was a general balance in the amount of give and take in the relationship. Most of the couples (7 of 9) saw their ability to adapt to changing circumstances and to adapt the way they interacted as giving them a fundamental hope to face an uncertain future. Finally, these couples demonstrated how expectations need to be adjusted in order for partners to reach a state of accepting each other and to be open to each other’s influence in their lives.
CHAPTER 4. DISCUSSION

This chapter seeks an integration of the discovered domains, the previously articulated theoretical examination (Chapter 2, above), and the current research literature. The theory chapter of this paper presented 9 propositions, which are each discussed below in the relevant domain. Then a typology of LQHS couples is proposed, followed by possible avenues of intervention in distressed couples who want to stay married but are fearing they are on the threshold of divorce. A preliminary assessment instrument is suggested to help clinicians and researchers predict stability. The limitations of the qualitative methodology used in this research is then addressed as well as ideas for future study.

Theoretical Formulation of Stability

As previously explained in Chapter 2, several theories from the family studies, human development, and marriage and family therapy literature were suggested that may have a bearing on understanding stability in LQHS couples. These theories included social exchange, lifespan, ecological, social construction, and solution focus. Nine propositions were suggested that explained the relationship between these theoretical orientations and the data that would be encountered in the present study. These propositions and theoretical orientations are examined in the following section in light of the data discovered in process of the research.

The domains and the previous theoretical examination

Domain 1. An ability to survive early challenges to the marriage

Proposition 9 suggested that the greater the life continuity in extra-familial sectors of life, such as employment, housing, life style, etc., the greater the probability that
marital stability will increase over time. This proposition was suggested by the ecological theory that holds that the systems one is a part of influences development (Bulboz & Sontag, 1993). The couples in this sample reported that the ecology of their early experiences helped them form as a couple. Continuity was important to most of the couples, but not all. A few of the couples indicated discontent in the area of their life goals. Jim and Debbie (couple #1) differed in terms of Jim's use of time. He wanted to continue his fast work pace in an effort to improve their financial situation, while Debbie wanted to spend time together instead. Another couple expressed disparity with who was or was not working. The wife was willing to go back to work because of their financial struggles; whereas the husband did not want her to, figuring he was gone enough for both of them. Yet this disparity did not seem to affect either of these couples' stability. While all of the partners of the couples in the sample had some differences of opinions about major issues, they tended to downplay their differences. This would indicate that this proposition is on target with this sample. It could be that couples who divorce would tend to emphasize their differences.

The idea that early experiences formulate couples is also shared in another theoretical orientation, namely, that of family scripts (Byng-Hall, 1995), an idea from Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory. Bowlby postulated in his attachment theory that early experiences of infants with or without their attachment figure (parent) affected the infant throughout his or her life. Bowlby's research began when he treated orphans after WWII. He noticed that children without parents tended to have more mental health problems than children with parents. Later research with Ainsworth (1991) differentiated between the behaviors of different types of parents. Those parents who were warm and encouraging had children who
were more able to explore the world in safety as long as the child could look to his or her parent for security at regular intervals. Children of parents who did not warmly receive their children after periods of absence tended to demonstrate much more anxiety about being away or with the parent and seemed less enabled to explore their world safely.

Attachment theory led to the theory of family scripts where early experiences affect the family unit and create stories that interpret for the family how they see each other. These scripts can either positively or negatively affect the family, depending on the nature of the experience and how it is interpreted by the family.

In looking at the couples in this sample, the early experiences they go through determined how they viewed themselves years later, for good or ill. If a couple successfully navigated an obstacle, they felt positively about themselves, both individually and as a couple. The successful navigation also increased mutual respect for each other, individual maturity and a feeling that they could face odds in the future.

In contrast to this, those couples that had an obstacle that was too difficult for them to manage tended to still bear hurt, resentment or a negative view of their spouses and their ability to change. Either way, the obstacles became a defining moment.

The universality of challenging experiences early in the relationship for each of the couples in this sample, and that each of the couples reported at least some success in handling the problems, raises some interesting questions: Does the ability to navigate early experiences in a way that is at least mildly satisfactory to each partner contribute to their stability? Do other couples who end up divorcing do so because of failing to navigate impressionable problems? If so, do problems early on have a negative effect on how they view the
relationship? Finally, if a couple fails to navigate early problems, does their family script become instead of “us against the world,” one of failure and that “we can’t address our problems?”

Proposition 1 suggested that stability is time dependent: the more time the couple is together, the greater the stability. Proposition II postulated that the longer the marriage, the more probable the LQHS marriage will increase in quality. That is, the relationship between quality and stability in LQHS marriages is stochastic in time and developmentally dependent. Stochastic in time means that at any time in the relationship, the marital quality could go any direction, up or down, but over time marital quality would generally as a rule for LQHS couples, go up.

Proposition 1 suggested that stability is time dependent; the more time the couple is together, the greater the stability. Proposition 1 was not tested by this study because only intact couples (i.e. stable) were interviewed. However, implicit in Proposition 1 is the idea that over time stability strengthens which is supportive of Domain 1 that surviving early challenges has a bearing on later stability.

Many of the aspects of stability discovered in this research could not take place unless the marriage was together long enough for the appropriate adjustments to take place. For example, couples had to be married long enough to have (a) experienced and overcome difficulty, (b) had time to see the other partners change or to make changes within themselves, and (c) had time to adjust expectations and make peace with the limitations each brought to the marriage and the idea that no matter their best intentions, the marriage would never be perfect. These types of adjustments will not occur when romantic and passionate feelings are
running high in the early idealistic stages of the marriage. Being able to survive the initial let-down that comes when reality sets in is critical for predicting stability.

Proposition 2 suggested that marital quality for LQHS couples is time dependent. That is, given enough time together, most couples will grow in their marital quality if they know that their stability is not in question. In this study two trajectories on marital quality were theorized: those who perceive their marital quality is improving over time and those whose marital quality has plateaued or dwindled over the years. These two trajectories were theorized before the study began as illustrated in Figure 47 in Chapter Two above. A third trajectory should be added: those who are stable over time (even long periods) but who eventually wear each other out and seek divorce late in life. In recent years there’s been an increased interest in divorce among those couples married for a long time (Goodman, 1993, Pett, Lang & Gander 1992). Still, as Stanley wrote recently, "if your parents have been married many years (let’s say 35 + years) and have never been divorced, the likelihood of their marriage ending in divorce is nil.” He goes on to ask the reader to contrast this to the 40% divorce rate predicted among those who marry currently (Stanley, 1998a).

Domain 2. A philosophy of marriage that emphasizes the bigger picture

Proposition III suggested that as constraint commitment increases, the probability of marital stability increases. Marital stability for LQHS couples is contingent upon constraint commitment, not dedication commitment. As delineated in Chapter 2 above, constraint (or social) commitment includes such factors as beliefs about divorce, religious values, the effect divorce would have on the children and shared financial resources, factors generally outside the immediate dyadic relationship. Dedication commitment was defined as
those factors that keep the relationship strong, such as love and a willingness of each partner to sacrifice for the welfare of the other (Stanley, 1998b, 1986). Domain 2 was related to constraint commitment. Constraint commitment was certainly strong among the couples in this sample (general belief that divorce was not an option, seeing the relationship as a priority, commitment to commitment and fidelity), but it was only one domain among five. Thus, the statement in Proposition III that Marital stability for LQHS couples is contingent upon constraint and not dedication commitment, would be an oversimplification. There were 2 couples in the sample for which this was true. For the other couples, constraint commitment held a priority, but it was not the only factor. These couples demonstrated an interest in dedication commitment and other areas that affected their relationship in positive ways as suggested by the other domains.

The previous discussion under life-span developmental theory and social exchange suggested the possibility that many couples may divorce before the developmental nature of commitment has had a chance to solidify in the relationship. As Stanley (1998b, 1986) suggests, constraint or social commitment increases with time together (dating, engagement, marriage, children, investments, owning a house, grandchildren, and pensions).

The developmental nature of constraint commitment was found to have a significant impact on the couples in this study. For example, Frank and Shelly (#4) struggled and even separated, yet when they bought a home together after their remarriage it signified their new life together. Children and grandchildren were viewed as glue for all except one couple (Mike and Kelly, married 10 years). George and Vi (#6) who had little in common said that what was important for them was their children, grandchildren, and their house.
Stability is time dependent as two individuals go through the process of formulating as a couple for the first time. For these couples, having children and buying homes is usually dependent on time. However, if these changes come too quickly (such as pregnancies before or early in the marriage) stability might be threatened. This is particularly seen in the second marriages in this study where children and houses and more bills related to two families came in a sudden rush. Thus, the aspects that are stabilizing for first marriages may be destabilizing for second marriages. Couples who survive remarriage will need an ability to adapt to cataclysmic change. If the remarried couple can survive the initial onslaught of change, time will be a more stabilizing factor as they share their own gradual accumulation of social commitments.

While constraint commitment is usually time dependent (see Proposition 1) some aspects of constraint commitment are brought to the marriage or acquired later. This was particularly true in this study for couples who held religious views that their faith superseded them as a couple. They felt that God called them as part of their faith to be good husbands and wives. In other words their responsibility was not to themselves alone, but to God, even if the situation was difficult. They brought these views with them to the marriage, having acquired them earlier in their lives. One person (Frank, couple #4) adopted a faith position after the marriage experienced a divorce. His new found faith was instrumental in their reuniting as a couple.

A more common experience for these couples where constraint commitment was not time dependent was in the area of the elevation of the relationship above individuality. For example, Wendy (#3) suggested that during all of their struggles as a couple, divorce was
never a consideration. She was determined to stay married whether or not she was happy. However, she sought to find ways to improve her marriage so that over time her own relationship satisfaction would be able to grow.

All of the individuals in this study except one (Eve, couple #8, married 9 years) held the view that divorce, no matter what, was not an option (Frank, couple #4, adopted this view after his separation and religious conversion). It is interesting that Eve’s husband was the only husband who expressed doubts about the security of the relationship, as his wife was the only person in the sample to express that her stability was contingent on how well the relationship was doing.

Domain 3. A sense of reciprocity in most of the areas of the relationship

Proposition IV suggested that the greater the perceived equality in exchange between spouses (reciprocity), the greater the likelihood that low-quality marriage will remain stable. This proposition was found to hold for all the couples, so much so, that a new corollary can be added that “the more areas of the relationship that are perceived to be reciprocal, the more the marital quality.” This was again seen in the separation of the couples into two groups: 7 of 9 who saw a relative balance of give and take in most of the areas of their relationship versus the 2 couples who expressed discontent in this area (couples #6, married 31 years and #1, married 27 years). In both of these latter couples, the wives were the ones who expressed inequity. Debbie (#1) expressed it in the areas partnership, time together, decision making, and sharing of household duties. Vi (#6) expressed it mostly in the area of time together, which was not about to happen because of Vi’s abhorrence of being alone with George and George’s abhorrence of being with Vi in the presence of others.
Domain 4. An ability to adapt to each other and their circumstances

Two proposition addressed the nature of developmental change in the marriage relationship and this effect upon stability. Proposition VII suggested that the greater the individual plasticity in one or both spouses, the greater the likelihood a low-quality couple will remain stable and Proposition VIII suggested that as multidirectionality increases, stability increases. That is, to the extent that couples are able to replace areas of deficit with pluses in other areas their stability will increase.

Using Baltes' (1987) description, plasticity was discussed above (Chapter 2, p. 40) as the ability of a person to adapt to changing circumstances and to make up for deficits, either through outside intervention or through compensating in other areas. Multidirectionality, on the other hand, was defined as the idea that throughout the life span people vary in the direction of their functioning. An example of plasticity would be if a spouse was unhappy in one area of the marriage, elevating another area of the marriage to meet the happiness deficit. An example of multidirectionality would be if the marriage wasn't working that well, for the spouse or the couple to find other ways to find fulfillment.

