ABSTRACT

MOORE, ANNETTE CARDENUTO. Influence of Recreation in the Lives of Low-Income Committed Couples. (Under the direction of Dr. Karla A. Henderson.)

Recent economic conditions have increased the number of low-income adults living in the United States. Many adults remain unemployed or underemployed, or are unemployable. Resulting financial stress can affect emotional and relational health.

Recreation provides benefits to participants including stress relief and cohesion. Most recreation-related literature concentrates on attitudes and behaviors of middle-class white populations. Further, family studies research often targets couples and those with low incomes, but infrequently investigates the role of recreation in their relationships. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the influence of recreation in the lives of low-income committed couples. The meanings couples attach to those experiences are also examined. Consideration is given to factors that facilitate and hinder participation.

A purposive sample of 25 couples was selected for this study. Participants were recruited through local food pantries that screen for low-income status. Data were collected from both partners together through semi-structured interviews lasting about an hour. An interpretive approach to data collection and analysis was employed, using coding, memo writing, and theorizing.

Theorizing of the data led to two substantive theories. First, low-income couples engage in a range of recreation activities individually, together, and with others, with financial status being only one factor that influences their recreation involvement. Second, low-income couples value shared couple recreation for its relational benefits and its residual contributions to daily life.
A Continuum of Orientations to Recreation for Couples (CORC) was developed to illustrate the recreation behaviors of couples. Three orientations indicate where partners focused their attention during participation. Within orientations, several categories are identified.

For independent orientation, the individual’s attention is on the particular activity. Individual activities are pursuits that one partner engages in alone (e.g., writing or taking a run). Some partners have few engagements in couple recreation for reasons expressed as a lack of ability, interest, or willingness, which results in only occasional recreation activities together. Couples with young children often cite family activities as substitutes for couple-only activities. Diversionary activities such as television watching provide opportunities for couples to relax together, but their focus is generally on the screen rather than the partner.

Recreation has an others orientation when the individual’s primary focus is on people other than one’s partner. Activities are categorized as group experiences when the couple engages in service to others. Family recreation with immediate or extended families is a common form of recreation, particularly for couples with children.

Pursuits in which partners focus their attention on each other are classified as shared couple orientation. At times, partners would provide support for their partners’ recreation through spectating or engaging in conversation about the interest rather than by participating together. Utilitarian couple experiences such as yard work or preparing meals are valued by couples for the satisfaction and enjoyment of accomplishing work together. Impromptu shared couple recreation includes activities that couples engage in spontaneously together, are contrasted to planned shared couple recreation, which require more effort to arrange and accomplish.
Couples engage in activities across the spectrum of orientations and categories. Those that desire shared couple recreation create opportunities by using the financial, temporal, and support resources available to them. After participation, couples generally feel strengthened in their relationship.

Strong relational bonds promote stability, which has long-term benefits to individual partners as well as to children, if any. Relational strength contributes to resilience in low-income couples, allowing them to face challenges in everyday life and negotiate obstacles to couple recreation.

Implications for research related to the substantive theory, methods and practice are useful in further understanding the value of recreation for committed low-income couples.
Influence of Recreation in the Lives of Low-Income Committed Couples

by

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DEDICATION

For my beloved husband and my precious family, who have taught me the importance of having fun together and loving one another.
BIOGRAPHY

Annette Moore grew up in State College, Pennsylvania. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Parks and Recreation from The Pennsylvania State University. Her Masters of Science degree in Recreation Management from Northeastern University included a master’s thesis focused on elderly use of local Boston parks.

Annette’s upbringing has greatly influenced her life and profession. Her father was the Recreation Specialist for the Extension Service at Penn State. Her mother was an elementary school teacher for nearly four decades. Since 1992, Annette has taught recreation-related courses in the Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management at North Carolina State University.

Annette’s primary teaching responsibilities have been at the undergraduate level facilitating the introductory and recreation program planning courses. A proponent of curricular engagement, Annette incorporates service-learning components in her classes. Her efforts contributed to NC State being recognized as a 2012 President’s Honor Roll for Service, a national award. Engaging students in the community has been an innate pedagogy for Annette, having been raised in an Extension Service home.

Annette’s research, too, has been influenced by her family. Her parents had been married for nearly 40 years when her father passed away. Her in-laws have been married for over 60 years. She and her husband have been married over 33 years. Through these examples, as well as from personal experience, Annette appreciates the efforts that must be invested to sustain a healthy marital relationship. She has also assisted at a local church-run food pantry, where she has become more aware of the challenges facing low-income couples
and families. These experiences have combined to contribute to her desire to investigate the influence of recreation in the lives of low-income committed couples.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the support and encouragement I received from many people throughout this dissertation process. My immediate and extended family members, as well as members of my church family, friends, and colleagues have provided support and encouragement throughout my doctoral program.

I am grateful to my advisory committee for their input and perspectives on my project. I am particularly grateful for the guidance, nudging, and encouragement I received from my committee chair, Dr. Karla A. Henderson. It has been an honor to work under you through this whole process, Karla. You have spent your career giving voices to many who have been silent, and inspiring and equipping generations of graduate students to continue this good work. I am honored to have been able to work under you and alongside of you. Thank you for holding off on your retirement until after I finished!

I am grateful, too, to Dr. Dennis K. Orthner, my outside committee member. Dennis, your research has inspired me from my first reading. I am humbled to have such an esteemed family studies researcher as a counselor and friend. Thank you for your dissertation work 40 years ago, and for the extensive research and projects you have undertaken since then, all to improve the lives of individuals, couples, families, and society. Your efforts have, and will continue, to make a positive difference in our society.

I am grateful to my immediate and extended family who have loved me unconditionally all my life, and have modeled for me what healthy (albeit loud!) family relationships look like. Thank you mom and dad, for demonstrating what a long-term healthy marriage looks like, even when times are challenging. Thank you, girls, for being wonderful
and supportive, and always game for whatever adventures your little mom proposed. Your love and support of me as I learn and grow has blessed me beyond words. Thank you, too, for bringing your wonderful husbands into our family!

I am particularly grateful to Roger, my husband of over 33 years, who has supported and encouraged me to do the good work and to be the person I was created to be. I am grateful for your love and continued commitment to me and to our marriage, regardless of the emotions of any particular day. You have been so helpful and supportive of me throughout this whole process ~ time to celebrate!

I am grateful, too, to the 25 couples who entrusted to me the stories of their lives. My desire is to honor you by telling your stories with honesty and to an audience who will hear. May the outcomes of our time together yield positive results for many other couples and families as well.

My desire has always been to strengthen and encourage people, particularly couples and families. I pray that this dissertation and the scholarship that follows from it will serve to strengthen couple and family relationships. This project was a gift to me, and a labor of love. May it bless and encourage all those who hear or read about it, that they may be strengthened in their lives and relationships. Finally, I thank Christ Jesus my LORD who has strengthened me, for He has found me faithful, putting me into service (1 Timothy 1:12).
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Recreational activities are often catalysts for relational development for couples. Through recreation experiences individuals come to know one another, discover mutual interests, and determine the extent that they are compatible. Recreation provides opportunities for couples to build relationships, engage in common experiences, create shared memories, and develop bonds which may lead to marriage (Doherty, 2000; Houts, Robins, Huston, 1996; Huston, 2009). After a couple is married, recreational pursuits including those activities that require partners to interact with one another as they participate, can strengthen marital bonds, improve marital satisfaction, and foster opportunities to communicate with one another (Crawford, Houts, Huston, & George, 2002; Huston, 2009; Kingston & Nock, 1987; Orthner, 1975, 1976; Orthner & Mancini, 1991).

During relational development and early years of marriage, couples may experience a sense of excitement and novelty as they engage in recreational pursuits (Aron, A., Norman, Aron, E., McKenna, & Heyman, 2000; Graham, 2008; Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993). Getting to know another interesting person better, particularly one with whom there is a romantic attraction, can be exhilarating. As their relationship continues, couples may need to find new and exciting ways to enrich and strengthen their relationship (Aron et al., 2000; Graham, 2008). Life experiences, such as the birth of a child or moving to a new city, may also provide challenges to couples that may result in greater relationship satisfaction. Couples who have strong relational bonds may fare better as they experience inevitable life
stressors (Black & Lobo, 2008; DeFrain & Asay, 2007). Recreation experiences may facilitate the development and maintenance of strong relational bonds for couples.

Recreation has shown to strengthen couple bonds and marital satisfaction (c.f., Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Orthner, 1976; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, 2003). However, much of the existing research on couples’ recreation has used middle-class Caucasian samples. Little research has explored the role of recreation among low-income couples, whether married or cohabiting. As demographic trends change in the United States, examining the role of recreation in more diverse populations could advance theory and practice in leisure studies and related fields.

Trends in couple relationships have changed in the last 50 years in the United States (National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC), 2007). Although marriage is still valued by adults in the United States today, approximately half of first marriages now end in divorce. Fewer couples are getting and staying married now as compared to 50 years ago (Pew Research Center, 2010). In 1960, 72% of adults in the U.S. were married. Only 51% of those individuals over 18 years of age were married in 2010. In 2007, only 33% of African American women and 44% of African American men were married (Fry & Cohn, 2010). Among the poor, 41% of men below the poverty line, and 54% of men from 100 to 199% of poverty were married in 2001 (Halle, 2002). For women in this same period, the marriage figures were 33% and 44%, respectively, for those below and from 100 to 199% of poverty. Even with low marriage rates, marriage is still seen as a valuable and desired condition for many low-income and African American couples (Edin & Reed, 2005).
Views on the value of marriage are also changing in the United States. American adults are much less likely to see marriage as a requirement for living with a partner (Pew Research Center, 2010). In contemporary American society, legal marriage is no longer seen as a prerequisite for bearing or raising children, particularly among low-income couples. However, the role of marriage is especially complex for low-income couples (Karney, Garvan, & Thomas, 2003; Pinderhughes, 2002). Financial pressures, cultural norms, and obligations to children affect the desire and ability of low-income couples to formalize their commitment to one another through marriage. Working low-income couples may have few temporal or financial resources to invest in their relationship, particularly if they have child care responsibilities as well.

Even with few temporal or financial resources, low-income couples and families find and make opportunities to engage in meaningful ways with one another (Roy, Tubbs, & Burton, 2004; Scott & McCarville, 2008). Everyday activities, such as mealtimes, preparing for bed, or running errands can be enjoyable, play-like events for couples (Huston, 2000; Marks, Huston, Johnson, & MacDermid, 2001). Enjoyable daily responsibilities and experiences may be seen as recreational to low-income couples.

Few research studies have focused on the recreational habits of low-income couples. With millions of low-income adults and families in the United State, increased understanding of the influence of recreation in their lives is needed. Studies that focus on the lived experiences of low-income couples may reveal information that could advance this body of knowledge, and assist recreation and human service professionals in their work to strengthen relationships, for the benefit of the partners as well as their children.
Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of recreation participation on relationships of committed low-income couples (i.e., married or married-like heterosexual partners). My guiding questions were:

1. What types of recreation activities do low-income committed couples engage in, individually, together, and with their children, if any?
2. What values and meanings do couples place on their shared recreation experiences?
3. What factors facilitate or hinder couples’ engagement in shared recreation activities?

Rationale for this Study

Evidence suggests that when couples invest in their relationships they benefit themselves. In a Centers for Disease Control (CDC, 2013) report drawing on data from the 1999 – 2002 National Health Interview Surveys (NIHS, N = 127,545), married adults were generally associated with better reported health than non-married adults in the three age groups studied (e.g., 18 – 44 years, 45 – 64, and 65 years and older). Benefits to couples may be attributed to one of two theories: marriage protection or marital selection (Schoenborn, 2004). Marriage protection proposes that partners who are married are more likely to have the financial resources, and emotional, psychological and relational support that facilitates healthy life patterns. Marital selection theory posits that healthier people are more likely to get and stay married than those who are less physically and emotionally healthy.

Pooled resources can also lead to greater financial stability for couples and families (Wilmoth & Koso, 2002). Couples in which both partners are working can potentially amass greater wealth than single adults alone, particularly for adults with children. Single-parent
adults, particularly people with low educational attainment, are often limited in their ability to earn wages which allow them to provide for the needs of their family members and accrue financial assets. Increased financial resources and improved health are benefits enjoyed more often by married adults than by single adults who are raising children (McLanahan, Garfinkel, Riechman, Teitler, Carlson & Audiger, 2003; Parke, 2004). Therefore, efforts that facilitate the establishment and sustainment of long-term couple relationships may benefit both partners and children in the family.

Couples, particularly those who are married and have healthy long-lasting relationships, can often provide a stable environment for themselves and for their children (Huston & Melz, 2004; Popenoe, 2008). Parents with a healthy union are more likely to have greater emotional, relational, and financial resources to invest in their relationship and in their children (Amato & Booth, 1997; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). In general, children in stable families are more likely to display strong study skills, controlled behavior, and have a healthier emotional state than children of divorced parents (Amato, 2000; Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Waldfogel, Craigie & Brooks-Gunn, 2010). Low-income children who are born to unmarried mothers run a greater risk of having children out of wedlock, of remaining poor, and for perpetuating a cycle of poverty (Addy & Wight, 2012; Waite & Gallagher). Therefore, efforts to strengthen couple relationships may result in stronger, more stable unions and families.

Recreation experiences for committed couples facilitate strengthening of marital-type relationships (Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Orthner, 1975, 1976; Orthner & Mancini, 1991). Through recreation, couples can learn and practice relational skills such as problem solving,
communication, and adaptability in roles (Smith, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2009). These skills may carry over to other areas of the relationship and into everyday life together.

Communication is an essential element in successful relationships because it facilitates interconnectedness among partners (Olson, 2000). Cohesion and adaptability in couple relations can occur as partners express their needs and desires. These conversations may become a vehicle for couples to define themselves and to refine their mutual relationship (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). As they communicate, couples send and interpret messages as appropriate within the context of their familial relationship. Communication can also be a catalyst through which partners can “sustain, repair, and redefine their relationship,” which can lead to maintenance of a long-term union between them (Thompson-Hayes & Webb, 2004, p. 254). Recreational activities in which both partners participate can provide opportunities for these conversations to occur.

Recreation that is pursued together by couples appears to provide immediate as well as carry-over value for their relationship (Aron, et al., 2000; Graham, 2008; Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993). While engaging in recreation together, couples potentially have the opportunity to develop and hone communication skills, to build or strengthen relational ties, and to see one another in a different light (Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Orthner & Mancini, 1991; Schrodt, 2005; Smith, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2009). Recreational pursuits may enable couples to see one another in different roles and settings, contributing to flexibility in the relationship (Smith, Freeman & Zabriskie, 2009; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). When challenges and changes occur in life, couples who are flexible in their roles in recreational settings may likely to be more adaptable in their everyday life together.
Interpersonal benefits such as bonding, interdependency, and adaptability are often facilitated through shared recreational experiences (Agate, et al., 2009). Recreational pursuits that require couple interaction have been associated with higher levels of marital satisfaction for couples as compared to satisfaction levels of those who engage in activities with minimal couple interaction (Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Johnson, Zabriskie & Hill, 2006; Orthner, 1976). Family members, including couples, can benefit interpersonally by working together toward common goals during recreation pursuits, similar to what members of sports teams or wilderness treks experience (Palmer, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2007; Smith, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2009). Couples can develop a stronger sense of cohesion and satisfaction as they confront challenges and overcome obstacles together in their leisure pursuits. These feelings are often carried over into their everyday lives as well.

Strong and stable relationships require on-going attention (Bradbury & Karney, 2004). Recreation may facilitate continued connection, satisfaction, and commitment to the relationship. The accessibility of time, financial resources, and social support may influence the ease at which couples may be able to pursue shared recreational experiences. Work schedules may make finding time together difficult, particularly in families where spouses trade off child care responsibilities. Availability of discretionary funds may restrict or facilitate participation in recreational pursuits for a couple, particularly for those with limited resources. Social support from family members and friends may encourage couples to engage in recreational opportunities and other healthy relational patterns.

Further, recreation experiences have the potential to stimulate good feelings between partners. As feelings of warmth and affection toward one another are bolstered, unions are
strengthened. In marriage, the absence of conflict does not indicate that the union will remain secure (Huston & Melz, 2004). It appears that the “loss of good feelings” has a greater detrimental effect on early marriage relationships than disagreements or arguments (p. 951). Therefore, engaging in recreation experiences may strengthen marriages by keeping such “good feelings” alive for couples.

Significance of this Study

Little research has focused on low-income couples and the role of recreation in strengthening their relationships. This line of research is important for several reasons. Nearly half of the American adult population is considered low-income earning less than 200% of the government determined U.S. poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Adults that grew up in stable homes are more likely to exhibit the healthy relationship patterns that were modeled for them, passing this pattern on to their children (Addy & Wight, 2012; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Furthermore, parental relationships with one another have an impact on child well-being (Amato, 2000; Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Erel & Burman, 1995).

Couples in long-term, committed relationships experience a variety of benefits. Partners often live longer and healthier lives than their single counterparts. Many report high levels of life satisfaction and tend to be more financially secure (Stanley, 2006). Children in dual-parent families are less likely to live in poverty (Addy & Wight, 2012; Department of Health & Human Services, HHS, 2012). Children from stable families tend to perform better academically and behaviorally (Cowan, C., Cowan, P, Pruett, M., & Pruett, K., 2007; Stanley, 2006). Because children tend to demonstrate behaviors that have been modeled for
them, they benefit from seeing their parents working together to negotiate the inevitable challenges of life.

This line of research is also important because millions of adults and children live low-income households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009; HHS, 2013). With high levels of unemployment in recent years, families have faced greater challenges in maintaining healthy lives and relationships. Recreation participation by couples and families can help alleviate stress and promote bonding (Moore & Driver, 2005). Yet little research had specifically investigated the role of recreation in the lives of low-income couples.

In studies that have focused on couple or family recreation, most have targeted middle-income samples (c.f., Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Johnson, Zabriskie & Hill, 2006; Orthner, 1976). Although many of those studies recommend further research targeted at a broader range of economic and culturally diverse populations, few have done so. Studies conducted by family researchers often examine low-income populations and fragile families, but these studies are generally void of questions related to the recreational pursuits of these couples and families. Recreation-related research targeting low-income couples could provide insights valuable for theory development and practice. Research using quantitative methods often is unable to capture data from lower income populations due to sampling techniques (Jackson, 2005; Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004) and low participation rates by low-income couples (Moore & Driver, 2005). Research methods that specifically target traditionally understudied populations are beneficial because “we have not achieved much understanding of the leisure of people whose very lives may consist almost entirely of constraint: the poor, many unemployed people…” (Jackson, 2005, p. 9).
Introduction to Conceptual / Methodological Approach

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of recreation participation on relationships of committed low-income couples (i.e., married or partners in married-like relationships). To enable me to collect data that focused on recreation among low-income couples, I took an interpretive approach to my research. As a result, I gained insight into the recreational and life experiences of low-income couples.

I was especially interested to understand the “everyday lived experiences” of the partners in my study (Creswell, 1998, p. 54). The particular phenomena of my study were the daily experience of being low-income and in a committed couple relationship. In-depth interviews allowed me to gather data that were rich. The perspectives of participants shed light on their lives and recreational experiences, as well as on the meanings they associated with those experiences.

An interpretive grounded theory approach to research effectively investigates how people relate to particular phenomena in their lives (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, I used a modified grounded theory methodological framework as a means for gaining insight into the recreational habits and pursuits of low-income committed couples, as well as into the role these experiences have on their relationships. In-depth interviews with 25 couples provided data from which interpretive theorizing occurred.

While I believed the opportunities were rich for the emergence of substantive theory regarding the behaviors, benefits, and challenges of recreation participation in the lives of low-income couples, I was cautious not to draw generalities to this population from the
participants in my study but rather to add to the body of knowledge through theorizing. Further, these data enabled me to analyze my findings in light of current theory related to the limited amount of research about recreation among low-income couples. Therefore, my approach was effective for deepening an understanding the influence recreation has in the lives of these couples (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). My aim was to expand the understanding of recreation in the lives of low-income couples as a means for advancing the theoretical underpinnings of the field, as well as providing insight to those professionals who serve this population.

**Delimitations and Definitions**

There were several delimitations associated with this study. First, potential participants had to meet the low-income and committed couple criteria I established for this study. Second, participants were recruited through connections I have within the community, which allowed me access to potential participants. Participating couples all resided in a mid-sized city in the Southeastern United States. No attempt was made to recruit participants from other areas. Third, as long as heterosexual couples met the established criteria, I invited them to be a part of the study. I did not seek out same-sex committed couples for inclusion in this exploratory study.

For the purpose of this study, I defined two key terms which are used throughout the remainder of this paper: **low-income** and **committed couples**. Low-income was defined as financial resources that met government established guidelines, which was the criterion used by the food pantries. By recruiting couples through local food pantries, I was able to help assure that couples qualified for my study.
Couples in my study also needed to have been in a committed relationship (e.g., married or in a married-like relationship). Couples were not required to be married to be considered in a committed relationship. While marriage often signified commitment, not all low-income couples invested the effort and resources to formalize their relationship in this way. Minority couples are also less likely than whites to marry (Parke, 2004). I established a one-year criterion because approximately one-half of cohabiting relationships dissolve within the first year a couple is together (Bumpass & Lu, 2000).

Summary

This study was undertaken to explore the influence of recreation in the lives of low-income committed couples, a heretofore understudied subject. An interpretive approach was employed to understand the behaviors, meanings, and values placed on recreation in these couples’ lives. By better understanding this, recreation researchers and providers may be able to assist in strengthening relational ties, which may lead to more stable relationships and families.

In the following chapter, I provide an overview of the literature related to marital and committed couple relationships and recreation. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology used in this study. The findings from my data are described in Chapter 4. The final chapter, Chapter 5, provides an analysis of findings and offers recommendations for future research and practice.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of recreation participation in the lives of committed low-income couples (i.e., married or in married-like relationships). In this chapter I provide an overview of the state of marriage, cohabitation, and divorce in the United States. In the United States, marriage and cohabitation trends among low-income populations vary markedly from those of higher income levels. Americans in lower income brackets are less likely to formally marry (Parke, 2004). The societal costs of relationship dissolution among low income couples are great (Jones, Charles, & Benson, 2013). These trends are relevant to research that considers aspects of marital or relational health and the role of communication in relational health. Contributions of recreation participation to relational strengthening are also addressed in this chapter. In particular, types of shared couple recreation are considered, including leisure activity interactions, core and balance activities, purposive leisure, providing support for partner recreation, novel and exciting recreation. Attention is given to research on recreation with low-income participants, and the absence of diverse samples in marital research. The chapter concludes with selecting the research paradigm for examining committed and married couples, particularly those who are traditionally understudied.

Couple Relationships in the United States

Marriage, Cohabitation and Divorce in the United States

Human beings have an innate need for relationship and intimacy with others (Doherty, 2000). For many in western society, these needs are met through long-term
committed relationships with a spouse. Although not the only outlet, marriage does provide a secure, on-going, often deepening relationship for many couples over much of the life course, particularly in the United States (Cherlin, 2005; Popenoe, 2007). The decision to marry may be deliberate for some couples, assumed for others (particularly for those cohabiting), or complex (as may be the case for low-income couples). Committed couple relationships can provide partners emotional, relational, physical and economic benefits, particularly if those relationships are healthy, stable, and sustained.

Changes in Committed Relationship Patterns

The United States is a marriage-oriented nation, particularly in comparison to other western nations (Popenoe, 2007). However in the last decades, the marriage rate in the U.S. has dropped notably (National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (NHMRC), 2007). In 2011, only 51% of the adult population in the United States was married (Cohn, 2013). While couples continue partnering together, patterns associated with couple relationships have shifted in recent decades in the United States, including changes in age at marriage, likelihood of cohabitation, and increases in unwed parenthood.

Couples are waiting longer to get married than they did in previous generations in the United States (NHMRC, 2007). The postponement of marriage may be due to a number of factors. More young people, both men and women, are pursuing post-secondary education. Following the “sexual liberation movement” in the 1960’s in the U.S. and the increased availability of contraceptives, premarital sex is no longer considered a societal taboo for many young people. Couples no longer see marriage as the only accepted context for sexual relationships (Pew Research Center, 2010).
**Cohabitation**

Cohabitation has become common place among couples in recent years. While virtually unseen in the 1950’s, approximately half of all couples married in this decade have cohabitated prior to marriage (Popenoe, 2008). Cohabitation is seen by many couples as an acceptable means for “testing” a relationship, as a precursor to marriage. Many other couples opt out of marriage all together possibly to avoid the likelihood of future divorce (Pinsof, 2002; Popenoe, 2008).

Many low-income couples, in particular, cohabit rather than marry for cultural and financial reasons (Parke, 2004; Smock, Manning, & Porter, 2005; Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000). Cultural upbringing or area of residency may influence the need a couple feels to formalize their relationship in marriage. For example, couples living in low-income housing communities may not have the social support or pressure to formalize their cohabiting relationship. Men with incomes lower than what they perceive to be ideal for maintaining a marriage are much less likely to marry than men in higher income brackets (Watson & McLanahan, 2011). This relative income influences decisions related to cohabitation, marriage, and child bearing for white males, but only the marriage decision for black males. Overall, the marriage rate among low-income couples is considerably lower than for couples in higher income brackets (Pinderhughes, 2002; Watson & McLanahan, 2011).

Regardless of income level, young people in the U.S., as in many Western nations, see unwed cohabitation as a step along a natural life course (Popenoe, 2008; Stanley, Rhodes, & Markman, 2006). This step may or may not lead to marriage. As cohabitation becomes a
more accepted practice, fewer couples are making the transition to marriage. Couples who do transition into marriage are doing so later in life. For example, the average age at first marriage in the U.S. in 1960 was 20.3 for women and 22.8 for men overall. In 2010, average age at first marriage rose to 26.4 and 27.8 years for white women and men, respectively, and to 30.0 and 30.7 for black women and men, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

Testing out a relationship by cohabiting before considering a long-term relationship is an option taken by many couples, to assure they will be compatible. However, “living together is not a preventative for divorce” (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p. 175). Research does not substantiate the claim that couples who cohabit prior to marriage have more successful marriages than those who do not cohabit. To the contrary, research has found that couples who marry after cohabiting (unless already engaged or committed to their union before cohabiting) are more likely to divorce (Hsueh, Morrison, & Doss, 2009; Popenoe, 2008).

Divorce rates among the cohabiting-turned-married may be due to a variety reasons. Stanley, Rhodes, and Markman (2006) suggested that some cohabiting couples “slide” into marriage, rather than intentionally deciding to do so (p. 505). Their research found that some couples move from a contented cohabiting relationship into marriage because they assume this is the logical next step for their relationship, a consequence of “the inertia of cohabitation” (p. 503). Cohabitation, much more that dating, involves similar life complexities to marriage (e.g., sharing habitation, shared financial obligations, stronger sense of commitment, limiting of relational alternatives). Because of this sense of inertia, disenchanted couples may find it much easier to slide into a more committed relationship
than to make the difficult decision to terminate their affiliation with one another. Hsueh, Morrison and Doss (2009) explained that some couples who are not well suited for married life together progress into marriage “simply because the barriers to ending the relationship increase as a result of cohabitation” (p. 244).

Divorce, more than death of a spouse, now marks the end of the majority of marriages in the United States (Pinsof, 2002). Life, health, and work conditions have all improved in the last hundred years, enabling people to live – and stay married – longer. However, about half of all first marriages in this country are likely to end in divorce (CDC, 2013). A number of individual and couple factors influence the likelihood of a stable, long-term marriage (Pinsof). Individually, people vary in their ability to select an appropriate mate, to commit and attach to them, to love them and to continually choose to control emotions and desires that would be detrimental to the relationship. The couple’s commitments to stay married (or aversion to divorce) as well as the interplay of individual characteristics, their ability to communicate constructively, and their ability to adapt to growth and change over the life course, all combine to influence the likelihood of a long-term marriage.

**Barriers to Marriage**

Lack of employment opportunities may also be a barrier to marriage, particularly among low-income couples (Haskins, McLanahan & Donahue, 2005). Couples who aspire to hosting large or extravagant weddings may hold off on getting married due to inadequate funds. Unemployed or underemployed men may be more reluctant to enter into marriage, knowing they will be unable to support a spouse and children (Pinderhughes, 2002). African-American, low-income married couples may experience high levels of dissonance in their
relationship as a result of living in a larger society “where men are supposed to have more power, but the power is denied because of race” (p. 275). Consequently, societal conditions may pressure these couples to forego marriage, or to divorce if married. Complex social networks among low-income Americans, particularly with former partners with whom one may have had children previously, may also discourage some from committing to a marital union with a current partner.

Long-term, committed relationships are beneficial to both adults and their children. Married men are generally healthier and less likely to engage in risky behaviors than their bachelor counterparts (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Married men are also generally more engaged as fathers, with more interactions and involvement in the lives of their children, than are unmarried or divorced, nonresident dads (Buswell, Zabriskie, Lundberg, & Hawkins, 2012; McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2012; Nock, 1998; Popenoe, 1996). Married women generally enjoy greater financial well-being than divorced or cohabiting women, due to pooled financial resources of the couple (Wilmoth & Koso, 2002). Children who grow up in households with their two-parent biological families are more likely to experience emotional and developmental nurturing than children from non-intact families (Popenoe & Whitehead, 2003). Children in intact families, particularly in families where the parents have a healthy marriage, are also less likely to drop out of school, have serious emotional problems, or to experience familial disruption (Cowen & Cowen, 2002; Jones, Charles, & Benson, 2013). Given the emotional, relational, and economic benefits of marital health, efforts to strengthen these committed relationships benefit individuals, couples, families, and society.
Societal Costs to Relational Dissolution

Relational dissolution among low-income couples results in costs to society. Approximately half of American children will spend some part of their childhood living in a single-parent household (Amato, 2005; Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Single-parents often struggle financially, and may rely on government subsidies or programs to provide services needed to provide basic necessities for the family (Hildebrandt & Stevens, 2009). Even when low-income single-parent mothers are employed, they face challenges to maintaining both jobs and healthy family environments. Many of these low-income women work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Some change jobs frequently, leaving them and their families with interrupted streams of income and benefits (Scott, Edin, London, & Kissane, 2002). In the United States, children living in female-headed households had a poverty rate of 47.6% in 2011, compared to 10.9% for children living in married couple families (HHS, 2012). African American and Hispanic children are more likely to live in poverty than non-Hispanic white children (37.4, 34.1, and 12.5 percent, respectively). Children who grow up in poverty are more likely to be poor when they are adults (Holzer, Schanzenbach, Duncan, & Ludwig, 2007). As adults, these children are more likely to earn lower incomes and to engage in crimes or have poor health when compared to children raised in higher income dual-parent families. When calculating increases in health care costs and crime-related expenses, as well as decreased individual earnings and lower national productivity, Holzer et al. estimate that the economic cost of childhood poverty in the United States is approximately 500 billion dollars annually.
Children living in poverty, particularly those who are African American and Hispanic, are particularly disadvantaged related to their low economic status. These children are likely to live in neighborhoods with high concentrations of other children in poverty (Drake & Rank, 2009). Often, these neighborhoods are typified by low quality schools and environmental hazards such as elevated levels of toxic pollutants. Social factors in these neighborhoods likely present further detrimental effects on children in poverty. Factors such as crime and violence, increased concentrations of substance abuse, and greater exposure to sexually transmitted diseases influence residents of these low-income areas (Drake & Rank). Additionally, negative peer influence among youth living in these impoverished areas can be great (Durlauf, 2006). Due to social norms and peer influence, youth in these high-poverty areas are more likely to engage in illegal activities, to have lower academic aspirations, and be more likely to experience teenage pregnancy. All of these behaviors contribute to perpetuating the cycle of poverty in the lives of these young people (Holzer, Schanzenbach, Duncan, & Ludwig, 2007). Therefore, efforts to strengthen low-income parental relationships may contribute to improving a family’s economic and environmental condition both currently and for the long-term benefit of their children (Charles, Orthner, Jones, & Mancini, 2006; Jones, Charles, & Benson, 2013).