Plasticity was found in all the couples in the sample. By definition each of the couples was discontent in some way in their relationship as their DAS scores were lower than the population of the rest of the couples. Each were able to find other things in the relationship that gave them personal satisfaction, such as their shared interest in their children or grandchildren and their friendship with each other. A particular area that gave satisfaction for most of the couples was the idea that the current status of the relationship did not mean that the rest of the relationship would stay at that level. There was a hope for most that over time
the relationship would continue to improve.

Interestingly, for the couples where plasticity was important, multidirectionality was not as important and for the couples where plasticity was not important, multidirectionality was important. The two couples who reported little change and adaptation also reported that they had other things to occupy their time. Jim and Debbie (couple #1) both kept busy in their own spheres: Jim in his work and Debbie in her job and circle of network outside the relationship. George and Vi (couple #6), who were retired, had opted for separate lifestyles, living in separate homes with George spending time in the outdoors, hunting and fishing, and Vi spending time talking with her friends. Both of these spheres gave them individual enjoyment, but at the same time reminded them of their vastly different interests. The other couples did not report multidirectionality and wanted to work things out together. While not specifically asked, one would anticipate that the other 7 couples would see multidirectionality as a deficit and taking away from their efforts to become partners in the relationship.

Two couples expressed pessimism about the future (married 27 and 31 years). The rest of the couples were positive about their future. The optimism of these seven couples was in stark contrast to the pessimism of the two couples. Is there a relationship between satisfaction in the relationship and the amount of anticipated positive change in the future envisioned by the couple? Perhaps the reason the other seven couples were in the low DAS scores compared to the other 91 couples in the larger sample is that the younger couples were still recovering from the conflict between them in the early years of the relationship. For example, two individuals expressed that despite the tremendous strides their partner had made in their years together, they still had their doubts and struggled with trusting that their partner
had made genuine changes. How long would these people have to wait until their trust had been built up enough to improve their overall outlook for the relationship? Thus, it appears that the seven couples had lower DAS scores for different reasons than the two long-term couples.

Much of the change in the relationship described in the "Results" chapter seemed to be related to individual maturity. For example, becoming more assertive, less demanding, more responsible, less argumentative, more open to a spouse's input, improved listening produce dramatically improved interaction effects with resulting positive feelings about the possibility of the relationship. While on the surface these would be observed as couple changes, they might also be attributed to individuals differentiating and learning to treat each other with more dignity and respect. Individuals being willing to change and adapt mean that their relationships will also change.

It is interesting to note that Gottman (1994b) reports his belief that couple conflict management styles do not change for couples. However, in this study, several couples indicated a change in how they interacted and dealt with conflict.

Domain 5. Attitude toward the limitations of each other and the relationship

Proposition V suggested that as the relationship changes and expectations of one or both spouses are not met, one or both will likely adjust their expectations and thus increase the likelihood that the marriage system will remain stabilized. Adjusted expectations were true for nearly all of the couples. As explained in the Results Chapter, adjusted expectations led to acceptance. This experience also improved marital quality. All but 2 of the couples reported making adjustments to each other. Two couples did not indicate
that change or adjusted expectations were instrumental in their stability. They were stable without these characteristics. However, this would not seem to be the norm for most couples in our culture where an emphasis on couple satisfaction is so important.

Proposition VI suggested that the more the changes in expectations and choices of spouses are congruent, the greater the probability that marital stability will remain at the status quo level. Congruency was divided again between the 7 couples who were congruent in most areas and 2 couples who were not congruent. Of the 7 couples who expressed congruency in most areas, one individual (Nick couple #5, married 7 years) indicated that he separated and was serious about filing for divorce from Angie because he did not feel his wife had the same expectations as he did with regard to emotional involvement. When Angie was willing to align her expectations and behavior (choices) more in sync with Nick, they were able to reunite and make considerable strides in their relationship.

Another couple reported that Mike's (couple #2) decision (choice) for Kelly to get an abortion had negative affects upon their marital quality. However, as devastating as this choice was, it was not a threat to the relationship, only to marital quality.

Still another couple (#3, Bruce and Wendy) said that even though their first year was marred by Bruce's choice to use domestic violence against Wendy, Wendy was determined to make the marriage work and to stay married. Bruce's choice did not affect Wendy's commitment to stay married.

A number of couples indicated that they chose to stay faithful to each other which had a bearing on their long-term commitment. It is not known, however, whether there were other negative choices that spouses made that were or were not a threat to the marriage. It is
doubtful that all negative choices (e.g. affairs, criminal behavior, gambling, etc.) would come to light in one or two interviews (for further elaboration on the limits of the qualitative method used in this study see that section later in this chapter).

In this study, then, for most couples it would seem that congruency in expectations and choices would be more a prediction of marital quality than stability.

Reformulating a typology of LQHS couples

Earlier this paper suggested that LQHS couples were different than high quality-high stability couples because for the former, marital quality was not an issue for their stability, but for the latter it was. Cole (1999) suggests that stability for both HQHS couples and LQHS couples is the same prerequisite for marital quality. It could be, however, that there are two types of HQHS couples: 1) those that will remain high stability regardless of the level of marital quality and 2) those who will move to HQLS or LQLS should their perceived marital quality deteriorate. In the former group stability may serve as a prerequisite for marital quality; in the latter group perceived marital quality will determine the level of stability. Similarly, this research (see Table 4) reveals two types of LQHS couples: those for whom stability is a prerequisite for marital quality ("Striving Couples") and those for whom stability has no bearing on marital quality ("Enduring Couples").

In Chapter 1 a model was created that postulated two possible trajectories for LQHS couples: those that would increase in marital stability over time and those that would plateau in marital quality. Stability for either group of LQHS couples would not be in question. The results of this study matched the created model. One group of couples (7 of 9) indicated that marital quality was still an ideal for them, one they believed they were moving toward. These
couples are differentiated here as *Striving Couples*, those who were making an effort to make their marriage better. "Striving" is defined here as a positive attribute indicating an effort to fight, contend, or battle against the odds. The opposite of striving is "quitting." These couples faced incredible obstacles, yet did not let those obstacles deter them from seeking to reinvent their relationships. They are also called "striving" because they are still in process, still seeking to change and move toward marital quality.

If the key characteristic of Striving Couples is movement, the key characteristic of the second group of couples is stasis. While both types of couples refused to "quit" on the marriage, the second group (2 couples) had given up on marital quality altogether. Even though these 2 couples "stayed married," the marriages served a functional purpose only. The relationships were devoid of relational camaraderie. These 2 couples are differentiated here as *Enduring Couples*. They "endured" the stalemate. Even though their relationships with each other were not rewarding personally, this desire for personal fulfillment in personal relationship was put on hold for the sake of the "marriage."

These two types of LQHS couples ("striving" and "enduring"), while sharing several characteristics, were considerably different from each other as the table below (Table 4) demonstrates.

The characteristics of Enduring Couples are close to couples who are highly distressed and in our culture highly prone to divorce (Buehlman, et al., 1992). Perhaps in other cultures
Table 4. Striving vs. Enduring Couples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Striving Couples</th>
<th>Enduring Couples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>enjoyed time together</td>
<td>avoided time together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>partnership</td>
<td>separate lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>meet other's needs</td>
<td>meet own needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>common goals</td>
<td>different goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>both partners have</td>
<td>neither has made changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>efforts to communicate</td>
<td>efforts to avoid talking with each</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>adapting conflict styles</td>
<td>rigid conflict styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>shared decision making</td>
<td>separate decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interdependency</td>
<td>independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>acceptance</td>
<td>acquiescence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>move toward</td>
<td>move toward resentment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>accept influence from</td>
<td>resist partner’s influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>respect partner</td>
<td>lack of respect for partner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

with stronger social mores against divorce, this type of couple may be more prevalent.

However, in this culture, with it’s strong emphasis on rewarding relationships, it would appear that most couples that enter the enduring type would be likely soon to wear out and end up in divorce.

A new model based on the new typology

As defined above acceptance is coming to a place where the other person’s
shortcomings are not taken personally, are even viewed positively, and are seen as part of who
the other person is. Striving Couples are those who are learning to accept the other. They
also are more apt to respect their partner and to be open to their partner’s influence in making
personal adjustments. Relationship pain is still a reality for these couples, but they are in the
process of learning to make peace with that pain. The pain is not used as a distancing factor.

Enduring Couples lean toward acquiescence. This concept was defined above as
merely enduring the other person’s shortcomings. Personal pain is still part of the relational
experience, and is used to keep the couple from relating significantly on a personal level. In
spite of little personal reward in the relationship, a conscious decision was made to stick with
the person despite this pain. Those who acquiesce seek to keep from holding the
shortcomings against their partners. Partners in enduring relationships may not like the pain
their spouse causes, but they persist in the relationship nevertheless. They have a high pain
threshold.

Those who end up divorcing are here theorized as being consumed by the pain they
have which they associate with their partner. They may think if they are not in the presence of
their partners, they will not be hurt again. Prior to the divorce, partners distance themselves
from each other. Divorce becomes a way to protect themselves from further hurt and the
ultimate distancing. Associating pain with their partners, they may struggle with resentment
or bitterness, not like this characteristic in themselves and view divorce as a way to recover
personally. They have exceeded their personal pain threshold.

A model is presented in Figure 3 that posits the relationship between the above named
concepts (acquiescence, relational pain, acceptance, pain threshold), marital stability, and
martial quality in low-quality couples. Following Cole et al. (1998), both martial quality and marital stability are theorized as being continuous variables. This counters Lewis and Spanier's (1979) typology that conceptualized stability as a dichotomous variable. They also suggested that marital quality was a precondition necessary for stability. However, this conceptualization suggests instead that for Striving Couples, who are one two types of LQHS couples, stability is a precondition for marital quality to occur. A continuum is proposed in Figure 3 to explain the relationship among these concepts in low-quality couples.

In Figure 3, Striving Couples are viewed as close to having satisfying marriages. They may fluctuate between periods of low marital quality and periods of higher marital quality. This model suggests that for many of these types of couples their satisfaction with the relationship would improve slowly over time. The movement they are able to make encourages both partners that the relationship has hope. Enduring Couples are viewed as those who make few changes in how they relate to each other. They have reached a stalemate with which they can tolerate. Divorcing Couples are those who have not learned the relationship survival skills of Striving Couples. When obstacles are faced that seem intolerable, they quickly may find themselves in an enduring mode. However, given the disparity our culture places on merely enduring a relationship at the expense of personal happiness, many of these people reach their pain threshold and begin to entertain divorce as an option.
Divorcing or Divorced Couples | Enduring Couples | Striving Couples  
--- | --- | ---  
exceeding pain threshold | strong pain threshold | making peace with pain  
bitterness/resentment | acquiescence/endurance | acceptance/influence  
highly unstable | stable | highly stable  
low marital quality | low marital quality | rising marital quality  
change for the worst | no change | movement toward improvement  

Figure 3. Marital quality-marital stability continuum in low-quality couples

Summary

This study looked at the factors low-quality couples say contribute to their staying together as couples. These are couples who decide to stay together regardless of their marital quality. In this qualitative sample of 18 individuals (9 couples) only one person indicated that her marital stability was linked to marital quality. Even this one woman, who had been married twice before, did not anticipate getting a divorce to her third husband, because for her the marital quality was sufficiently high. For the rest of the subjects, divorce was not an option.

This study discovered that in low-quality couples there are two trajectories. One trajectory was where change is not anticipated, leaving the couple to stand together in perseverance. They “endured” the situation for the welfare of the marriage. These couples (2 married 27 and 31 years) were marked by the lack of partnership between spouses, a lack of agreement on decision making and little fondness for each other. The second trajectory was marked by younger couples who still had hope that things would change for them and
between then in the future, because they had witnessed change of some sort in the relationship already. These Striving Couples (7 of 9) reported being happier in their relationship, shared more in decision making and tended to be able to accept or were working on accepting the shortcomings of their partner.

While all the couples reported immediate setbacks early in their relationship (such as early pregnancy, abortion, financial problems, career problems, disagreements on career choices, health and mental health issues, domestic violence, in-laws, drop in social support) and all were able to endure these setbacks, only the 7 couples mentioned above were able to move beyond these setbacks to begin to heal the relationship. For them marital quality was still important and worth their effort. All 7 of these couples reported making conscious efforts to making their relationships better. The latter 2 couples reached a certain marital quality plateau from which they were never able to rise. The wives of these 2 husbands reported making considerable efforts to improve their marriages. The husbands of these two wives reported that these efforts were viewed as meddling and negativity. These two husbands were not open to the influence of their wives. By the time of the interview each partner had given up the idea of their relationships improving.

Clinical Implications

Intervention with unstable couples in couple therapy

What about those couples who marry with high ideals and high relationship quality, reach a major obstacle or series of obstacles, and then seek divorce early in the relationship? It would appear that these couples have NOT learned the survival skills of Enduring or
Striving Couples and end up assuming that the downward spiral they are on can only get worse. Thus, therapeutic intervention with these couples would seek to instill these skills in the couple.

Those couples unable to endure the difference between their expectations and the reality of their relationship and who are resistant to making changes necessary to change personally or to receive input from their partner would be viewed as those who are highly likely to divorce. Thus, for couples struggling with issues of bitterness and resentment, acceptance may be too distant a goal for the initial stages of therapy. A more achievable goal might be to help them move toward endurance. On the other hand couples who come to therapy who are in the "enduring" stage may need to learn to not take the actions of their partner as personal affronts and to accept influence from their partner. Movement in these two areas would be critical steps in helping acquiescent couples move toward acceptance.

Many of the distressed couples who come to therapy often do so in the early stages of marriage, and find the challenges before them as too stressful, bringing their marital system to the breaking point. This research would suggest that the first item of business of the therapist in this type of situation would be to assist the couple in overcoming these challenges and to help them unite against their foes, whatever they may be.

While certainly there are those who divorce for purely self-centered and self-serving reasons, the experience of this researcher as a therapist is that most people who are struggling in their marriage do not seek divorce as an option until they have reached a pain threshold where the relationship seems unbearable. They do not have or do not want to have the
endurance to simply bear through an unrewarding relationship. They have no desire to stay in the "enduring" mode as outlined in Table 4. However, most say that if there is some movement toward the characteristics listed on the "striving" side, that that would be enough to keep them going. The key elemental difference between enduring and striving couples seems to be movement. Enduring couples are locked in an unchanging stasis that eliminates hope from their repertoire, meaning that they either decide that the current pattern is bearable for the rest of their human lives, or they divorce. In this case stability is dichotomous.

But for striving couples, words like "hope," "change," "maturity," kept reoccurring. They were not content to stay at a level where the relationship did not seem to be working. Interestingly, for all 7 of these couples, each partner was making an effort to change themselves or how they interacted in an effort to improve the marriage. Thus, a key intervention strategy would be to look for how the couple had changed together over their time as a couple, how they had been open to the other's influence, how they had tried to reach out and meet the other person's needs, and in what way they had sacrificed their own happiness for the benefit of the other. Perhaps these characteristics are present in the relationship, but overshadowed by the level of stress the couple is facing at the time they come to therapy. Reminding the couple of these strengths and helping them to harness them in times of need may help them triumph over their obstacles.

Assessment of stability

The domains discovered in this study are suggestive of the characteristics of couples who are able to keep their marriages together. An instrument that measured these
characteristics would be helpful for therapists engaged in working with highly distressed and unstable couples. The instrument might be able to determine strengths of the couple and areas of change where the couple might move that would encourage their stability.

These domains need further elaboration and confirmation in research to help us understand more adequately these strengths, how these characteristics are played out in the actual lives of other couples and whether or not the characteristics are applicable to other couples.

The need for an instrument that measures strengths in stable and unstable couples would be an added resource for both the clinicians and researchers. Other instruments have been created that either measure characteristics of highly functioning couples, are limited in scope or measure deficits in dysfunctional couples.

Kayser’s Disaffection Scale (1993) is an example of an instrument that was developed after qualitative interviews with divorced couples about the loss of their affection for their partner and how that played into their divorce. However, her study emphasized what the divorcing couple perceived as shortcomings. Her sample and research questions contrasts with this study which was done with clients further along the continuum and asked what they were doing that was helpful to their stability.

The DAS, while still used repeatedly in current research, seems dated. One of the constructs measured on the DAS is consensus or agreement on various issues. Research in the last 20 years has emphasized that all couples differ on issues. It is not that they differ, it is what they do with that difference.
Another recent scale, the Relationship Dynamics Scale (Stanley & Markman, 1997), is highly suggestive of what issues predict divorce. It measures eight areas that have been shown to predict divorce in couples who display characteristics such as withdrawal of one partner in conflict, low friendship factor, feeling of loneliness in the relationship, inability to solve problems together and high conflict levels.

The idea for an instrument presented here suggests that an effort be made to measure characteristics that predict stability! This would help clinicians and researchers take a proactive stance in measuring this illusive construct.

Other researchers, like Gottman (1994b), have suggested that stability can not be predicted, that only instability can be predicted. This orientation leaves clinicians and researchers at odds. Clinicians typically strive to help clients emphasize available resources and are trained to locate these. Researchers find it easier to measure deficits.

An instrument that makes this bold claim would need to be tested with future research. Peer review, factor analysis, comparison of scores with divorced, low-quality but married, clinical and the general married population would be critical to determine the reliability and validity of the instrument. This research is outside the current scope of this dissertation, but a preliminary Stability Assessment Instrument is offered in Appendix E. It is presented as suggestive of the domains discovered in this research and modeled after Kayser's Disaffection Scale. Ultimately the instrument would have to be narrowed down to around a more manageable 20 items with an appropriate mix of positive and reverse coding.
Limitations of the Qualitative Methodology in This Study

No research is definitive and needs further confirmation of other research to reaffirm or fine tune results. The advantage of qualitative research is its weakness. The advantage is that qualitative research makes no presumptions ahead of time and seeks to discover how the subjects see a particular item in detail. The time intensive nature of this research and the detail of the data prevent researchers from using many subjects and as a result the conclusions are limited to context and generalizations are difficult to make.

A further limitation of all research is that subjects may be prone to present themselves in a positive light. This becomes more of a threat with qualitative research than with quantitative research. Quantitative research deals with this problem by assuring subjects of the anonymity of their responses. Answers to questionnaires are mixed together and the data collators are not aware of whose instrument is matched to what person. Qualitative research also seeks anonymity. For example, in this research, names, locations, and occupations were changed or altered. However, the information offered by the subject is known to the researcher on the scene and thus the information gathered is limited to the rapport that the researcher has with the subjects. Thus, while a goal of qualitative research is to get at the underlying factors, these may be illusive if the subject does not feel free to discuss the matter or perhaps is not aware personally or has forgotten the nature of the aspect in question.

In this research the shortcomings of qualitative research became apparent on two occasions. Kelly (#2) was explaining that she still felt her husband resented her in a certain area of their lives. The interviewer was a little uncomfortable at that point and made a
statement to smooth over the situation. The interviewer said: "I don’t think he resents you personally, if there’s any resentment it probably is toward that situation.” Kelly replied, "No, it’s me...Ask him how he feels about my body.” At that point the interviewer asked to go on to another subject, not wanting to create an uncomfortable situation for the subjects.

While Kelly may have been open to discuss this subject, the way she presented it was interpreted by the researcher at the site that a fight was about to begin. This example makes one wonder how often qualitative research subjects are truly forthright, if they are prepared to tell the unvarnished story, or how often the interviewers might redirect conversations away from therapeutic or serious problem areas.

This same issue came up during the interview with George and Vi (#6) when they were discussing how they met:

Vi: Yea. When I went to the door, there he was with these sun glasses on and he was pretty handsome as a young guy, and I thought "Oh, god, this guy is really something".

George: Oh, my, really something.

Vi: He was the most different guy I had ever met as far as saying something. We were dancing, and he

George: Ooooh, don’t say that for God sake.

Vi: And he

George: Talk about yourself

Vi: Alright. So that’s all that.

Here the discussion was cut short by the other partner. How often does this happen with a knowing glance between partners or just their own boundaries that they have established as a couple to protect the relationship from outside harm? In this study one couple mentioned domestic abuse. Was it more prevalent in the sample? No one else mentioned it. No one mentioned an affair. Is it possible that none of them had one? Perhaps. Perhaps some issues
are safe for some couples to discuss and not safe for others. Maybe they would open up in later interviews once rapport is established. But again, this makes qualitative research even more time intensive.

But just because we do not know everything, that does not mean we do not know what we have learned and that what we have learned is not helpful. While this current research is not exhaustive, that does not mean that it is not a legitimate investigation.

**Directions of Future Study**

Directions of future study are suggested by the limitations of qualitative research. Testing these domains with different populations (couples who stay married after an affair, criminal behavior by one partner, problems with habitual behavior, a severe loss or health problem of one partner, those who seek therapy, etc.) to see how these domains play out with them. Or perhaps they have different domains that apply to them altogether. This research question could also be applied across cultures to see how the issue of stability is viewed by peoples with different life experiences and ethnic backgrounds. The study could be expanded beyond midwestern, rural America to urban and suburban areas. Couples could be located who are satisfied with their marriage now but reported that earlier in their relationship there were early stressors and problems in their marriage. This would help to determine if these were the same domains that helped them move toward marital quality or if others were significant. Perhaps many high-quality couples were at one time Striving Couples. Understanding how they made the transition would be helpful.

Interventions based upon these domains could be developed and tested with clinical
populations to see if these characteristics can be taught to distressed and unstable couples in an effort to help them become more stable in their relationships. And as mentioned above, an assessment instrument could be developed to assist in intervention and research.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

This dissertation has investigated the question of what keeps low quality-high stability couples together. It was suggested that the normal method of study of marriage, using marital quality as a predictor of marital stability, would not be relevant for LQHS couples who have decided to stay married regardless of their marital quality. It was also decided to use a qualitative methodology in order to ferret out the characteristics of LQHS couples, since this research question, while suggestive was not directly approached in the marital literature.

A model was postulated based upon the research literature that suggested two trajectories for low-quality couples: one where marital quality gradually increases over time and one where marital quality plateaus or drops over time. Nine propositions were made with regard to the nature of stability in LQHS couples based upon a review of the literature and appropriate theoretical orientations.

Qualitative interviews with 9 couples married 5 years or longer who scored the lowest on the DAS out of a larger sample of 99 couples were used for the investigation. The couples varied in length of marriage from 5 to 31 years. The interviews were transcribed and studied. Five domains were discovered that LQHS couples suggest are characteristics that determine their stability as couples. Appropriate qualitative techniques, including peer review, were utilized to assure the trustworthiness of the methodology.

It was found that the couples in this sample had considerable struggles early in their marriages that tended to serve as a bonding factor for them. The challenges ranged from career and money problems, in-laws, bosses and children, health and domestic violence. It
was also found that all of the couples viewed the marriage as more important than individuality, expressed in such areas as their belief that divorce was not an option, their belief in the benefits of marriage, the priority of the relationship, and their commitment to faithfulness in the relationship.