Strengthening couple relationships, however, may be particularly difficult among low-income couples (Jones, Charles, & Benson, 2013). Tension in a relationship often leads to relational dissolution. Low-income couples often live with continual stress related to income and employment uncertainties (Charles, Orthner, Jones, & Mancini, 2006). Having children by multiple partners also weakens relational bonds within current romantic
relationships for some low-income adults (Edin, Tach, & Mincy, 2009). Low-income couples may also lack social support that nurtures stable couple relationships (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004). Social barriers such as attitudes and aspirations toward marriage, divorce, childbearing, and relationship quality may all influence low-income couples’ willingness to commit to marriage (Edin & Reed, 2005).

Even with pervasive challenges associated with being low-income, many couples and families are surprisingly resilient (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004). Individual and collective problem solving skills, family cohesiveness, and confidence in a family’s ability to depend on one another strengthen resilience in families. Although the items used for most of these measures were not recreation related, these attributes can be developed through couple and family recreation. Due to limited finances, many families resort to diversionary activities such as television watching as primary sources of family recreation. Programs that focus on enhancement of skills needed to improve employability or to broaden a family’s recreation experiences to include more engaging activities could benefit many low-income couples and families. However, limited funds often restrict participation in formal education or counseling programs that might strengthen resilience in low-income couples.

Formal intervention programs are designed to facilitate the development of relational skills that may strengthen relationships of low-income couples. However, programs may have limited positive impact for a variety of reasons (Karney & Bradbury, 2004). Formal intervention programs may be challenging for low-income couples to attend because of work schedules, accessibility of venue or opportunities. Partners with limited incomes may live in
neighborhoods where couple relationships are not highly valued, providing participants with little social support for implementing behaviors learned through the program. Continual stressors associated with the low-income condition may also present challenges to the relationship that counteracts improvements that may have been initiated during the program experience. Without the benefit of intervention programs and support afterwards, couples may not develop or sustain important relational skills. Consequently, low-income couples may lack both relational stability and benefits associated relational health.

Aspects of Marital Health

Marital health can be measured through a variety of means. Marital quality, satisfaction, distress, and stability are common indicators of marital health. The terms marital quality, marital satisfaction, and marital distress can be used as descriptors of one’s assessment of their marriage or cohabiting relationship (Karney & Bradbury 1995). Marital quality generally refers to an overall assessment of health of a relationship. Marital satisfaction often denotes the level at which a partner feels contented or fulfilled in the relationship at a particular moment in time (e.g., at the time a survey instrument is administered). Marital distress, feelings of anguish within the relationship, is considered to be a “consequence of a couple’s difficulty dealing with conflict” (p. 5). Marital stability (or instability) generally refers to the status of the marriage, whether the couple is in a continuing relationship, or if the union has been or is being dissolved (i.e., separated or divorced; p. 3). Satisfaction in a relationship at a given point in time does not necessarily indicate stability over the long-term. Although “an unstable marriage is marked by dissatisfaction, the experience of dissatisfaction does not strongly predict instability, indicating that knowing a
couple's initial perceptions of their marriage alone is insufficient to predict their eventual stability” (p. 20).

Marital satisfaction is distinct from marital stability. For example, “the presence of children tends to decrease marital satisfaction but increase marital stability” (Hill, 1988, p. 430, original italics). Children in the home, especially young ones, require sizable amounts of time and attention to be invested in them by parents, reducing the amount of time available for couples to interact directly. A reduction in shared time leads to decreased levels of marital satisfaction for the couple. However, child rearing responsibilities and opportunities may increase marital stability, as parents may feel a commitment to maintaining the family structure for the sake of the children’s health, emotional, social, and economic well-being. On the other hand, this decrease in marital satisfaction may lead to marital instability and dissolution through increased stress and conflict in the marriage and through decreased time invested in the nurturing of the couple’s relationship.

*Role of Communication in Couple Relationships*

Effective communication between partners can contribute to relational health in a number of ways. As couples practice effective communication skills, they develop emotional and commitment safety that leads to the establishment and maintenance of safe and healthy relationships (Stanley, 2006).

Communications can facilitate the maintenance of healthy relationships (Olson, 2000). As environmental and relational conditions change, couples need to adapt to maintain healthy familial relationships. Effective communication between partners allows them to maintain appropriate balance points in their relationship in regard to cohesion and
adaptability. For example, when a family emergency arises, couples respond by drawing closer to one another, becoming more enmeshed as a mechanism for coping. They may also put more rigid protocol in place during the crisis as a way to maintain lines of communication until the crisis passes. Interconnectedness among partners is fostered through effective communication between partners, strengthening cohesive bonds between them. A sense of adaptability in their relationship enables them to flexibly respond to changes in their environment or relationship. Effective communication allows couples to process these changes and respond as necessary.

Effective communication skills foster long-term relational health (Thompson-Hayes & Webb, 2004). Couples who are effective communicators demonstrate the ability to speak openly, to listen attentively to one another, to stay on track in a conversation, and to assess the effectiveness of their communications and make adjustments as necessary. Emotional safety within the relationship is fostered as partners express their needs and desires to their partner, particularly if the other is attentively listening to them. As couples communicate, they send, receive, and interpret messages through the filter of their familial relationship.

Regular effective communications between partners enables them to recognize changes in one another as each grow and change over time (Niehuis, Huston, & Rosenband, 2006). Communication, therefore, can be a catalyst through which partners can “sustain, repair, and redefine their relationship,” often leading to maintenance of a long-term union between them (Thompson-Hayes & Webb, 2004, p. 254).

Relationship maintenance can be affected by a number of factors, including relational skills, support, and distress. Bradbury and Karney (2004) studied communication patterns
and behaviors of couples over the first four years of marriage. From their observations, they concluded that negative communication behaviors and comments during problem-solving exercises were indicative of communication patterns in other areas of the marriage as well. Couples who provided emotional and relational support to one another during these exercises were more likely to consistently display these types of positive interactions in their everyday lives together.

Kurdek (2005) also investigated couple relationships over the first four years of marriage. To determine possible predictors of dissolution of relationship, Kurdek analyzed data collected individually from partners to ascertain the extent to which intra-spouse, inter-spouse, or external social support characteristics early in marriage predicted subsequent divorce. As expected, both spouses in couples headed for divorce reported higher levels of marital distress, lower levels of marital satisfaction, and decreasing levels of spousal interaction than did couples who remained married. For men, low levels of social support early in marriage were associated with subsequent divorce. Social support, particularly from one’s spouse, appeared to contribute to marital satisfaction and marital strength.

Communication also becomes a vehicle for couples to define themselves and to refine their mutual relationship (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002).

Contributions of Recreation to Couple Relations

Participation in recreation activities together can strengthen couple relationships in a number of ways. Recreation provides opportunities for relationship formation (Doherty, 2000; Houts, Robins, Huston, 1996; Huston, 2009), for bonding and cohesion (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001), and to promote relational skill.
development (Christensen & Brooks, 2001; Orthner & Mancini, 1991; Schrodt, 2005; Smith, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2009; Thompson-Hayes & Webb, 2005). Couples who feel satisfied in their leisure often feel relational satisfaction as well (Johnson, Zabriskie, & Hill, 2006; Russell, 1987, 1990). Couple recreation promotes relational satisfaction, particular through shared or joint activities, whether considered core or balance activities. Recreation is beneficial to couples whether they enact it purposively (Shaw, 2008; Shaw & Dawson, 2001), through service to others (Palmer, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2007), by supporting one another’s interests (Baldwin, Ellis, & Baldwin, 1999; Hultsman, 2012), or engaging in novel or playful ways (Aron et al., 2000; Aune & Wong, 2002; Casado-Kehoe, Vanderbleek, & Thanasiu, 2007; Guitard, Ferland, Dutil, 2005).

As couples begin dating and courting, recreational pursuits facilitate relationship development. Recreation provides a setting in which couples engage in conversation and get to know one another. During these conversations individuals assess compatibility and determine whether or not to pursue a longer term relationship (Niehuis, Huston, & Rosenband, 2006). Often individuals feel a sense of exhilaration as they become a couple (Aron, et al., 2000), encouraging to spend more time together. As they engage in recreation activities together, they create bonds that lead to a desire to form committed relationships, often in marriage (Doherty, 2001; Doherty & Carlson, 2002; Kalmijn & Bernasco, 2001).

Recreation continues to serve as an important catalyst for nurturing couple interactions throughout the stages of the relationship (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Crawford, Houts, Huston, & George, 2002; Orthner, 1975). As life experiences and family commitments change for couples, recreation activities, particularly those that are enjoyed and

**Shared Couple Recreation**

Couples often form strong relational bonds as they participate in recreation activities. The types of activities couples pursue can affect relational benefits (Agate, et al., 2009; Hill, 1988; Holman & Epperson, 1989; Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Johnson, Zabriskie & Hill, 2006; Orthner, 1975, 1976; Orthner & Mancini, 1990, 1991). Early research in this area (Orthner, 1975) has laid a foundation on which other lines of research have built.

**Leisure Activity Interactions**

Orthner (1976) drew attention to the relationship between leisure participation and marital satisfaction. Orthner hypothesized that marital satisfaction could be associated with varying levels of interaction during recreation. Through his study of married couples across five marital periods, he identified three categories of leisure interaction patterns exhibited by couples engaging in recreation experiences: individual, parallel, and joint activities.

*Individual* recreation activities were engaged in independently by partners. Low levels of interaction occurred because of physically distance during activities such as reading silently or doing woodworking. For those who engaged primarily in individual activities, couples (in particular husbands in the first 5 years of marriage, and wives in subsequent years) indicated greater marital dissatisfaction than other couples.

Couples were together during recreation in Orthner’s (1976) other two activity types, but with varying levels of interaction. During *parallel* activities, such as sitting together on
the couch to watch TV or a movie, the couple may be in close proximity of one another, but their focus is on an object, rather than on one another. Little social interaction occurs between partners during parallel activities. *Joint* activities are those in which couples communicate and interact together to accomplish the task, such as playing cards or games together, or engaging in mutually enjoyable conversation over dinner. Orthner found that joint activities appeared to be most advantageous for couples during adjustment periods in their relationship (e.g., forming their relationship in early marriage and when launching grown children). Particularly during times of change and adjustment in a marriage, couples’ expressed marital satisfaction is closely associated with participation in shared recreation experiences, particularly joint activities.

Building on Orthner’s work, other researchers have continued investigating the role of recreation, particularly shared recreation, on marital relations (Hill, 1988, Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Johnson, Zabriskie & Hill, 2006). Holman and Jacquart modified Orthner’s work by allowing couples themselves to determine the interaction level classification of particular activities, rather than having them classified for them by the researcher. Holman and Jacquart also modified Orthner’s categories, creating three levels of joint activities rather than one parallel and one joint activity choice. Based on couple-determined levels of interaction, Holman and Jacquart redefined their shared leisure categories as low joint leisure (most similar to Orthner’s parallel category), moderate joint leisure (allowing for moderate levels of interaction between the couple during their activity) or high joint leisure (which the couple determined as requiring high levels of interaction between them). In addition to these leisure interaction patterns, Holman and Jacquart also looked at the impact of stress levels on
expressed marital satisfaction. From their 153 couple sample, the researchers concluded that the level of communication between the couple during their shared leisure is needed to understand its influence on marital satisfaction. Consistent with Orthner’s results, Holman and Jacquart found participation in high joint leisure was associated with high levels of marital satisfaction, particularly for wives who were highly stressed and husbands who had low levels of stress.

Marital satisfaction and participation in shared recreation may have a chicken-and-egg relationship. The interplay between shared recreation and marital satisfaction may flow both ways (Hill, 1988). Shared recreation facilitates “enjoyable interaction that draws spouses closer together, benefiting both of them and helping maintain the marriage in the distant as well as immediate future” (p. 429). However, couples who were experiencing low levels of satisfaction in their marriage were less likely to participate in joint activities. Couples who are highly satisfied in their relationship may be more inclined to want to share leisure experiences together. In her national study of 280 middle-income couples, Hill found that recreational activities such as travel, active sports, and outdoor recreational pursuits were most strongly associated with marital stability. These types of interactive engagements between partners would be expected among low-income couples as well. Modest positive associations between marital satisfaction and joint television watching suggests that watching TV may be more interactive than previously assumed for couples in healthy relationships.

Connections between relational satisfaction and participation in joint recreation activities have been widely documented (Agate, et al., 2009; Hill, 1988; Holman & Epperson, 1989; Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Johnson, Zabriskie & Hill, 2006; Orthner, 1976,
1976; Orthner & Mancini, 1990, 1991). Highly interactive shared recreation stimulates communication between partners, and strengthens cohesion. In the last decade, a line of family recreation research has emerged that extends Orthner’s (1976) work. The Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001) considers the contributions of recreation to family functioning.

Core and Balance Activities

Shared couple recreation activities have great potential for enriching couple relationships and staving off boredom. Couples can engage in activities in and around the home, or when away from their area of residency. Where couples recreate, the amount of time, planning, and expense associated with those activities, may influence the recreation benefits they experience. An important line of research related to this has been initiated by Ramon Zabriskie (c.f., Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, 2003). The focus of this research has been on family units, but application can be drawn to couples as well. Zabriskie and McCormick (2001) designated two categories of activities associated with family leisure: core and balance. *Core* activities are those that are generally performed in or around the home, with little advance planning, with little cost, and for relatively short amounts of time. Activities such as playing a board game or cards in the evening, walking around the neighborhood, or playing catch in the backyard provide opportunities for couples and family members to connect with one another. Informal recreation provides couples with opportunities to relax, get to know one another, to appreciate the other, and to nurture their relationship (Doherty & Carlson, 2002). Casual, frequent, often spontaneous activities build cohesion and offer opportunities for informal communication, which appears to be a
significant indicator of family functioning (Smith, Freeman & Zabriskie, 2009). Freedom to express one’s ideas and feelings contributes to perceptions of cohesiveness and flexibility within the family unit (Schrodt, 2005). Flexibility indicates a couple or family’s ability to grow and change as its members do or as environmental conditions require (Olson, 2001; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001). While individual development is often most noticeable with children in a family, adults also grow and change. Therefore, activities which nurture flexibility for committed couples contribute to relational strength and cohesion.

Balance activities are also beneficial for providing novel experiences for couples (Smith, Freeman & Zabriskie, 2009; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, 2003). Balance activities, such as traveling on vacation, camping, or attending a major entertainment event, may require greater time commitments for planning and execution than core activities, and often present opportunities for people to see one another in atypical roles. This change of roles contributes to flexibility within relationships as individuals must negotiate new patterns of interaction and activity, often in unfamiliar environments. “There is a tendency for roles to become increasingly defined over time, especially in the family. It is only during leisure that persons become free to consider other means of handling tasks” (Orthner, 1976, p. 177). Shared leisure experiences, whether core or balance activities, may provide couples with opportunities to see one another in roles they do not usually perform. Therefore, flexibility in roles and interactions that occur during leisure may assist couples in developing flexibility in their relationship during everyday life (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2003).

Zabriskie’s Family Leisure Activity Profile (FLAP) instrument has been used in studies looking at family recreation, cohesion, and flexibility (Agate, J., Zabriskie, Agate, S.,
The FLAP instrument categorizes leisure into 16 classifications, eight which focus on core leisure activities, and eight on balance activities in which the family may participate. Subjects indicate if they have participated in a particular type of leisure as a family, how frequently, and the estimated duration of participation. This information is then gathered and tabulated, resulting in overall core and balance involvement scores. Studies utilizing FLAP often include other instruments to measure family functioning. Other studies looked at family leisure in conjunction with other measures including those measuring religiosity (Agate, Zabriskie & Eggett, 2007); in families with children with developmental disabilities, (Dodd, Zabriskie, Widmer & Eggett, 2009; Smith, Freeman & Zabriskie, 2009), family bonding and satisfaction (Agate, J., Zabriskie, Agate, S., & Poff, 2009; Aslan, 2009), family communication (Smith, 2005), and satisfaction with married life (Johnson, 2005; Johnson, Zabriskie, and Hill, 2006).

Leisure activity interactions (Orthner, 1975) and core and balance activities (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, 2003) provide researchers a way to categorize recreation activities. As noted above, these types of shared recreation contribute to relational satisfaction for couples and families, and promote cohesion and stimulate communication, contributing to relational health. These relational benefits often carry over to other life situations as well.

During periods of transition, the residual benefits of shared recreation may be particularly beneficial to couples (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Orthner, 1975). These benefits may be particularly important to couples as they transition into parenthood (Claxton

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Couples with high levels of shared couple recreation prior to the birth of their child appear to maintain a healthy relationship, even though participating in low levels of post-partum couple recreation. The foundational shared leisure experiences between partners may have a residual beneficial effect on a couple’s relationship during this transitional time. Engaging in care of their new baby together is often perceived as valuable shared time as parents, and contributes relational benefits to the couple. These relational benefits appear to be associated with what couples perceive to be “satisfying about leisure” (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008, p. 40).

**Leisure Satisfaction’s Contribution to Relational Satisfaction**

Leisure satisfaction has been emerging as a significant line of research (Johnson, Zabriskie, & Hill, 2006; Russell, 1987, 1990). Unlike other studies that focus on activities, Russell’s research indicates that satisfaction with one’s leisure is a strong predictor of life satisfaction. In other words, how satisfied people are with their leisure is a more important predictor of life satisfaction than the type or duration of leisure activity.

Leisure satisfaction has also been associated with marital satisfaction (Johnson, Zabriskie, & Hill, 2006). Building from Russell’s (1987, 1990) research with individuals, Johnson et al. find strong links between leisure satisfaction and marital satisfaction. Neither time spent in couple leisure nor types of activities are significant predictors of marital satisfaction. As Russell had found with individuals, Johnson et al.’s findings conclude that marital satisfaction is strongly associated with satisfaction with couple leisure.
The connection between leisure satisfaction and relational satisfaction suggests that the meanings couples attach to recreation experiences are more important than the activities themselves.

Purposive Leisure

Couples often intentionally select recreation activities for their anticipated benefits. This intentionality is particularly evident in family recreation (Shaw & Dawson, 2002). Research in our field has looked at purposiveness of family recreation among middle-income families, rather than at low-income couples. For families, parents purposively plan activities that stimulate youth development and that strengthen their sense of family. By making choices that benefit their children, parents often choose to set aside their preferred activities, engaging in recreation with their children out of a sense of responsibility. Extrinsic motivations drive parents to plan and engage in activities they feel are valuable for their children’s short- or long-term benefit. For parents, these activities often lack the sense of freedom of choice and intrinsic motivation that typically define leisure. Still, parents purposively create and engaged in family recreation for the benefit and enjoyment of the family.

Desires to expose children to new and challenging situations may also motivate parents to engage in purposive family leisure (Palmer, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2007). Palmer et al. investigated the role of service projects on families who participated together. Service projects lasting several weeks required family members to travel, incur expense, and often sacrifice comforts associated with their home environments. Through participation in these projects, “family deepened” occurred (p. 446). Palmer et al. explain that the experience of
family deepening “surpassed what was previously captured by the concepts of family strengths, purposive leisure, or family leisure” (p. 446). Five elements to these purposive leisure service experiences appear to precipitate deep family connections: uniqueness of experience, shared and interactive, purposive, challenging, and required sacrifice. As families actively work together and support one another on their service projects, their shared experience deepens their bonds and connectedness as a family both during and after their service experience.

Supporting Partner Recreation

Similarly, the level of support between partners during recreation activities also appears to be related to connectedness and satisfaction for couples. Baldwin, Ellis, and Baldwin (1999) studied married marathon runners and their spouses. Runners of either sex who had spouses that were supportive of their physical activity expressed greater satisfaction in their marriages than those with less supportive spouses. Their findings also showed that runners who perceived lower spousal support for their activity noted decreased marital satisfaction as well.

Supporting the interests of a partner or family members is an intentional choice that partners and parents make. These choices require looking beyond the immediate situation to longer term benefits. Purposive leisure, whether in a couple or family, often requires a partner or parent to set aside his or her preferences in favor of what is beneficial to the other.

Couples often make deliberate decisions on activities they engage in together. Crawford, Houts, Huston, and George (2002) concluded that there was a difference in marital satisfaction levels depending on how interested one partner was in participating in those
activities. They found that women expressed greater marital dissatisfaction when their husbands engaged in recreation activities that they, the wife, did not enjoy, regardless of whether she participated or not. In couples where wives expressed high marital satisfaction early in their marriage, couple leisure ten years later appeared to be more oriented toward activities both partners enjoyed. Findings from this study suggested that couples should pursue shared recreational activities that are mutually interesting and enjoyable.

Enjoyable shared recreation activities play an important role throughout relationship development and maintenance for couples. In particular, shared recreation experiences that are exciting and novel can be valuable for strengthening marital relationships.

**Novel and Exciting Recreational Activities**

Novelty can counteract monotony in a relationship. Couples that stay together for extended periods of time risk becoming bored with one another and with the activities in their shared lives (Aron & Aron, 1986; Lyubomirsky, 2012). As two lives become entwined, couples may find a sense of comfort in routines of life and familiarity with one another. Alternately, they may experience “hedonic adaptation,” where stimuli that had been exhilarating become commonplace, and may lead to indifference among partners (Lyubomirsky). As partners (individually or together) take on roles and form relational habits, they may restrict further individual development. As a result, one or both partners breed a sense of indifference or dissatisfaction with the relationship.

Engaging in novel experiences contributes to marital quality (Aron, A., Norman, Aron, E., McKenna, & Heyman, 2000; Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993). By engaging in novel activities together, “the expansion of each self in the context of the joint activity
becomes associated with the partner and the relationship” (Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993, p. 246). As partners engage in exciting, challenging, or creative experiences together, they experience this positive expansion of self while engaged in shared activities. As a result, positive personal feelings associated with one’s partner expand to positive feelings about the relationship.

The level of excitement or novelty associated with shared recreation can affect levels of marital satisfaction (Aron et al., 2000; Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993). Couples who engage in exciting activities together express higher levels of relational satisfaction compared to those who engage in pleasant ones. It appears that couples who invest leisure time doing novel or exciting activities together experience greater individual and relational benefits than those whose shared experiences were merely pleasant. Couples see relational benefits when engaging for short periods of time (Aron et al.) Participation in shared or joint activities, particularly ones that are novel or exciting experiences, can help couples develop cohesive interpersonal bonds which deepen their enjoyment of one another, combat boredom between them, and strengthen their relationships.

Couples that engage in recreational experiences together develop shared interests that further enhance their sense of companionship and enjoyment of one another (Baxter & West, 2003). Couples who engage in exciting activities together are more willing to work on their marriage and on relational skills, and have more success in doing so (Casado-Kehoe, Vanderbleek, & Thanasiu, 2007). Playfulness, too, can lead to positive emotions and relational satisfaction for couples (Aune & Wong, 2002; Guitard, Ferland, Dutil, 2005). Engagement in playful activities serve to rekindle emotional connections between couples,
strengthen relational bonds, provide opportunities for self-disclosure to one another, and remind partners of the relational history they share. Recreation experiences, particularly ones that are playful, may be a catalyst for strengthening relationships.

For many couples, shared recreation, whether frequent and spontaneous core activities or novel and exciting balance activities, may provide opportunities for informal communication, for building memories, for strengthening interconnectedness, and for fostering flexibility throughout their relationship. From the foundation of shared recreational experiences, couples may develop foundational communication, conflict resolution, and problem solving skills which they can carry-over to their everyday lives (Casado-Kehoe, Vanderbleek, & Thanasiu, 2007; Zabriskie, 2001).

Couples of all economic levels can benefit from creative and exciting shared experiences. People are “biologically hard-wired to crave variety” (Lyubomirsky, 2012). Creating these types of enriching activities may be a challenge for couples with limited financial resources.

Recreation Research with Low-Income Participants

Families with limited finances are often resourceful when seeking or creating engaging recreation opportunities (Churchill et al., 2007). Low-income, rural women with young children often create opportunities for family fun through inexpensive activities based in and around the home (i.e., core activities) or community (i.e., balance). While their findings are not surprising (c.f., Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, 2003; Smith, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2009), their intentional look at low-income populations and their recreation participation is unusual for this field.
Low-income women also use daily routines, perceptions of time, and access to community resources to connect with their families (Tubbs, Roy, & Burton, 2005). For the mothers in this study, “family time was embedded in common activities, and did not emerge exclusively in leisure activities or time ‘off the clock’ from mundane daily caretaking of children” (p.82). Time spent engaging in enjoyable interactions together most frequently occur amidst common life experiences, running errands, doing chores, watching television, or performing daily caretaking responsibilities of children, such as bathing, bedtime rituals, and mealtimes. Low-income mothers highly value and deliberately create opportunities to engage in family time with their children on a frequent, often daily, basis. Relaxed, enjoyable, interactive shared experiences are a priority for the women.

Easily accessed recreation provides families opportunities to share enjoyable experiences even when resources are scarce (Scott & McCarville, 2008). Despite limited financial resources, low-income families find ways to enjoy the benefits of shared recreation.

Absence of Diverse Samples in Marital Research

Learning about the patterns, impacts, and meanings of recreation participation for low-income couples is often difficult. Research samples are often drawn from middle-income populations for a number of reasons (Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004). Studies investigating marriage often preclude minority populations, as they are less likely than whites to marry. Whites are also more likely to volunteer for research studies than other couples. How and where samples are drawn may also preclude low-income couples and those of diverse ethnic or cultural backgrounds. For example, convenience samples may be drawn.
from communities or organizations that have fewer low-income or ethnically diverse residents.

Marriage and family researchers acknowledge that marital research lacks ethnic diversity, noting that samples are most often drawn from middle-class white subjects (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004). Middle-class Caucasian couples comprise the primary samples for 75% of marital research studies (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Consequently, they caution against generalizing findings from these demographically homogenous studies to broader populations.

The absence of minority populations from marital research studies may be due to several factors (Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004). First, minority couples are less likely than whites to be married. If legal marriage is a qualification for participants, non-white couples are likely to be excluded from the sample. Second, minority couples are less likely to volunteer to participate in research studies than their white counterparts. Researchers are encouraged to consider using sampling techniques that may be effective for reaching a more diverse sample. Karney et al. suggested cultivating relationships with cultural insiders (p. 523), people in the community who have connections to potential study participants. Another strategy would be to find alternatives to technology-based recruitment and data collection methods. Researchers are encouraged to consider employing recruitment and data collection methods that would expose and encourage participation by underrepresented groups. Grounded theory research may be an effective strategy to accomplish this goal.

These studies demonstrate that semi-structured interviews can provide valuable data on the lived experiences of low-income couples. Particularly because little information has
been gathered on this topic, this current study provides insights into the lives of low-income committed couples to assist the recreation and family professionals that serve them, and to advance the field of family and leisure research.

Selecting the Research Paradigm

Paradigms are a way of viewing the world (Henderson, 2006). Researchers design studies based on their paradigms. I selected an interpretive research paradigm for my study. An interpretive research paradigm acknowledges that the social world of participants is complex. The participants themselves must instruct the researcher as to the relationships, meanings, and attributes that exist within their world. Researchers, then, must be willing to release preconceptions. They must accept that multiple realities exist in the world they are researching. Researchers are charged with discovering and then explaining the social world of study participants.

A phenomenological framework provides a way for researchers to discover and explain a given phenomenon. Phenomenology is appropriately applied in studies where the researcher is interested in understanding the lived experiences of those in the population of interest (Henderson, 2006). “Human behavior is heavily mediated by the context in which it occurs” (p. 27). My study used phenomenology as a framework for exploring the experiences of low-income couples. To understand the context of their lives as well as their behaviors, an interpretive approach to studying this phenomenon was selected.

To date, low-income committed couples have received little interest in leisure research. A phenomenological approach to my research enabled me to examine the influence of recreation in the lives of the couples I studied.
Summary

In this chapter I have provided an overview of the literature related to marriage and cohabitation in the United States, to relational health, and to the role of recreation in facilitating marital strength. I have highlighted the need to study low-income couples, particularly by utilizing a phenomenological interpretive approach to my research. In the next chapter, I outline the methodology I used to gather data on the lived experience of couples in this study. I explain my rationale for my methodological selection, and I include specifics on sample selection, data collection and analysis protocol.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research has substantiated that stability in a marriage or committed relationship benefits the health and well-being of both the couple and their children (Amato & Afifi, 2006; Cowan, C, Cowan, P, Pruett, M., & Pruett, K., 2007; Parke, 2004; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Enjoyable recreational experiences can contribute to stability in adult relationships, which in turn may foster a more stable environment for their families (Aune & Wong, 2002). The benefits of couple recreation activities on their marital satisfaction have been well documented (Aron, et al., 2000; Aune & Wong, 2002; Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Reissman, Aron & Bergen, 1993).

Participation in recreation activities as a couple has potential for contributing positive benefits to individuals and to relationships. However, most of the research related to couples and families has been of white, middle-class samples (c.f., Agate, Zabriskie, Agate & Poff, 2009; Orthner & Mancini, 1991; Smith, Freeman & Zabriskie, 2009). Consequently, little is known about the effects of participation in recreation on the lives and relationships of low-income committed couples. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of recreation participation on relationships of committed low-income couples (i.e., those in married or married-like relationships).

My guiding questions were:

1. What types of recreation activities do low-income committed couples engage in, individually, together, and with their children, if any?

2. What value and meanings couples place on their recreation experiences?
3. What factors facilitate or hinder the couple’s engagement in recreation activities?

Because little is known about the role of recreation in the lives of this population, a modified grounded theory approach to research using in-depth interviews was appropriate for this initial exploration (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Purposive sampling was used to locate study participants who fit the study criteria: low-income and in a committed couple relationship. In-depth interviews with both partners were conducted. After coding, categories and themes were identified in the data, leading to interpretive theorizing (Charmaz, 2006).

Rationale for Methodological Strategy

When studying low-income committed couples, a researcher should strive to understand the individual, relational, and societal influences that affect the attitudes and behaviors of those participating in the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To compile a more complete picture of the complexities and influences of life, especially in the lives of people not frequently studied by leisure researchers, I used in-depth interviews for data collection. Participants in this study had the opportunity to express perspectives, to share their stories of the challenges, experiences, and value of leisure in their lives, and to explain how these experiences shaped and influenced their relationships. While other means of collecting qualitative data could have been used, in-depth interviews provided participants in this study an avenue for sharing detailed information that could not easily be observed or captured in a limited response survey alone.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory methodology was developed by sociologists Barney Glaser and Anslem Strauss (1967) as a means for discovering theory that emerges from data derived
from the lived experiences of participants in a study. A grounded theory study observes and inquires about “the actions, interactions and social process of people” through data collection that can lead to theory that describes “a plausible relationship among concepts and sets of concepts” (Creswell, 1998, p. 56). Through a grounded theory phenomenological study, a researcher has the opportunity to “study how people act and react to this phenomenon… [and eventually develop] theoretical propositions or hypotheses or … a visual picture of the theory” (Creswell, p. 56). By using a grounded theory approach to my study of low-income committed couples, I was able to gain a better understanding of the role of recreation participation in their lives than I could by using a closed response questionnaire. The emergent theory and theorizing from the data I collected through the in-depth interviews provided insights to inform future research as well as to aid practitioners in their service to their clientele.