From here the couples diverged into two types called in this dissertation Striving Couples and Enduring Couples. Striving Couples (N=7) were defined as those who were making movement and efforts to improve their marital quality. Enduring Couples (N=2) were locked in a unchanging pattern that convinced the couple that improvement in marital quality was not to be expected.

Striving and Enduring Couples had different approaches to the final three domains. Reciprocity was a critical aspect of Striving Couples, but not Enduring Couples. Striving Couples invested time and energy in encouraging the good things in the relationship (fun, friendship), sought to meet each other’s needs, and made an effort to work together as a partnership. Striving Couples also made an effort to adapt to each other and their circumstances and viewed their relationship as changing drastically since the early stages of their relationships. They were open to change and viewed it as a reason to give them hope to face the future. Change in how they communicated with each other was crucial as Striving Couples were able to adapt to less conflictual patterns of interaction. Enduring Couples had the same general patterns of interaction over the course of their marriage and did not anticipate that that would change. Striving Couples shared decision making responsibilities, whereas in Enduring Couples the decisions were either made by the husband or made
individualy, with no regard for partnership. All of the couples had to deal with shattered expectations, but Striving Couples tended to move toward acceptance of their partner's limitations, be open to their partner's influence in their lives, and respect their partner. Enduring Couples acquiesced about their partner's limitations, that is, they endured them, but did not like the limitations and tended to let those limitations bother them personally. As a result they were unable or unwilling to accept influence from their partner nor to respect them. Several couples in the sample were able to move beyond acceptance to contentment with their situation and lot in life.

The domains were then integrated into the nine propositions, the theoretical and empirical research literature review. The five domains and two couple types supported the initial model delineated in the theory chapter. A new model was created that suggested that for low-quality couples, both marital quality and marital stability are on a continuum. Divorcing Couples, on the left of the continuum, were those couples who had exceed their pain threshold with such characteristics as change for the worst, instability, resentment, and low marital quality. Enduring Couples, in the middle of the continuum, were those who "endured" their relationship pain, but had not been able to make peace with it. They were characterized as unchanging in interactional patterns, tending toward acquiescence in their attitudes toward their partner's limitations, and had low marital quality. The third group of couples, on the right of the continuum of low-quality couples, were Striving Couples, characterized as those who had made peace or were in process of making peace with the pain they had experienced in the relationship. They were learning to accept their partners'
limitations by adjusting their expectations of one another. They were more open to their partner's influence and tended to respect their partner. As a result, while their marital quality was still low, they improved in their marital quality.

Clinical implications based on this continuum were explored including a suggested assessment instrument for measuring stability in low-quality couples and possible intervention strategies. The limitations of this study and qualitative methodology and directions for possible future study were explored.

It is concluded that LQHS couples, indeed, have much to teach researchers, clinicians, and other couples about their particular view of reality that emphasizes the stability of the marriages in spite of low marital quality. They have many positive qualities that are worth emulating and that should be applicable to other couples who desire to stay married in spite of heavy odds that they may feel weigh against them.
APPENDIX A: DYADIC ADJUSTMENT SCALE (Spanier, 1976)

Most people have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item based on the following scale: 5 = Always agree 4 = Almost always agree 3 = Occasionally disagree 2 = Frequently disagree 1 = Almost always disagree 0 = Always disagree

1. Handling family finances
2. Matters of recreation
3. Religious matters
4. Demonstrations of affection
5. Friends
6. Sex relations
7. Conventionality (Correct or proper behavior)
8. Philosophy of life
9. Ways of dealing with parents or in-laws
10. Aims, goals, and things believed important
11. Amount of time spent together
12. Making major decisions
13. Household tasks
14. Leisure time interest and activities
15. Career decisions

The following questions have different answers. Please read the questions and answers carefully. Now, please indicate below approximately how often the following items occur between you and your partner based on this scale:

0 = All the time
1 = Most of the time
2 = More often than not
3 = Occasionally
4 = Rarely
5 = Never

16. How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation or terminating your relationship?

17. How often do you or your partner leave the house after a fight?

18. In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?
19. Do you confide in your mate?

20. Do you ever regret that you married (or lived together)?

21. How often do you and your partner quarrel?

22. How often do you and your partner "get on each other's nerves?"

How often would you say the following events occur between you and your partner?

23. How often do you kiss your mate? (Circle your response) 0 = Never 1 = Rarely 2 = Occasionally 3 = Almost Every Day 4 = Every Day

24. How many outside interests do you and your partner engage in together? (Circle your response) 0 = None of them 1 = Very few of them 2 = Some of them 3 = Most of them 4 = All of them

How often would you say the following events occur between you and your partner, based on the following scale:

0 = Never 1 = Less than once a month 2 = Once or twice a month 3 = Once or twice a week 4 = Once a day 5 = More often

25. Have a stimulating exchange of ideas
26. Laugh together
27. Calmly discuss something
28. Work together on a project

There are some things about which couples sometimes agree and sometimes disagree. Indicate if either item below caused differences of opinions or were problems in your relationship during the past few weeks. (circle the number under yes or no)

Yes No

29. Being too tired for sex.

30. Not showing love.
31. The numbers on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, "happy." represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please circle the number which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Unhappy</td>
<td>Fairly Unhappy</td>
<td>A Little Unhappy</td>
<td>Happy Happy</td>
<td>Very Happy</td>
<td>Extremely Happy</td>
<td>Perfect Happy</td>
</tr>
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32. Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about the future of your relationship?

_____ I want desperately for my relationship to succeed, and would go to almost any length to see that it does.

_____ I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and will do all I can to see that it does.

_____ I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and will do my fair share to see that it does.

_____ It would be nice if my relationship succeeded, but I can’t do much more than I am doing now to help it succeed.

_____ It would be nice if it succeeded, but I refuse to do any more than I am doing now to keep the relationship going.

_____ My relationship can never succeed, and there is no more that I can do.
APPENDIX B. SAMPLE SECTION OF RUNNING COMMENTARY: AUDIT TRAIL

This Appendix is a section from the "audit trail" the researcher created in analyzing the data. Comments and quotes relevant to the research question were put into a separate document for each couple as demonstrated below. The interviewer is abbreviated "I:" and Frank and Shelly are abbreviated with the first letter of their names.

004 Married 14 years Frank and Shelly: "I believe one of the first things we must do is not be warped." (Frank) "Love is something deeper." (Frank) "If you can put those responsibilities and obligations ahead of your own self interest, you will be a content, self-fulfilled person."

This couple has two things that set them apart from the rest of the group. First, the couple divorced after 10 years of marriage, separated about a year, moved back in together and then remarried a year later. They also cohabited prior to marrying each other the first time. While they've been officially married 14 years, their total years together is higher.

Secondly, this couple (and particularly Frank) is the only couple to share in the course of the interview how their individual decisions were influenced by outside cultural factors. Frank sees their relationship and his own personal quest as being very interactive with larger issues facing society. For example, he grew up in the 60's and continued a drug and free love type of lifestyle until he was nearly 30. By that time the 60's had given way to the 70's and he began to see himself as outdated and outmoded. His beard and wire rims, tendency to get drunk for no particular reason and his animosity for institutions began to take a toll on him emotionally and physically. He was lonely! When he met Shelly, a nice Catholic girl with a strict background and conservative values and family upbringing, he saw some stability he hadn't realized prior to that point. Shelly, on the other hand, saw what she believed was his potential and that she thought he would settle down if he married. His life on the edge was exciting to her, but also a bit troubling.

While Frank was initially attracted to Shelly as just another conquest, he began to see some deeper qualities about her that tugged at some of the deeper needs he was feeling at the time. His friends were all married and settled down with regular jobs and kids and he noticed that they even seemed happy. How could this be, when he had rejected family values as being one of the puritanical restrictions that hindered free love? While "living by the moment for the experience" may have met his needs when he was younger, he began to yearn for something real, something that didn't seem so artificial.

F: You cannot bring that kind of attitude into a marriage— that sort of life can be lonely and as I got older, a little older, in my late 20's, I began to notice that my friends again seemed to be perfectly content and I was getting a little lonely, a little tired of this "by the moment for experience" BS. It was wearing me out, frankly. I was missing something in life. It seemed to me I was missing something substantial. It seemed that all of these experiences I was having - and I have had a lot of unusual experiences - and without knowing it I tried, like Ernest Hemingway, see the bulls run in Spain and be an ambulance driver...
and during the Spanish Revolution and all that sort of thing, but, of course, that was not reality, that's something... those were the kind of things that I wanted to do.... I wanted to "be drunk with life" was my line - be drunk with life and all those things, but again, if you do that it's very shallow...I noticed that I was missing something. Perhaps, I should find out why in the hell my friends who had...been like me...seemed to be happy in this other mode.

While his love for Shelly began to settle him down a bit, it was a close relationship with an older couple that helped him see that marriage may be worth the commitment. The mentoring relationship he had with them and the frank discussions about life and love with the husband, Martin, had a profound effect on his worldview.

Frank and Shelly were living together at the time. Cohabiting fit Frank’s idea of being on the edge philosophically, but countered Shelly’s Catholic morals. She was uncomfortable in the situation and wanted to get married. She felt some pressure from her parents who were also dedicated Catholics. Frank was beginning to feel uncomfortable with the uncertainty of cohabitation. It took Martin and Jan to bring about a change in Frank’s thinking. Frank and Shelly explained:

S: I still think we had this one couple who are older than us and they had been married for a lot of years and they really, they had been with you (Frank) a lot through your younger years.
F: They were like my older brother and sister I never had. I was the oldest in my family...
S: And they really - they
F: They had been married at that time about 15 years.
S: Yeah, and they seemed they had a lot of rocky roads, but they seemed to have a really solid relationship and they really talk(ed) to us a lot trying to get him (Frank) to make me an honest woman. I just think they had a lot to do with
F: Yes, they did, to changing my attitude because I trusted this friend of mine (name was Martin and Jan). As a matter of fact, I did something similar to what you're (the interviewer) doing now when I was in college with them, to check the progress of their relationship as it went on. They had a lot of fun and meant something to each other. In fact, they were obviously each other's best friend. And, as Shelly said, they had their share of rocky times. They had a badly, I don't know of the politically-correct term for it is now, but they had a badly retarded son who was sometimes violent, even as a little boy. When he was 9 years old he chased and tried to stab his mother with a knife, and they had to pull together through those times and it was wrenching on them, but they stuck in there. They did not believe in divorce. They really did not. They believed in each other and their family. They believed in something higher than themselves.

My friend was an electrician - he's not necessarily well-spoken or articulate or well-educated. He has a very simple way about him that is easily understandable to someone like me who, in case you hadn't noticed already, can fill (his) head up with philosophical, ideological bullshit (laughter), and he
can - the way he'd talk is very calm, very straightforward...matter-of-fact way about his life with his wife and his kids and how they were his greatest source of joy and really the meaning for his existence. And it had an effect on me.

You know, I won't listen to many people, but him - I would listen to, you know. As I say, in effect, he was my older brother and I'd known him since I was 16 or 17 years old. I would listen and talk to him and, most of all, I could see with my own eyes over a period of time, 'cause I was in their house often and even lived with them for a time. What they had was something that you couldn't get if you lived for experience and by the moment because that wouldn't have lasted more than a day. They... got married and had four children, all of whom are grown now and they have been married 30 years now, over 30, I guess. The point being is that his attitude and I remember him telling me this more than once. He wasn't trying to tell me this as a lesson or an analogy or a parable or anything like that - he was just trying to tell me how this has all come together for him.... I remember...him telling me that he had never had any regrets about it... never, not once. That there had been bad times, but he never had any regrets, and the depth of his feelings for his wife and about marriage and again, without philosophizing, over-analyzing or reading a lot of self-help books, that was just how he felt about marriage. That had a big effect on me as far as changing my attitude toward getting married.

But even prior to this, Shelly and Frank's mother had this idea that a "good woman" would help settle Frank down.

S: I was looking for somebody to get married. You know, I came from a large family, I wanted to have kids and we were Catholic. I guess everything that Frank said was against my morals completely but at that time I guess I really felt like-I remember thinking that Frank would change if he just had a good person...

F: A good woman

S: a good woman, yup; I really did...

F: It seems to me women seem to have this thing in them that they believe that one of their roles in life is to civilize men somehow, you know. And if ever there was a barbarian that needed to be civilized it was me. My mother was particularly afraid for me because my younger brother had been killed in a car accident and she was very concerned that it might happen to me, too...

S: And I think she thought on the same line I did, that if he just settled down and got married, then he'd be...

F: Yeah, that's what she thought.

S: And I was from - they were Catholic and I was Catholic and I was from a stable Catholic family here and I think she just really thought that, you know, Frank would be saved.

F: They were right: I was saved.

Still, how did Shelly reconcile their different values? It wasn't easy, but it seems that she had a very high opinion of Frank.
S: I knew he was wild and reckless and that drew me to him. I think we were so much opposite and I was a real quiet, hadn’t-been-off-the-farm-long type and he really just appealed to me, just that “let’s go do anything” type of guy. But I just, I thought my morals and my religion and my having a family (was what I wanted). He used to tell me after we started dating and stuff, “I don’t want to get married; I don’t wanna have kids,” and yet I stuck in there ‘cause I knew he’d change.”

Like many of the couples in this sample, they didn’t start out very well. When asked to discuss the ups and downs in their relationship Shelly said: “Ooh, the downs were big-time bad...It didn’t seem like we had very many (ups) for a long time...it just seemed like everything just kept getting worse.”

The initial issue facing them wasn’t the ideas about commitment delineated above, but the harsh reality of Shelly’s diabetes which she had had since she was 11. The doctors told her that because of her illness it would probably take a long, long time for her to get pregnant. But she ended up getting pregnant right away, which posed an ethical and financial strain early in their relationship.

F: Some of our downs...were related to poverty, frankly. I think we’re not well-trained or well-educated people...We did not have the skills or education for any decent work. We, you know, got married and Ronald Reagan became President and began busting the unions and well-paying, unskilled blue-collar work disappeared and never returned. When I came to (their town of residence) in the ’80’s or even before that, jobs out here at the packing plant hit $30,000 a year. Now that was in 1979 dollars. In three years they were gone. And they have been replaced by jobs at places like for $6.50 in 1995...I saw a lot of people go through a lot of things because of that sort of thing and that trend has continued. I guess I'm talking on a larger scale here now, but solid opportunity (was lacking). Our problem was poverty.

S: We didn't know how to. Like me - I was raised that you grow up and get married and that's it. I mean, really, my Dad and Mom didn't teach us anything accept being a homemaker, you know, and the boys were taught to go out and raise hogs and have money and we (the girls) weren't. And then I married Frank who had parents who didn't teach you anything. (Laughter) I don't mean it like that, but

F: But that's the truth, it's true -- experience that pays well (laughter).

S: Or never the support and the encouragement. I just didn't have it - and, you know, to attend college or whatever ... A lot of people, I think, draw on the strengths of the other and, you know, support - like the wife supports the husband. I'm not saying we didn't support each other, but neither one of us knew how to.

F: We were unprepared for reality of what ...

S: Yeah, neither one of us knew how to pull the other one's good out.

I: So how did you learn that? You had to learn the hard way?

S: Yeah, I don't know...
F: We broke up (laughter).

The passage above reveals the financial pressure the young couple felt as well as how unprepared they were to work together to solve their problems. But they were willing to learn from their experiences and from each other and to begin working as a team. In order to do that there had to be some compromise when particularly harsh issues were faced head on. Frank’s liberal ways extended to his view of abortion, which he believed was a simple answer to their dilemma. He thought they couldn’t afford a baby this early in their marriage when he was still in college, so she should just get an abortion. This brought their values to a head. Who’s values would win the day? Shelly was opposed to abortion on moral grounds, but, more than that, she felt the baby was God’s way of blessing them. The doctors had prepared her psychologically to the idea that she would never get pregnant and now, here she was pregnant. Sure the timing wasn’t what they had wanted, but she was prepared to sacrifice for that. How could she spurn what she believed was God’s gift? Furthermore, she believed that if she got an abortion, because of her frail health anyway, she would never be able to bear a child again.

S: I felt that God had actually given us this child. Because the odds were so against me...For so long that they had told (me) there was a good chance that I never would (have a child). I just felt that (even though)...it was a wrong time, I guess my belief always was, we’ll work it out. I don’t know how the money’s gonna come in, but it’ll come. And that was my belief that God had given us this child and that things would work out.

How would Frank respond to this watershed decision? Would the couple be able to adapt together? Would Frank be bitter against Shelly if he acquiesced? Would Shelly be persuaded to abort her baby?

F: Well, at the time I didn’t believe in God and I thought that (God) was a fairy tale and the most preposterous thing I’d ever heard, but I could see by the depth of her feeling and emotion concerning the abortion thing that this wasn’t going to happen. That this was just out; I was rather surprised. So I thought well, as she said, it’ll just have to be worked out somehow; it will just have to be done. No, I wasn’t too happy about it at all. Especially when it turned into three months in Iowa City Hospital, and it put a tremendous strain on us both - it really did.

Even though Frank had a completely different world view than Shelly at the time, he respected her so much that he was able in his own heart to go along with her decision. He was able to believe at least in a small way that “it’ll just have to be worked out somehow.” He was able to accept his wife’s influence and ended up in the long run changing his view:

F: I have come around to her way of thinking probably than she has of mine. Especially on the issue of marriage and abortion, things like that.

By the time of the interview for this study, Frank expressed that the highlight of their life together as a couple was the birth of Matthew! Frank had come a long way in a short time.

Shelly’s faith ended up being prophetic for them as a couple. Matthew, their baby, was born healthy, in spite of all the medical risks, and he’s also turned out to be the only child
that Shelly could bear. Had they aborted Matthew, they would never have had children of their own.

S: But then again, I also felt like, Matthew came out perfect, and I think - there was God again. That that's what I kept thinking - that God was always there with us. I know Frank didn't feel that way, but I did. I (believed)...God had saved him (Matthew). God had let me live through it - you know, all this kind of stuff, so I mean on my end of it, I really felt like God was taking care of it and that He would.

This testing ground solidified their faith in each other and certainly had a profound effect on Shelly’s faith. Interestingly, faith was a major motivator for the couple to reunite after their later divorce. Frank even began teaching Sunday School during the period of their separation. Once they got back together and began attending church as a family, church became a regular ritual for them each week. It brought them into contact with their community, they were able to give back and they were able to learn from others. This sense that they are part of something larger also came to give them a higher calling as a couple than just for themselves alone.

Shelly was also right in her belief that Frank would change after marriage. Indeed, after this first encounter with “reality” Frank began to take his studies and career pursuits more seriously. They moved to another state to take a job in his chosen field. This move had a positive effect upon the relationship:

S: It was hard for quite a few years - we split up there for awhile, got back together again, moved away. We moved to (another state) for a couple of years. Frank had a...job out there. I think we both grew up a lot. You know, we had just us to depend on. We had no family, no real friends when we first got there. That made me start growing up and depending - not depending - but our communication maybe was strengthened because we did depend on each other.

While prior to this they had competed, even separating for a time, now they began working as a team. But Frank’s choice of a career had built in casualties. Most of those who succeeded in media moved constantly, which took a toll on their intimate relationships. Frank noticed that those in the top in his field had been married and divorced several times. He wanted more stability than that. He also noticed that their many moves (they moved 3 times during Matthew’s kindergarten year) was beginning to take a toll on Matthew. They noticed he became more shy intermixed with periods of showing off, a way Matthew had learned to cope and gain new friends. In addition, Shelly became weary of all the moves and longed to settle down somewhere.

F: These were the (media) guys - Larry King, for example, being married for the seventh or eighth time...I don't care if he is on TV, he's a damn fool. But those were the type of guys I began to run into. I got nothing in common with these guys at all...This was Yuppie time - this was mid-to late 80's... from the spiritually empty souls of Yuppie scum where you had choices in life too many and you had (to) decide what you were going to give up to achieve these goals.
Apparently what these successful people had given up was everything but the selfish pursuit of—guess what? Social status and materialism. When I was a child, in the mid-60's, those were two things that we rejected because they were the empty bourgeois values of our parents. That's why the 50's were so conformist and so stringent, so stale and everything we didn't want to be. We wanted to live by the moment and for the experience and have these rich experiences in our lives. And all of a sudden it seemed like things had come full circle and now people my age and younger were pursuing the empty values of my parents. They all looked the same, they all talked the same, they all had been married a couple of times, they were all doing this and doing that all by themselves.

I had nothing in common with these people and I never want to be like them. I didn't want to be like them when I was 35 and pretty soon I'll be 45 and I still don't want to be like them. But those were the choices that we faced—that I faced. I could continue this blind pursuit well... (But) I believe one of the first things we must do is not be warped. And I had gotten blind to the fact of even though it had allowed us a certain lifestyle, (there was a price to pay). We'd agreed when we were in (the other state) and we had had a lot of experiences, Matthew seemed more of this world and country than 9 or 10 boys of his age. I'm beginning to see that that was beginning to take a terrible toll, as Shelly mentioned, on Matthew and on us... and on me, for all of us... it was tough to move every two

S: Well, we'd just make friends and we'd be off again and then we'd start over, too, just like Matthew. For me, I never wanted to leave my folks' farm! Frank used to joke about building a trailer and puttin', it on the farm because I never want to go anywhere...For me it was real hard to start over all the time. I still, you know, think

F: Yeah, if I move again, I'm moving by myself. I'll be on the road all alone.

If they were going to stay in one community, this meant that Frank would have to change careers. He moved on into sales. They chose a medium size middle Iowa community. Normality was beginning to emerge for them.

Since normality was the very thing that had kept Frank from settling down earlier, it wasn't long before he was beginning to question all of his decisions over the years. He began to feel hemmed in and that he wanted to experience life again. He started to feel bored in his relationship with Shelly and feel like there was more to life. Shelly was also working and learning to become more assertive. Frank was not ready for her to express her opinions which regularly differed from his.

It wasn't long before Frank moved out to pursue his life of happiness. Shelly began to question the advice of her friends who told her to throw the bum out. She didn't really feel that way. Even though she still loved Frank she couldn't bring herself to invite him back to her life. People advised her to be strong and to be her own person. She was learning to be assertive and yet could not assert herself above this peer pressure and express to Frank that she wanted him back. One thing she could not do was to turn him away. As Frank struggled
with his own reason for being he found that the only person he could talk to was Shelly. He would call her up or stop over to tell her his woes and she listened and invited him in for dinner. Secretly, he was hoping she’d invite him to stay. He reported later that if she had turned him away when he was going through his own personal struggles that he would have turned away for good. As it was, she was available and had a listening ear. Plus, she knew Frank was a good dad and she did not want to discourage him from being around their son Matthew.