Emergent theory comes from the collected and interpreted data, but is also influenced by the researcher’s own perspectives and experiences. In her view of grounded theory construction, Charmaz (2006) veered from the traditional Glaser and Strauss approach. Charmaz, in contrast, perceived grounded theory to be constructed by the researcher based on “our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices…. that any theoretical rendering offers an interpretative portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it” (p. 10). All research has elements of bias, as the researcher herself determines what will be studied, the research questions pursued, methodological choices made, and what aspects of the results are reported and in what way (Henderson, 2006). As with other methodological approaches used by leisure researchers, trustworthiness
in data analysis and reporting is essential, and requires “strategies to assure that unknown biases are not entering into research” (p. 188).

I took a modified constructivist grounded theory approach to my data analysis. I was able to interview couples a few at a time, but did the bulk of my transcribing and initial coding simultaneously. Ideally, I would have transcribed each interview within a few days of data collection and completed initial coding of those shortly thereafter. I did some memo writing after each interview, and periodically throughout the analysis process. Memo writing enabled me to reflect on the data collection process, the couples I interviewed, and the codes, categories, and themes. For example, I used memo writing to process my thoughts on the data I had collected as well as themes I was beginning to identify.

After transcribing Couple 15, I was struck by several things that relate to Orthner’s seminal work. First, this couple really enjoyed, respected, and honored one another…. Clearly, they were engaged in high levels of joint activities, and were reaping the benefits of these shared experiences. Curiously, however, both spoke at length about their own hobbies. Based on their explanations, I would say they each invested a significant amount of time in their individual leisure activities. As they spoke, I could see that they both knew quite a bit about the other one’s hobbies…. Several things are noteworthy about recreational benefits to this couple. First, this couple visibly delighted in one another, and in their marriage. Often they praised one another, laughed with one another, and encouraged the other to provide more information to me so I too could be impressed with their spouse’s accomplishments or endeavors. Second, each spouse was well acquainted with the details of their spouse’s individual
recreational pursuit. While each spouse pursued his or her own hobby, they clearly made a point of sharing their experience with their partner…. By sharing these experiences either as they unfolded or after the fact, this couple is converting their individual interests, pursued in a parallel activity format, into joint leisure activities. They are reaping the high level marital satisfaction benefits from their individual pursuits by transforming them into shared recreational experiences.

With this independent research experience behind me, I anticipate being more efficient and effective in my data collection and analysis process in future research projects.

**Researcher’s Role**

Because this study was exploratory in nature, participants and the interviewer were encouraged to see themselves as collaborators in this research (Aron, & Aron., 1997, Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A collaborative approach to data collection and discovery was appropriate because this study was investigating research questions about which little research has been done. Participants in this study were afforded the opportunity to speak for themselves, to share their life experiences and to explain the contexts in which they live, as “human behavior is heavily mediated by the context in which it occurs” (Henderson, 2006, p. 27). Particularly with traditionally understudied populations, researchers need to examine their motives for conducting the research and their understanding of cultural factors related to the population of interest (Wheeler, 2003). The researcher, too, needs to recognize the “positionality” she brings to the project (Henderson, 2006, p. 55). One’s socioeconomic status, race / ethnicity, gender and upbringing may affect how a researcher approaches the study, how she interacts with participants, and how she interprets the data. Because I
conducted in-depth interviews myself, I recognized that I became more effective at drawing out data from participants the more familiar and comfortable I became with the guiding questions and with my role as a researcher. Additionally, I recognized that I brought certain experiences and biases into this research. I was raised in a two-parent family. Although both my parents were employed, we had limited discretionary income, but a strong sense of family unity and community connectedness. I have been married to my husband for over 33 years, and together we raised two children to adulthood. Throughout the research process, I was cognizant of my personal experience and strived to be intentional to not judge those I studied, even when their lived experiences were markedly different from my own. For qualitative researchers, this process represents “a challenge that brings the whole self into the process” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 13).

Immersion in the research process by one’s whole self is often what draws researchers to pursue qualitative approaches to research (Charmaz, 2006). This draw has the potential to be a drawback as well, if the researcher is not deliberate and conscientious in disclosing the “location of self” in the entire research process (Hertz, 1997, p. viii). As a researcher, I recognized and differentiated between the “emic” voice of the people I interviewed, and my “etic” voice, with which I perceived and interpreted what I observed as I interviewed and interacted with study participants (Garson, 2008; Henderson, 2006,). I shared common experiences with some of the couples I was interviewing. With other couples, my life experience was different. As I met with couples and analyzed and interpreted data, I was reflective in an attempt to recognize when my personal biases, experiences and identities were prevailing. While researchers often select projects that have
personal value to them, I was committed to being honest and forthcoming about the personal perspectives that influenced my work (Hertz, 1997).

While conducting the interviews, I was mindful to view these sessions as part of a “collaborate communication process” through which “the sharing of personal and social experiences of both respondents and researchers… tell … their stories in the context of a developing relationship” (Ellis, Kiesinger, Tillmann-Healy, 1997, p. 121,). I observed a careful balance between wanting to understand the lives, situations, and viewpoints of those who participated in my study, and wanting to protect them from distress and harm. I recognized that what goes on in the public lives of couples may be very different from that which occurs in private. Therefore I developed prompts that were broad enough to allow participants themselves determine the degree of personal intimacy they disclosed. This strategy was particularly important because many of the couples were racially and relationally different from me. To maximize the potential of couple disclosure, I encouraged couples to contribute to our conversation more than I did.

*Sensitivity to Population of Interest*

Minority populations have been noticeably absent from marital research (Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004). The lack of minority participation in research may be due, in part, to how participants are recruited and qualifications for inclusion that may be in place. Therefore, I designed my recruitment strategy to maximize the likelihood of including minority couples in my study. I made a conscious effort to approach couples who were qualified for my study regardless of race or ethnicity, to assure that I gathered data that provided as complete a picture as possible of the lives of a diversity of low-income couples.
Because I used purposive snowball sampling techniques, I intentionally invited eligible couples of diverse cultures to participate in my study. To help build trust during interviews, I made a conscious effort to be culturally sensitive to each couple (Welsh, Ballard, Nash, Raiford, & Harrell, 1994). For example, if I was offered some refreshments, I graciously accepted the hospitality that was extended.

Distrust of researchers may influence also potential participants’ desire to be included in studies (Green, Bischoff, Coleman, Sperry, and Robinson-Zanartu, 2007; Huang & Coker, 2010; Nápoles-Springer et al., 2000). As I initiated interview sessions, I was intentional to create an atmosphere of trust with my participants. I tried to make the physical environment as comfortable as possible for them by allowing them to choose where the interview would take place: in their home or a public place of their choosing. I spoke with a calm, relaxed voice, using simple phrases to explain the study and to review the consent form in an effort to establish a casual conversational tone to the interview. This approach seemed to alleviate concerns and fears of my participants, and encouraged them to share freely and forthrightly.

Participant fears have been associated with a lack of understanding of the informed consent process and influence levels of trust and accuracy when sharing information about oneself (Corbie-Smith et al., 1999; Mason, 2005). Therefore, I made concerted effort to alleviate potential fears. In an easy to understand manner, I explained the purpose of the informed consent form and its benefit as a means of protecting the participant, not the researcher. As I developed my informed consent document and protocol, I used words that were clear and easy to understand for laypeople and to develop procedures that were comfortable, not intimidating (Mason, 2005).
Clearly explaining the purpose of my study to participants encouraged some of them to engage more fully in interviews. Participants that indicated they had a college degree or some post-baccalaureate education seemed to understand and appreciate the formal consent process. Others may have experienced a sense of altruism and desire to volunteer to participate in research because they perceived value for expanding knowledge or for contributing to the betterment of their family, of other couples, or the community (Corbie-Smith et al., 1999; Kerkorian et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2007). I explained to participating couples that the goal of my study was to gain a better understanding of the role of recreation in the lives of low-income couples. This information would then be used to assist recreation and social service providers to better facilitate educational and recreational experiences that could enrich the lives and relationships of low-income couples.

Providing financial compensation for participating in my research project also encouraged the involvement of these couples. With many of the couples, I had never met one or both of the partners. With arms crossed and bodies leaning away from me, some partners gave visual cues that they were reluctant participants in the study. For them, the $50 gift card to a regional grocery store chain appeared to be their primary motivation for participation through much of the interview.

Study Characteristics

Ethical Issues (Institutional Review Board)

I secured approval for my study through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at North Carolina State University. Participants in my study were adults over the age of 18. The in-depth interviews were not inherently physically risky endeavors, and the interview
guide I used was not of a sensitive nature, I gained exempt approval for my study. Couples were given consent forms to read, which I reviewed with them before they signed at the start of the interview session, in accordance with IRB guidelines. Each partner was given a signed copy of the form to keep; the other I retained. (Materials that were approved by IRB are included as Appendix A - E.)

In addition to the IRB requirements, I was cognizant of personal ethical issues regarding my study. In establishing rapport with my participants, I recognized my responsibilities to them (Henderson, 2006). From the initial explanation of the study to potential participants, I assured them of the confidential nature of my study. I explained that I would use quotes from the interviews, but not identify them by name or share information that would make it obvious that they were the informant. While I worked to establish a comfortable, “friendly” rapport with them, I was also honest in my interactions with them so they did not have unrealistic expectations for continued contact after the study. While I was interested in promoting healthy, stable committed couple relationships, I reminded myself that I was not a trained family therapist, and therefore not qualified or equipped to provide personal or relational counseling.

Study Sample

The population of interest for this study was low-income adults in committed relationships, either married, or in a married-like relationship for at least one year, living in an urban community in the Southeast United States. Research shows that the majority of cohabiting couples in the U.S. live together for less than one year before splitting (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Popenoe, 2008). “Cohabiting partners tend to have a weaker sense of couple
identity, less willingness to sacrifice for the other, and a lower desire to see the relationship go long term” (Popenoe, 2008, p. 13). Therefore, I recruited married couples, or those who identified themselves as committed couples and had been together for a year, to participate in this study.

My intent had been to attract married and cohabiting couples. As I began recruiting and interviewing couples, I realized that couple relationships among low-income pairs were more complex than I had anticipated. Twenty-five couples participated in this study. Thirteen of these couples were married. Couples had been married from 3 to 53 years, with most ranging from 7 to 21 years of marriage. Of the twelve unmarried couples, four had been together for just under one year. I included them in the study because I believed they would provide important perspectives as recently connected committed couples. Three couples did not live together, yet identified themselves as committed couples. Two of the unmarried couples and one of the married couples were not living together at the time of our interview. (More detailed information on these couples can be found in Chapter 4 and in Appendix F.)

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2010) publishes poverty level figures each year. These income guidelines are used to determine eligibility for federal relief that provide subsidies or support for people with limited financial resources. Programs determine eligibility by calculating a percentage above the annual announced poverty level. For this study I used one and one-half, or 150%, of the federal government-determined poverty level to qualify for my study, as that was the criterion used by the food pantries. Couples with combined incomes of less than $22,065 were eligible for my study. A family of
four was considered low-income with a combined income of less than $33,525. Because of how they were recruited, couples in my study were prescreened to be low-income.

Participants for this study were recruited intentionally to attract low-income couples. I have assisted with a bi-monthly local food pantry for several years, and have established a friendly relationship with many of the regular attendees. Some of these regulars included couples and those in committed relationships, though often only one partner frequented the food pantry. Shoppers at the food pantry must meet the requirements of the low income criteria as derived from U.S. government guidelines (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2010), and therefore met the income qualifications of this study. I also enlisted participants from a sister church in another part of town that offered a food pantry on alternate Saturdays that had the same income stipulations.

My pre-existing relationships helped me recruit participants. Because of my association with the food pantry, I was able to recruit potential participants directly or through them as they informed others of my desire to interview eligible couples (Nápoles-Springer et al., 2000; Walsh et al., 1994). Marital or committed couple stipulations were made orally and in writing to further identify eligible participants from within these sources. Announcements were made at the food pantries, with informational fliers distributed at that time. (See Appendix A - E) Eligible food pantry attendees were encouraged to participate and to pass along the information to neighbors, friends or family members who would be eligible for the study.

Participants in this study were purposively selected as “representational of phenomena” (Henderson, 2006, p. 172) of being low-income and in a committed couple
relationship. Within this pool of potential participants, I drew a convenience sample of couples. I was able to provide couples a $50 gift card to a regional grocery store chain for their involvement in the study. Funding for these gift cards was obtained through a grant from my academic department. Providing this incentive was effective for recruiting participants, and appropriate for acknowledging the value of their contributions (Freimuth Quinn, Thomas, Cole, Zook, & Duncan, 2001; Huang & Coker, 2010).

Data Collection

Twenty-five couples contributed data through their interviews. Twelve of the 25 couples had been shoppers at the food pantry operated by my church. Two of these couples were interviewed in a quiet space near the food distribution area after they had finished shopping. Nine of the couples were recruited from the sister church food pantry. Four of these were interviewed on site at the church. Two couples were members of the researcher’s church at the time and volunteered to participate. The remaining two couples were referred by one of the couples that had been recruited from one of the food pantries.

I wanted couples to be in a comfortable environment for their interviews. Participants were given the option of where they wanted me to meet them, namely in their homes, or in the community. I had anticipated problems in arranging interviews with couples. With the exception of a few couples, scheduling times and places to meet couples for the interview was not difficult. I was able to interview seven of the couples on site at one of the food pantries. One couple met me at the café inside a bookstore, and another at the Y. I interviewed one couple in the hospital because the wife had become ill and they were anxious to earn the $50 grocery store gift card. The other 15 couples were interviewed in
their homes. The interview sessions that took place in participants’ homes allowed me to observe couple interactions in a comfortable and familiar setting and to “observe them in the surroundings they had created” (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995, p. 11). Six of the nine couples with children in elementary school or younger were interviewed in their homes. Only one of these couples had arranged for childcare to minimize the potential of being distracted by their offspring. In general, children who were in the home spent most of the interview session in another part of the residence from where we meet, to ensure confidentiality of information collected and to safeguard the children (Gorin, Hooper, Dyson & Cabral, 2008).

Introductions were scheduled at a place, day, and time convenient to the couples. I felt this consideration of convenience to the participating couples communicated to them that I respected their time and valued them sharing their experiences with me (Huang & Coker, 2010; Mason, 2005).

Methodologies for Studying Couples

Collecting data from couples was essential for understanding their lived experiences, but this also had challenges. Because researchers have had difficulty getting both partners together (c.f., Kalmijn and Bernasco, 2001), researchers have used alternate strategies. Some researchers have collected data from only one individual, from partners separately, or from both partners together (Churchill et al., 2007; Orthner & Rose, 2009). Studies on marital satisfaction have frequently collected data independently from both partners in a relationship (c.f., Aron et al., 2000; Baldwin, J., Ellis, & Baldwin, B., 1999; Orthner, 1975). Gathering information from each partner independently of the other partner was recommended to collect data that might be perceived as sensitive as a means to provide more accurate
responses, especially in couples who may have low levels of trust between them (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008).

Because the purpose of my study, however, was to understand the role of recreation in the lives of low-income couples, I felt it was essential to interview partners together. Observing couples together allowed me to better understand their lives (c.f., Huston, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Stamp, 1994). I was able to investigate interpersonal aspects of the couple relationship rather than merely gaining intrapersonal perspectives from only one of the partners (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). “Because husbands’ and wives’ psychological makeup, knowledge structures, and attitudes are reflected in their behavior (as well as in their reactions to each other’s behavior)… each spouse provides a context for the other” (Huston, 2000, p. 314). Although some studies of couples have interviewed partners separately (c.f., Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Kurdek, 2005), I found the interaction between partners during the data collection process to be valuable data. For example, some couples like Kevon and KK recalled episodes of playing hide and go seek together using loud and animated descriptions of their antics. Others, like Maude and Harold smiled and held hands as they reminisced about sitting on the porch swing together before they were married, over 53 years ago. Reactions to memories of recreational experiences and interpersonal interactions that occurred during interviews provided critical data. I would have missed these insights if partners had been interviewed independently. Interviewing both partners together provided information regarding the health of the relationship as well as stimulating responses to the guiding and follow-up questions.
Interview Procedures

I began each interview session with a welcome and introductions, review and signing of human subject consent forms, reminder of the possible necessity of a follow-up interview, and brief overview of the study purpose and session. I then initiated the in-depth semi-structured interview with couples participating together. Interviews were digitally recorded on two machines to assure the conversation was captured (Berg, Trost, Schneider & Allison, 2001; Charmaz, 2006). During interviews, the couples often recalled aspects of recreation experiences they had forgotten, enabling them to “collectively make sense” of their experience (Stamp, 1994, p. 92). Care was taken to assure that each partner was speaking for his or her own self (Henderson, 2006). Responses to guiding questions were followed up as needed to clarify the perspectives and experiences of study participants.

The development of the interview guide was determined by the underlying theoretical model that frames this study. Following a phenomenological protocol, questions were worded to focus responses to a particular topic, but were encompassing enough to allow participants the freedom to describe their experiences without feeling they might be judged as having given a right or wrong answer. Guiding questions and associated prompts were worded to direct the conversation to particular aspects of their lives. Prompts were designed to help me gain an understanding the facilitators and challenges to recreation participation that couples experienced.

The interview guide was designed to “invite detailed discussion of topic” (Charmaz, 2006, p.26). (See Appendices A - E for the IRB approved interview guide.) To build comfort and trust, initial interview questions were general in nature and invited couples to tell me
how long they had been together, how they met and early recreation experiences together. The interview then moved into current activities and what they felt was important to them about participating. Couples were invited to share hindrances and facilitators to their recreation. If there were children living in the home, questions guided them to explain how children influenced their recreation. To conclude the interview, couples were invited to share other information they thought might help me better understand the influence recreation had in their lives.

After each interview, I took notes of my observations and impressions during and after the session. Particular attention was given to recording visual observations of the couple’s behaviors and interactions, which could not be detected by the digital recorder. During the course of the interview, socio-demographic information was gathered including: marital status, number and ages of children or others living in the household, employment status, and access to a personal vehicle.

At the conclusion of the interview session, couples were thanked for their involvement and for sharing information about their lives and relationships. Couples were also reminded that follow-up interviews might be needed to provide clarity or further explanation. Providing an incentive for participating in this study was appropriate, given the low-income status of these couples, and given the length of interview session and possibility of additional follow-up sessions.

Data Analysis

I used a modified grounded theory approach to data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After each interview, I wrote observational notes to debrief the experience.
and record data that were not captured on the tape recorder. For example, I recorded what was occurring at their home when I arrived (e.g., watching television, or only one partner being present when I arrived), and observations from the interview (e.g., body language or placement of people in the room).

For each couple, I transcribed verbatim data collected on the digital recorders. To facilitate this, I tried unsuccessfully to use voice recognition software. Once I was able to secure a foot pedal to control the playback of recordings, transcription writing became much more efficient. After several transcriptions were complete, I began initial coding using MaxQDA software. My initial coding was line-by-line coding resulting in approximately 2800 codes. I used in vivo codes when I felt what a participant had said could more effectively capture the meaning of what they were describing than a code I could assign. For example, Dalton and Mitzy encouraged and supported each other’s hobbies. Dalton effectively conveyed the pride he felt for his wife and the relational benefit he received when he proclaimed, “And I’m married to her!”

Initial and focus coding occurred simultaneously over time. I was able to interview 17 couples in the first seven months of data collection. After these data had been transcribed and coded, I used focused coding to begin synthesizing initial codes into related categories, creating approximately 85 focused codes. As I collected new data, I executed line-by-line coding and continued with focused coding as data analysis continued. Periodically during this process I wrote memos reflecting on relationships I was beginning to interpret through the data. I finished my data collection a few months later, and transcribed and coded the remainder of the interviews. In my last six interviews, I intentionally guided follow up
questions to address theoretical hunches I was seeing through data analysis, which allowed
me to capitalize on the grounded theory technique. In addition to data on my central guiding
questions, I sought clarification regarding the value associated with planned activities, the
role of transportation in facilitating recreation, utilitarian activities including cooking, and
spontaneity in recreation pursuits.

Once data had been coded and categorized, I began more focused efforts in theme-
building and theorizing. Memo writing helped me to sort through my ideas and bring clarity
to the two central themes. When my memo writing shifted from word processing on the
computer to taking a pencil to the flip chart paper that lined the walls of my stair well,
organization of couple recreation into the CORC model as a theme with several subthemes
became apparent. Through continued refinement, analysis, and theorizing, I interpreted the
value of shared couple recreation to couples during and after the experience. These two
themes provided a means for initial theorizing as I continued interpreting what these concepts
meant in light of the phenomenon of low-income couples. Reviewing the data related to
hindrances and facilitators of recreation (e.g., finances, transportation, support, children,
disabilities, attitude, and spontaneity) informed my theorizing further. Chapter 5 contains the
products of my interpretive theorizing.

Trustworthiness

Through my data collection and analysis process, I tried to minimize possible bias
and thereby assure as much trustworthiness as possible. Couples who met the criteria for my
study were invited to participate. In this way I minimized the likelihood that I would try to
recruit only couples that I knew, felt comfortable with, or preferred over others. As I
conducted interviews I made intentional efforts not to ask leading questions. Rather, I encouraged participants to speak freely and to provide clarification when needed. As I analyzed data I began with as many codes and categories that represented the data as honestly and completely as I could. I had to continually check myself, making sure that I was not trying to conclude that my data fit into existing theory, which could have ended the depth of analysis and would result in premature theorizing (Henderson, 2006).

Rigor within qualitative approaches is associated with trustworthiness (Henderson, 2006). Rigor includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Morrow, 2005). To promote credibility I developed guiding questions that would allow participants to contribute data that reflected their lives and experiences. I worded interview guide questions to provide focus but tried to keep them broad enough to allow free expression from the couples. In this way I attempted to collect data that was as valid as possible. The recruitment strategy I used also helped facilitate a level of trust with my participants. Because I regularly volunteered at one of the food pantries where participants were recruited, I was able to establish a level of trust with them as an interviewer. Henderson (2006) cautions that interviewers against becoming too close with participants as this could affect credibility. Even though I knew some of the individuals that participated I did not have a close enough relationship with any of them to have compromised credibility. As I conducted the data collection and analysis, I reviewed the data and initial codes of my first few interviews with the chair of my dissertation committee. As an external reviewer, she provided objectivity in her assessment of my process and analysis. She brought an outside perspective during analyzing and theorizing phases that helped assure credibility in my study.
Transferability relates to generalizability concerning the development of themes and theorizing (Henderson, 2006). In particular, data gathered from participants allowed me to think about how the data contributed to existing literature as well as how the findings might contribute to the body of literature about recreation. To facilitate transferability, I have given specific details in my description of participants, my recruitment strategy, data collection and analysis and theorizing process. I have also been honest in sharing information about myself and my biases to offer a comprehensive picture of my research. In this way, I hope readers will be better able to determine the extent to which my findings are transferable.

Having data accurately and adequately reflected in study findings is important for assuring dependability in research (Henderson, 2006). I used an audit trail and aimed to chronologically account for my research activities, although in retrospect, I should have included more details. After each interview I did record my observations and impressions to serve as a reference related to the lives of the couples. Periodically during the analysis process I engaged in memo writing to help me process what I was seeing and to begin formulating ideas that related to themes, theorizing, and personal reflections on the lives of low-income couples and of the research process.

Confirmability in qualitative studies assures that analysis accurately conveys the original data rather than biases or beliefs of the researcher (Morrow, 2005). Similar to dependability, I described in detail how the study was designed and modified, how data were coded and analyzed, and how theorizing developed as noted earlier in this chapter. As I reported my findings, I drew directly from data to illustrate and support my suppositions. I selected quotes that were indicative of the lives of participants. Throughout the analysis and
reporting process, I conferred with my committee chair. As an objective outsider, she drew my attention to areas where my bias could influence data collection, analysis, or reporting. Accurately representing the lives, experiences, and relationships of couples in my data and throughout the analysis process was a priority for me. Although I brought my personal experience and preconceptions into this research, I endeavored to be credible in my research and honoring of my participants. For my participants and myself, I sought to represent the data collected as honestly and accurately as possible. These interviews enabled me to gain an understanding about couple’s recreational behaviors and the meanings they associated with those experiences.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of recreation participation on the relationships of committed low-income couples. Focusing research on low-income couples provided insights into a traditionally underrepresented group. A modified grounded theory approach to this research allowed me to construct insights into the behaviors, meanings, and value of recreation for low-income couples. Chapter 3 provided an explanation of the research methods and strategies I used in this study, as well as the rationale for their use. In the following chapter, I present my findings and provide an interpretation of them.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of my study was to explore the role of recreation in the lives of low-income committed couples. Guiding questions included the types of recreation activities engaged in, the importance placed on individual and shared activities, and what aspects might facilitate or hinder recreation participation. In this chapter, I provide data analysis from the 25 couples who participated in this study. Through the data analysis process, two main themes emerged: that couple recreation for low-income partners took on various forms, and that couples that valued the relational benefits of shared couple recreation effectively negotiated challenges to participation. Subthemes related to couple recreation also emerged and are discussed. I begin the chapter with a description of study participants, definitions of key terms, and then introduce the Continuum of Orientations to Recreation for Couples (CORC) framework to describe the data gathered. An explanation of CORC and each element of the model are included as well as examples of couple activities in each category. Other factors associated with couple recreation are also discussed, including the role of finances, transportation, personal limitations, the influence of children and extended family members. The value of shared couple recreation is also discussed. The chapter concludes with a summary of findings.

Life Contexts of Participating Couples

To explore the role of recreation in the lives of low-income committed couples, I conducted semi-structured interviews with couples. Announcements were made at local food pantries and flyers were distributed stating I was looking for committed couples to interview.
For the purpose of this study, “committed couples” was defined as married, cohabiting, or in a married-like relationship. A table summarizing couple characteristics is included in Appendix F. An overview of couple characteristics is included here to provide a context about the lives of the couples who participated in this study.

The couples represented a variety of relationship make-ups. One couple had been married for 53 years, beginning when she was 17 and he was 18 years old. Other couples had been living together for less than a year when I interviewed them. Several, including one couple who had been married for 11 years, were not currently living together, yet considered themselves to be in a committed relationship. Ages of participants ranged from 21 to 71 years old.

Most of the couples I interviewed were born and raised in the United States. Two couples were from Northern Africa, and one from the Middle East. The partners in one Latino couple had been born in different countries and met in the United States. Three couples were bi-racial: black men with white women partners. One couple was bi-cultural: a Latino man and his Caucasian wife. In thirteen of the couples interviewed, both partners were black. In four couples, both were white.

Twelve of the 25 couples I interviewed were legally married, including the four white couples, the bi-cultural couple, African and Middle-Eastern couples, and four of the black couples. One of the married couples and two of the not-married couples did not live together. The married couple was not currently living together because they appeared to be experiencing marital conflict, so the wife was living with her parents while the husband was in a homeless shelter or living with friends temporarily until their issues cleared themselves
up. One of the not-married couples was not living together because his disability benefits included a housing voucher that was valid on a one-bedroom apartment only. Because his partner had a daughter, a one-bedroom apartment was inadequate for this family of three. The woman and baby lived with her mother in an apartment along with the woman’s brother, sister, and sister’s young daughter. In the other couple who did not live together, the woman resided as the care taker for her brother and his wife who were blind. The man in this relationship rotated his residency between the woman’s, his mother’s, and his brother’s homes.

The 13 non-married couples were in various stages of their relationships. Five of the couples that were not married had been together for a year or less at the time of interview, but they considered themselves in a committed relationship. One of these couples had been together as a couple previously, then broke up and were together again. One cohabiting couple who had been together for less than two years was expecting their first child together. They look forward to getting married someday, but in the woman’s home country where they have family members and friends with whom they can celebrate. One other cohabiting couple said they had been engaged, but financial troubles necessitated their pawning her ring and postponing wedding planning. None of the five longer-term cohabiting couples mentioned any intentions of legalizing their unions. All 25 couples were in heterosexual relationships.

Just as marital status varied among couples, so did their residences. A few of the couples lived in houses. One couple lived with the husband’s elderly mother in her house. Two other couples shared a house together. One couple owned a townhome, and another rented a small house. Most of the couples lived in apartments, with some subsidized by the
municipal housing authority. Others had federal housing subsidies, with the remainder supported by their earned incomes.

Employment status varied among the couples interviewed. In five of the couples, both partners had full-time or steady employment. Jobs ranged from food service, cab driving, public works, retail, and office security. Of the 20 men whose partners did not work outside the home, eight held steady or somewhat steady jobs. Their partners either stayed home with young children, or were disabled in some way that restricted their ability to perform or hold down jobs. Approximately half of the couples were unemployed at the time of the interview. Many of these individuals were seeking employment, but had been unsuccessful in finding work. They indicated that the recent downturn in the economy played a factor in the limited job opportunities for some. Others were challenged by their lack of reliable transportation. One admitted to having a criminal record, which he felt made him a high risk candidate for many potential employers, even for day laborer positions. Three of the couples mentioned at least one of the partners was retired. In two of the couples, both partners were legally blind, and either did not work, could no longer work, or worked at a sheltered workshop for people with visual impairments.

Not surprisingly, in every couple where at least one partner held a steady job, the couple had their own means of transportation. Most frequently, the couple shared one vehicle between the two partners. Of couples who were not steadily employed, two of the retired couples had private vehicles. Another couple had a vehicle that enabled the man to sell goods at the flea market from time to time. Of the eleven couples with children present in the home, only two of these families lacked personal vehicles. Neither of these couples was employed.
Children residing in the households of interviewed couples ranged from 1 to 19 years of age. Eleven of the 25 couples had at least one child living with them. Young children, elementary school-aged or younger, lived with nine of these couples, including the one child who lived with her mother, as described above. One woman was expecting the couple’s first child. Both she and her partner had at least one child from previous relationships; one of whom lived with them. Six other couples indicated that at least one partner had adult children or children that did not regularly live with them.

Recreation in the Lives of Low-Income Committed Couples

Just as the demographics and living situations varied among couples, so did their recreation experiences. Activities included independently engaged individual recreation pursuits, diversionary parallel activities, family or other-centered shared pursuits, and highly engaged relationship-focused endeavors. Their engagements occurred both in and around the home and beyond the home environment.

To provide clarity and consistency throughout the description of findings, a few definitions were established. *Couple recreation* referred to activities that couples found enjoyable and that they engaged in together. *Shared recreation* or *shared couple recreation* referred to engagement in couple recreation that generally required couples to interact and communicate with one another as they recreated. Activities such as television or movie watching, which generally did not stimulate much communication or concentrated attention on one’s partner, were considered couple recreation, rather than shared recreation, for the purposes of this study. Couple recreation, then, was used as an overarching term to refer to enjoyable activities that the couple did together, while shared recreation was used to denote
those activities that also required high levels of interaction and communication while pursued.

Throughout the paper, I use the term *home-based recreation* as well. For the purpose of this study, home-based recreation was considered to be enjoyable activities performed in and around the home, in the yard, or in the immediate neighborhood, which were generally pursued spontaneously or with little planning. Depending on the amount of available time, home-based activities were of short or long duration, and were often expense-free.

**Continuum of Orientations to Recreation for Couples (CORC)**

Couples in this study tended to participate in a variety of recreation activities. Involvement ranged from individual or parallel to joint activities (Orthner, 1976), depending on the particular day, stage of life, or intrapersonal or interpersonal conditions. While Orthner’s categories of couple recreation patterns were helpful, they did not fully encapsulate the complexities of recreation behaviors of low-income couples in my study.