When asked what were the factors that led them to get together again, Frank simply said, "Guilt." He still believed that Shelly was a good person. Neither of them made a lot of money and they could not afford two households. Shelly and Matthew had moved into a tiny apartment. Shelly could not afford clothes for Matthew. Frank saw their plight and began to feel he just needed to be responsible and do the right thing. He recalled his struggle, which, again was centered on cultural messages he had been hearing and having a hard time sorting out:

F: The way I remember it is that there was a proliferation of self-help books at the time, and it seemed like the language of psychoanalysts had worked its way into the general conversation of people. I personally jumped right into this business of having to do for yourself what you may need to do that particular day. There were a lot of victimization books out - all this wounded child and co-dependency crap, and on and on and on...It seemed to me that alls you had to do was be a real star for yourself seeing how your obligations and responsibilities had basically exploited you and robbed you of personal happiness.

He believed that not only did he jump on this bandwagon, but that Shelly had, too. She saw it as a much simpler search for being able to express herself. She hadn’t been able to do this in own home growing up and found communication increasingly frustrating in her relationship with her husband. She was tired of feeling like her opinion wasn’t important or that she shouldn’t express her opinion at all.

F: I think that both her and I got too much into that sort of thing - into those - Oh, God, what were those books that were around - and the whole attitude ...

S: I thought I was trying to better myself ...

F: Right.

S: as being, you know, stand up for myself more, not be a slave - and I really did feel like that a lot. That was the way ... and it wasn't because Mike demanded it of me. It was because that was the way I thought women were supposed to be. They were supposed to wait on men. I got tired of it...I remember... saying, "I'm not doing dishes tonight because I don't feel like it," you know, and that type of stuff. Is that what you remember? I mean, I started changing as far as standing up for myself more, and I don't think you liked the change in me.

Part of the problem was Shelly’s perception that Frank tried to run her life. Frank longed for a give and take relationship and was initially unaware that his way of interaction was having a negative effect on his wife:
F: I can honestly say that I never tried to run her life, necessarily you know, I about did
S: You never meant to, but I felt like you did.
F: Hmmm, and so - maybe I did; I don't know.
Actually, when all was said and done, and the couple got back together, Frank was happy his wife was expressing herself; he could engage her as a peer. But at this period in their relationship her opinion was viewed as a threat.

Again Frank explained his divorce to Shelly in terms of cultural forces that had played havoc in his mind. He effectively used a rerun he had seen a couple of nights prior to the interview to explain the thinking that was going on in his mind at the time. In the passage below he reflects on his reaction to hearing Silvester Stalone use the same justifications he had used some years earlier. In his description he also hints at what his view of marital love is all about, which is more than he or Stalone could ever have imagined at the time:

F: The other night I watched...a rerun of Barbara Walters' interviews and there was one with Sylvester Stallone, Rocky, you know. It was done...probably the mid to late '80's after he had achieved quite a bit of success. He had just gotten divorced from his first wife and Barbara Walters asked him why... He was getting ready to be married to this Bridgitte Nielsen, who promptly reached down his throat and pulled his insides out over his tonsils, but that was before we knew this (laughter). Barbara Walters asked him why he had divorced his first wife who had stayed with him when he was very poor, who had been with him through the roughest parts of his life and through, to that time, all of his success and had two wonderful children with Stallone. Barbara asked him, "Why, then, did you get a divorce?" And he said, "Well, it became passionless; it became like brother and sister; it became very content" and all this stuff, and "rather than be a brother and sister, why don't we just part." And I thought, "selfish little son of a bitch, you're mean" (laughter), 'cause that's the way I felt at the time. And this is what Shelly was saying (that) I was getting antsy, pushing 40, and wanted to go out and sow wild oats, part 2. Maybe those things were true. I'm not proud of it, and I'm not denying it, either. I just hope I don't do it again. What Sylvester Stallone was saying is "I'm bored, so I'm gonna get a divorce and go chase this hot Bridgitte Nielsen babe," and I thought, "Yuppie scum" (laughter). That's what you are, and while ---- to justify calling myself yuppie scum, I - that was my attitude. (Ours is) a passionless relationship, and it's grown more like brother and sister.

What I didn't realize at the time is that's what love is - that's another level of a marriage - that is just another degree of marriage - that's when you relationship is deepening, when you know each other so well. And so, Sylvester Stallone even said "we knew each other so well we could anticipate each other's moves". Jesus, God, that was a --(laughter) when you know somebody that well...That sort of attitude was out there...A lot of people seemed to get divorced around 35...We were actually in our late 30's by this
time - a couple of years older, but that attitude that he described of just being a passionless brother and sister, knowing each other so well, so content that nothing ever happened, no more fire, no more passion, "it's time to get divorced" -- that's the biggest reason in my mind why (she) and I got divorced, was for that same reason. Never mind the tremendous effect it had on the children - never mind the effect it had on his wife - who's a good mother - and he even said that. Never mind that it was ultimately very painful and destructive to him. He was bored, so he got divorced. He wanted more out of his life...

S: I think you've gotten a little off the track a little bit on Sylvester.

F: No, when I was talking about Sylvester Stallone, I was talking about how I felt at the time. You know, Sylvester Stallone said the words, but they were my words, were my feelings, and that's what I'm saying. That is a big reason - I learned every lesson I ever learned the hard way - and this one was no exception... that if you're going to be a selfish, spoiled child you are going to pay the consequences. If you insist on remaining self-involved, your life is going to be difficult. If you cannot learn the lesson that my friend Martin taught me years ago when he was talking about his wife, that there was something higher happening in a marriage than just slugging it through, or just boredom, or just all this - that marriage was about something more. And that love is not about sex or heat or passion, but it's about something deeper, and if you could really communicate - and as my friend Martin was saying, that he was really happy in his own very plain way - that he had absolutely no regrets about being with his wife all those many years. Even though he had a rocky up and down, he had no regrets about that. If you can learn that lesson, then you're gonna be all right, I think, then you're gonna be all right.

What went through Mike's mind to help him get back together with Shelly had to do with an awakening of his conscience, that he needed to be responsible for his family:

F: Shelly said I was a good father, and I try to be - the reason was that my own father was absent most of the time. You know, I always felt alone without a father as a boy, and I was just determined that was not going to happen with me. When we got divorced, of course, I was not still making a huge income. Certainly, Shelly and Matthew's lifestyle, standard of living, fell off considerably. They were living in this dumpy little apartment over here on 1st Ave. North and they were really, really struggling. People like us just cannot keep two separate households going at a decent standard at all. Matthew had very few clothes to wear to school. The way they lived was not good. I couldn't stand that. My boy was going to grow up poor. Shelly was living a life that she did not deserve. She did not deserve that. She had put (helped?) me through some pretty tough things.

And when I saw that happening, I realized (sometimes we are called on - by this time I did believe in God; I had had a spiritual awakening)...that God calls us to do things, and he was calling me to be a man. And what that means
is that men have certain responsibilities, I think, sorry to say this again, traditional responsibilities toward their women and their children, and they include financial support, spiritual support, all of those things. If you can do that-I think you get to a point where - and, again, getting back to my friend - this is what he was trying to tell me, if you can put those responsibilities and obligations ahead of your own self interest, you will be a content, self-fulfilled person, and you will know your place in the Lord's picture. That's something that's come about to me in a difficult way, because, you know, there's a part of me who's always gonna be kid who wants to jump on a chopper and ride off into the sunset.

His renewed sense of responsibility grew out of his budding faith. Shelly says that Frank began to attend church during the period of their separation:

S: And also ... during that time that we were apart, Frank started going to a Presbyterian Church...Frank was raised a Catholic, but he absolutely thought the Catholic Church was

F: Oh, raised a Catholic - that was the religion my mother was in.

S: Yeah.

F: My father thought all religious people were fools. Well ...

I: Did you go before...earlier in your marriage?

S: Yeah...

I: By yourself?...

S: Yeah ... and then (after the separation) Frank started teaching Sunday School and being involved with the church and he asked me - after we'd kind of started seeing each other again- he asked if Matthew could please go with him to Sunday School. Then we just kind of all started going, and we were remarried in the Presbyterian Church

F: Umhum.

S: and I think that was the biggest jump. We started going as a family. We started being involved with these people that attended church as families.

F: Right.

S: And I think that was a big change for us right there. We started going every Sunday together. Matthew attended Sunday School every Sunday. You know, that was the biggest thing. It was such a change for me.

While their religious values and activities helped the couple reestablish their bond, the couple made some changes that had a positive impact on their stability as a couple. One of these was enlarging their commitment to each other by buying a house together. Stanley (1998) writes that social commitment is one of the major glue's that holds couples together and that it is a least partially developmental. Thus, as a couple matures together and takes on more and more responsibility (engagement, marriage, children, house, IRA's, etc.) together their attachment to each other grows. Frank and Shelly demonstrate this principle. Buying a house together was a major step of commitment for them, solidifying their relationship shortly after getting together again after their brief separation and divorce.

Buying a house together sent a strong message to Shelly that Frank was committed to
her and that they were the normal couple she had always hoped they would be. For Frank it was a major concession that much of what he had spent his life pursuing wasn’t worth all that much and that maybe being a normal family was OK:

S: Because Matthew is buying this house from us when we retire and move into a home because this will be our last
F: Yeah, he said to me just the other day, "We're gonna stay here, right, Dad? How long we gonna live here?"
S: But I think, you know, we just kind of
I: Yeah, you just moved into this house not too long
S: A couple years
F: Two years
I: Two years, yeah. That's long for you, huh?
F: Yeah, it was
S: We had never bought - this is the first house we've ever bought. We had never owned anything because we were always - you know, we never thought we'd ever be at a place I mean I guess we didn't go into it thinking "We'll only be here awhile", but we would rent and just never bought so this was kind of a big step for us

The decision to buy a house led to a more regulated lifestyle and with it some traditions worth repeating. Frank was able to interpret tradition as part of life instead of seeing them as "boring." Regular rituals became a highlight for them, traditions that they would pass on to Matthew:

S: I think a lot of our up times have been with family things...
F: Yeah.
S: We've tried to take little trips
F: We've taken little trips
S: for a weekend, or we go up to - there was one thing that I know you didn't do as a child and I certainly didn't was go, oh, like to the Civic Center...I mean maybe they didn't have it that much back then, but we never experienced anything outside of our own little world. And that's one thing we've been trying to do, 'cause we both enjoy that a lot...Making traditions of our own that Matthew can pass on and stuff like that, that's the highest things for me, at least. And the last couple of years we've settled down pretty well

The little nuances of life were not lost on Frank, either. He felt like they were working as a team. He also said little things, like going to the grocery store together meant a lot to him because he remembers periods of time in his early years of feeling really loony in grocery stores when he would see a family together at the checkout counter. These little moments are not lost to him now. It is the little things that give family its richness.

What's different the second time around? Communication is much better. Shelly learned to be a bit more assertive with her wishes and Frank became better able to hear her instead of reacting negatively:

S: I mean, we still have our downs, but they're certainly not downs like we had before. And it's like we could fight now, but it's for a day rather than three
weeks, you know. I think...our communication is better...If something's bothering us I feel like we're ...

I: It sounds like your communication pattern changed considerably.
S: Yes, I feel it did, because I'm not so afraid. I was always so afraid to say ...how I felt...When we divorced, I was so afraid to tell him, "Please come home" because I knew that he would say no anyway, so why should I get slapped in the face? So I was always afraid to say how I felt for fear of what other people would think or do. So I just always kept everything up.

F: Glad you mentioned that. That used to just drive me nuts.
S: I know...
F: If she'd said that, I wouldn't have told her no; I'd have come home...

The same area of communication came out when the couple completed the Marital Potential Inventory, an instrument used to measure what percent a couple feels they are using their potential in 14 areas of interest (Cole & Wall, 1997). The couple first answers the questions by themselves and then they discuss their different scores and try to come up with a couple score. Here is their conversation on the subject of their communication score:

S: Communication skills - I said 75%. We're still working on it. What did you put?
F: Oh, I put 100%. When I read that I was thinking, "Who don't I have trouble talking with?" That would be you, you know. I don't have any trouble talking to you or telling you how I feel. In fact, I'm probably brutally frank more than I guess I was thinking of myself. You know, it's something that I'm working on and getting better, but I don't feel like I always do it. But our communication still isn't, you know...
F: I feel I can understand you and - God, I've been with you long enough if you talk at all (laughter). You know, I recognize your nuances. I recognize your body language. That's what I like. You have to be with somebody a long time before you can recognize those things, and I really don't think you can really know somebody really well unless you're married to them...I mean you know more about me than most people...I mean you can anticipate my moods.

It is apparent from the above quote that this couple appreciated each other as friends. Affection and spending time together were important aspects of their relationship, particularly after their remarriage:

F: We're careful about, careful about, you know, expressing, you know, hugs, kisses, that sort of thing. I call her twice a day from work.

Another factor that enabled them to stay together after they remarried was Frank's maturity in the area of anger management. Earlier in the relationship he would let Shelly's actions bother him. The second time around he was able to make peace in his mind. As a result, not everything that bugged him had to be brought out in the open. He figured out how to go on in the relationship and not let resentment and anger build:

F: The only thing I could say is if you're gonna stay mad it's gonna be a long night, so you'd better get over it. You know, a friend of mine used to say,
"Well, there's two things that can happen: you can either get over it or stay pissed... Staying angry... just takes too much strength and energy... I spent too much of my life being angry... To heck with it.

Most of the couple's in this sample have traditional male/female roles. For most of the couples the stringent roles were a source of continual irritation for the wives, while most of the husbands were bewildered at their wife's strong feelings about it. While this couple also had traditional male/female roles, both have been able to deal with potential hard feelings by not keeping the roles too ridged and by keeping a light-hearted view about how they related. They used humor to handle the tension. In spite of their differences, they feel pretty good about the way they work together as a couple. This is clear as they discuss male and female roles and teamwork on the MPI:

F: Agreement on male/female roles. I'd say we're pretty much in agreement.
(Pause) What?
S: (laughter) I put 50%.
F: You put 50 (wife-laughter)?!
I: This oughtta be interesting.
S: Well, I read this as, when you said that, yeah, I knew what the male job is and what the female job is.
F: Fifty?!
S: But I'm thinking that you're a little bit too much on what the female role should be (laughter).
F: I see (wife-laughter)... 
S: I like how times have changed now where it should be... not necessarily that all the housework has to be done by the female.
F: Oh, yes it does.
S: You see (to interviewer-laughter)? So this is a toughee here. This probably will never change; that's why I said 50% (laughter) because
F: Yeah, Shelly's having a little trouble adjusting to her role (laughter). I've been working with her, God knows
S: I'd say about 50% (laughter).
F: We may have to split on this one (wife-laughter).
I: We can come back to that one.
F: Yeah, that's too hard for us (wife husband-laughter). Boy, this is a hard test!
S: Cooperation and teamwork: Oh, no I put 50% (laughter) on that one again.
F: You put 50%?! One hundred on mine.
S: Yeah, it should be higher than that 'cause...
F: I rest, you work. What's the problem (laughter)?
S: I cook, you rest. What's the problem (laughter)?
F: I can't cook! When I first left home I had breakfast of hot dogs and soup (laughter). That's all I knew how to make.
S: Well, I guess it should....
F: Course, my mother taught me that.
S: be higher than that 'cause teamwork - we do good.
F: Yeah, what's the problem? I think we do. We get together when we discuss finances. We get together, you know, if this has to be - like today, for example. You couldn't get away to get your registration (so) I went up and did it.

S: Yeah.

F: and I took time off work to do it because that's just the way it had to be done.

S: So that should probably be about 90%, probably?

F: Yeah.

For some couples decision making becomes an area of power and control issues. One partner may make a decision which the other partner thinks has been done without his or her input. For example, Jim (Husband from the first couple) decided to go ahead with his new business venture despite his wife's strongly expressed objections. While he felt he was making the right decision for the family, he did so without receiving his wife's blessing or support. The new business venture became a symbol of their distancing relationship. For Frank and Shelly, traditional roles were seen in the way they handled decision making. Shelly would give Frank her input and he made the final decision. For Jim and Diane, this method led to hurt feelings. For Frank and Shelly it led to a building of confidence in each other. The following segment is taken from their discussion of decision making while going through the MPI:

S: Decision-making - that's why I put 60% because I feel like I'm not good at it.

F: Decision-making.

S: Oh, I should come up a little bit.

F: I do not, I believe-nty personal opinion is—that I do not do anything without consulting you first. Do I?

S: No.

F: And you see the wisdom of my ways, and on we go (laughter).

I: Sounds like a good deal for you, Frank!

F: Oh, yeah. No, and I should say, if she has a strong objection, I don't do it. We don't do it, I should say. I don't make a decision, honestly, with my own interests at heart.

S: No, and I let you - like I was saying, I guess I said 60% because I'm not good at a lot of decision-making, so I let you do it.

F: No, you're not, and I hate waffling in indecision. I make a decision based on what's best for the family, and I can honestly say that's not always what's best for my own selfish pleasure. I think-because the minute you do, boy, the minute you start making those decisions based on yourself rather than the higher concept of family, you're taking the first step away from each other. I really do. I think that.

Shelly was able to let Frank make decisions because she believed he would make them in their best interest. There was a certain level of trust between them. Frank hints that their method may not work if a person (husband?) took this position and used it for their own advantage or personal gain instead of for the welfare of the family (couple) as a whole.

Frank and Shelly also demonstrated that they had been able to adjust roles to suit their individual needs and interests. This ability to adapt to changing circumstances or
compensating for each other’s strength and weaknesses was a major asset of this couple. Other couples in this sample were so rigid in their roles that sameness became a source of irritation, resentment and acquiescence. Adapting and compensating brought this couple together, built respect and encouraged acceptance of each other’s abilities and limitations. How they handle their finances is a case in point:

S: Frank took over all the finances and it’s just been wonderful - he does a budget every month.
F: Just assuming my traditional male role (husband-interviewer laughter)
S: Well, that is what a man’s role is (husband-laughter).
F: Shirley’s intimidated by money.
S: Yeah, I am.
I: And you’d been doing it
F: She had been
I: for a number of years?
F: Yeah.
S: I tried, but I wasn’t very good.
F: Yeah, Shelly’s a worrier - a terrible worrier.
S: Boy, I’d get such a stomachache every payday; I’d just go home sick with a stomachache and, you know, I hated it, and Mike took it over - what, the last year?
F: And it wasn’t working out with both of us trying to do it, because she’d worry and worry and drive me nuts, and finally I just said, "You do it", and then she’d do it and got all crazy and sick and nuts and now I’m doing it and she feels better (laughter).
S: I don’t even worry about it - I don’t even think about it, you know, and he’s doing a great job.
I: But do you communicate or let her know what
S: Of course.
F: We still sit down, you know, every month and Mike says
F: We sit down together.
S: "let’s do this and let’s pay this" and, you know
F: Right, and I figure - get the bills together
S: And he tells me what he’s gonna take out of this month’s paycheck and we talk
F: I set a budget every month
S: Yeah
F: I write out a budget in advance, knowing that we’re gonna do these certain things
S: So it’s been working real well.
F: Yeah

This couple had many ups and downs over the years and had entered a new phase of being able to appreciate their lot in life without a lot of thoughts about not keeping up with everyone else, either financially or materially. Contentment led to marital stability for this
couple:
  S: I think where Mike and I are at now is that we have finally come to the point where we're content where we're at.
  F: Yeah.
  S: We've even talked about, you know, moving over to the North side of town (a side of town that had newer, more expensive homes) or whatever, but we're content here. Why not stay here? Why not better ourselves, but still be content where we're at now, without losing us here while we're looking up (t)here? I think that's kind of where we're at right now.
  F: I think that is a big part of it; Shelly's right

Contentment would be shallow unless they shared the same goals and values in life. Contentment could come to both of them once they reached some of those shared goals:
  F: I think that for the most part that's something that we share - our common goals ... We would like to be married to each other; we would like to build a life for ourselves right here; we would like to see our son go to college; we would like to be good parents; we would like to equal our circle of friends...

As well as this couple is doing, all is not perfect. They both expressed a need to grow and change. Two issues that they acknowledge struggling with were sexuality and spending enough time together. Concerning sexuality, they differed greatly on their own expectations and comfort level. Their discussion using the MPI is illustrative:
  F: Sexual fulfillment. OK, Shelly (laughter).
  S: Go ahead, Frank.
  F: No, no, no, no (laughter).
  S: His is gonna be way low; I said 75.
  F: (exclamation) (wife-laughter) Seventy-five!
  S: A little high, Frank (laughter)?
  F: (husband-laughter) Look, dreams do not count, Shelly (husband wife-laughter). I mean, dreaming about it after you're asleep does not count!
  S: Whose dreams - yours or mine?
  F: Yours!
  S: Oh (laughter).
  F: "Oh, I dreamt we did it, is that good enough?" NO! (wife laughter)
  S: Oh, well. So what did you put - 25% or something? (laughter)
  F: No, I was generous. I gave you 50 (laughter)...Oh, yes, I went 50. This is an area of contention in our marriage right now.
  S: Yeah, it is.
  F: I want sex a lot more than she does. I do. She is, uh, having some, uh, psychological problems (laughter) - that she needs big time help with (laughter). No, our sexual desires, surprisingly God, we're a backwards couple...When we first met she wanted to pounce on me all the time, you know, and I didn't want to so much. I was younger. But now it seems I don't want to pounce on her all the time, but she's supposed to be at her sexual peak - a woman in her early 40's. Her sexual desire went south and mine is back
(laughter). I was supposed to have peaked 25 years ago (laughter).

I: Got everything all mixed up.

F: (laughter) That's right. Guess I'm all screwed up.

S: Our whole life is a ---

F: Well, sure... We're all screwed up, but that's - I wouldn't say it's a huge problem, but it's a definite problem as far as I'm concerned.

S: And I guess mine goes back to that I'm content without it.

F: Without it (laughter)! See, we may be getting to the problem here (laughter).

S: I think, I mean, like I said to you the other day (husband laughter). OK, that's fine.

F: No, I'm sorry, I don't mean to embarrass you. I'm sorry, what, you were saying like what?

S: Like the other day we were talking about it and I was saying I was concerned about when Matthew got older and left, what our lives would be then? Would we go our separate ways or what would happen? And I'm content - remember we talked about it that Sunday.

F: Uh-huh

S: and I'm content with that - I'm content

F: Yup.

S: with just you and I being alone together just to be able to talk and to spend time together quietly and that kind of stuff. And, to me, sex doesn't have to be a part of all that - to be fulfilled - I don't know...

F: Um-hum. Well, it's not my attitude.

S: I know it's not.

F: But, anyway, no, I'd have to say that we're at - you're at 75? I'd say we'd better go 60 tops.

The second problem they are struggling with was being able to spend enough time together. Frank explained:

F: I wish we had more time to do things together - we don't, so - what we have, I would like to say, that when we have free time, we spend it together. I'm not out playing cards, shooting pool, I'm not involved in a men's bowling league, she's not involved in any of that crap, either; we're involved in family-related activities, primarily the church; when we do something, we usually do it as a family. Matthew is getting to the age where he wants to run off with his friends, but that's OK. I plan my weekends, as does she, around family things ... at least, like, even if it's sitting home with a rented movie. Like, if I'm going out, rarely does it occur to me not to take her, or I should say them.