To better understand the role of recreation in couples’ lives, a Continuum of Orientations to Recreation for Couples (CORC) emerged from the data that illustrated the types of recreational pursuits engaged in by couples in this study and were categorized based on where couples placed their focus during the activities (See Figure 1). Data from the couples indicated three orientations to their recreation activities: independent, others, and shared couple orientations. Definitions of types of activities for each cell are included with the continuum. Full explanations of each category with support from the data follow this continuum overview. The vertical dash lines on the continuum indicate the permeability between each category, allowing couples to engage in a variety of activities independently,
together, and/or with others depending on the situation, day, or time. Couples tended to participate in recreation activities in more than one orientation, and possibly more than one category within orientations.
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<th>Independent Orientation</th>
<th>Others Orientation</th>
<th>Shared Couple Orientation</th>
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<td>Individual pursuits</td>
<td>Few engagements</td>
<td>Diversionary couple</td>
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Figure 1. Continuum of Orientations to Recreation for Couples (CORC)

**Independent Orientation:** Recreation activities reflected individual needs or desires; partner was excluded or incidental to individual activities

*Individual pursuits:* One partner pursued recreation experiences for his or her own benefit, which generally did not benefit the couple relationship.

*Few engagements in couple recreation:* Individual partners engaged in few shared couple recreation activities together and tended to not value these engagements. In some cases family or group activities took precedence over couple-only recreation.

*Diversionary couple recreation:* Partners acknowledged that they engaged in couple activities, but these activities required little meaningful communication between partners (e.g., TV or movie watching).

**Others Orientation:** Recreation activities reflected high value on interaction with others in addition to one’s partner (e.g., immediate or extended family members, and/or other community groups).
Group experiences: Couple provided service to others, which enhanced the couple relationship by sharing experiences together. Service occurred in the home or community, with or without children or extended family.

Family recreation: Couple recreation experiences were embedded in activities with immediate and/or extended family members, whether at home or in the community. Family activities often led to high levels of individual +/- or shared satisfaction through the couple’s investments in family members.

Shared Couple Orientation: Recreation activities reflected high value placed on partner and on the relationship.

Support for partner’s recreation: A partner demonstrated active support for partner’s interests by watching, listening, assisting during, and/or talking about experiences together after the activity.

Utilitarian couple experiences: A couple engaged in utilitarian activities (e.g., preparing meals, doing yard work), seeing these activities as recreational because they were shared experiences. Emphasis of the activity was generally more focused on the task than on nurturing the couple’s relationship, but couples considered this time together as important.

Impromptu shared couple recreation: Couple recreation was playful and/or creative with couples demonstrating a focus on one another and on strengthening their relationship. These activities occurred primarily in and around the home.

Planned shared couple recreation: Couple invested time, resources, and/or energy (e.g., to secure childcare engagements) to engage in recreation experiences that
focused the couple on one another and on strengthening their relationship. These activities occurred in the community or in and around the home.

Though the CORC model was illustrated with a linear design, couples did not necessarily exist in only one cell in the continuum. For example, many couples engaged in diversionary television watching, played in the yard with the family, and engaged in impromptu or planned shared couple recreation at different times. The CORC model provided a visual representation of the various orientations from which partners and couples approached their recreation participation. The model also illustrated the framework from which I describe my findings in this chapter. In each of the orientations and categories, I provide supporting data and discuss facilitators and ways in which couples negotiated challenges to couple recreation.

*Independent Orientation to Recreation*

The first orientation of couple activities in the CORC model included activities where the focus was on the individual. Three categories described this independent orientation. The categories under the Independent Orientation heading included activities that were engaged in as individuals, to the exclusion of one’s partner, few engagements together, or diversionary with little if any interaction between partners.

Some partners confided they did few activities together as a couple. Couples with young children in the home, for example, often explained they had restricted their involvement in couple recreation in favor of family recreation. For many of these parents, family recreation was their primary outlet for couple recreation experiences. With limited
financial resources, these couples invested in activities that provided benefit to the entire family rather than to just the couple.

Though not all, some of the independent pursuits mentioned by couples were activities that enriched one partner, enabling her or him to be more refreshed or fulfilled and, therefore, a more engaged partner after the solo activity. Many couples identified recreation activities such as movie or television watching as frequent couple pursuits. These diversion activities provided couples with time together, but often contributed little to the enrichment of the relationship. The focus of recreational pursuits in the Independent Orientation category was on the individual within the couple. Subsequently, investments in the couple relationship were of lesser importance than the individual activities.

*Individual Pursuits “Mellow Me Out”*

Individual pursuits were described as recreation by couples with varying motivations and outcomes. For many couples, individual pursuits supplemented couple activities, often serving to invigorate or “mellow out” individual partners. Some individuals encouraged their partners to pursue recreation activities alone because they had no desire to participate in that particular activity. In a few cases, one partner preferred individual pastimes as a way to provide temporary distance from the other. Consequently, some participation in individual activities was also included in the Shared Couple Recreation Orientation. However, when a partner actively viewed or supported the participant, either during the activity or after, the experience more appropriately was classified as Support for Partner’s Interest. This category will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.
The primary focus of the Independent Orientation activities was on the individual. In some instances, a residual benefit to the couple resulted from the improved mental or physical health that the participating partner then brought back to the relationship. Often, these activities provided a cathartic outlet, which enabled them to release pent up tensions or creatively express feelings, freeing them to connect with their partners more fully.

Unwinding from the challenges of the day motivated some partners to engage in individual activities. At the end of a long workday, LeBron used basketball as a means to shift gears mentally as well as for getting some exercise. “I just shoot around, work up a sweat, and I’m alright… It mellows me out,” he explained. LeBron’s partner, Gloria, on the other hand, found movie watching at home a more relaxing way to unwind after her day as a security officer.

Individual activities provided physical and emotional outlets for some partners. Creative writing whether at the library or at home provided personal satisfaction to both Eddie and to Barb. They said that their enriching individual activities gave them a sense of personal satisfaction that enabled them to engage with their respective partners more fully later. Eddie enjoyed going to the library, even when he could not convince Lori to join him. He explained his motivation to go, saying, “I’m a writer. I write books.” Ever since he was a young boy, Eddie wanted to be an author. This dream propelled him to engage in futuristic fiction writing as a fulfilling intellectual individual pursuit. Barb, too, felt a compulsion to write. Her play writing provided creative and emotional outlets that were healthy for her individually, which in turn appeared to make her more emotionally available to her children and to her partner, James.
Some couples enjoyed time apart because they had different social needs. As much as she enjoyed her partner, Leroy, sometimes Sandy needed some time alone. “I go out a lot,” she summarized. Leroy was content to stay at home. He had endured his share of harsh weather while he and Sandy were homeless. Leroy explained, “We were out there for a while, in the rain and the cold and stuff…. If I don’t have to be out there, I’m not goin’!” Still, he encouraged Sandy to go out for walks on her own so she could get exercise and fresh air.

Pete liked to take walks, too, but more so to engage in social connections. Pearl explained that her husband might visit an older neighbor down the street who had been a significant friend of his family since he had been a boy. Pete assured me, “She always knows where I’m at though… I make sure to tell her where I’m going.” Even though partners in this couple were spending time independent of the other, they conveyed their respect for one another and value for their relationship by maintaining open communications about their respective activities. Pearl, for her part, engaged in social activities without her husband by being active in senior adult trips offered by the local park and recreation department.

Some couples used their time apart from their partners to engage in enriching individual activities. Akila took advantage of her alone time to practice her needlework skills. When her husband was at work and daughter at school, Akila pursued her artistic outlet to unwind from her shift at work. Preferring a physical outlet in her time alone, Lindsay was able to run or work out regularly because she left her preschooler at home with her husband before he headed to work in the afternoons. Physical excursion gave Lindsay the energy she needed to resume child care duties.
In other couples, one partner sought time away from the other. For example Simon’s recreation activities were often solo in nature. He enjoyed reading, working on the computer at the desk in the bedroom, and watching television in the living room. At times, SaFire watched with Simon, but she could not take his marathon TV viewing. She explained, “He just wants to see it back to back to back to back, till it’s time to go to sleep.” Simon’s dissatisfaction with his relationship appeared to diminish his desire to actively pursue shared recreation with SaFire.

*Few Engagements in Couple Recreation*

A number of couples admitted to engaging in few couple-only recreation activities. Limited engagement in couple recreation, for some, was attributed to a lack of interest, ability, or willingness to engage in shared recreation experiences. For others, engaging in activities without one’s partner seemed to signal discontent in the relationship. For other couples, family or group recreation was substituted for couple-only activities.

*Lack of ability.* The mental health and attitude of one individual affected both partners’ lives. For example, KK talked about hindrances she and her partner Kevon faced, which limited their shared recreation. As she spoke, KK acknowledged her diligence in taking her prescribed medications directly affected her mental health and the couple’s ability to enjoy activities together. She admitted:

> Not taking my medicine hinders me! Because I’m not like myself, and I don’t want to be around nobody…. If I don’t take my medicine, now that hinders me! But I take my medicine every single day because I know I need it.
Kevon acknowledged, too, that his attitude and emotional health had a facilitating or hindering role in their shared recreation. He accepted his responsibility as a hindrance at times:

Me. If I don’t be feeling like it…. She tries to do recreation stuff more than I do. ‘Cause I be like, “I don’t feel like it. Let’s do it tomorrow. I don’t feel like it.” So I kind of stop some of that sometimes.

*Lack of interest.* Some couples expressed disappointment when one partner felt shared recreation was less important than they did. Other individuals expressed annoyance at their partner’s unwillingness to engage in desired activities together. Shared recreation was infrequently pursued for some couples because it did not always yield positive results, especially for couples that appeared to have strained relationships. For example, while Valerie longed for deeper, healthier connections with her husband, the outings she and her husband took on occasion to the Rose Garden were gambles for her. She confessed she never knew if the time together would end in greater cohesion or increased conflict for them as a couple.

Because couples are comprised of two individuals, partners sometimes assessed the importance of couple recreation differently, and they had different interests. Throughout their interview, Samantha and Pedro expressed frustration at each other due to the lack of appreciation and understanding of the other one’s perspectives. Yet, as they talked about their past experiences, they seemed to begin to understand each other and their recreation motivations. Having grown up with limited recreation opportunities and experiences, Samantha found no pleasure in being pushed beyond what was comfortable for her. Carefree
Pedro, on the other hand, was continually active and engaged in social recreation experiences all throughout his childhood and youth. Pedro’s irritation with Samantha’s lack of desire and initiative in facilitating fun for the couple was evident. Pedro was desperate to have Samantha initiate and engage in recreation. Because of her upbringing, Samantha had few ideas of what she could do, and she initially said she saw little value in wasting limited resources on recreation.

During the interview with Samantha and Pedro, we talked about their upbringings, their marriage, and the potential benefits of going out together as a couple. As Samantha talked, a sense of hopefulness seemed to arise regarding developing a more positive and healthy relationship facilitated by couple recreation:

> We’re so different. And I’m so extreme over here, and he’s coming from extreme over here [she gestures with arms open wide], that we both have to rub off on each other, so we can meet in the middle…. so that I wouldn’t be sooooo hard about my stuff, and he wouldn’t be so lax … So we meet in the middle and… I can do your thing, and you can do my thing, and we’re both OK with it. Instead of you being bored ‘cause you’re home, and I have no ideas about what to do.

*Lack of willingness.* Even when one partner did have ideas about what would be fun to do as a couple, the other partner may not have been willing to participate. CeCe, who had been active in her youth, spoke with a tone of resentment toward her partner, Durrell, because of his apparent unwillingness to engage in activities she enjoyed doing. With Durrell in the room, she explained:
I’m going to be honest…. Durrell, I don’t know what his issue is. He doesn’t spend time with me doing the stuff I like to do. I spend a lot of time, you know, doing stuff he likes, but the reciprocation’s not there. … It’s not there like it used to be. We used to do a lot of stuff that each other liked…. Compromise helps build the relationship stronger…. If I do what you like, then sacrifice some time to do what I like, too!

Earlier in their relationship, they indicated that each partner was willing to engage in the other’s preferred activities. CeCe was disappointed that Durrell did not acquiesce as often as she when deciding on joint recreation activities now that they were several years into their relationship. This lack of willingness to compromise when selecting recreation activities obviously created negative feelings in CeCe toward her partner.

For some couples, engaging in independent activities signaled dissatisfaction in the relationship. For example, Simon’s list of recreation activities (i.e., watching television, reading, or working on the computer), were almost always pursued independently from SaFire, his partner of 11 years. When I asked him what he felt had held the two of them together for so long, he pointed to SaFire’s 12-year old son, who was 6-months old when they came together as a couple, and said, “Him.” While he and SaFire did engage in some forms of recreation together, Simon most frequently participated in individual activities. Likewise, Rashon and his wife, Valerie, shared few couple recreation activities. Rashon had a tendency to leave home for extended periods when there was “negativity” in their relationship. His frequent absence limited opportunities for them to recreate as a couple.

Rashon’s aversion to negative feelings not only affected their couple recreation, but also whether or not he would live with his wife. When the couple had disagreements, or if
discussions were needed to come to a compromise or solution to a shared problem, Rashon detected “negativity” and would walk out on Valerie. Valerie provided a definition of what negativity meant in their marriage:

That’s along the lines of when we’re arguing, stuff like that. Now I don’t mean arguing, I mean just not getting along. Put it that way. But it passes in time.

Sometimes it takes longer than others, but eventually, it passes.

Negativity in their marriage was a major deterrent to couple recreation for Rashon. He was clear in the couple’s interview about what he felt affected their likelihood of enjoying time together:

If you’re not negative, I’m ok. But if she’s negative, I can’t take her. There’s no sense about it. If she’s negative, I’m out of here…. When that subsides, and availability happens for us to be together, then I’ll see her. … I can’t take the negativity. I love her, but I can’t take it. So I leave. And I come back when there’s no negativity.

Rashon’s aversion to negativity, which he said developed in his youth, caused instability in this marriage. He would rather temporarily leave his wife than address conflict or challenges in their relationship. As a result, this couple identified few recent positive recreation experiences.

Impact of children. Even when both partners were present in the household, opportunities for couple-only recreation were limited for some couples. Adults with young children in the home often opted to engage in recreation as a family rather than separate themselves for couple-only activities. Carl explained, “As far as [just] each other, we’ll go to the movies together sometimes.” Opportunities for the two of them to go out on dates
together without their three children were “very few and far between,” Jackie added. Mitchell and Lindsay expressed similar sentiments, “We don’t really do anything, just the two of us.”

Therefore, couples who engaged in few recreation activities together did so for a number of reasons. Dissatisfaction or conflict in the relationship affected some couple’s desire to recreate together. Similarly in other couples, one partner’s lack of ability, interest, or willingness restricted shared recreation. Not all couples that indicated they shared few recreation experiences together were negative regarding their relational health. Those with children in the household, particularly young ones, or those with extended family members in the area, often enjoyed couple recreation in the form of family recreation, which is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. Some couples had few engagements together due to a preference for individual activities, which also contributed to perceptions about the role of recreation in people’s lives.

*Diversionary Couple Recreation*

Television and movie watching were frequent pastimes for most couples, regardless of their apparent relational satisfaction. These forms of at-home entertainment were essentially individual activities that couples did simultaneously in the presence of their partner. Though these diversionary activities inspired little if any conversation during the endeavor, they often provided entertainment or amusement for couples in their homes while allowing them to spend time together with little investment or energy required.

Watching television or movies at home served as a facilitator for getting to know one another early in some couple’s relationships. “When we couldn’t find jobs, we’d watch TV together,” Richard explained. A second couple said they might go out to dinner and to the
movies, but often, “We’d stay home and watch movies, watch TV.” Another couple said of their courtship days, “We just watched TV and smoked pot.” Even as they formed more permanent unions, couples still included television watching as a popular pastime. “We watch TV” was a common reply to the question on recreation activities couples enjoyed doing together. Sandy chuckled that she and Leroy, “Watch TV. We watch a lot of TV.” Leroy also noted that they frequently “drink beer and eat and watch TV.”

Every couple in this study mentioned or demonstrated watching television or movies as home-based recreation they currently enjoyed. In addition, of the 15 couples I interviewed in their home, over half of them had the television playing when I arrived. Several couples kept it running as I conducted the interview. Possibly due to the convenience and lack of mental energy required to participate, being entertained at home appeared to be a common low-cost diversionary choice for couples looking for something to do together.

Sitting together to watch a movie was an almost ubiquitous diversional choice for couples, even for those with visual impairments. CeCe, who was totally blind, explained how she and her profoundly visually impaired partner, Durrell, enjoyed watching movies at home:

I have DVS movies that the library sends. I tell him, “Let’s watch that.” See neither of us has to see…. When the people [on the movie] are talking, then they talk. But when it’s something sighted going on, a visual, then the background [voice] tells you what’s happening.

Many couples enjoyed watching television or movies as a way to unwind and to share time together while being entertained. Although couples typically said they did not communicate much during their viewing, they often had to talk about show selection. When
couples had differing preferences for what to watch, some couples recognized this opportunity as a way to learn to discuss options and reach a compromise. The level of communication between partners appeared through their approaches to deciding what to watch. Valerie explained how her tastes in movies and those of her husband were different, and how she would often acquiesce to his preferences:

Well him… he likes the movies. He’s more big adventure type… We’ve seen movies like The X Men, Green Lantern, stuff like that… Me, I’ll watch them, but I am not really into it. I watch them because that’s what’s playing…. I’m more into the girly movies.

Couples such as James and Barb learned to use this parallel activity as a means to practice couple communication skills. When they each wanted to watch a different movie at home, they had a simple solution for deciding what they watched. James explained, “I know this may sound weird, but we actually do Rock, Paper, Scissors... The winner decides what movie we get. That’s how it goes.” Though James considered their behavior “weird,” it did allow them to interject a shared couple experience into the otherwise low-interaction activity. Because this couple intentionally added this simple game to their movie viewing protocol, they developed an enjoyable negotiating strategy that averted potential conflict between the partners.

Diversionary couple activities were often motivated by one or both partners desiring time to decompress, unwind, or escape the cares of life. Whether television or movie watching, or reading in close proximity to one’s partner, low-interaction activities primarily provided individual benefits to the participant. Likely, these activities alone added limited
value to nurturing the couple relationship. While some couples found ways to make elements of television watching interactive, many engaged primarily for its diversionary value. For a few couples, diversional activities such as these were their primary form of couple recreation.

*Others Orientation*

Whereas the focus of Independent Orientation activities was generally on the individual, the focus of Others Orientation activities was on the other members of the group, rather than primarily on one’s partner. For example, couples with small children in the home often engaged together in family-oriented activities such as going to the playground together, or visiting historic or culture sites or events. During their community or faith-based activities with others, couples interacted with one another. Whether with family members or those outside the immediate or extended family, experiences in the “Others Orientation” classification reflected high levels of interaction with others in two primary ways: group experiences, and family recreation.

*Group Experiences*

Couples who provided community or faith-based service recognized the value to the people being served and to themselves as a means to enhance their couple relationship. Couples in this study served others in a variety of ways and settings. Some assisted others in the community (e.g., helping a neighbor move), while other couples served members of the community in their homes (e.g., mentoring young people). Some forms of service were engaged in together as a couple, while other couples included their children in the experience when appropriate.
For Lamont and Nancy, “helping people” was a natural part of their life together as a couple. Both partners had experienced challenging early life experiences. As a result, they explained the benefits of relying on others and of being people others could rely on for help. While the service experience itself was not always considered recreational in nature, the sense of community and accomplishment, and the benefits of their shared experience motivated this couple to serve. Nancy provided an example:

It's like this morning, there's a couple who's moving…. They are just moving from one apartment building to another. But it was just her, see? Her boyfriend… he had a stroke the same time [Lamont] had his [shoulder] accident…. If they [those that came to help] weren’t here… she’d still be trying to move.

Serving others was a rewarding form of couple recreation for Carl and Jackie. They invested many hours a week together mentoring the young adults at their church. As a couple, they took satisfaction in helping college-aged and young professionals negotiate the transition from adolescent to independent adult. Together, Carl and Jackie enjoyed social time with the group as a couple and with their children. Most Sundays after church, Carl and Jackie’s family would join the young adults in their group at a local eatery. As a result, this couple was creating a meaningful extended family type of relationship with the group they were serving.

The young adults at their church further presented opportunities for Carl and Jackie to spontaneously engage in recreation together with the group. Jackie related an incident that happened after church one winter day:
Like Super Bowl [Sunday], we were at church, and after church…. for Super Bowl Sunday, they were like, “Party at the Johnson’s house!” and we’re like, “What?!” But we ended up having them. We just straightened up the house, and they ended up coming, and everybody brought food. So we do a lot like that….

While Jackie hinted at being taken advantage of by their young adult church group, she also expressed satisfaction in being able to engage as a couple with these young people.

Similarly, Jasmine and Jack expressed satisfaction in being able to mentor troubled teens together in their home. Jasmine explained:

There are some kids that we mentor from [a nearby city] who come. They are teenagers. They are in bad situations…. And they come to our house, and Jack cooks waffles for them, and we play Scategories…. We have cookouts, we play the Michael Jackson Game. We laugh, we watch movies together. We go to the store. The kids read books, we talk…. We give them a place to come and get out of [their city]. They come away, and they feel like they’re on a vacation. So we’re supportive of that program.

In addition to providing service, acts of kindness toward others allowed couples to share experiences that were rewarding and often enjoyable. As couples recounted their shared service experiences, they indicated they felt satisfied in their investments in others, and gratified to have worked together to provide needed service. In summary, some couples had the potential to nurture their relationship through their shared service to others.
Family Recreation

The topic of research for my study was on couple recreation. However, many couples regarded family recreation as a high priority for them. Citing the potential for long-term benefits to their children, many couples, particularly those with young children in the home, invested heavily in recreation with their families. Couples noted that they sacrificed adult-only activities in favor of family recreation. Because of this, I felt it was important to examine family recreation as a form of couple recreation.

For some couples, the greatest opportunities for recreation were with their families. Whether with their children or with extended family members who lived in the area or within a day’s drive, many couples recreated with others who were related to them. Couples like Amir and Naaz enjoyed exploring recreation venues in their new city such as museums and parks with their children. Other couples like Maude and Harold relished extended family gatherings to celebrate holidays and family events.

While family members did provide opportunities for enriching and satisfying recreation, they also posed challenges to couple recreation at times. Cliff, for example, lamented, “They just drop by,” when describing extended family impositions to couple-only recreation. Many of the challenges identified related to couple recreation were also evident in family recreation, including access to transportation, financial limitations, and the impacts of family on desired intimacy and couple recreation.

Couples with young children in the home often said they “do a lot with them.” Family activities included television and movie watching together, listening to music and dancing, playing with toys or games, or taking outings to parks, lakes, or other natural areas.
Occasionally families might go out to eat at a restaurant, take a picnic lunch to the park, visit a museum, community event, or go to the discount movie theatre.

Family activities provided important outlets for recreation as a group but reduced the likelihood of adult-only shared recreation. Many couples indicated that family recreation was their primary outlet for couple recreation due to their limited financial and temporal resources. Consequently, many parents delighted in their family recreation activities with their young children. Parents expressed an understanding that after the children became independent, they would have ample opportunities to engage in couple-only recreation.

Family recreation provided couples with opportunities to enjoy the individual and relational benefits of activities while strengthening their relationships with each other and with their children. James and Barb, for example, smiled and laughed as they related shared experiences they pursued with their children. They appeared to enjoy these experiences as individual participants as well as delighting in engaging together with the girls. Many couples with young children articulated the importance of family recreation to them as adults, identifying a sense of enjoyment through engaging in pleasurable activities and of satisfaction in building memories together. For couples like Fabil and Akila who grew up in other countries, family recreation as couple recreation was modeled for them as they grew up and entered marriage in their country of birth.

When adults engaged in family recreation with their children, activities were generally selected to match the interests and abilities of the youth. The focus of parents’ attention was often on their children, to engage their interests, or to correct behavior, if necessary. Nurturing relationships was an important aspect of experiences that stimulated the
development of their children. While the family recreated together, most parents stated they felt family bonds were strengthened and memories were built. Although adults often found family recreation enjoyable, many recognized an important benefit to the couple was the satisfaction they gained from investing in their family together, similar to the benefits identified by couples who served others together.

Children, particularly school-aged and younger ones, influenced couple recreation. Frequently, parents admitted that their desire for recreation time together apart from their children was eclipsed by their commitment to nurture the development of their children. Adults often consciously chose to use their recreational time to enhance their children’s lives, exposing them to new or interesting places or experiences. For other couples, religious beliefs shaped how they viewed their roles as active parents. A few couples noted that their young children served as facilitators of family recreation, while others identified their children as a hindrance to recreating together as a couple.

Couples often identified their children as both facilitators and challenges to recreation. Eight of the couples I interviewed had young children who were elementary school aged or younger. For these parents, caring for the physical and developmental needs of their children was the underlying mission of their lives at this time. For example, Mitchell and Lindsay said the primary focus of their lives was on their two children. They were committed to their children’s development, but the individual personalities and temperaments of their children challenged the adult’s experience as the family recreated together. For Mitchell and Lindsay, their family outings were often exhausting. Lindsay’s hope that her children would mature as they aged was evident as she explained:
Our kids are stressful. We try to do things together as a family… I think good times are coming soon, when things will settle down a little bit, and things will go more smoothly. But our kids are super special and precious and wonderful. They have great personalities, but they’re not easy kids. They are handfuls…. But hopefully they’ll get through whatever phase they’re going through so we can just relax and have fun.

As physically and mentally draining as it was for them to take their children out, Mitchell and Lindsay valued the importance of their family recreation. Mitchell had entered the foster care system when he was about 5 years old, and was in and out of foster homes before he aged out of the system. Though Lindsay’s family background was different, she understood the hardships Mitchell had experienced as a result of the lack of consistent parental presence. While their children were still young, Mitchell and Lindsay were committed to seizing opportunities to train them and to develop the children’s interests.

Lindsay justified their investments in their children:

> We’ve been trying to teach them to get along and respect each other…. We always want to give having a fun family outing a chance. And we get a lot of good stuff, because we don’t give up, and we keep doing fun stuff together as a family…. At least the kids are getting good experiences, seeing interesting places, learning interesting things, and one thing they’ve learned is how fortunate they are.

Amir and Naaz recognized how fortunate they were to raise their children in the United States since they had migrated from a war-torn Middle Eastern country. They cited their children as positive motivators for engaging in recreation. Though their children were very young, they guided the family’s selection and location of recreation activities. As recent
immigrants, this couple used family recreation as an opportunity to acclimate to a new country and culture, while developing memories and strengthening family bonds and couple relations.

Preschool children also provided motivation to some parents to become actively engaged in family recreation. Shantel identified her toddler as an important stimulus for getting her and her partner, Terrell, active and out of the house. Terrell lived independently of Shantel, though they considered themselves a committed couple. Shantel explained the role her daughter played in facilitating family recreation:

She's got lots of energy. If I have the baby over, then maybe I can get him outside. You know we go outside right here. The baby likes to go out to the store to get her a piece of candy. You know the little corner store right over here. She's like, "I want some candy. We go to the store!" And she be pulling me, so we go to the store. And that's our little walk as our little family. Just go and walk. And we come back, and maybe stay outside for an hour or so.

An activity that was intended to appease a young child’s desire subsequently motivated this family to engage in activities together after they returned from their walk.

Similarly, Barb’s children motivated her and James to spend time together outside. The girls were always eager to ride bikes or play in the neighborhood. As they watched the children play at the playground, or on the sidewalk outside their apartment, Barb and James said they enjoyed talking with one another.

Developing positive memories as a family was important to Barb, mother of two young daughters. The three of them had been living in a women’s shelter in a northern state
before settling in Raleigh. Now that James was a part of their lives, Barb enjoyed being a
family of four, engaging her girls in positive recreation experiences, and sharing her life with
James in simple ways. She described family activities they enjoyed together:

We sit down here and watch television together. Watch Aladdin or some movies
together, or when we go out as a family, I love that, too. We ride the bus, and
communicate and stuff. Because my daughters, they love the bus ride. They love it!
[She giggles]

Access to transportation. James and Barb’s situation suggested how couples often
wanted to enrich their children’s development by taking advantage of affordable recreation
resources in the community, but access to transportation was sometimes a problem for low-
income families. When they had no private vehicle, couples with young children took family
outings using public transportation, with differing results. For some, like James and Barb,
riding the bus as a family was part of the adventure of the outing and of the process of
growing as a family. Others found taking public transportation restricted their family
recreation outings. For those who had personal vehicles, activities in the community were
more accessible. These couples said that they had flexibility in where and when they
recreated.

Although public busses passed by many city attractions, which made them accessible
to low-income couples that did not have private vehicles, relying on public transportation
meant passengers were restricted to the destinations, routes, and time tables of the busses.
This lack of freedom was frustrating for some couples. Shantell and her partner Terrell said
they would like to get out and enjoy more recreation opportunities in the community, such as
visiting museums or attending special public events. “But it’s really hard if you don’t have a car… to actually go and do stuff,” Shantel lamented. She went on to elaborate:

We don't have a car, which is a bummer; because there's definitely stuff you can do for free. Like go to the park. And I like to go to the Art Museum, to the Museum of History, and the Museum of Science…. I'd like us to take my daughter there. We've been there only twice [she and Terrell], and we had a car then.

Though the museums were accessible by bus, they no longer visited them, in part because they would be challenged to maneuver a baby stroller on and off the bus.

Using public transportation was necessary for some couples, while others benefitted from having access to a private vehicle to facilitate family recreation. A car made outings convenient when couples decided to “go out” with the family on the spur of the moment.

When Pedro announced his plans to his family, at least one member was delighted:

Sometimes I tell [Samantha], “We go out.” We take the babies and we go out… to Wal-Mart, [or] to Food Lion [grocery store]. You tell [the son], “We’re going to Wal-Mart,” and he yells [excitedly], “We’re going to Wal-Mart!!” because he already knows. That’s where we usually go.

Having their own vehicle was more than a luxury in Pedro’s eyes. It was a necessity, especially with a family.

Mitchell and Lindsay also saw a car as essential. Their recreation now most frequently included their two children, one in elementary school and one in preschool. This family enjoyed being active, engaging in community events, and visiting nature-based and
historic sites. The vehicle was important as evidenced through the list of activities they participated in as a family. Lindsay, the primary organizer of family outings, explained:

> We like to take the kids to special events. We take them to things at Mordeci House [historic site], and cultural things, like Artsplosure. … There’s all sorts of stuff in the summer…. We’ve taken them to the state parks, like Fort Macon Recreational Area…. We love doing the historical and cultural things as well…. There was a good while there after church Sunday, we’d pick up food at Cook Out, and go straight to Yates Mill Pond [County Park].

Their private vehicle gave them the freedom and means to come and go as they pleased, and as the children’s interests and behaviors dictated.

Similarly, Fabil and Akila liked to engage in family recreation with their elementary school-aged daughter. Their daughter often determined the destination for their outings. Though she was born in Africa, the daughter’s preferred activities had been influenced by her upbringing in America. Her dad listed their common family excursions, “We go to different places. We go to restaurants…. we go to malls.” Having access to their own vehicle made these outings possible for Fabil and his family. Family recreation was enhanced through excursions into the community. Despite financial limitations, opportunities for socialization, bonding, and the development of family memories were possible when transportation was readily available.

*Overcoming financial limitations for the family’s benefit.* Family recreation was often influenced by the financial situation of these low-income couples. Finances often determined if a couple went out and what they might do when they were out together. Some couples, like...
Terrell and Shantel, seemed preoccupied with their lack of financial and transportation resources. As a result, they said their recreation opportunities were limited to what they found convenient to pursue. Much of their recreation occurred in the home or immediate neighborhood. Other couples, like James and Barb, made the most of their situations, overcoming constraints to recreation participation for the sake of the benefits they anticipated.

Some of the couples considered their financial condition to be a temporary one. They spoke of “when we get more money,” “when things improve,” or “when the kids are grown.” Because they had the attitude that life would change for them, they seemed willing to invest the effort to find ways to negotiate constraints and pursue valuable recreation despite their lack of financial resources.