This couple had been able to adapt to most of their problems over the years. Like Bruce and Wendy above, their relationship could be divided into two halves: the negative early years and the positive later years. For both Bruce and Frank, maturing was a major reason they were able to make the latter years of their relationship more successful. While Bruce's immaturity led to domestic abuse, Frank's led to distancing to the point of leaving and divorcing his wife. While Bruce attributed his immaturity in dealing with conflict to the style
he learned in his home, Frank saw it as his willingness to take his personal cues from the culture at large. Perhaps Frank’s distancing was learned in his family of origin as well and he used cultural values to justify his behavior?

A stabilizing factor in this marriage has been Shelly’s faith and steadiness as a person. Even when Frank went through a period of doubting he should be with Shelly, she was able to withstand pressure from friends and welcome him back to her single parent home. Shelly felt one of her drawbacks was that she was unable to assert herself, yet it was her assertiveness against pressure from others that won Frank’s heart back again. Frank trusted and respected Shelly even when he went through a period of self-doubt. As a result, pursuing faith did not seem out of character for him when he began to see that the hollowness of the messages from society were having on his and his family’s life. Securing a faith in a God to whom he had to answer gave him a higher calling, a higher reason to be with Shelly than his own personal happiness. His new-found faith taught him that being responsible for one’s choices is an admirable thing in and of itself. Once he remade his commitment, there was no turning back and the relationship began to finally take on the characteristics of a marriage!

While contentment had become a major value for this couple as they faced their future together, they each had an area of possible tension between them. For Frank this was Shelly’s disinterest in pursuing things sexual in their relationship and for Shelly it was her feeling that somehow the relationship could be more egalitarian as far as the household chores went. Both admitted these were problems facing them, but both quickly added that neither of these issues were contentious or sources of bitterness between them. It was as if they were able to accept these shortcomings as part of the sacrifice necessary to make their marriage work.
**APPENDIX C. HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW COMMITTEE**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Last name of Principal Investigator</th>
<th>Wall</th>
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**Checklist for Attachments and Time Schedule**

The following are attached (please check):

12. **Letter or written statement to subjects indicating clearly:**
   a) the purpose of the research
   b) the use of any identifier codes (names, #s), how they will be used, and when they will be removed (see item 17)
   c) an estimate of time needed for participation in the research
   d) if applicable, the location of the research activity
   e) how you will ensure confidentiality
   f) in a longitudinal study, when and how you will contact subjects later
   g) that participation is voluntary; nonparticipation will not affect evaluations of the subject

13. ☐ Signed consent form (if applicable)

14. ☐ Letter of approval for research from cooperating organizations or institutions (if applicable)

15. ☒ Data-gathering instruments

16. Anticipated dates for contact with subjects:

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17. If applicable: anticipated date that identifiers will be removed from completed survey instruments and/or audio or visual tapes will be erased:

   9/1/00

18. Signature of Departmental Executive Officer:  
   
   Signature: [Signature]  
   Date: 12-17-98  
   Department or Administrative Unit: HOFS

19. Decision of the University Human Subjects Review Committee:
   
   ☒ Project approved  
   ☐ Project not approved  
   ☐ No action required

   Name of Committee Chairperson:  
   Signature: [Signature]  
   Date: 12-23-98
APPENDIX D. TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE RESEARCH

Trustworthiness:
Definition: The rigor of qualitative research. Aspects of Trustworthiness include: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The following diagram is used by Guba (1981) and Joanning and Keoughan (1997) to explain the relationship between qualitative and quantitative (traditional) research rigor:

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<th>Qualitative</th>
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<td>Truth Value</td>
<td>Internal Validity</td>
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Credibility:
Definition: That the interpretation of the data corresponds to the natural state of affairs without distortion; Credibility corresponds with internal validity in that it addresses the truth value of trustworthiness

Methods used:

1. *Collected referential adequacy materials:* the interviews were taped so that they could be referred to as many times as necessary to make proper conclusions from the data

2. *Prolonged exposure to the tapes and transcripts*
   - tapes were transcribed
   - transcriptions were edited for errors while listening to the tapes again
   - while transcriptions were read, pertinent quotes were copied into a separate file called "Running Commentary"
   - Running Commentary was edited and comments added by the researcher as thoughts came to mind to make a coherent whole
   - the transcriptions were read again to make sure they matched the interpretation of the Running Commentary
   - the Running Commentary was read again, noting topics and key quotes
   - the topics were organized using note cards
   - the cards were used to determine domains, clusters and categories
   - a summary of each couple was written for the Results chapter
   - the domains were explicated using the material from the interviews
2. **Peer debriefing**

- Dr. Enders (POS committee member) looked over the Running Commentary with list of topics and helped the researcher edit the domains; Dr. Cole offered guidance throughout the project; 3 other Ph.D. students each looked over one couple tape, transcripts, Running Commentary, Domains and Results chapter and made comments.

3. **Member Checks:**

- two couples were interviewed a second time asking their views of the domains that were discovered
- these comments were integrated into the Results chapter

4. **Triangulation:**

- couples were interviewed and given paper and pencil instruments to fill out, including a background questionnaire. Both were used to inform the other.

**Transferability:**

Definition: *Care is taken not to overstate the applicability of the findings to others outside the context of the study. Transferability corresponds with External Validity as the Applicability aspect of Trustworthiness.*

1. **Theoretical/Purposive sampling**

- the sample was collected based upon a well-received theoretical typology of couples (Lewis & Spanier's [1979) quadrangle of high quality-high stability, high quality-low stability, low quality-high stability and low quality-low stability)
- the sample was based on a larger population of 99 couples and was selected based upon their low scores on the DAS (Spanier, 1976), a widely used instrument to measure marital adjustment and the criteria that they had been married at least five years
- the methodology for the research was peer reviewed by the student’s POS, major professor and Ph.D. students in a Qualitative Research class at ISU
2. **Thick description**
- the research literature was culled for possible theoretical explanations for low quality-high stability couples to stay together
- a theoretical paper was written based upon the literature review
- this paper was peer reviewed for the NCFR Theory and Construction Workshop and by two Ph.D. level classes at ISU
- the methodology of the research was approved by the researcher’s POS Committee and was also reviewed by a Ph.D. level class in qualitative research at ISU
- the researcher made regular inquiries with his major professor on the project as well as consulted with another member of the POS committee as the project continued

**Dependability**

**Definition:** *Concern that the data are stable and answers whether or not the data are consistent over time. Dependability corresponds with reliability in being the Consistency aspect of Trustworthiness.*

1. **Stepwise replication:** using more than one researcher to collect the data.
   - each of the nine couples was interviewed by a separate researcher
   - each of the interviewers were trained to used the structured interview technique
   - all but one of the interviews were transcribed by the original students. This researcher then listened to the tapes and read the transcription to assure accuracy. One of the interviews was transcribed by this researcher immediately prior to beginning the Running Commentary. Three other qualitative researchers dThree of the nine interviews were listened to while following the transcriptions

2. **Audit trail:** a Running Commentary was created as the process of investigation went on

3. **Dependability audit:** Three researchers competent in qualitative research looked over tapes, transcripts, Running Commentary, biographies and resulting eminent domains to make sure the research corresponded with established qualitative techniques
Confirmability

Definition: While quantitative research seeks objectivity and neutrality of the research results, qualitative research recognizes that the researcher brings a bias to the subject at hand. Confirmability is concerned with whether the researcher has revealed his views so that the reader can make appropriate judgments on the final results of the project. Confirmability corresponds to Objectivity as the Neutrality aspect of Trustworthiness.

1. **Triangulation** (see above): in order to test the researcher’s predilections
2. **Practicing reflexivity**: the researcher had a section in the Methodology chapter of the paper describing his interest and views about the subject matter. A Running Commentary was kept to keep a record of his views as the project continued.
3. **Confirmability audit**: the researcher arranged for several researchers trained in qualitative techniques to audit the data and results to certify that the data support the interpretations made.
APPENDIX E. PROPOSED ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT TO PREDICT STABILITY IN HIGHLY STRESSED COUPLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>QUESTION</th>
<th>VERY TRUE</th>
<th>SOMEWHAT TRUE</th>
<th>SOMEWHAT NOT TRUE</th>
<th>NOT TRUE AT ALL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>My spouse and I share little in common.</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I have hope that even though things aren’t perfect, the relationship will get better.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>I have seen changes in our relationship that give me reason to hope.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Some problems we have had and the way we have handled them have encouraged me about the future of our relationship.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>I have noticed that both my spouse and I have made personal changes that have positively affected the relationship.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>There are a lot of things about marriage and my spouse that I would miss if I were not married.</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>We both have a lot of time and energy invested in this relationship that would be very difficult to give up if we divorced.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>My faith suggests to me and I believe that divorce is not an option.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>My personal happiness is more important to me than keeping the marriage together.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>In most areas of our relationship I think we have a pretty fair give and take.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I feel taken advantage of in this relationship.</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>My spouse and I are so different that I do not think those differences can be overcome.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>My spouse has some characteristics or behaviors that I find personally offensive.</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Even though my spouse has some behaviors or characteristics that I do not like, I have been able to not let them bother me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>In most areas that matter, my spouse and I are in agreement or have at least been able to work out a compromise that is acceptable to both of us.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>While our relationship may not be the greatest, we each have other things to keep us occupied and fulfilled.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>While some things in our relationship need improvement we have many things about our relationship that are great.</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>My spouse is my best friend.</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>I enjoy being alone with my spouse.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>I enjoy doing things together with my spouse.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Sometimes I think the only thing going for us is our children or grandchildren.</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>My spouse and I disagree about where this relationship is heading.</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>My spouse and I disagree about the most fundamental aspects of life (faith, meaning in life).</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>We have both made adjustments in how we treat each other and deal with conflict.</td>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Most of our issues go unresolved.</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>In the long run the biggest problems we have faced have brought us closer together.</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>My spouse and I frequently disagree about career and or money issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>We have lost significant support from loved ones over our relationship.</td>
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<td>29</td>
<td>One or both of us have seriously doubted the sincerity of the other’s commitment to the marriage.</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>I have personally benefit from this marriage.</td>
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<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>One of my goals in this marriage is to try to meet my spouse’s needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>This marriage will never work unless my spouse makes some serious changes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>I have made some real positive changes in my life because of the influence of my spouse.</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>This marriage has severely taxed my expectations of what I envisioned a marriage to be.</td>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Even though my spouse is not perfect, I highly respect him or her as a person.</td>
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<td>36</td>
<td>I have lost all respect for my spouse as a person.</td>
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<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>There are some things about my spouse's actions or attitudes that I deeply resent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>This marriage seems to me to be a partnership with both people working together for the benefit of the relationship.</td>
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<td>39</td>
<td>My partner acts more like a single person than a married person.</td>
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<td>40</td>
<td>My partner and I have a hard time communicating.</td>
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<td>41</td>
<td>My partner seems to take what I say and do personally even though I don't mean it to be a personal affront.</td>
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<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>We seem unable to resolve our conflicts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>43</td>
<td>After a disagreement we both seem to feel worse about our relationship.</td>
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<tr>
<td>44</td>
<td>My opinions don't seem to matter when we make a decision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>My partner makes major decisions without consulting me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>46</td>
<td>Overall I am content with our place in the world.</td>
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<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Overall I am content with the direction our relationship is heading.</td>
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<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Since our relationship began I have seen some real positive changes.</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


Stanley, S. E-mail on divorce statistics. [www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com), November 3, 1998a).