Enterprising couples found economical ways to continue going out to restaurants, even now that they had a family. For Carl and Jackie going out to eat became part of their family’s routine. Jackie described their strategies for eating out inexpensively:

It’s expensive to go out to eat, but we’d look forward to it. And we don’t do it so often now…. It’s usually like McDonalds or something like that. We might have a coupon to go to Steak ‘n Shake…. Chargrill has everything’s $1.29 on Sundays, and so we’ll go there after church.

Other couples, like Abraham and Sarah, found creative ways to enjoy time together with their children without spending extra money other than for gasoline. Sarah described:

You have to be smart with your money…. Sometimes I make food, we go to park, or we go to the country…. Yes, sometimes we go to the lake here. We make exercise.
We take in [fresh] air over there. It is not expensive. It costs us nothing. We take food, the same food we would eat here.

By packing a picnic, Abraham and Sarah both conserved financial resources and facilitated a beneficial family recreation experience. They said they savored the satisfying shared experience of watching as their children rode bikes and played together in a natural setting.

\textit{Families and desired couple intimacy.} Many couples enjoyed the satisfaction they shared investing time with their offspring, but the presence of children also hindered couple recreation. A few of the men, in particular, expressed frustration at young children being in the home when they wanted to have intimate relations with their partners. Terrell, for example, saw the baby’s presence as a hindrance at times, particularly when he was more interested in having the baby’s mother to himself:

We just want to sit down and be with each other… and hold each other. Talk little subtle nothings in each other's ears. Put on some little romance music. Cook a little dinner, talk, listen to the music. Maybe, a little smooching here and there, when we're alone. And with the baby around, you know, you have no time for that when the baby is around. No!

Similarly, Pedro identified his children as an obstacle to quality time alone with his wife. Time for romance or for going out on a date was often occupied with child care responsibilities for him and Samantha. Pedro explained:
The babies. It is not that they are in the way, it is just that we are with them every day, every day, every day. That’s probably one of the things that don’t make for me and her together alone, just me and her.

Even when young children demanded their time and attentions, most couples acknowledged the temporal nature of their parenting roles. Some couples seemed content to bide their time enjoying their children for now until they could focus on their partner and their relationship more fully later in their lives. Couples who had grown children spoke warmly of the years they had together as parents, and appreciated opportunities they had to spend now with their adult children. When their children left home, life did change for couples with grown children. As Harold explained, “It was like a new lease on life to me, with the kids gone!” He had time to focus on his wife and to enjoy time together, just the two of them.

*Impacts of extended family on couple recreation.* Children in the home were not the only family members that influenced couple recreation. Extended family members both enhanced and impeded couples’ opportunities to recreate together. Several couples identified the value of having extended family nearby, particularly to serve as trusted childcare providers. Some also enjoyed time with extended family when celebrating birthdays and other significant family milestones. However, other couples identified extended family members as hindrances to couple recreation, sources of frustration, and sometimes as causes of conflict within the couple relationship.

Extended family members provided valuable childcare support for several couples. Because her cousin was close by, Barb could ask her to watch her daughters so she and
James could have some couple time, either at home or to go out together. Similarly, Jackie’s parents lived in the area and could be tapped to watch the children when needed. Jackie’s retired father routinely met two of her girls when they disembarked from the afternoon school bus. The girls and their grandfather spent time together until Jackie’s husband finished his shift at work, and could resume child care responsibilities.

Spending time with extended family members to socialize and celebrate holidays and family events provided some couples shared family recreation experiences. “She has kind of a big family, so it’s always somebody’s birthday. Somebody’s something…. So we go to different people’s houses,” Simon explained of their experience with SaFire’s family. Daniel and Ruth traditionally spent Christmas at her brother’s house, north of the city. Gloria and LeBron often traveled to a neighboring state for Thanksgiving as a way to connect with extended family and celebrate the holiday. Maude and Harold hosted two generations of offspring at their house for Thanksgiving and Christmas every year.

Being with extended family for significant events and holidays was an unquestioned commitment for some couples but for couples who had migrated to the United States, the absence of extended family was noticeable. Without the engaging presence of their birth families, immigrant families felt their recreation opportunities had diminished in some ways. For example, the absence of extended family in the area was particularly difficult for Fabil and Akila. Their native culture highly valued extended family, and most free time was spent engaged in activities together. Akila explained why they no longer participated in certain recreation activities here in the U.S., “There is no family here, so it is not so easy to do here.”
Some American couples, however, found extended family to be more of a hindrance than help for nurturing couple relationships. When I asked about hindrances to his ability to enjoy shared recreation with Lori, Eddie’s immediate response was, “Our families!” Neither Lori’s family nor his approved of their selection in partners, and they vocalized their negative opinions often. Cliff was quick with his similar response when I spoke with him and Crystal. As he provided some clarification, his words indicated the frustration he felt when extended family members interrupted their plans:

Family members – they just come over…. They don't look at the point that you have a life as well. They might sit at home all day being bored, so they may come over just to see what you're doing. Sometimes we’re getting ready to set out to go do something, and it prolongs what we were getting ready to set out to do, like go to the park or take a walk or whatever. We end up not going to do it.

Cliff’s partner, Crystal, agreed.

We'll have plans to do something, and they will come unannounced. They don't [call and] say, “Hi. We’re coming over. You have some time?” They just kind of show up. So I think that's hindering…. Yes, I’d say family. Sometimes they don't support you in enjoying your life.

I experienced this frustration while I was interviewing three of the couples. Family members stopped by the apartments, just as couples had explained would happen. For example, when interviewing Terrell and Shantel, the interruption seemed to come because the family was inquisitive as to what was going on through the interview. They had called earlier in my visit, and heard Shantel explain they were busy with an interview. Still, they
came by to see for themselves. In another interview, SaFire’s father and other extended family members showed up when we were well into the interview. I was unsure if this was a planned visit or not, but Simon was eager to wrap up our time together once the family arrived. I asked if there was anything else they might want to tell me about the role of recreation in their lives, my typical wrap-up question. Simon curtly replied, “No, not really. That’s about it. We get old. We don’t do a whole lot like when we were younger, but we still have fun sometimes. You can see the family comes by.”

Involvement by extended family, therefore, was seen as interference by some couples and as an asset by others. Couples identified their extended family members as hindrances to their recreation when family members interrupted or prevented couples from engaging in desired activities. On the other hand, extended family served to actively facilitate recreation, particularly for celebrating holidays and family events. When extended family was able to provide child care services, couples felt this outside support enriched their relationship by enabling opportunities for shared couple recreation.

In summary, couples with children, particularly young ones, often placed their children’s needs and interests ahead of theirs when choosing how to recreate. Family recreation was commonly pursued by couples as a means for developing their children’s values, interests, social skills, and physical health. They negotiated this family recreation despite transportation and financial limitations and the benefits as well as the challenges to recreation related to children and extended families. For many of these couples, family recreation was their primary form of recreation together, but for many of these same couples as well as others, shared couple recreation was also important.
Shared Couple Orientation

The final major classification in the CORC model was Shared Couple Orientation. Recreation activities in this orientation reflected a high value placed on focusing on one’s partner and on the couple’s relationship. Categories in the Shared Couple classification included: Support for partner’s recreation, utilitarian couple experiences, impromptu shared couple recreation, and planned shared couple recreation. For example some efforts of support were given during a partner’s participation (e.g., watching the husband play pool), and others after the activity had ceased (e.g., listening to the partner explain the play she is writing). Couples also found satisfaction in doing chores together. Impromptu and Planned Shared Couple Recreation categories represented the most couple-focused activities in the continuum. Overall, couples who engaged in shared recreation valued it and had overcome challenges so they could have these meaningful recreation experiences.

Support for Partner’s Recreation

One way of experiencing recreation was through vicarious sharing of recreation pursuits. Couples explained that shared recreation did not always mean the two partners were actively engaged in the pursuits together. As they discussed their recreational interests, several couples indicated that one partner participated actively in recreation, while the other supported him or her. Some partners were physically unable to participate in activities with their partner. Others did not share the same interest in active participation, but were content and even pleased to share in the activity by supporting a partner’s participation. Richard and Helen provided examples of both of these scenarios.
Richard actively participated in a blind bowling league, but his wife, Helen, did not. She explained, “I have some severe arthritis in my back and my hip. If I don’t join, I just go out and cheer him on!” Though legally blind as well, Helen’s encouragement of her husband’s recreation appeared to spur him on to be active. This couple clearly enjoyed sharing their lives together, and being a part of one another’s activities, even if only in a supporting role. Richard shared, “I just was in a talent show. I’m a singer, and everywhere I go, she supports me. Each and every thing I come up with, she supports me in that.” Helen enjoyed Richard’s musical interests and exclaimed, “I’m his biggest fan! I’m his Number 1 Fan!”

Dalton and Mitzy were each other’s biggest supporters as well. Both encouraged the other to pursue individual recreation, and then they would take turns sharing their outlets with their spouse. Mitzy had a nail polish blog. Most days, she posted a photo of her nails (left hand only), and a description of what she did to create the effect. Dalton complimented his wife’s expertise, and showed his delight in her endeavors:

You’re really good at it. You’re really good at what you do…. [To me:] I’ve learned a lot watching her. I’ll see a woman wearing crackle [a type of nail polish technique that gives a unique effect], and I’ll know that. I’m not supposed to know [about nail polish]. When I first worked with my boss, she had on crackle. I said, “Wait till I get home. I can’t wait to get home and tell my wife you’re wearing crackle! By the way, crackle looks pretty.”
Previously, Mitzy had a YouTube video series on make-up, which she mentioned in passing during our conversation. Dalton wanted to make sure I knew all that Mitzy’s project entailed. He described her work further and continued:

She’s so good. I just like to sit here and look at her. She can just take stuff out [make-up] and make it look good. And I think, “And I’m married to her!” … And she stood over here to do the videos. But I was the voice, but they never saw me. … but they would hear me comment, and they’d hear a little bickering, just play stuff over here. But it was kind of fun. I enjoyed watching them!

When the conversation worked its way to Dalton’s particular hobby, family genealogy, Mitzy was supportive of her husband’s research. “It’s a big genealogy project – it’s huge! … It’s his passion,” she explained. She then provided the details of her husband’s endeavors.

Similarly, Lindsay spoke with passion as she described her husband’s love for gardening. Once the couple had their first child, however, they moved out of their rented one-bedroom townhouse, leaving behind the raised beds Mitchell had built in their back yard:

We told the kids about the garden Mitchell used to have in the first place we lived. He had a bang up garden. He had a great herb garden. He had a great veggie garden, a lettuce garden for a while…. And those gardens meant a lot to him. He was always out there, working on it, taking care of it, checking on things… and harvesting. It was good. I wish we could do that now.
A love for landscaping and being outside was an important part of Lamont’s life as well. As he shared some of his life story with me, Lamont’s passion and Nancy’s support were evident:

Back in the day when I was coming up, I enjoyed being out. I was born and raised on a farm. I enjoyed it. I'm a country boy. I love the country. When I got into landscaping, it just felt better being outside, just getting in the dirt. And that's why I do such a good job when I do. And I'm pretty good where I am right now. I'm 52 years old and I don't want to do nothing else but landscaping. If I live to retire, I just want to help, you know, plant trees, take care of trees, prep people's yards and help them beautify their yards, or whatever.

Nancy urged Lamont to tell me about his “new hobby.” “Planting Japanese maples [trees],” he explained. “And he’s going to sell them…. And we’ve got a big one growing in our yard, at our apartment,” Nancy was quick to add. While there was some element of anticipating additional income to the household, Nancy strongly conveyed her pride in Lamont’s capabilities as an amateur horticulturalist.

Not all couples were as actively involved in supporting their partner’s recreation. KK was excited to talk about how she and Kevon enjoyed music and dancing. Kevon set the record straight, “She’ll dance. I’ll stand. She’ll dance.” For this couple, dancing was an activity that one partner enjoyed and the other encouraged in a supporting role.

For Daniel, Ruth’s support was passive, yet positive. Daniel detailed how Ruth would accompany him when he went out to play poker with friends:
I could be sittin’ over here playin’ [poker at the bar] and she could be over there drinkin’ a Pepsi by herself. Not far from me in fact. And I’ll always look over at her, and throw her a kiss, wave to her, something of that nature.

Ruth explained, “He likes to play poker. And pool. And horseshoes. I go with him. I don’t do any of that, but he likes it.” Her activity, she said, was “just watchin’.”

For some couples, Support for one’s partner’s interests came in the form of verbal encouragement. Barb disclosed that she began writing plays when she was 14 years old. She had written a number of plays, which she recorded in a notebook. Recently, her book of plays was lost when she missed a rent payment on the storage unit that held her writing materials. After spending a few weeks mourning her loss, Barb had begun writing again. James encouraged Barb’s renewed commitment to writing when he explained:

You know what that means to me, though? It means there’s a second chance. A second chance for a fresh new start. You’ve got this play you’re working on. That’s going to lead to more plays. Just basically, you’re just multiplying your plays. Just whatever thought comes to mind, you write it on a piece of paper, and you hope that one day, one day, you will get discovered! Honestly, that’s the way I think about it. She will get discovered.

Writing was an important outlet for Eddie as well. His partner, Lori, appreciated the skill and effort he was putting into his writing by providing assistance. Lori explained her role:

I listen to parts of the stories as he’s typing them. And they seem amazing, some of the ones that I’ve actually heard. And I be like, “Wow!” That’s all I can say
“wow!”… I did type a short story for him one time…. He wrote it on paper, and I just typed it on the computer. Yeah, I try to help him out as much as I can.

Support for one’s partner was expressed tangibly and practically in other couples as well. When Sofia began working toward a certificate to enable her to become an administrative assistant, Raphael stepped up to support her efforts by renting her a computer she could use. Having access to a computer was more than just a helpful tool for school work. One of her sons remained in her home country, being cared for by her mother. Sofia explained how she felt by having computer access:

The computer is magic for me, because I can see my family. I can listen to my music, from my country…. The computer is good for important things. Because my [other] son is still in [South America], I can talk to him and see him in the computer.

Sharing a partner’s hobbies or activities, even in a supporting role, communicated a sincere interest in nurturing their relationship. Partners who actively supported one another demonstrated they valued the individual partner as well as their shared relationship. Couples communicated appreciation for and from their partner as they both gave and received support. Whether they observed the partner’s individual pursuits from the sidelines, listened to them share about their activity, or provided tangible support, couples who supported one another demonstrated that they placed high value on their partner and, by extension, on their relationship.

Utilitarian Couple Experiences

Support for one another was not only found in specific recreation activities but also evidenced in utilitarian activities shared together that were perceived as recreational. When
one partner aspired to accomplish chore-like tasks, the other partner was often engaged for
assistance and for the pleasure of the company. In some instances, couples shared
responsibilities because they both enjoyed the tasks or the products of their labors, and
performing the tasks together enhanced their experience. Levels of social interaction between
partners in activities in this category varied depending on the task being performed and the
personal inclinations of partners on a particular day. Regardless, couples often identified
engagement in utilitarian activities as forms of recreation they shared.

Household tasks or practical utilitarian activities are often considered by many to be
drudgery compared to the recreational activities described by couples in this study. Daily
duties that typically might be labeled as chores, however, provided opportunities to engage
and enjoy time together. Most frequently mentioned utilitarian recreation activities included
food preparation, yard work, and housekeeping.

“We got a meal here!” Couples with low incomes often capitalized on everyday
aspects of life and valued them as important avenues for shared recreation. Because they
lacked financial resources that often facilitate recreation experiences, these couples enriched
their relationships through commonplace activities such as preparing and eating food
together. Jasmine remarked, “We both like food and like cooking healthy food.” Her partner,
Jack, added, “We go shopping. We shop together at the grocery store.”

Food was described as a catalyst for bringing couples together in pleasant ways.
Simon compared his life before being with SaFire to now:

Before I met her, I always used to go to clubs and stuff. But now I’m more of a
family man. [Before] I’d go out to clubs. I might go to a friend’s house, or have a
cook out. But now that I’m getting older…. 50 is looking at me. I’m not into partying. I’m content watching TV, cooking and creating a good meal, or having a cook out.

Cooking special meals at home was potentially an economical way to literally and figuratively add spice to relationships. However, cooking at home required a substantial outlay of cash if couples needed to obtain ingredients suggested on television cooking shows. SaFire’s outrage at Simon’s extravagant purchases was evident when she exclaimed, “$80 on spices!” Simon felt it was justified, explaining:

I like to cook and stuff. Me and her cook sometimes. We like trying new things. We don’t waste a lot of money going out to eat….. She does some of the cooking, but I’m like the better cook, you know, watching the [Cooking Channel] shows, and I put a little spice. And she gets mad at me sometimes because I go to Food Lion, and I’ll blow like 30, 40 bucks in spices. [Defending himself, he states] I got more than spices…

Cooking together, and learning to cook together, were common utilitarian recreation experiences couples mentioned. Kevon said he had not done much cooking before he and KK came together as a couple. He spoke of the fun they now were having cooking together, and learning to cook together. For example, Kevon narrated some culinary challenges he and KK had recently faced together:

Yeah, we do a lot of experimenting out of this [Betty Crocker] cookbook here. They’ve got all kinds of dishes in here. We don’t really do a lot of things out of here, but we do a lot of lookin’ in this…. So I started looking in this book. I was cooking this lamb, leg of lamb, the other day. But it ended up tasting wild because I didn’t
marinate it overnight, I didn’t put red wine up there…. I know how to do it now!

Yeah, so we love to cook, and we love to eat!

Although eating is essential for survival, food appeared to also be a catalyst for enriching a couple’s relationship. Cooking evening meals together was more than food focused. It also provided couples with an opportunity to connect emotionally with one another at the end of the day. LeBron summarized:

I think it’s a good thing when you can sit around, and just be in the kitchen, have a little conversation. And cookin’ is a relaxed mellow type thing. And I think anybody [can cook], once you’re in tune and know what you’re halfway doing… I’ve learned, if you put it on the fire, it will cook.

Terrell and Shantel had a similar experience in how they related to one another, depending on the particular meal they had prepared and shared. The quality of their shared preparation and dining experience appeared to be influenced by how “special” the food was. Terrell explained:

We go to the grocery store and we get food. We won't say anything. We don't say anything over the food. But when we got something special, we start talkin’. We say, “We got a meal here! We got something special.” We just sit there [at supper] and talk and talk all night…. It does wonders for the inner parts of you. Like your soul, it does wonders for your soul.

For this couple, special food preparations triggered a response in them that facilitated talking and solidified their connection together in ways that an everyday meal did not. Food
preparation and consumption nurtured their relationship and was clearly an example of shared recreation.

Many couples associated special foods with eating out at restaurants, rather than eating at home. Eating out together was often a rare but special treat for many of these couples and was associated more often with Planned Shared Couple Recreation as will be discussed later in this section. Not being able to go out to eat as often as they would like was disappointing for some. Valerie expressed her dismay, “I can’t remember the last time we went out to eat. … We don’t usually go out to eat that often. Not as often as I would like.”

Because of limited finances and sometimes limited energy or health restrictions, these low-income couples most frequently ate at home. Depending on their schedules or day of week, some couples shared the cooking responsibilities, since this work was an opportunity to connect with one another. Eddie explained:

I enjoy the restaurants tremendously! She likes them, but she likes lunch. I like going to restaurants for dinner. But by the time dinner comes around, she’s ready to lay down and kick back for the evening, and I’m ready to throw on some clothes and go out to a restaurant. And tonight I had planned to do it, but we just kicked back, and now we’re here, so we’ll be in the kitchen again. It’s still going to be fun, but it’s not going to be different, but it’s still going to be fun.

Going out to restaurants was not always an option for some. CeCe’s declining health restricted her ability to go out to eat with Durrell. Subsequently, preparing food together became an important experience for them. Because they were both legally blind, this couple felt a sense of pride and accomplishment in being able to cook delicious meals at home.
Durrell had limited sight until recently when he lost all of his ability to see. For him, cooking had become a particularly rewarding endeavor. He explained, “But really, I never used a crock pot up until this fall…. I’m getting good at the crock pot.” CeCe shared some of her culinary experience and aspirations for Durrell:

[A crockpot is] the easiest thing for a blind person to use. And George Foreman [electric grill]…. I been cooking since I was 20. So eventually, Durrell’s going to go to the rehab center and relearn…. They’re going to teach him some adaptive ways. But I’m kind of helping him. But there are some techniques that might work better for [him]…. The crock pot does the work! You stick your meat in it, stick a little water in it, and you put in your sauce, and keep on going! [She laughs] I love a crock pot!

Learning to adjust to a partner’s preferences appeared challenging for some, but a welcome change for others. Barb had been a single parent before James came into her life and home. Barb appreciated the culinary role James now played in the kitchen:

[It] just used to be me being in the kitchen by myself, with the girls just running around upstairs or something. But soon as I met him, and we started cooking together, it’s been wonderful. Yeah, I like it.

Some couples, like Cliff and Crystal, took turns planning and serving meals to one another. Crystal explained, “He's a good cook and I'm a good cook. So we have the opportunity to out bless one another. So he can bless my socks off, and we can try to out bless one another.”

For many low-income couples, cooking and eating at home was about more than just the cooking. Nancy illustrated, “I mean I go fishing with him all the time. Like on Sundays,
we will ride down there. I have my little puzzles. I'll do my puzzles, and he does his thing.”

[She laughed.] Lamont added, “I catch some nice size bass. I tried to catch a mess of them, so when we have a fish fry, I clean them all, and we have a nice fish fry.” Lamont and Nancy’s frequent trips to the lake provide them with time to get out of the city, to be together, even though they were engaging in different activities. Lamont’s fishing was enjoyable for him while also being utilitarian in nature.

“Play in the dirt.” Taking care of the yard was also mentioned by several couples as a utilitarian activity they enjoyed doing together, similar to the cooking experiences noted earlier. Being outside, taking care of their yards, and being together proved to be a positive combination for couples in this study such as Lamont and Nancy. Lamont described it as “playing in the garden.” Nancy stated that they liked to “play in the dirt.” Lori also explained what yard work was like for her and Eddie. “He’ll mow the grass, and I’ll be out cutting the hedges or working in the yard. There’s always something. But we always try to do it together.”

Pete and Pearl both grew up gardening and being outside. Yard work appeared to be their primary type of outdoor activity, and they engaged in this together. Pearl explained, “If he’s out there cutting grass, I’ll take the lawn mower. I will take the lawn mower from him….I want to cut grass too! And I will cut it as long as he will let me!” Pete confirmed, “If I don't give her the mower, she gets mad at me, so I let her cut too…. I can cut the whole yard by myself, but she wants to help me. So I let her help.”

Cliff and Crystal had recently moved into a rental house when I interviewed them early in the spring. The weather was still chilly but Crystal described their desire to enjoy
time together in the yard. They were both nature lovers and had visions for their backyard, and enjoyed this recreation together.

While gardening was an aspiration for Cliff and Crystal, it was a way of life for other couples. Maude noted the central role gardening and yard work played in her 53-year marriage with Harold:

“We haven’t been too active in the yard, because now we’re getting older…. Used to we stayed in the yard together, me and him. We’d do everything together…. We’d build flower beds, we’d shovel 2, 3 big truckloads of dirt, and put it over yonder and here, and everywhere. And we’d haul rocks. We done everything…. We dug a ditch all across the back of our house. Yeah, we just did it all.

While they were strong and had the opportunity, some couples found yard work to be challenging yet rewarding work. Being able to share the tasks and the rewards together was what appeared particularly valuable to them, regardless of the project.

“He helps me out a lot.” Some couples also found house or car cleaning to be rewarding utilitarian activities they stated they enjoyed doing together. The relational aspect of working together to accomplish a challenge appeared to have been the reason couples classified these chores as recreation. For example, when I prompted couples to tell me about recreation activities they enjoyed doing together, Eddie listed several traditional types of activities, like watching TV and movies, and then added, “You know, we might even spend the day washing the car, stuff like that. She likes to keep the car clean.”

Lori also appreciated the help she received from Eddie when household chores needed to be done. She said, “He helps me out a lot at my brother’s house, with the odds and
ends that I can’t really do. So he helps out.” She said she appreciated not only for the work he performed, but that they could be together as he worked.

Responsibilities for pets also provided motivation for couples to engage in recreational activities together in their homes. CeCe and Durrell had a pair of parakeets that they tended to together. Helen and Richard lived with a cat and Helen’s service dog. In both cases, these couples took care of and enjoyed their animals. Daniel and Ruth enjoyed walking their pets, a dog and an outdoor-only cat. Daniel enthusiastically delivered his description of their experience with their pets:

We even got an outside cat. I wish you could see that cat! When my wife walks down the sidewalk, that cat walks with her. And me too…. We’ll walk the dog down the street right down here. And that cat will rub up against the dog…. The cat and dog, walkin’ together, just like 2 dogs walk.

As they performed the necessary task of exercising their pets, Daniel and Ruth enjoyed the simple pleasures of both the unusual behaviors of their pets, and of getting out of the house to walk together.

Couples found utilitarian activities rewarding shared experiences. Working on projects together enabled couples to accomplish tasks. Activities classified as Utilitarian Couple Experiences were also valuable to couples because of their relational focus.

*Impromptu Shared Couple Recreation*

Focusing on one’s partner and on the couple’s relationship were essential for Impromptu Shared Couple Recreation activities. Engaging with one another in simple, often home-based, spontaneous activities provided many couples with satisfying recreation
experiences either on a regular or infrequent basis. These types of activities were particularly
gratifying because the primary purpose was to have fun and connect as partners as a means to
nurture their couple relationship.

Several couples mentioned that they recreated together using resources that were
readily accessible to them. Some played board games, cards, or dominos together, as a way
to connect in a casual way. Couples that had the equipment enjoyed playing computer and
video games together. Unlike those classified as diversional, these activities required both
partners to be attentive to, and interactive with, the other to successfully accomplish them.
Although some couples tended to engage in familiar impromptu activities, others found novel
ways to recreate with little advance planning or specialized props.

Engaging in activities that were “out of our norm” or novel enhanced relationships for
some couples. Even if home-based, these activities seemed to provide a sense of adventure
and closeness for many couples as they shared new, unusual, or light-hearted experiences.
Recreation activities that were engaged in infrequently, for the first time, or in creative or
playful ways enriched couple relationships.

Common home-based activities had the potential to become novel and exciting
couple encounters. Kevon and KK delighted in explaining to me how they turned television
watching into an exhilarating shared recreation experience. KK began, “Yeah, we love to
watch basketball and football together. Oh yeah, tell her how we be bettin’ on the games!”
Kevon recalled a recent incident, “We throw a $5 wager on the game… She won. I lost.” KK
jumped back in:
I said, “Give me my money! Yeah!” [She laughs!] So that was fun! That was fun! Stuff like that is recreation. Yeah, gamblin’. You know, play cards; put a dollar up there…. I don’t know what it is, but he always wins at cards!

CeCe and Durrell, too, infused creativity into some of their everyday experiences at home. When this couple got bored, they would stir their imaginations and create stories together. CeCe explained:

Oh, you should see us. We sit around here. We get so bored that we make up stories! We make up stories! He’ll start it off, and I’ll add something to it, and we’ll get to laughing so hard ~ it’s so fun!... We used to put people in a story, like horror characters, like Freddie Krugger. And we’d hang out with him, and he’d go to the bar with us and have beers. It was funny! We just didn’t have anything else to do, so we’d sit there… and make up stuff. I mean vivid imaginations!

Even everyday activities became extemporaneous vehicles for fun for couples when playfulness was interjected. Some couples described playful situations that had positively impacted their relationship, and that counterbalanced the normal frictions within relationships. For example, Pete and Pearl confessed that they had misunderstandings at times. “What couple don’t? Everything’s not cream and sugar. You gonna’ have some problems sometime,” was Pete’s take on this normal phenomenon. Pearl agreed, and then shared that playfully teasing one another was healthy for their marriage.

Playfulness between partners had a positive effect on couples both as they engaged in the experience, and as they recalled it later. I asked KK and Kevon to tell me some of the recreation activities they enjoyed doing together. They rattled off a typical list of home-based
activities. “Look at the [Olympic] Games [on TV], watch basketball, watch football, watch movies… Game Boy. We take walks and stuff. Play cards. Play Uno. We got a lot of good games that we play.” “Go Fish. Yeah, Scrabble, Trouble, yeah,” KK contributed. Kevon’s next statement caught me by surprise. “[We] play hide and go seek. Yeah, yeah, we scare each other! I might be on my knees right there and scare her!” Excitedly, KK chimed in:

Yeah, I got him good one day! He was mad! He got mad cause he got scared! He was in the bathroom, and I was there in the hall, and he walked out. He jumps all! I got him good!

Hide and go seek provided this couple an on-going thread of playfulness that was woven through their relationship. They said they played this game at any time, without any forewarning to their partner. This additional element of uncertainty as to when the game would be picked back up added to the excitement of sharing this playful form of impromptu recreation for Kevon and KK.

Playful sexual engagements were mentioned or implied by several couples as they discussed their relationships and their shared recreation. From what couples disclosed, sex was a mutually enjoyed activity between partners. When Sandy explained that her partner did not “play well with others… but] he plays well with me.” With this statement, Tyrone let out a low growl that seemed to be sexual in nature.

Some pairs found movie watching (usually considered Diversional Couple Recreation) a catalyst for stimulating intimate relations as a couple. Terrell explained the connection between their movie viewing and the romance that sometimes followed:
I've seen a lot of movies, and I say "I wish I had a woman like that, a woman I can do things like that [with]." Movies like “Romancing the Stone.”…It wasn't what you saw in the movies, it was your imagination of what they were doing in the meantime….

What you see in your head while the movie’s playing [is what] makes… a romantic movie.

Terrell and Shantel found that choosing romantic movies aroused impulses in them that facilitated shared sexual activity.

Some couples specifically identified sexual activity as a form of shared couple recreation. Their descriptions indicated that their encounters had a mutually satisfying, playful, or unifying opportunity for them. For Jack and Jasmine, sexual relations provided intimacy that was more than physical in nature. Jack explained, “It also became a thing that we were not only enjoying the physical connection, but we recognized it was different. It was good to the soul!”

These impromptu activities, whether related to playing games or sexual activity, provided opportunities for couples to connect with one another and to nurture their relationship without much effort, additional resources, or advance planning. Because they often occurred in or around the home, minimal effort was needed to make the necessary investments in sharing these types of couple recreation activities. Spontaneity in couple recreation was a usual pattern for participation in impromptu shared activities for some couples.

Because little to no advanced planning was required for participation, these impromptu experiences were easily accessed. Some couples indicated they normally had a
narrow planning horizon for their recreation endeavors often because of personal preferences or financial uncertainties. For other couples, spontaneity in pursuing recreation opportunities appeared to be exciting and serendipitous. For example, Eddie and Lori do not tend to plan their recreation activities much in advance. Lori explained, “It will just come out of the spur of the moment. It’s not like we just sit down and plan it.” Eddie, who obviously enjoyed the excitement of uncertainty and flexibility in planning, articulated the value he saw in their loose schedules:

> The spontaneity of this relationship, on a scale from 1 – 10, is probably a 10.5. It’s like she said, we be lying in the bed, and decide we’re going to do this tomorrow, and we do it! And that’s what keeps it fresh. That’s what keeps things interesting.

Many low-income couples tended to maintain an air of flexibility in their recreation planning. With only one disability check coming in monthly as support, funds were limited for KK and Kevon. As a result, home-based recreation was their primary avenue for shared activities. Even when they did choose to go out together, they maintained flexibility, in the event Kevon might get temporarily hired as a day laborer. KK summed up their usual strategy for engaging in recreation together by saying, “We play it by ear.” Kevon explained how his planned efforts often unfolded:

> I don’t like to plan too much ahead. I don’t like to say we’re going to do this or that. I would just rather keep it in my head, and just know what I need to do. And about the time we get halfway there, then I let her know. ‘Cause things could change. And if I tell her something, she can expect it. So I don’t say that to her no more. If she wants to plan, I say, “I’m thinking about it.” And I know that’s what she wants. But I have
to be sharp enough to plan ahead for that, because I know it’s going to come back up. So when it does come back up, I can say, “OK, we’re halfway there,” or “Come on, let’s go.” So it’s just about learning.

Kevon learned to manage his partner’s expectations regarding shared recreation in the community. If he remained silent about potential plans, he minimized the likelihood of disappointing or frustrating his partner. When the somewhat planned event did occur, Kavon knew KK would be pleased to participate.

Spontaneity was a way of life for KK. During the course of our conversation, she showed me a photo of a friend of hers who had suddenly passed away about a year ago. “She was sittin’ right there in that chair he sittin’ at. She came over here. And I see her again the next day… and then that weekend, she’s gone.” KK did not elaborate on the cause of her friend’s death, but it had fueled her determination to stay flexible to what might come up in life. “And that’s where I’m at. I just take life day-by-day. I don’t like to plan things. I play it by ear and stuff.”

With the uncertainty of life, income, health, and other opportunities that arise in the lives of couples living on limited incomes, spontaneity appeared to be an often necessary approach to recreation for some couples.

For other couples, particularly those with earned incomes, spontaneity and impromptu activities were an exciting change to their structured lives. For example, Jackie and Carl both had full-time jobs. Even with three children in their household, they had some disposable income to spend on recreational activities or going out to eat as a family. For Jackie, last
minute decisions to engage in activities signaled exciting, adventurous propositions, particularly given her upbringing:

We haven’t been real spontaneous [as a couple]. I know growing up, my dad was always spontaneous. So when he [husband Carl] is spontaneous, I just love it! … That kind of spontaneity is really fun. We’re not there yet, mainly because of the income restrictions. But I know if we were able to financially, we would do it a lot.

Spontaneity frequently generated positive recreation experiences for couples. For most, spontaneity represented an opportunity to engage in an enjoyable activity that had not been planned or anticipated. Without advanced planning, investments of resources, or much effort, couples could engage in impromptu shared recreation experiences that communicated the priority they placed on each other and on their relationship. In addition, however, some couples devoted considerable time, resources, and effort to orchestrate shared couple recreation they considered important for nurturing their relationship.

**Planned Shared Couple Recreation**

Investments of time to prepare for and engage in activities together were typical of the final category of shared recreation – Planned Shared Couple Recreation. As couples allocated financial resources and / or effort to secure necessary support (e.g., make childcare engagements), they transformed their activities into special events. For couples in this study, these types of activities occurred both in the community and in and around the home. Couples who engaged in these planned shared recreation activities demonstrated they valued the mutual activities and were willing and able to negotiate challenges that other couples found prohibitive. The couples described examples of shared activities such as going out as
well as planning special activities at home. They facilitated their shared recreation through planning and negotiation efforts including overcoming physical limitations, coordinating time and work schedules, addressing financial constraints, securing needed transportation, and accessing recreation venues.

“Going out” was a phrase couples used to describe the most common Shared Couple Recreation experiences. For many, this meant eating at a restaurant, going to a local theatre to watch a movie, or partaking in other community-based opportunities. These were sometimes considered “dates” and needed to be planned rather than done at the spur of the moment. Regardless of the activity, when they invested time, resources, and effort to get out of the house together to focus on each other and their relationship, couples identified these outings as enjoyable, significant bonding and enriching relational experiences.

Couples acknowledged that eating out at restaurants enriched their relationships. Food was an important aspect of shared recreation for some couples as previously described in relation to family recreation. Because going out to eat was somewhat restricted due to finances, when it did occur it was often the catalyst for a recreation experience not just a means to satisfy their hunger. The shared meals facilitated conversations that enabled them to get to know one another. Without the distractions of the home environment, they could focus their attention on one another. Couples seemed to enjoy one another by “sittin’ and talking and going out to eat.” Couples identified eating out together as a popular shared activity. Those with earned incomes were able to eat out more frequently than other couples.

Gloria and LeBron both had steady jobs, which provided them financial resources for recreation, such as eating out at restaurants. From time to time, they left Gloria’s three high
school-aged children at home and went out as a couple. Gloria explained what this time together was like for them, saying, “We go out to eat. We go out to the movies. We try to get away sometimes, just to have some time away without the kids.”

While some couples were financially able to eat at restaurants somewhat regularly, many couples reserved this activity for special occasions. When I asked one couple about what they did to celebrate holidays, Daniel noted, “There’s always birthday cards, that sort of thing…” His wife, Ruth, immediately broke in, “Going out to dinner!” Daniel then did admit, “I take her out to eat. I always take her out to eat on her special days.” Although seemingly nonchalant for Daniel, going out to eat was a meaningful expression of love and celebration for his wife.

In their retirement, Pete and Pearl still liked to eat out together. Restaurant eating was often austere and their feet often provided the necessary transportation, but they still enjoyed this time together. When they wanted to lengthen their time out together, they modified the route they would walk home after eating at a local fast food restaurant. Pearl explained:

We go to McDonald's, and we eat. If we go this way to McDonald's [she points along a main street with sidewalks] and then we go the other way home. So that takes a while to get back to your destination.

Other couples, especially those who had to arrange for child care services, also recognized the importance of maximizing time alone together to boost relational benefits. Rather than catch the bus to the nearby affordable movie theatre, James and Barb chose to walk, “just because we wanted to get to know each other even more.”
Watching movies, a common home-based recreational pursuit, provided a popular outing for many couples when they went to a theatre. When incomes were restricted, recreation expenditures had to be minimal. When sharing his strategy for economizing when taking SaFire out, Simon summarized, “I’m glad the dollar-fifty movies is right down the road.”

Couples like Dwayne and Nora liked to make an event out of their movie watching dates. They would linger in the park-like environment created outside a movie theatre in an upscale shopping center and indulge in a dish of ice cream. Their splurge on dessert, more affordable than dinner out, extended their date, and expanding opportunities to connect as a couple.

Beyond going to the movies and eating out at restaurants, couples who lived on limited incomes found other novel, relationship enriching recreation activities in their communities. Dalton was somewhat reluctant to share an activity he and his wife Mitzy enjoyed doing when they went out together. He confided, “It’s kind of crazy, but the kinds of things we do, if you call it recreation, is going to karaoke.” Added Mitzy, “Yeah, I love going to karaoke, when we have the time.”

Engaging in enjoyable recreation activities in a public setting enhanced the experience for some couples, particularly if their activities were normally home-based. Dwayne and Nora found dancing at home to be an enjoyable recreation pursuit. However, their experience was enhanced when dancing took place in a more public setting. Nora explained how the effort she invested in making Dwayne’s birthday special benefitted them both:
I took him out for his birthday, to a nightclub. That was our first time going out
dancing actually. Usually we stay home and dance in the living room. But it was fun
going out…. Yeah, we do like to dance.

Dancing in a novel setting seemed to transform the familiar activity into a memorable special
event for Dwayne and Nora. Dwayne was pleased by his wife’s determination to honor him
on his birthday though they had limited disposable income. Nora demonstrated the value she
placed on her husband and on their marriage by arranging their evening out.

Many couples engaged in shared couple recreation beyond the home environment, but
some like Jack and Jasmine found ways to bring the novelty of an evening out into their
home. This couple drew on past personal experience and added a twist to turn an individual
pursuit into a fresh, creative, and challenging shared couple’s event. When I asked about
activities that they planned ahead to do, Jack and Jasmine explained that they were going to
have a head-to-head DJ competition. This shared recreation experience allowed them to
creatively express their personal skills while satisfying their individual competitive natures.
Through the efforts they invested, they communicated the value they placed on each other
and their relationship. Jack and Jasmine’s description of their anticipated experience took me
by surprise:

Jasmine: We’re going to do some DJ’ing. We both used to be DJ’s in the ‘70’s or
‘80’s.

Jack: I can’t wait for that! That’s going to be so much fun! What we’re literally
planning on doing is buying some DJ equipment…

Jasmine: Renting
Jack: Yeah, that’s right, renting, and we plan on just, you know…

Jasmine: Battling it out!

Jack: Yeah, battling it out, you know.

Jasmine: And may the best woman win!

Interviewer: So, the Battle of the DJ’s!

Jack: Yeah, and just have a really good time. I’m really looking forward to that. That’s going to be so much fun.

Jasmine: He really knows. He’s really the one who is going to be teaching me a lot, but once I pick it up…

Jack: And she’s going to pick up on it quick. She has a real good ear for music. She’s good. I know she’ll pick it up. Once I teach her how to read and do all that other stuff, she’ll pick it up. I know she will.

Interviewer: So is that going to be a large party, or…

Jack: No, no, no, no.

Jasmine: Just him and me

Jack: No, just her and me. We’re going to rent the DJ equipment, bring it in the house, and just DJ. Spin records right there in the house.

This exchange illustrated their excitement as they anticipated this playful event. Jack and Jasmine were investing time and financial resources into this experience knowing they would not have an audience. In doing so, Jack and Jasmine communicated to each other the importance of keeping their relationship engaging and enjoyable. They clearly valued their shared recreation.
Valuing shared recreation was a necessary first step to experience the benefits of couple recreation. Most couples aspired to having opportunities for impromptu and planned shared recreation, but that was not always possible. Negotiating challenges such as physical limitations, priorities and time, money concerns, and access were important.

Overcoming physical limitations to experience shared couple recreation. Some couples had to overcome physical limitations, which changed the nature of their recreation. Physical factors related to aging for some older couples, while other limitations such as ailments or available personal energy, affected other couples. Personal physical comfort of one partner influenced the types and frequency of recreation for some couples. As a result, most of the couples who disclosed physical limitations primarily participated in home-based shared couple recreation rather than going out into community.

Daniel and Ruth recognized they rarely went out together anymore because of Daniel’s “sickness.” They had enjoyed regularly taking walks around their neighborhood, often with their dog. Ruth summed up their activity simply stating, “Yeah, we liked to walk together.” Daniel now got around by riding his motorized scooter, although it was broken at the time of our interview. Ruth said she enjoyed their sidewalk outings when Daniel could get out.

CeCe acknowledged her physical health was one of the major determinants to what she and Durrell did as a couple and where they engaged in shared recreation. Most of their shared activities now were home-based: television or movie watching, enjoying music, cooking and eating together, talking or telling stories, or taking care of their parakeets. She explained:
Most of it [recreation] depends on my energy level. Sometimes I’ll wake up and have the energy to do stuff, and I’ll say, “Do you want to order out such and such tonight?” … That’s pretty much what gets the ball rolling: my energy level, and how much time I can tolerate.

Temporary health issues also restricted shared recreation for some couples during the partner’s debilitation period. For example, Simon suffered with abscessed teeth for several months, which made him increasingly preoccupied with the pain. Only after he found relief at a free dental clinic event did he feel well enough to engage in recreation activities with SaFire.

One partner’s physical preferences also influenced how they engaged in shared recreation. Mitzy’s aversion to hot weather, for example, affected her desire to engage with her husband in outdoor activities. During the summer heat and humidity common in North Carolina, Mitzy physically had a hard time enduring outside activities. She explained her challenge:

I am miserable [in the summer heat]. So that’s my big hold up: living in the south, and being outside for any given period of time, from May until September. After that, I’m OK. You want to go ice fishing? Let’s go! Yeah that’s my problem. I can’t stand the heat. I’m miserably uncomfortable…. I just get absolutely positively sick in the heat. I’m not [she pauses] I’m a true Northerner, in that I just can’t handle it. I can handle the cold. I cannot handle the heat.

Similarly, CeCe was adversely affected by intense summer heat. She and Durrell were contemplating attending summer camp for the visually impaired on different weeks.
instead of together because of the temperature differences between May and August. CeCe preferred a cooler early summer week, but Durrell wanted to go during a warmer time in the summer when many of their other friends attended camp. While this couple enjoyed sharing the week at camp together, the differences in their heat tolerances affected their attitudes and potential behaviors and created potential scheduling conflicts.

_Time, work schedules, and shared recreation._ Opportunities for shared recreation were also influenced by work schedules and other responsibilities that affected the time available for shared recreation. “We work so much,” Mitzy explained, “that we don’t have much time for recreation.” Fabil and Akila shared a similar experience. Both worked in food service, an industry known for requiring its often transient employees to work long hours. Akila described the situation, “Yes, the schedule and the money is not easy. You need the money, and you have to work.” Her husband continued:

Yes, to find a specific time [for couple recreation] is difficult. We get our time at work, that’s when we have to work! … Every week they change when I work. They do this so different people work different weekends, not always have the weekend to work…. Some days you close, and some days you open. It always changes.

Co-workers’ vacation plans also influenced couples’ work schedules. Gloria’s work schedule tended to change frequently during the summer months, as she would pick up more hours to cover shifts of vacationing coworkers. LeBron’s hours varied as well in his job. This couple found few opportunities to recreate together during the work week. Gloria reported, “Our schedules vary. But we have the weekends off, so that’s really the only time we get to spend together, on the weekends.”
Jackie’s work schedule also varied seasonally. During summer programs and just before the start of the academic year, she had little time at home, which left even less time for her to enjoy recreation with her husband. Jackie explained:

I had to be at work at 9 o’clock in the morning, and I don’t get off work until 9 o’clock at night. So I’ve had long days for the last 2 weeks. My schedule has been crazy…. By the time I get home, all I want to do is sit. And with the long travel, and stuff like that, I think that’s a real hindrance to our recreation, because of my job.

Jackie’s job appeared to be salaried as contrasted to the hourly wage jobs. She did not receive overtime pay but for most low-income couples, time at work meant earned income coming into the household. Often these work schedules changed from week to week. Employed couples were frequently challenged in making plans for couple recreation because they often were unsure of when they would both be available to enjoy time together. Couples like Gloria and LeBron were fortunate to have positions that required only Monday through Friday hours. However, those working in the food service industry could be scheduled any time of day, and any day of the week.

These work schedule issues were described by Mitchell and Lindsay as well. Mitchell was the sole wage earner in his family, and his schedule varied. On the days he worked as a chef, his long shifts often extended late into the night. Mitchell’s only time for shared recreation was during mid-day or on days he did not work. Like most other low-income couples, if Mitchell did not work, he did not get paid. However, unlike most low-income couples, Mitchell and Lindsay owned their own home. Their financial priority was paying the mortgage on the family’s small townhome, not spending money on recreation. Fortunately,
both were skilled in locating free public recreation events they could attend, which they often
did. When he thought about factors that hindered him and his wife from shared recreation,
Mitchell cited, “Time. Yeah, time constraints certainly. Finances can and do put hindrances,
too.”

“If the money’s not there, you got issues.” Many people might assume that the
greatest obstacle to shared recreation for low-income couples was lack of finances. Many
couples noted they felt financial strain and that it had an effect on their emotional wellbeing,
as well as on their interest in recreation. Finances were a major issue for many couples,
especially for those who were unable to work. Still, couples found creative ways to enjoy
shared recreation without spending a great deal of money as has been illustrated in these
findings. For some, engaging in activities in or around their home allowed them to participate
in beneficial experiences with little or no cost. Other couples, even those without earned
incomes, prioritized small amounts of money for couple recreation, most frequently to eat out
at restaurants or to go to the movies. Making financial investments in couple recreation
reinforced to both partners the value they each placed on the other and on their relationship.

The financial situation of couples appeared to influence their mental state and attitude
about participating in recreation together as a couple. Financial worries served as a trigger for
relational distress at times for some couples. For example, financial concerns created stress in
couples like SaFire and Simon. After 11 years, Simon admitted that their relationship was not
as strong and healthy as it had been previously. He blamed their lack of interaction on
finances and thought the relationship would do better if they had more money. Simon stated:
We don’t go out and do things together any more like we used to…. We don’t have the opportunity. We don’t have the finances, we can’t…. Like the [interview consent] form says, “What do we do for fun?” Nothing much, really, to be honest with you….

Limited finances also had an influence on individual emotional health as well as on relationship health for some couples. LeBron and Gloria both noted the effects of their financial health on their relational health. Gloria stated, “Not having the money does cause friction in the relationship sometimes…. You may not always have the money, so it puts a strain on the relationship.”

Similarly, LeBron admitted to the implications of their financial condition on their emotional and relational health, saying, “After you’ve got the finances, it’s all fine and dandy, and then if the money’s not there, and you got other issues, that can be depressive.”

Gloria reflected:

We have our moments. There are times when money will put a strain on our relationship. If we’re stressed and worried about paying the bills, you’re not really thinking about spending quality time at all, even getting along, for that matter. Sometimes it causes other problems in a relationship. So you’re not always thinking about y’all spending time together, because sometimes, I don’t even want to see his face! He’ll upset me and piss me off so much I’m not going to move for him. I don’t even want to be around him. Last thing I’m thinking about is spending time together.

Financial pressures affected how they viewed and interacted with their partner, and how willing they were to engage and enjoy time together.
In contrast to those whose financial stress inhibited their recreation, some couples found shared recreation helped alleviate relational strain. Dwayne and Nora, for example, felt a sense of freedom from the everyday stressors of life when they went out together. Dwayne explained:

It’s like when we go out. It takes all the focus off the responsibility. Me and her having a good time out for that moment. You know that moment? Not really worry about the bills and stuff like that. So it does help to go out and have a good time.

Similarly, Carl and Jackie found that their relationship felt differently after they shared recreation together. However, the types of planned shared couple recreation they engaged in appeared to be influenced by their financial situation. Jackie explained, “I know that [our relationship improves after shared couple recreation]. Because different times, when we’ve had time together and we’ve had the money, the tension is less between us.” Even though they felt financial constraints, Carl and Jackie still found ways to connect as a couple through shared recreation activities. “I always try to figure out the most economical way to take advantage of things,” Jackie clarified.

Finding economical recreation opportunities was a common strategy for couples who valued the relational benefits of shared recreation. Daniel and Ruth, for example, often engaged in spontaneous home-based activities or those in the community that required minimal financial investment. Activities that were planned ahead were infrequent occurrences for this couple. “We usually don’t do that. It’s usually a spirit of the moment type thing,” Ruth explained. Daniel provided more clarity, “And the reason why is because of our budget-type thing. It’s just so tight. We gotta’ pay food and rent. And bills are
important. A place to live, that’s important.” This couple made the conscious decision to prioritize bill paying over recreation expenditures. Knowing they had a home to live in and food to eat provided Daniel and Ruth with security and peace of mind. As a result, they were content to primarily pursue shared recreation activities that were free or that they could do at home.

Most couples, like Daniel and Ruth, were in a financial state that limited their recreation expenditures. As discussed earlier however, these couples maximized their available resources for recreation. These couples demonstrated the importance of their relationship, even with minimal financial investments, by pursuing free opportunities in the community or by creating special shared recreation experiences at home.

Financial pressures were felt by couples who were employed as well as those who had no earned income. Regardless of the source or amount of money coming into the household, the amount of disposable income a couple had affected their attitude, their relational health, and their desire and ability to engage in shared recreation. For example, couples who were employed all indicated that they did have access to a personal vehicle. While having a personal vehicle was not required to engage in shared couple recreation, couple recreation was affected by access to transportation.

*Securing needed transportation.* Finances were also closely tied to access to recreation through suitable transportation. Being without a personal vehicle did not stop couples from getting out into the community to recreate together. Several low-income couples talked about using city buses to access recreation opportunities. Daniel was no longer able to drive due to his disabilities. When he and Ruth wanted to visit her dad and her sister,
they relied on public transportation to get most of the way to their destination. Daniel explained, “They live in Garner. We catch the bus down to Wal-Mart, and they come over to Wal-Mart and pick us up.” “They don’t live but a mile from Wal-Mart,” Ruth added.

For Pete and Pearl, public transportation made some of their recreational outings possible. Pearl detailed a typical outing for them, “We go to Cameron Village, go to Bargain Box over there and look around; then to the drugstore, and then over there to K and W [Cafeteria]. Eat a meal. We do that and then we catch the bus home.”

Leroy and Sandy also described how buses helped them enjoy spending time in local city parks, particularly the larger ones where more activities were available to them. Walking, picnicking, and listening to concerts, watching sporting events, and people watching could all be enjoyed for free except, “It takes bus fare, but that’s about it!”

Buses were also important for other couples. Daniel explained how he and his wife Ruth made a day of this low-cost bus riding opportunity to get out of the house and enjoy time together:

Sometimes we get on the bus and we ride out and look at this and look and that… just ride. We look around, and talk about the things we’re seein’. Then we get back on the bus and come on home.

Riding the city bus also facilitated Eddie’s ability to acclimate his then recently acquainted friend Lori around her new city. They described how their friendship grew as they spent time together on the bus. Eddie recalled the progression of their relationship “bloomed into a beautiful friendship! And then the next thing you know, here it is, almost 3 years later, we’re still here together, and I’m still showing her around!”
Even couples without private vehicles negotiated this potential constraint to shared recreation by using public transportation. Whether the bus ride took them to a particular recreation setting or the ride itself was the recreation experience, couples were often able to compensate for not having a personal vehicle when they wanted to engage in recreation in the community.

The location of some recreation sites, however, posed a challenge for some couples, particularly if they did not have a private vehicle. Daniel and Ruth talked about the trips they enjoyed taking to a lake where they used to picnic and fish. They swam there and made a day of hanging out by the lake. Unfortunately, that lake was now inaccessible to them as it was situated beyond the range of public transportation routes. Ruth explained that they no longer went there because Daniel “had to quit driving.”

Although public transportation facilitated shared couple experiences for some, recreation opportunities were more accessible for couples with their own vehicle. Having one’s own transportation allowed couples to choose when and where they would like to recreate, and how long they would like to stay. Couples with their own vehicles were able to choose whether to plan their recreation activities in advance, if desired, or to decide to go at the last minute, as they were not reliant on schedules of public busses.

Jack and Jasmine had access to a private vehicle. As a result, going out together was easily facilitated, assuming they had the energy to do so. If one partner needed time to relax at home before going out, couples with a personal vehicle had the flexibility to set their own schedules. Jack appreciated Jasmine’s propensity to plan recreation activities and outings for them to enjoy on weekday evenings. He was also grateful that she was comfortable with
changing plans when he was too exhausted to participate. This flexibility, whether in “sticking to the plan” or changing it, was influenced in part by their individual personalities and temperaments, but facilitated by access to their own transportation.

Having a personal vehicle provided low-income couples flexibility and freedom when they wanted to participate in recreation activities together. These couples did not have to rely on bus routes and schedules to take them or bring them back from venues of interest. As a result, these couples could take advantage of spur of the moment decisions to go out, or they could plan their excursions in advance.

Access to recreation venues. In addition to physical limitations, work schedules, financial issues, and transportation, the actual recreation setting itself posed an obstacle to couple recreation. For example, some couples lived within a few miles of a regional public park, where they liked to spend the day enjoying a picnic and park amenities. Unfortunately, during the time of the interviews, the park was closed for major renovations. Several couples specifically mentioned their dismay at not being able to visit this particular park.

Inaccessibility was also an issue for some couples due to closures of recreation venues. Certain bowling alleys, movie theatres, and ice skating rinks were mentioned by a few couples as examples of commercial recreation facilities that had shut down during the years they had been together. Activities or recreation venues that they had enjoyed in their early years of their relationships were no longer available to them.

Overall, couples in committed relationships often worked cooperatively to find ways to engage in shared couple recreation experiences. Their desire to maintain a strong relationship motivated many couples to pursue resourceful solutions in negotiating
challenges, whether related to child care, finances, transportation, or physical limitations. When couples wanted to engage in activities in the community together, they boarded public transportation if they had no private vehicle. If they had little or no disposable income at the time to invest in recreation, they packed picnic meals, visited free events, or created engaging shared activities in and around the home. Most couples intentionally invested the necessary effort to overcome hindrances because of the value they placed on shared couple recreation.

The Value of Shared Couple Recreation

Intentionality and focused couple attention were key elements to the Shared Couple Recreation Orientation and especially to planned activities. Couples who made intentional efforts to engage in shared couple recreation expressed the value of these experiences to them as individuals and to their relationship. I asked Dwayne and Nora about the importance of recreation in their lives as a couple and in particular times when they engaged in shared couple recreation. Nora described the importance to her, using the example of eating out:

We like to go out for dinner…. I think it gives us a chance to go out, no distractions, just me and him, you know. Even if it’s something small, and we get to go out and just get to talk with one another. I enjoy that. It’s good to get away from home for a little while, a different ambiance…. At home … you’re used to each other…. But when you go out… it’s special.

Dwayne followed up on his wife’s view that eating out together was “special.” Dwayne reflected, “Spending time together, enjoying each other’s company. Yeah, [being] in the moment. We’re in the moment.”
This idea of being “in the moment” together, distraction free, enjoying one another’s company while engaged in a special recreation experience was significant for couples. Nora explained the emotional effect going out with her husband had on her personally:

When we go out together, it reminds me of all the things [she pauses] why I fell in love with him. Plus I enjoy his company. It’s fun to just do things. It puts me in a better place when we come back…. [Going out together] just makes it all better. It puts the cherry on top of the cake. It doesn’t matter what we’re doing.

Kevon and KK recognized a difference in their individual emotions as well as in their relationship as a result of having participated in a shared recreation experience together. KK described the effects as, “Definitely more peaceful and more calm… It feels good to have gone out and done somethin’ different.” Kevon added, “Yeah, I would say so, yeah. Any time we do something together, the mood is always going to be different, during it and afterwards…. You’re gonna’ learn something new [about the other].”

This sense of contentment was healthy for sustaining most relationships. Leroy and Sandy spent the first year of their committed relationship living homeless, mainly in a downtown city park. Living in an apartment together, they now appreciated the peaceful aspects of the life they shared together. As Sandy described some of their recreation, she sounded contented. “Walking in the park and holding hands, means everything to me! I call that recreation… Laying in the grass in a picnic, that’s recreation to me, and it doesn’t take a lot of money!” Leroy agreed. He experienced joy and satisfaction at being with his partner, supporting one another in steering clear of drugs, and enjoying every day experiences
together. “We’re still holding hands, knowing that, for me, I am the reason she’s smilin’! Yeah, I make her feel good, and that’s suffice for me.”

“Recreation means a lot to us. Having fun means a lot to us,” Sandy stated. When I asked this couple directly how important it was for the two of them to have fun together, Leroy simply and quietly stated, “Extremely… extremely.” Sandy added, “It keeps us together.”

For some couples, the recreational aspects of their relationships had helped them overcome some of life’s difficulties. Lamont and his long-time partner, Nancy, had experienced many challenges and hardships in their lives. Yet, they spoke joyfully about their lives together. Lamont summarized by saying that they “just enjoy life…. We do. I enjoy everything we do.”

Sharing everyday life together was important for most of these couples. Earlier in their relationship, for example, Helen and Richard had lived in a small town in the foothills of western North Carolina. Since public transportation was not a viable option for them then, they walked “everywhere we went.” They were both unemployed at the time, and spent a lot of time watching television, and listening to books on tape, or reading books to one another from Braille. Both then and now, Helen explained that the best part of their recreation was “just to enjoy being together.”

Spending recreation time together provided both individual as well as relational benefits. Cliff summarized the individual benefits he experienced by being in nature with his partner, “It clears your mind... It takes a lot off your mind.” He felt he could reconnect with
his partner more positively after their time together in nature. Crystal confirmed the importance of getting outdoors for her, “It keeps it [their relationship] fresh, keeps it new.”

This sense of rejuvenation was an important element of recreation for some couples. Through recreation, partners often acquired individual physical and emotional benefits that then transferred to relational benefits for the couple. Jasmine explained:

Recreation plays a good part in our lives to keep us young and healthy and fit, and have us doing things together that’s valuable…. That’s helping both of us, as a family unit, and also as individuals. So I think it keeps us healthy sexually and mentally clear.

Jack saw notable differences in the amount and quality of shared recreation between what he had with his ex-wife, and what he was experiencing in his current relationship with Jasmine. For him, shared recreation with Jasmine had infused his life with energy and drive that had been lacking for many years. Jack explained how shared recreation with his partner had transformed his life:

I have become a changed man in terms of recreation. I know when I was married, when I was in a relationship with my [ex-] wife, I didn’t do much. There wasn’t much there…. I guess our relationship was going on a down slope. So, really, it didn’t matter much to me. We did what we did, just out of ‘because of.’ But right now, it has definitely changed my life, because I really enjoy the recreational part…. So this is a whole new world to me…. I was in a life where I would go to work and come home…. But I’m using part of my brain that I didn’t even know, allowing me to be this new person. So I’m very, very inspired by the recreation.
Living with his current partner was enriching for Jack. In Jack’s case, it was hard to
determine if the lack of recreation he shared with his ex-wife contributed to the demise of
their marriage, or if the slipping of their relationship led to a lack of shared recreation. Either
way, Jack’s past experience led him to appreciate his new-found recreation with Jasmine.

Similarly, Gloria and LeBron had both been in relationships prior to coming together
as a committed couple. LeBron’s children were grown, lived in other states, and had families
of their own. Gloria’s high-school aged children lived with them. While this couple did not
describe the details of their previous relationships, they realized spending time together away
from children and household responsibilities was important for their relationship. When
asked about the change in their relationship during or after these outings, Gloria explained:

I notice a change while we’re doing it. It brings us closer, and there’s more peace
around us…. Sometimes it’s getting out of the house, getting some fresh air, just
being in a different environment. Different scenery will just change your mood.

Gloria had mentioned their home could get chaotic with three active teenagers living with
them. Going out together allowed Gloria and LeBron to each relax, and to refocus on each
other and on enjoying their time together.

Time together with a significant other was important for another couple, Dalton and
Mitzy. When they both worked for the same cab company, they often drove together, which
allowed them time together around the clock. During the past year, Dalton had changed
companies, resulting in less work time together for this couple. Mitzy explained the
importance of the time they had together now for recreation:
It’s very important now that we don’t work for the same company because we’re used to having all that time. Now we feel deprived! I guess we’re more like “normal couples” – at least that’s what they tell us. They don’t work together. So now [time together in recreation] is like precious gold.

Summary of Chapter 4

Not all couples felt their time together was “like precious gold.” A few couples in this study appeared to be in relational distress, and thus, couple recreational distress as well. Consequently, many of their recreation activities fell in the Independent Orientation category. These couples did few activities together, or engaged primarily in activities, such as television watching, that stimulated only low levels of communication between them.

As compared to those couples whose primary recreation had an Independent Orientation, couples who frequently engaged with Others and in Shared Couple Orientation activities appeared to have healthier relationships. Because these types of activities required couples to interact directly and frequently, partners often expressed that they felt more connected with one another and more satisfied with their relationship.

Many of these couples directly stated that their relationship was “very important” to them. Some expressed its value through the efforts they invested in their partners and their relationship by supporting each other’s recreational interests or by engaging with them directly. Activities in the Shared Couple Orientation classification required focused attention and intentional efforts by partners. By engaging in these types of recreational pursuits, couples communicated that their relationships were valuable to them.
The Continuum of Orientations to Recreation for Couples (CORC) was introduced to illustrate the breadth of recreation engaged in by low-income committed couples in this study. The CORC model grouped activities into three orientations: Independent, Others, and Shared Couple. Within each orientation, categories of activities were described. Examples from the data were also provided, and challenges, facilitators, and negotiation strategies were examined that contributed especially to shared couple activities. The next chapter summarizes these findings, examines the data analyzed in light of substantive as well as current theories, assesses my methodological approach, presents limitations, and provides recommendations for practitioners serving low-income couples as well as for future research.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

My study was initiated to learn about the influence of recreation in the lives of low-income committed couples. Recreation and leisure researchers generally have not explored activity behaviors or attitudes of low-income couples. Family studies literature often includes research on low-income couples and families, but to the near-exclusion of information related to their recreation patterns or interests. As a result, my study was undertaken to bridge the gap between these two bodies of literature. Specifically, I was curious to discover what types of recreation activities were engaged in by low-income committed couples, whether individually, together, or with children. I was interested to find out how valuable they felt couple recreation was to them as well as what challenges they faced and possibly overcame to be able to recreate together. In Chapter 4 I explained the findings of my study. In this chapter, I discuss the substantive theory that emerged from my data and how it relates to current theories.

To begin this final chapter, I summarize the findings from the data including the Continuum of Orientations to Recreation for Couples (CORC) model. Substantive theory interpreted from these data is used to integrate themes and connect this study to previous literature. The next section reflects on the methodology used, highlighting lessons learned, and notes some of the limitations. I also reflect on the personal impacts of this research on my personal and professional development. This chapter concludes with recommendations for future research and for agencies that serve low-income couples.
Summary of Findings

Data from my study suggested that low-income couples engage in multiple forms of recreation and that shared couple recreation can provide meaningful experiences. A summary of the continuum of these activities provides a context for the discussion of substantive theory related to couple recreation and the potential of shared couple recreation. Forms of recreation for low-income couples in this study were illustrated through the Continuum of Orientations to Recreation for Couples (CORC), as introduced in Chapter 4. Activities ranged from individual pursuits (Independent Orientation) to those recreation activities engaged with others (Others Orientation) to couple-only activities (Shared Couple Orientation).

Independent Orientation included types of recreation activities that stimulated little if any interaction among partners. Categories included: individual pursuits, few engagements in couple recreation, and diversionary couple recreation. Some partners chose to pursue individual activities that provided benefit to the individual and to the couple (e.g., cathartic release for a partner) and/or self-centered reasons (e.g., did not have interest in sharing the activity). In some situations, couples engaged in few couple recreation engagements together. While some of this lack of couple recreation was prevalent in couples with small children in the home, some couples appeared to be in relational distress. As a result, partners did not seek out or create opportunities for shared couple recreation. Couples participated in low-interaction activities such as television watching. Though they were physically in close proximity, partners essentially viewed these shows independently. These types of activities generally facilitated low levels of interaction between partners.
Activities associated with an Others Orientation potentially provided couples with greater opportunities for connectivity. Categories within this orientation included group experiences and family recreation. However, because people beyond the couple were active participants in activities, couples often shifted their attention to the others, rather than to their partners. Group experiences often related to activities that were service oriented. Some couples provided one-time assistance to friends. Others provided mentoring or other ongoing service commitments together as a couple. For couples with young children, family recreation was their primary form of couple recreation.

Family activities were common forms of recreation for couples, particularly among couples with young children in the home. Young children in the home represented continual responsibility by parental adults, thus impacting couple recreation. A common constraint for couple-only recreation related to securing trusted child care. This challenge was most frequently negotiated by family members or trusted friends providing supervision while couples enjoyed time together. Couples with young children frequently engaged in family recreation rather than couple-only activities. Even so, couples often expressed great satisfaction and unity of purpose in being able to invest in their offspring together.

Shared Couple Orientation included four categories: support of partner’s recreation, utilitarian couple experiences, impromptu shared couple recreation, and planned couple recreation. The distinguishing feature in activities in this orientation was a focus on the meanings couples placed on recreating together. In some couples, one partner participated in an activity or hobby while the other provided support and encouragement during and/or after the engagement. Individuals who supported one another’s interests demonstrated the value
they placed on their partner and on their relationship. Utilitarian activities, too, provided opportunities for couples to engage with one another, often turning everyday tasks into enjoyable shared experiences. The final two categories in this orientation highlighted the value placed on shared couple recreation for partners. Whether couples invested many or few resources in these activities, their focused attention on their partners served to sustain and strengthen their relationship.

While the model provided a visualization of various categories and orientations along a continuum, couples participated in activities in different categories and orientations. In other words, a particular activity could be located on the continuum, but the couple themselves generally could not be pinned to one particular category on the continuum. For example, one partner might engage in individual activities to get rejuvenated at the end of a difficult day (Independent Orientation / Individual Pursuits), sit at the kitchen table with family members to play a board game (Others Orientation / Family Recreation), and then spontaneously engage in playful sexual activities with one’s spouse after the children are asleep (Shared Couple Orientation / Impromptu Shared Couple Recreation). Most study participants described engagement in a broad range of activities as couples during interviews.

In addition to engaging in a range of recreation activities, many couples both verbalized and demonstrated their commitment to maintaining a healthy union and valued shared couple recreation as an element of that union. They identified shared couple recreation as a valuable contributor to relational health, and made intentional effort to engage in recreation together. While causation could not be determined, there appeared to be an association between dedication to relational health and intentional investments in shared
couple recreation. Couples that appeared to be in relational distress tended to pursue primarily activities that required or prompted low levels of focused interaction with one another. While all couples faced challenges to shared couple recreation, it appeared that those that valued recreation’s influence in relationship enhancement invested the effort necessary to negotiate challenges and engage in recreation together.

*Interpretive Theorizing on Couple Recreation*

Because few studies had focused on this topic, I employed a qualitative approach to my research. Although formal theory has posited to explain relationships that couples have primarily within families (e.g., family systems theory, Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning), I sought to broaden an understanding of couple recreation through theorizing about the findings of my study. My research highlighted the complexity of recreation’s influence in the lives of low-income couples.

To learn about the phenomena of low-income couples and their recreation, I took an interpretive approach to my research (Charmaz, 2006). Through semi-structured interviews, I collected data from 25 couples over the course of 15 months. Once transcribed, I conducted initial line-by-line coding using MaxQDA software. After several interviews had been initially coded, I began conceptualizing my ideas by memo writing. I continued collecting and analyzing data creating categories of my theoretical concepts. After collecting data from 25 couples, I focused my analysis on identifying themes and theorizing.

My theorizing led me to interpret the data into two substantive theories that can be applied to these low-income couples and that can provide basis for further research.
a) Low-income couples engage in a range of recreation activities individually, together, and with others, with financial status being only one factor that influences their recreation involvement.

b) Low-income couples value shared couple recreation for its relational benefits and its residual contributions to daily life.

This theorizing framed the interpretation of my findings. Current research, which was useful for guiding research questions and for analyzing data, was compared with findings. Findings expanded theoretical understanding of recreation in the lives of low-income couples.

**Couple Recreation across a Range of Activities and Orientations**

The CORC model provided a visual representation of the range of activities and focal orientations for low-income couples’ recreation engagement. Recreation for these low-income couples was influenced by a number of aspects, some related to their economic status, others not. For example, recreation behaviors of couples appeared to be influenced by their employment status in some ways, particularly related to amount of disposable income and their accessibility to a personal vehicle. Associated with this, for couples with earned incomes, spontaneity appeared to be an option for their recreation. Spontaneity was often a way of life for other couples. Young children present in the home had an effect on parental adult recreation, to both facilitate and hinder participation.

Findings also indicated that many couples valued their shared couple recreation experiences and enjoyed the carry over benefits to their everyday life. Often, couples made intentional efforts to facilitate these experiences by overcoming challenges to participation.
Interestingly, all couples faced challenges associated with their low-income status (e.g., financial pressures, transportation needs, coordinating schedules). However, some partners made intentional efforts to connect together through shared couple recreation while others did not. Couple recreation contributed relationship development, cohesion, communication and problem solving skills, and mutual support benefits that transferred to daily life.

Existing literature on couple and family recreation provided a framework from which I interpreted my findings. Orthner’s (1975; Orthner & Mancini, 1991) Leisure Interaction Patterns, Zabriskie and McCormick’s (2001) Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning, Baldwin, Ellis, and Baldwin’s (1999) support of spouse’s interests, and Shaw and Dawson’s (2001) purposive leisure provided theoretical concepts that related to my findings. However, as I interpreted findings through the CORC model and began theorizing, I realized my findings expanded these theoretical frameworks as they related to recreation among low-income couples. For example, the models put forth by Orthner and by Zabriskie and McCormick focused on the relationship between participation in certain types of activities and marital satisfaction or family functioning, respectively. My findings highlighted the importance of looking beyond participation in particular activities to the meanings associated with those activities. As a result, couples received relational benefits from activities that would not be considered traditional joint, core or balance activities. Additionally, low-income parents of young children were often purposive in their selection of recreation activities, seeking to stimulate youth development. Unlike Shaw and Dawson’s (2002) findings with middle-income families, parents in my study expressed feelings of
Engaging in Recreation in Many Ways

The value of shared couple activities on marital satisfaction has been well documented and widely accepted (Hill, 1988; Holman, 1981; Holman & Jacquart, 1988; Orthner, 1975; Orthner & Mancini, 1991). Consequently, more research has built on the foundation that was laid by this body of research including applications to couple involvement in serious leisure (Hultsman, 2012; Stebbins, 2007), family vacations and travel (Kluin & Lehto, 2012; Lehto, Lin, Chen, & Choi, 2012), women’s leisure (Herridge, Shaw, & Mannell, 2003; Shaw, 2001; Shaw & Dawson, 2002), and family members with disabilities (Mactavish & Schleien, 2004; Palisano et al., 2009). Another notable line of research that expanded this base was Zabriskie and McCormick’s (2001) Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning. The core and balance framework expanded the body of knowledge on recreation for couples (Johnson, Zabriskie, & Hill 2006) and families (Agate, Zabriskie, Agate, & Poff, 2009; Hodge et al., 2012; Poff, Zabriskie, & Townsend, 2010; Smith, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2009; Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001, 2003).

This collective body of knowledge informed my study, and was useful for comparing and contrasting my findings with theirs. Orthner’s (1975) leisure interaction patterns and Zabriskie and McCormick’s (2001) Core and Balance Model of Family Leisure Functioning provided an initial framework for analyzing my findings. Orthner’s model highlighted the importance of considering where one’s attention was focused during an activity. Zabriskie and McCormick’s model drew my attention to the importance effort invested had on couples’
activities. Together, these theoretical frameworks emphasized to me the importance of understanding the meanings couples associated with their shared recreation. An understanding of the value of couples’ recreation experiences required knowing what types of activities they engaged in as well as the meanings they associated with those activities (Moore & Driver, 2006). Through the use of semi-structured interviews with both partners together, I was able to gain a more complete picture of couple recreation in the lives of my participating couples. As a result, my findings offered multifaceted views into the types of activities as well as insights into the meanings associated with those activities, expanding what was previously understood about the influence of recreation in the lives of low-income couples.

Couples in my study engaged in a range of activities, individually, with others, and with their partners. For most couples, their recreation activities were included in all three of these activity orientations. The work of Orthner (1975, 1976; Orthner & Mancini, 1991) classified couple recreation as individual, parallel, or joint activities, as described in Chapter 2. Their work provided a comparable framework for analyzing my findings.

Looking at couples in my study, individual activities resulted in both positive and negative couple experiences. At times, partners that engaged in individual activities cited the cathartic or expressive personal benefits they derived from these activities. Having obtained these personal benefits, partners noted they were more able to contribute in healthy ways to their relationship. However, partners whose recreation was most focused primarily in Independent Orientation categories appeared to be experiencing relational distress. My findings on couples who engaged in individual activities support Orthner’s (1975) findings.
Couples who engaged in individual activities reported strong levels of marital satisfaction as long as these independently oriented activities were not a primary form of recreation for the couple. Similar to Orthner’s findings, couples whose primary recreation engagements were individual activities in my study appeared to be dissatisfied in their relationship.

Parallel activities, Orthner’s (1975) second category, included activities such as television or movie watching. These were considered diversionary activities in my study. As a means of distraction or escape from the cares of the day, diversionary activities were viewed as positive recreation endeavors by most couples. As noted above, however, activities that diverted attention from the partner or issues in the relationship often indicated likely relational distress. My findings supported Orthner’s earlier ones. With parallel activities, both partners were involved in the same activity at the same time. However, due to the nature of diversionary activities, little interaction was stimulated between partners.

Diversionary activities such as television watching were pervasive among my couples, as in American households. The Nielsen Company (2010) reported that American adults watch television or DVR shows an estimated 34 hours per week, plus additional hours spent watching videos via phones. Media use has been associated with lower levels of communication between viewers and has been negatively associated with family functioning (Hodge, et al., 2012).

This lack of healthy family functioning was evident in couples in my study who relied heavily on diversionary activities such as television or movie watching as their primary form of couple recreation. Because their attention was focused on the diversion rather than the partner, low-levels of communication occurred. In both diversionary and parallel activities,
couples were physically close to one another, but emotionally and relationally, they may be distant. As a result, couples for whom diversionary activities were their most common recreation appeared to be dissatisfied with their relationship. This was aligned with Orthner’s findings that high involvement in parallel activities was associated with low marital satisfaction.

My findings diverged from those of Orthner’s (1975) final leisure interaction pattern, joint activities. Joint activities, from his perspective, were considered activities that were highly interactive between partners, stimulating communication between them, and resulting in high levels of marital satisfaction. My findings considered multiple forms of activities that provided these same relational benefits, broadening the scope of what Orthner would consider joint activities.

As illustrated in the CORC model, couples identified various ways in which they experienced shared couple recreation. Impromptu and planned shared couple recreation aligned with a traditionally held definition of joint activities. However, couples also derived positive relational benefits from engaging in utilitarian activities and in supporting their partners’ interests. Close and simultaneous involvement together was missing for activities in both of these categories, yet couples expressed high levels of relational satisfaction through involvement in these activities. When couples engaged in activities in shared couple recreation orientation categories, their focus was primarily on their partners. Through this focused attention, individuals appeared to feel esteemed by their partners and said they felt that their partner valued their mutual relationship. These couples appeared to be receiving similar relational benefits to those participating in traditional joint activities, though couples
were not necessarily participating in the same activity at the same time during utilitarian activities or when they supported their partner’s interests (Crawford, Houts, Huston, & George, 2002; Graham, 2008).

Individuals who actively supported their partners’ interests appeared to net similar relational benefits to those who engaged in joint activities. This finding was similar to what Baldwin, Ellis, and Baldwin (1999) concluded from their study of marathon runners. Their findings indicated that the benefits of shared recreation were not limited to couples engaging in the same activity simultaneously. Similarly, couples (e.g., Dalton and Mitzy, and Richard and Helen) that actively supported their partner’s interests expressed high levels of pride in their partner and satisfaction in their relationship. Although these couples did not actively engage in the hobby pursued by their partners, the benefits appeared to be the same as those of a shared experience.

Individuals who were not engaged in their partners’ interests seemed comfortable in their supporting role. For these couples, encouraging each partner to have his or her own interests was healthy for their relationship. Partners that did not have aptitude or interest in participating had the freedom to spectate or to engage in more personally pleasing activities. This sense of freedom likely strengthened relational satisfaction for couples (Huston, 2000). Because relational satisfaction has been linked with leisure satisfaction (Agate, et al., 2009; Johnson, Zabriskie, & Hill, 2006; Poff, Zabriskie, & Townsend, 2010; Russell, 1987, 1990), encouraging one’s partner to engage in an activity alone was beneficial for these couples.

The notion of leisure satisfaction as critical for relational satisfaction highlights the importance of understanding the value of couples’ recreation rather than categorizing the
activities they did. Because I used an interpretive rather than a more positivist approach to data collection and analysis, I was able to learn about the importance and meanings couples attached to their recreation experiences. For example, activities such as television watching, utilitarian activities, and playing board games were technically all core activities. However, connectedness between partners was markedly different. Partners generally interacted minimally during television watching compared to what they experienced during highly interactive home-based activities such as Jack and Jasmine’s interactions with the youth they mentored. Segregating couple recreation into only two categories (i.e., core and balance) did not adequately address the nuances of shared experiences that were evident in the data collected through semi-structured interviews of both partners together.

My findings highlighted the importance of considering couple recreation more broadly than through activities classified as core and balance alone (Samdahl, 2005; Shaw & Henderson, 2005). When low-income couples were invited to talk about their recreation, they included activities that they did alone, in service and with others, with their immediate and extended family members, as well as those they engaged in together as a couple. Even when looking at couple-only recreation, the activities of couples in my study extended beyond the limitations of core or balance categories. As noted earlier, core activities such as watching a video contributed little to the couple’s relationship, particularly if this type of diversionary activity was a primary form of couple recreation. On the other hand, even when partners did not engage in activities together, as in the case of Dalton supporting Mitzy’s nail polish blog, these activities clearly provided meaningful shared benefits for couples. In other words, couples attached meanings to their experiences that extended beyond the activities.
themselves. When KK came to life at Kevon’s mention of their hide and go seek playing, she attached meanings to the game that went beyond its technical core classification. By considering the meanings couples associated with their recreation, my findings expanded the activities-focused core and balance model.

Meanings and Importance of the Recreation Activities

The meanings attached to experiences, not the activities themselves, were central to my interpretation of recreation for these couples. The activities they were doing seemed of secondary importance compared to where their focus was and what they valued about the experiences. For example, Terrell articulated that special meals he and Shantel created and ate together stimulated conversation and were recreational compared to daily meals consumed for nutritional purposes. Likewise, riding the bus was an effective means of transportation for couples without private vehicles. What the couple experienced, however, was different if the purpose of the bus ride was to get to a doctor’s appointment or if it was an element of a broader recreational adventure.

Recreation experiences proved to be meaningful avenues for enriching relationships with partners and family members. Intentionality in activity selection and participation was described as purposive leisure by Shaw and Dawson (2001). They found that parents in their study often engaged in family activities that were not freely chosen or intrinsically motivating for them personally. The motivation of enriching the lives of their offspring propelled them to plan and participate in purposive family recreation. Family recreation purposively exposed their children to experiences that stimulated youth development and that enhanced family bonding and functioning. Couples in my study identified these same
benefits to couple and family recreation. However, they associated freedom, intrinsic motivation, and positive meaning to couple and family engagements.

Parents of young children admitted they planned and engaged in family recreation that was purposively designed to benefit the children and the family as a whole. However, many of these parents also indicated they enjoyed and received personal benefits from the activities. Unlike those in Shaw and Dawson’s (2001) study, the parents in my study were all low-income. Because most parents indicated that family recreation was their primary outlet for couple recreation, parents were intrinsically motivated to participate in these activities. They saw participation in purposive family recreation as a wise investment of their limited resources. In other words, low-income parents attached positive meanings to purposive family leisure. With personal and family benefits, they saw this as an efficient and effective investment of their financial and temporal resources.

Purposive leisure had applications for couples as well as families. Partners in my study used their recreation to enhance couple functioning. In contrast to the adults in Shaw and Dawson’s (2001) study, most of my participants who intentionally designed activities to enhance couple functioning were intrinsically motivated and freely chose to participate. For example, Nora honored her husband on his birthday by making elaborate plans for an evening out. Other couples supported their partner’s interests, deliberately focusing attention on them and on their interests. Their support encouraged their partners and strengthened their relationship. Ruth and Helen, for example, each accompanied their husbands to their respective activities so they could share the experiences with them. Couples that participated
in planned shared couple recreation purposively invested resources, time, and effort for the relational benefits they anticipated.

In short, purposive leisure was perceived as positive and desirable by low-income couples in my study. Activities in the shared couple recreation orientations were largely pursued to achieve desired outcomes such as enhanced couple communications, shared experience, strengthening relational bonds and identity, and communicating the value partners placed on each other. Their purposive leisure experiences were associated with intrinsic motivation, personal enjoyment, and benefits to the activity organizers. Perhaps one explanation for the differences between my findings and those of Shaw and Dawson (2001) was that couples in my study, especially those with young children, were less likely to have additional recreation opportunities. Couples with limited financial and temporal resources valued their shared experiences for personal fulfillment purposes as well as for relational benefits. Often they recognized the more traditional purposive leisure outcomes (e.g., positive youth development and instilling a sense of family), but they also appreciated the innate value of participating in an enjoyable shared experience. By illuminating the intrinsic motivation and personal value associated with intentionally designed recreation, my findings expanded the purposive leisure research of Shaw and Dawson in regards to low-income couples and families.

Purposiveness was an important component to recreation for some couples, but many also valued playfulness in their recreation. Leroy and Sandy, who had lived homeless for a year together, laughed often during their interview. Pete and Pearl teased each other as a sign of affection. Couples like Abraham and Sarah laughed as they shared stories of the fun they
had during impromptu activities with their children. Engaging in playful, unplanned activities brought an element of unexpected pleasure and a break from normal routines that were light-hearted and refreshing to couples.

An important aspect of recreation for couples was the refreshment and break from the ordinary that they experienced through participation. Engaging in recreation activities helped some couples survive and thrive amid the pressures of life. Recreation experiences as a couple or as a family required considerable planning at times. Determining the types, locations, and times of activities that the couple or family would enjoy were reasonable investments for most couples. In their study of families that included children with developmental disabilities, Mactavish and Schleien (2004) noted that many parents articulated the importance of engaging in family recreation spontaneously but were rarely able to capitalize on spur of the moment opportunities. As a result, they felt their family recreation was, as one parent stated, “routine… predictable” (p. 132).

Overcoming this sense of routine and predictability in their recreation was important for some couples in my study. Pedro, for example, longed for Samantha to recreate with him beyond their usual activities in their familiar home environment. Others, like Cliff and Crystal, recognized the value of getting into natural park environments as a way to refresh themselves and their relationship. At times, however, couples had to plan ahead to fulfill their desire to engage in activities beyond their routine and predictable ones. This willingness to invest time and resources to execute shared couple recreation was central to my second theoretical proposition: low-income couples value shared couple recreation for its relational benefits and its residual contributions to daily life.
Valuing Shared Couple Recreation

Many low-income partners valued their shared couple recreation and recognized it as a source of relational benefits. They indicated that their shared activities prompted relationship development, fostered cohesion, facilitated relational skills development, and provided a means of escape from the cares and pressures of daily life that fortified them when facing everyday challenges. Couples who identified and valued these relational benefits successfully negotiated obstacles to participation in shared couple recreation. Other couples, however, found these obstacles to be insurmountable. After a brief review of the relational and residual benefits of shared recreation for these couples, I analyze possible explanations as to why some couples were successful in overcoming obstacles to recreation and others were not.

Valuing the Benefits

Recreation was valued as an integral part of couples’ shared experience in a number of ways. As noted earlier, recreation was beneficial for couple formation and bonding (Doherty, 2000; Smith, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2009), for developing communication and problem solving skills (Johnson, Zabriskie, & Hill, 2006; Olson, 2001, Poff, Zabriskie, & Townsend, 2010; Schrod, 2005 Zabriskie, 2001), and as a way to strengthen their relationship amid challenging circumstances (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Willimason, 2004). These attributes of shared recreation were elaborated on in Chapter 2.

Recreation experiences were often the catalyst for couples getting to know one another. Many couples recalled recreation experiences at the onset of their relationships, whether going out to dinner, or sitting on porch swing singing together. Through the
Shared couple recreation also facilitated the development and refinement of relational skills such as communication and problem solving (Johnson, Zabriskie, & Hill, 2006; Poff, Zabriskie, & Townsend, 2010; Schrod, 2005). These provided carry over benefits to daily life. James and Barb, for example, learned to negotiate differences of opinion as they decided on a movie to watch. The residual benefits of recreation participation contributed to resilience in couples’ everyday lives.

Shared couple recreation allowed couples to escape from the pressures and cares of everyday life, even if just briefly. Recreation provided individuals and couples to determine what they wanted to do during non-work time. Many couples who felt overwhelmed at times by work, family, and financial pressures sought ways to break free (Guitard, Ferland, & Dutil, 2005; Iso-Ahola, 1999). Gloria and LeBron, for example, went out to enjoy time together, but also to escape the stress associated with the three adolescent children living in their home. Dwayne identified his dates with Nora as a time to forget about their financial issues and focus on their relationship. For both of these couples, the positive individual and relational benefits of their shared recreation lingered with them even after they returned home.

Some couples found this sense of escape without leaving home by being playful together. Couples like Kevon and KK were able to connect in positive yet engaging ways that distracted them from life’s cares, even if for brief periods of time (Aron, A. et al., 2000; Reissman, Aron, & Bergen, 1993). Playfulness had a therapeutic role for some couples,
particularly associated with creativity, curiosity, sense of humor, pleasure, and spontaneity (Guitard, Ferland, & Dutil, 2005). These elements appeared to create a resiliency that extended beyond the periods of active engagement. Benefits of playful engagement brought enjoyment to couples as they recreated, as they anticipated experiences (e.g., Jack and Jasmine), and as they reflected back on them (e.g., Maude and Harold). Having positive relationship-enhancing shared experiences seemed to spur some couples on to negotiate inevitable challenges to participation.

Overcoming the Obstacles to Shared Couple Recreation

Couples in my study faced and negotiated obstacles to shared couple recreation with varying degrees of success. Obstacles were related to factors within the individual or couple as well as external to them. Energy levels, available transportation, finances, and desire posed challenges to couples engaging in shared recreation.

Negotiating challenges to participation in shared recreation took time, effort, and resources on the part of couples. Women partners stated they were often the ones to organize couple or family activities, which could be contributed to gendered role expectations (Shaw & Henderson, 2005). Similarly, Shaw (2008) indicated that mothers often take on this planning role. She found that frequently, however, mothers were “too tired to organize ‘positive’ family activities” (p. 697). Consequently for the families in her study and the couples in mine, electronic entertainment (e.g., television and video games) became an unfulfilling fallback for time use.

Physical and emotional exhaustion of men as well as women seemed to limit recreation for some couples. For example, Terrell or Simon indicated that they were too tired
or emotionally exhausted to pursue fulfilling recreational opportunities and spent much time watching television alone or with their partners. Interestingly, many of the couples who felt most overwhelmed were ones that appeared to have the fewest external responsibilities or time constraints. Couples in which one or both partners worked often appeared to have the vitality to initiate or participate in recreation at least on weekends. However, some couples without earned incomes also appeared to have the energy needed to participate in recreation together. Income alone, therefore, was not the sole determinant as to whether or not a couple would actively engage in recreation together. For example, couples often found ways to negotiate economic and transportation constraints by engaging in low-cost activities together in or around the home or neighborhood (Jackson, 2005; Shaw, 2008).

Obstacles to shared recreation were commonly faced by couples. Some were undeterred from participation, successfully negotiating strategies to overcome constraints (Jackson, 2005). Others saw these same constraints as barriers, “immovable, static, obstacles to participation” (p. 3). Lack of private transportation, for example, literally immobilized Terrell and Shantel. James and Barb, on the other hand, enjoyed the adventure of a family bus ride. Even when money was tight, couples like Pete and Pearl extended dinner at McDonald’s by walking home a longer route. Some couples like Carl and Jackie juggled schedules of their work, activities of their children, and availability of the grandparents make opportunities to go out together. Jack and Jasmine made elaborate plans for at-home shared couple recreation. However, other than periodic extended family gatherings and occasional outings to the discount movie theatre, Simon and SaFire, did little together beyond Independent Orientation activities.
A couple’s ability to negotiate obstacles to recreation participation was influenced by a variety of factors. These hierarchical constraints (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991) occurred both positively and negatively at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural levels (Jackson, 2005). Similarly, they were associated with the individual, the relationship, and external circumstances (Rauer, Karney, Garvan, & Hou, 2008). Individual partners each had different family and educational backgrounds, life experiences, personalities, mental and physical health, and recreation preferences (Niehuis, Huston, & Rosenband, 2006). Individuals brought these *enduring vulnerabilities* (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) into their committed relationships. As a result, couples had varying levels of success in communicating with one another, negotiating differences, and realizing recreation and relational aspirations. For example, Rashon and Valerie’s dissimilar upbringings affected their relationship. As a result, Valerie felt frustration at not being able to work through relational differences, and Rashon felt compelled to enact his learned response to negativity by leaving.

Not only did past experiences affect relationships, but changes in individual partners over time did as well. Couples like Simon and SaFire had been together for over 10 years, but seemed to have drifted apart. Though the cause was unclear, they indicated they had not engaged in much shared recreation in recent years. Consequently, they may have missed opportunities to deepen their understanding and appreciation of the ways each one was growing and changing (Niehuis et al., 2006). In total, these intrapersonal and interpersonal factors represented universal challenges faced by couples.
Valuing Despite Financial Limitations

Common to these couples was also their low economic status. Limited financial resources and associated factors (e.g., ability to afford basic needs, access to affordable health care, perceived safety of residential neighborhood, and social support; Orthner et al., 2004) contributed to external circumstances, or structural factors (Jackson, 2005), that affected couples. Many couples felt financial pressures to pay their bills, provide healthy food, live in safe housing, cope with health issues, and maintain relationships beyond the couple. Additionally, individuals who were employed were challenged to retain those positions while balancing responsibilities in other areas of life. People who were not employed felt the pressures related to uncertainty about obtaining resources they needed. These factors often plagued individuals and couples and stood in some ways as obstacles to shared couple recreation.

Largely, however, couples who engaged in shared recreation saw it as a healthy aspect of everyday life. Their activities were typically home-based, easily accessed, and required few resources to enjoy, conditions over which they had control (Scott & McCarville, 2008). When the weather was warm, they spent time outside together, with their children, or with neighbors. When they had free time in the evening, they played cards or watched television. Caring for the yard was satisfying and enjoyable because they worked together. As many Americans do, motivated couples found ways to connect with extended family over the Thanksgiving or Christmas holidays. When special occasions such as birthdays or anniversaries approached, couples intentionally designed ways to honor each other. Couples mentioned activities they would like to do but could not. These were not considered
constraints. Rather, couples seemed to view these recreational aspirations as attainable when their finances were more abundant or their children were grown. In many ways, couples did not consider what kept them from participating in particular activities. Instead, they identified activities that they valued and enjoyed that enriched their lives and their relationships.

Couples who valued shared recreation found ways to engage in activities together, despite their low-income status. Couples without earned incomes, for example, engaged in activities with few advance preparations. Their decisions to engage in activities were often spur of the moment. As explained earlier, these couples’ lives were full of uncertainties (e.g., changes in residence, unexpected income or expenses, extended family engagements, status of mental and physical health). Because they never knew what the next day would bring in these areas of life, many of these couples remained flexible in their planning. For many of these couples, flexibility was their plan. They had no Plan B for recreation engagement because they had no primary plan. Their ability to be spontaneous, taking advantage of recreation opportunities as they arose was an adaptation employed by many couples who lacked steady jobs.

Couples who made spur of the moment decisions to engage in recreation opportunities missed out on an important aspect of many recreation experiences: the anticipation phase (Clawson & Knetsch, 1966; Stewart, 1998). Anticipation is seen as an essential phase for heightening excitement while recreation experiences are being planned. However, many of these couples expressed a sense of excitement and satisfaction from engaging in serendipitous recreation opportunities. This sense of unexpected adventure may be attributed to “the enjoyment experienced from not planning the details” (Hyde & Lawson,
of their activities. For many couples in my study, spontaneously engaged recreation activities were welcomed and enjoyed in the moment.

When considering factors that influenced the recreation behaviors of couples, viewing constraints from a sociocultural perspective was critical. Similar to understanding the role of recreation in women’s lives (Shaw & Henderson, 2005) constraints in the lives of low-income couples were not always as clearly defined as a hierarchical view would propose. For example, low-income couples who had been brought up in generational poverty tended to have a narrow planning horizon compared to other couples. As a result, they most frequently engaged in spontaneous activities rather than planning and saving for a special outing. Classifying their constraints to participation in a particular (presumably beneficial) type of activity according to the hierarchical model was problematic.

Perhaps the lives of low-income couples were more complex than constraints theory (Jackson, 2005) could explain. Like Samdahl and Jekubovich (1997; Samdahl, 2005), I found it possible to identify examples of how couples successfully negotiated constraints in each of the hierarchical model levels. Similar to their experience, I felt the model constrained my efforts to interpret the place recreation held in the lives of these couples. Most of the couples I interviewed expressed the richness recreation, particularly shared and family recreation, brought to their lives. They identified hindrances to participation, but few articulated them as insurmountable barriers. Instead, they elaborated on the activities that enriched their lives and brought joy and meaning to their relationships.

Shared couple recreation was valued by couples in my study. As a part of their everyday lives, recreation contributed to short-term fulfillment and longer term residual
relational benefits. Through enjoyable shared couple recreation experiences, couples seemed “capable of momentarily forgetting about the outside world’s rules and conventions” (Guitard, Ferland, & Dutil, 2005, p. 20). Many couples were able to forget about the outside world and its associated pressures. Instead, they strengthened their relationships by focusing on one another. Participation in shared couple recreation fostered resilience (Orthner et al., 2004) that contributed positively to other aspects of the relationships of couples in my study. Shared recreation fortified cohesion, cultivated problem solving and communication between partners and strengthened couple relationships even amid the hardships many faced.

*Combatting the Costs of Couple Dissolution through Couple Recreation*

These relational skills often developed and practiced during recreation activities, appeared to strengthen bonds between partners and likely contributed to stability in the union. As discussed in Chapter 2, strong, stable unions provide financial and emotional benefits to partners, their families, and to society. For many couples, relational stability appeared to provide benefits to the adults as well as any children in the household (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Drake & Rank, 2009). Couples often spoke with positive tones and descriptions of their shared recreation experiences. Most indicated they intended their relationships to be long-term commitments, and they anticipated positive futures together. Most of the young children I met seemed content and secure in their familial relationships, which suggested to me minimal levels of strife or tension in the family and in the couple relationship. More than the absence of visible distress, most couples and families communicated positive connections with one another. These positive attributions were associated with shared recreation experiences they recalled during our interviews.
Recreation activities, particularly those shared by the couple, appeared to serve as an antidote to ubiquitous stressors in life associated with being couples with low incomes. Couples valued shared experiences that allowed them to focus on one another, to the exclusion of every day pressures of life. Unlike formal intervention programs (Karney & Bradbury, 2004), informal shared recreation was engaged in by couples spontaneously, often at home. Activities were enjoyable, accessible, and generally considered acceptable by those in the couples’ spheres of influence (i.e., neighbors, friends, extended family members). As seen in my findings, not all couples maximized the potential relational benefits recreation can afford. Those individuals who primarily engaged in activities in the Independent Orientation, for example, interacted with one another minimally during recreation. Other couples engaged heavily in Shared Couple Recreation Orientation categories. These couples, on the other hand, communicated ways that they developed or practiced relational skills, including supporting one another, through their recreation experiences together.

Couples that were satisfied with their shared recreation experiences appeared to also enjoy relational satisfaction (Johnson, Zabriskie, & Hill, 2006). Though previous studies targeted middle-income samples, findings from my study supported the premise of this association between leisure satisfaction and relational satisfaction. Many couples spoke comfortably and positively of their shared recreation experiences and of their relationship to one another in general.

Given the economic implications of relational dissolution, particularly among couples with low incomes, this finding about parallels between recreation experiences and couple relationships may provide researchers and service providers a strategy for strengthening these
particularly vulnerable couples and families. Partners in my study sought out opportunities to engage in recreation activities individually, as a couple, and with others. Most gave the indication that shared recreation experiences were valuable to their relationships. Though I did not ask directly, only one of the couples mentioned having participated in a program designed to strengthen the couple relationship. Interestingly, that program had been offered at my church, and stressed the importance of *couple time*, which included weekly recreational outings for the couple (Lee & Lee, 2000). Low-cost convenient interventions did not need to be formally facilitated to be valuable for strengthening couple relationships. Recreation participation for most couples in my study was a frequent and enjoyable aspect of their lives together. Recreational couple time, whether at home or in the community, provided partners the opportunity to focus on one another and on their relationship. Couples like Pedro and Samantha desired the relational benefits recreation participation often afforded, but their past individual recreation experiences had little in common. Our interview served as a brief unplanned intervention that appeared to positively impact this couple. This interview experience illustrated the potential that even informal intervention efforts may have for strengthening couple relationships.

Shared recreation contributes to cohesion that promotes resilience in low-income families (Orthner, Jones-Sanpei, & Williamson, 2004). Therefore, efforts to stimulate recreation participation may be particularly valuable for couples and families that are affected by multiple risk factors (e.g., low incomes, unsafe housing or neighborhoods). Therefore, providing opportunities and encouragement for shared recreation may be useful for developing relational skills in low-income couples that could be on-going and beneficial.
Recreation involvement provided personal and relational benefits to couples in my study. Though their low-income status challenged them, many couples found ways to engage in shared recreation because of the value it brought to their lives and relationships. Couples valued the enjoyment, refreshment, cohesion, and relational skills associated with these activities. Through the use of semi-structured interviews to collect data, I was able to learn about the influence of recreation in these couples’ lives. In the process of learning about their lives, I learned more about myself.

Methodological Lessons

The interpretive approach to my research both challenged and enriched me personally and professionally. I was challenged by the vulnerability I felt initiating conversations with strangers about personal aspects of their lives and relationships. I was personally enriched by what I learned from them. In the next section, I elaborate on these personal lessons. Here I explain the lessons I learned as an emerging researcher related to the use of this methodological approach.

Partners were interviewed together to provide a more complete picture of the lived experience of low-income couples. Data in this study were collected through semi-structured interviews. As expected, my familiarity with the interview questions and process improved my effectiveness and comfort levels as I proceeded through the interview cycle. I began to “pay attention” as I conducted interviews (Henderson, 2006, p. 58). I was more attuned to cues that signaled opportunities for follow-up questions or probes to better understand couple recreation behaviors and meanings as I conducted subsequent interviews.
Reflecting on this process, I realized that positionality and reflexivity came into play as data collection proceeded (c.f., Henderson, 2006). I brought with me my identity, or position, as an educated, white, married woman who was economically comfortable, having risen from the lower-middle class ranks from both from my childhood and early married days. I consciously tried not to express any semblance of entitlement as I met couples. Rather, I attempted to convey my interest in them and my desire to learn from them. Reflecting on our conversations, I realized that I shared many similarities with the couples I was interviewing. Like them, I was in a committed relationship, challenged by the stressors of life to make time and summon energy to engage in partner-focused shared recreation. Unlike them, I do not face the financial pressures or associated concerns that they do. As couples opened their homes and their lives to me, I developed a deep appreciation for their fortitude in pursing healthy relationships amid economic hardships. As we engaged in the conversation of the interviews, my deepening understanding of their lives helped me to establish rapport with couples, helping them to feel that the sharing of their experiences was making a positive “contribution to science” (p. 63).

As noted in Chapter 3, previous research has sampled one partner in a relationship to understand couple behaviors. By interviewing both partners together in my study, I was able to see the interplay between partners, observe visual cues as they spoke, and receive follow-up information from both partners, if needed. At times, one partner’s response to a question prompted additional information from the partner, which would have been missed if only one individual had been interviewed, or if partners had been interviewed separately. A notable
example of the richness of data collected by both partners was KK’s immediate and animated response to Kevon’s matter-of-fact mention that “we play hide and go seek.”

Past research warned that distrust of researchers influenced potential participants’ desire to be included in studies (c.f., Green, Bischoff, Coleman, Sperry, & Robinson-Zanartu, 2007; Nápoles-Springer et al., 2000). As explained in Chapter 3, participants were recruited through one of two bi-weekly food pantries operated by local churches, or by referral from someone who had received information there. As a regular facilitator at one of these sites, I felt my position there legitimized my request for study participants, and provided them with some familiarity with me. In most cases, only one partner frequented the food pantry, but our interactions had been positive enough for that individual to arrange with his or her partner to meet with me.

Because I did not have established relationships with most of the partners, a few were skeptical of participating and reluctant to engage in the conversation at the onset of our interview. Their initial cross-armed, back-leaning body language indicated their unwillingness to disclose much about their lives. The incentive of a $50 gift card to a regional grocery chain seemed to motivate them to participate in the interview process. Once they got comfortable and opened up, most found the interview to be an enjoyable experience. At the conclusion of our interviews, some couples commented, “That was fun!” Others engaged me in casual conversation, extending our time together.

To facilitate a comfortable environment, I had structured the interview questions to begin with non-threatening prompts, which warmed up most participants. Because I was familiar with questions I wanted to ask, I was able to use a relaxed, personal tone that I felt
created a warm and comfortable atmosphere for conversation, rather than constructing a rigid, interrogation-like formal interview environment. Interviewing couples in a familiar venue also helped facilitate a comfortable atmosphere for the interviews.

I was able to interview fifteen couples in their homes. Most were welcoming to me as I arrived in their homes. They looked me in the eye, shook my hand, and offered me a comfortable seat. Interestingly, of all the couples interviewed in their homes, I was offered something to eat or drink by five of them. I had not anticipated being offered refreshments during the interview. In retrospect, I realized that all four of the immigrant families interviewed in their homes extended this hospitality to me, as well as one couple who had been homeless together. One of the men from another country even made tea for the three of us. I had the impression that in their home culture the husband would not normally serve tea. His wife was delighted to see him extend this hospitality to me and mentioned that this was his first time ever making tea for her or for a guest. I took this as an indication of the couple’s hospitable nature, and his desire in particular to make me feel like a welcome guest in their home. A few of the individuals, however, were not as hospitable. Some partners that I had never met were cold to me, curt in their responses as I introduced myself, and skeptical of participating as we reviewed the consent form.

Prior to the start of my data collection process, I had concerns that individuals would not be forthcoming with information about their lives, as I was an unfamiliar person to them. I was concerned that they may be reluctant to talk about their lives to someone they perceived as being above their economic status. Therefore, I intentionally dressed in business casual attire rather than more formally to minimize the likelihood of them feeling a
differential of power between us (Henderson, 2006). As mentioned before, I felt my previous association with some individuals through the food pantry helped minimize issues of distrust. These previous encounters may have been particularly relevant since these participants had seen me being in a serving, rather than authoritative, role with them. With the exception of one man who spoke very little, study participants shared openly. Some went into detail about their past experiences (e.g., sexual habits, homelessness, police records, drug use) with candor. With a few couples, the women warned me that “he won’t say much; I’m the talker.” However, these men spoke extensively during the interview. Couples, particularly the men, seemed to welcome the rare opportunity to tell their life and relational stories to an interested listener. Bedini and Henderson (1995/96) suggested that providing opportunities for people’s “voice” to be heard through research efforts was important, “particularly for males who have been stigmatized by society and who have been largely invisible in society” (p. 60). Certainly, low-income couples, and particularly men, needed to be heard.

A few couples in this study seemed to see the interview as a chance to be heard and to directly voice their disappointments in their partner. One example of this disappointment was CeCe stating, “I don’t know what Durrell’s issue is,” with her partner sitting nearby. Durrell tried to defend himself, mentioning that they listened to books together, but CeCe retorted, “He goes to sleep!” Since I am not a trained counselor, I shifted their attention back to activities they had mentioned they did enjoy doing together, and moved on in the interview.

I chose to follow a semi-structured interview protocol to allow couples to provide information they felt was most relevant and important to them. As a result, I did not collect information on certain topics from all couples. Sex, for example, was a topic some couples
offered as a shared recreation experience, while many of the others never mentioned it. Perhaps they did not consider their sexual intimacy to be recreation, or they saw it as a form of recreation they did not want to disclose to me.

Researchers who study couples (c.f., Huston, 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Stamp, 1994) suggested gathering data from both partners together was valuable for prompting memories and stimulating interpersonal interactions. This method proved effective for collecting data on recreation experiences of the individuals and the couple. In some cases, as with Pedro and Samantha, guiding couples in talking about their life and recreation experiences afforded them opportunities to gain insight into their partners and their relationship that might not otherwise have happened. In their interview, I prompted Samantha and Pedro to discuss their past recreation experiences. As they did, they seemed to better understand that their current shared recreation frustrations could be tied to their expectations of shared recreation in their marriage, given the patterns of their respective youths.

Interviewing partners together also served to ground couples’ responses. As with any research, there was the potential for participants to provide responses they believed the interviewer wanted to hear. By interviewing couples together, I believe, I was able to gather more accurate information than might have from one respondent. For example, LeBron began giving me an academic philosophical-sounding response to my inquiry on the effects of finances on their relationship and shared couple recreation, explaining that money was not necessary for enjoyment. When Gloria bluntly contributed her perspective (e.g., “Money does cause friction”), LeBron shifted to a more direct and realistic reflection of their situation (e.g., “If the money’s not there… that can be depressive”).

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Couples seemed to be willing to share directly about their life experiences, perhaps because of the financial incentive given to them. As noted above, couples who completed the interview were given a $50 gift card to a regional grocery store chain. This incentive attracted attention to the study, and motivated couples to participate. Couples verbalized their appreciation for the reward. Providing a substantial incentive for participating was an effective recruitment tool, and may have been a factor in prompting couples to be open in sharing their stories and perspectives. On the other hand, some couples may have responded to my questions with what they thought I wanted to hear. To counteract this potential, I provided prompts and asked follow-up questions that encouraged participants to talk about their lives and experiences, topics on which they could speak directly.

Based on the experience of my study, I offer a few suggestions to future researchers. First, when studying couples, interview both partners together. I was able to obtain a more complete picture of couples’ relationships and recreation experiences than could have gained from interviewing one partner only. Second, make participants as comfortable as possible. I asked the partner who contacted me to choose where we would meet, either in their home or in the community, to allow them to suggest what would be most comfortable for them. Interviewing them in a familiar place put couples at ease. Most couples that had young children chose to be interviewed at home, eliminating the need for them to arrange child care. I was also intentional in making my physical (e.g., clothing choice) and emotional (e.g., smiling, being respectful of them) presence as comfortable as possible to them, while still maintaining professionalism. Having a previous, even though casual, relationship with some couples helped put them at ease, I believe. If possible, future researchers may find this
beneficial as well. Third, provide an incentive for participation when studying low-income
couples. Couples were motivated to contact me to set up interviews because of the incentive. I felt having a sizable incentive (e.g., a $50 gift card) also communicated that I placed high value on hearing about their relationships and life stories.

Impacts of this Research on the Researcher

By taking a qualitative approach to data collection, I had the opportunity to be affected by the interview process and by what I learned as I spoke with and poured over data from these couples. This interview process was “an educational experience for [me] beyond the obvious purpose of collecting data for analysis” (Bedini & Henderson, 1995/96, p. 55). The data collection and analysis process provided me with opportunities to reflect on my motivation for conducting this research, assumptions that were challenged, and personal and professional next steps for me.

I selected this research topic because of my personal experience and interest in marriage and families. I grew up with my birth parents, three siblings, and maternal grandmother in a rural setting, a few miles outside of a college town. Although my birth family was lower middle class, I never experienced a sense of lack of resources, largely because my basic needs were provided, I had sisters to play with, and fields to explore. My parents had loud and animated disagreements often, but divorce was not a concept I knew about until I was in late elementary school. At that time, the father of close friend of mine left her, her at-home mom, and seven siblings to survive on their own. Once my eyes were opened to the realities of disrupted family life, I felt a determination to protect other families, particularly those in lower economic strata, from experiencing this same trauma.
I experienced for myself the challenges to sustaining a healthy marriage when my husband and I were raising our young daughters. I enjoyed the family recreation we shared together, but I felt distance from my husband at times. Our attention was almost exclusively on our children or on the logistics needed to keep our household functioning smoothly. After we moved to Raleigh, I became involved with a local nonprofit that ministers to at-risk youth. Many of these youth, raised by single mothers, were challenged continually by the temptations and negative forces prevalent in low-income, urban environments. I began to realize that the most effective way to strengthen families is to strengthen the couple relationship.

Both my husband and I grew up in two-parent families where “till death do us part” dedication was modeled for us. I came into this research with the bias that most couples would approach their relationships with a similar sense of commitment over the long-term. Of the 13 married couples in this study, most gave verbal and visual cues that indicated that they were, in fact, committed to working to assure their relationships last. While many of the long-term non-married couples also gave this impression, some of the more recently connected couples showed signs of impermanence. While I was initially surprised by this perception, I realized that many low-income couples perpetually live with uncertainty about their futures. Partners with chronic health issues never knew from one day to the next how they might feel. For others, prospects might arise any day that could impact current situations or provide new opportunities for housing, employment, or recreation. For many with low-incomes, flexibility in life was imperative for survival. It would follow, then, that individuals would maintain an air of impermanence in their romantic relations as well, particularly if
they did not have a supportive network of family or friends or a model for stability in the relationships of those around them.

Previously, I identified differences between employed couples and those without earned incomes. A noteworthy difference between many of these couples was their outlook on the future. The three retired couples aside, couples in which at least one partner was employed appeared to have a more optimistic and hopeful view of their futures. Some spoke in ways that indicated they felt that their position as low-income couples was a temporary situation. They were optimistic that their economic status would improve, providing them with more opportunities in the future, expanding their ability to enjoy more frequent and elaborate recreation together as a couple. The couples that had grown up in generational poverty did not give any indications that they felt their futures would be much different than the lives they were currently experiencing. Reflecting on this observation, I am convinced of the importance of investing in children living in poverty, developing in them the skills they need to successfully graduate from high school and to secure steady employment. Nurturing healthy relationship development skills would also provide long-term benefits to them. Supporting parenting efforts, too, would benefit children and families, as caregivers develop skills that would help them more effectively raise their children. Certainly, efforts that target strengthening adult couple relationships would be paramount for increasing family stability, particularly for those with low incomes.

When I began my doctoral program, I intended to conduct research on family recreation. The more I read and learned, the more I realized the most effective way to enrich family life and provide a healthy, secure home life for children was by strengthening the
parental couple relationship. While I acknowledge that partners should not stay in abusive relationships that would endanger their lives, I believe many couple relationships dissolve unnecessarily. Being in a healthy committed relationship contributes short and long-term benefits and rewards for couples.

Going into this project, I knew I had much to learn from these couples. My first lesson came with the first question to my first couple interviewed. When I asked how long they had been together as a committed couple, they began arguing over whether it had been one year or two. Their dispute arose over whether or not they should count their first year together as a committed couple, as they had been living together as a homeless couple, camping out in a public park downtown. “Yes, that counts,” I assured them. My life experience had not led me to consider that some low-income couples could initiate, develop, and sustain committed relationships while living homeless together.

Many couples today enter into committed relationships with few role models for healthy relationships. Media often projects an individual perspective of relationships. As with merchandise, media conveys the message that relationships are valuable while they feel good, until a new, improved model comes along. The notion that marriage (or committed relationships) is a personal matter has become pervasive in our culture. Unlike in past generations, it has become taboo to ask friends or relatives, “How is your marriage (or relationship)?” From an early age, Americans have been acculturated to assume that once a couple says, “I do,” they “live happily ever after.” In reality, those two uniting words inaugurate the work, as couples must “live intentionally ever after.” Intentionality in a
relationship includes making choices to invest in the health and wellbeing of the relationship, including engaging in shared couple recreation regularly.

Shared couple recreation is not a panacea, able to solve all relational problems (c.f., Gager & Sanchez, 2003). Still, I believe that those that partake regularly in shared couple recreation have the potential to ward off threats to their unions, particularly relational erosions associated with boredom, familiarity, and a lack of personal and couple fulfillment. Having conducted research looking into the lives, relationships, and recreation of these 25 couples, I am more fully convinced of the importance of shared couple recreation for strengthening relationships, particularly for couples with low incomes.

Encouraging couples to engage in intentional efforts to strengthen their relationships is especially critical with couples who have children. When these relationships dissolve, single-parents, usually mothers, often carry the financial and parenting responsibilities of their family, with little if any support from the former partner. As a result, many of these families sink into poverty, with little hope for the children to break free from its hold. On the other hand, couples with strong, healthy relationships are more likely to encourage and support one another, creating a healthy home environment for their children (Cowen & Cowen, 2002; Popenoe, 2008). Based on my research, these couples may also look optimistically to their future together, anticipating better financial times, which may translate into steps taken to secure employment opportunities necessary to lead to that better life. Children in these families, then, are more likely to experience similar supportive, engaging relational benefits from their parents.
One avenue for me to support intentional relationship strengthening efforts is to offer marriage and preparing for marriage courses on a regular basis through our church. These courses provide practical advice and guided within couple discussions that facilitate communication between partners, whether married or in committed non-married relationships. Participants should be recruited within and beyond our church. Similar to how couples were recruited for my study, marketing should target couples in the low-income neighborhoods surrounding our church and to people who frequent our food pantry, to nurture family benefits as described above.

Through my research, I had the opportunity to peek into the lives and relationships of these couples. I find myself reinvigorated in my desire to offer more couples, particularly low-income ones, with tools, techniques, and opportunities to enrich their connections with one another. This research has given me an understanding of the realities, challenges, and satisfaction low-income couples experience as they navigate life together. As a result, I believe I will be more effective communicating the importance of investing in relationship strengthening activities through my professional and scholarly contributions as well as my interpersonal interactions with the people around me.

**Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

A number of strengths were associated with this study. First, I was a familiar person to individuals who frequented our church’s food pantry. This afforded me a level of trust with potential participants that likely contributed to success in my recruiting efforts. This trust carried over to the interview sessions as well, with couples being forthcoming in sharing their life experiences with me. Second, as mentioned previously, by interviewing partners
together, I was able to gather richer data than if I had interviewed only one partner or if I had interviewed them separately. Because they were together, couples were able to build off one another’s contributions and to convey more of the meanings associated with their recreation activities. Additionally, I was able to observe their interactions during the interview, which allowed me to make an assessment of their apparent relational health. Third, my sample included a variety of low-income couples. As detailed earlier, employment status among couples included both adults working full-time, those who were retired, and couples who were living off of one partner’s disability check. My sample included African American couples, Caucasian couples, bi-racial and bi-cultural couples, as well as couples who had migrated to the United States. Some of my couples included partners who were in their 20’s to those who were in their 80’s. Having a diverse sample of low-income couples provided me a more complete picture of the influence of recreation in the lives of these committed couples.

While I had success in recruiting couples and securing valuable data through interviews, limitations were present in this study. Because I am not bi-lingual, my sample was limited to partners who could both speak English. I wanted to interview both partners together, so it was necessary for both to be able to communicate well in English. I felt that securing an interpreter would be a challenging process, and the presence of another “stranger” might add to the formality of the interview, further inhibiting couples from sharing openly.

My sample was also limited because of where and how they were drawn. I drew from only one community. A multi-city or multi-regional sample may have netted different results.
Depending on local or state policies or resources, couples may have had more or fewer opportunities for recreation and social services than this population did.

How I recruited participants may have also presented a limitation. My sample was purposively drawn from couples who attended local church food pantries. While the sample represented a range of faiths, their connection with a church even tangentially may have had an effect on the sample. For example, participating couples may have been more religious, regardless of faith, than couples that might have been recruited through other means.

By identifying strengths and limitations of my process, I hope future researchers will be able to design and execute studies that will expand what I learned through this exploratory study. As I reflected on the findings of my study, I identified applications that would advance professional practice for those who work in agencies that serve low-income couples. I also identified areas for future research.

Applications to Professional Practice

This research project enabled me to gain insights that could be useful to agencies providing social services to low-income couples. Public, nonprofit, and faith-based recreation providing agencies are uniquely positioned to facilitate relationship strengthening opportunities for low-income couples through the programs and services they offer. Natural areas such as parks and greenway trails provide venues for couples to visit and enjoy at little or no cost for use. Free public events, such as festivals and concerts in the park, offer couples novel, community-based, experiences to share. Couple-only or family recreation programs stimulate interaction among participants that can enrich couple relationships. Suggestions are offered for other agencies such as nonprofits and faith-based agencies that also desire to
serve low-income couples and families. In light of my findings, I offer considerations for professionals desiring to enhance couple relationships through recreation opportunities.

Recreation for Couples

Low-income couples valued public parks, and often used them as destinations for couple recreation because of their aesthetic appeal as well as their accessibility by public transportation and their affordability. The relaxed environment allowed couples to determine the types and intensity of their activities. The park setting provides refreshment and immersion natural scenery that provides physical, emotional and relational benefits to these urban couples. When inventorying existing sites and proposing new park areas, park planners are encouraged to consider how to make even small urban natural areas provide accessible to area residents, including low-income couples.

Many low-income couples in this study decided to participate in recreation activities at the last minute. Because of uncertainties in their lives (e.g., whether a temporary job will come through, family members dropping by, or if a partner’s health will allow them to leave home), many couples chose a spontaneous approach to their recreation pursuits. Therefore, these couples would benefit by knowing advance registration is not required for some program offerings. Even though many low-income couples prefer to be spontaneous in their recreational pursuits, agencies are encouraged to advertise events, program offerings, and activities well enough in advance, and by means that are appropriate for low-income couples. If these couples know what opportunities are available, they may consider participating in them. For example, most low-income couples do not subscribe to a local newspaper, and may not have internet access in their homes. Couples and families with limited resources may
change residences on a frequent enough basis that notices that are mailed to them may not be received. Consequently, marketing efforts should take into account life patterns of under-resourced couples. Because many low-income couples who are not employed rely on public transportation, recreation providing agencies may want to consider posting flyers announcing upcoming free community events at or near bus stops, and on public transport vehicles, if possible.

In austere times, public recreation departments are challenged to provide services with diminishing resources, and to become more entrepreneurial in their approaches and programs. Therefore, nonprofit agencies and churches should consider expending more concerted effort to serve low-income couples. Mission statements and visions may motivate nonprofits and faith-based organizations to invest human and fiscal resources in serving low-income residents. These organizations may have interested volunteers who are willing to provide needed services at low or no cost to participants. Agency resources may be allocated to program supplies and equipment, to the benefit of the clientele served.

Nonprofit organizations and churches may have more flexibility in providing convenient and beneficial recreation services to low-income couples. These organizations may be able to take programs to low-income neighborhoods, thus minimizing the time and transportation challenges that exist for many couples with limited resources. Providing programs and services in these neighborhoods on a consistent basis may allow residents to become familiar with programs that are offered and with the people who are serving. Familiarity may facilitate engagement among these residents.
As identified in this study, playful and creative activities, even if home-based, provide couples with engaging, enjoyable couple-focused endeavors that energize them, even during the retelling of their adventures. Recreation providers are encouraged to consider the beneficial effects of creative experiences when they design programs and activities. By favoring creative and playful activities over low-interaction ones (e.g., movie watching), practitioners can enrich couple relationships, and expand their participants’ recreation activity repertoires. As a result, participants experience immediate relational benefits during the programs, from which they can draw ideas for beneficial couple-focused activities they can repeat on their own in the future.

Recreation as an Avenue for Relationship Education

Because many low-income couples had long-term aspirations for their relationship, social service agencies have the opportunity to strengthen couple relationships by providing programs that are attractive to couples. In addition to recreation activities, agencies might develop programs or program supplements designed to help couples build their relational skills, or partner with social service agencies that have the expertise and resources to provide programs and services. Information on topics such as effective communications, conflict resolution, and the value of shared couple recreation would benefit committed couple relationships.

Often low-income couples choose to participate in activities and special events that would be beneficial to their young children. Knowing this, recreation providers should consider capitalizing on opportunities to reach these parents with information and ideas that would enable them to connect with resources that would benefit the adults as well as children.
in the family. Recreation agencies may consider partnering with couple- and family-focused agencies so both types of social services could disseminate information to these couples, promoting both recreation and relationship building activities.

Even when opportunities are available, couples do not always realize the importance of couple-only shared recreation to their families. Parents often become so focused on providing enriching opportunities for their children that they neglect investments in their adult relationship. To address this, social service providing agencies could develop and distribute educational materials that provide information to couples, encouraging them to engage in shared couple recreation. These communications ought to be designed and distributed appropriately for the target audience.

Social service agencies who provide opportunities for low-income couples should design programs relevant for each individual and couple as much as possible. Depending on the particular couple, different skills should be targeted (Rauer, Karney, Garvan, & Hou, 2008). For couples with strong relational and life skills, encouraging participation in couple recreation would be beneficial. Other couples may benefit from additional programs, services, or materials that develop job-related, life, parenting, and relational skills.

By providing relevant services in times, locations, and avenues that are appropriate for couples, social service providers may effectively serve their targeted low-income market. Public recreation departments, government assistance agencies, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations all provide valuable services in local communities. By working cooperatively to provide recreation, parenting and couple skills training, employment skill development
workshops, and educational opportunities, these diverse agencies may effectively deliver relevant and valuable services that positively impact their mutual target audience.

Future Research

Research lines that focus on low-income couples would also expand our knowledge and ability to better understand the influence of recreation in their lives. Little research to date has studied couple recreation focusing on low-income couples. This exploratory study provided initial insight into the lives of low-income couples and the function of recreation in their relationships. Continued research in this area would be beneficial. Drawing samples from different types of couples would provide a clearer view of the recreation’s role in strengthening low-income couple relationships. For example, studies targeting Latino couples or retired low-income couples would expand our understanding of the influence of recreation in the union of these specific populations. Longitudinal studies of couples would provide important information to researchers particularly for understanding what types of activity participation were associated with sustained and with dissolved unions.

Coupling the interviews with a standardized relational satisfaction index would be enlightening. Instruments such as Olson’s Couple Checkup (Olson, Larson, & Olson-Sigg, 2009) or the Satisfaction With Married Life Scale (SWML, Johnson, Zabriskie, & Hill, 2006) could provide the researcher with individual assessments of relational satisfaction and health. This quantitative data could then be analyzed with qualitative data gathered through the interviews to provide a more complete picture of the interplay between couple recreation patterns and relational health.
Connections between playfulness or creativity in couple recreation and relational health would also be important future research avenues. In a time where much of life is rapid and ever changing, couples may experience boredom in static relationships. Little is known about the value of playful or creative activities to couple leisure satisfaction or to relational health. Findings from this line of research may be valuable for strengthening relationships of low-income couples who must maximize the benefits of their investments in shared couple recreation. Research that targets relational health along with couple leisure satisfaction may contribute to our professional body of knowledge while informing professional practice.

Our professional body of knowledge may also benefit from a comprehensive review of studies related to couple recreation. Reviewing study samples, methodological approaches, and theoretical bases as well as summaries of findings would help to advance what we know about couple recreation currently. This might also help shape future research efforts.

The CORC model was introduced in this study. Additional research would be beneficial to validate the multiple ways couples recreate could also gather information specifically related to challenges to couple-only recreation, and if or how they were negotiated. Additional information related to relational health as well as demographics should also be gathered. Expanded research targeting couples of other socioeconomic levels, regions, and cultures would be useful for assessing the application of this model to broader populations.

Summary

The purpose of my interpretive study was to explore the influence of recreation in the lives of low-income committed couples. This study revealed that couples pursue recreation in
a variety of forms, including independently, with others, and as shared couple experiences. Most of these couples indicated they were in long-term committed relationships. They recognized that shared couple recreation was an important facilitator for relational health. Despite their limited financial resources, couples were able to overcome obstacles to recreation and gain the relational benefits of those experiences.

By researching traditionally understudied couples, this study adds to the body of knowledge on couple recreation. Findings serve to expand what was previously understood about couple recreation and highlight complexity in recreation behaviors among low-income couples. Results from this study can be valuable for guiding future research and theoretical development, and for better serving low-income couples through recreation opportunities available in the community.
REFERENCES


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http://www.census.gov/population/www/cps/cpsdef.html


APPENDICES
North Carolina State University  
Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research  
SUBMISSION FOR NEW STUDIES

GENERAL INFORMATION

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Date Submitted:</td>
<td>16 February 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1a. Revised Date:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Title of Project:</td>
<td>Role of Recreation in Lives of Low-Income Committed Couples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Principal Investigator:</td>
<td>Annette Moore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Department:</td>
<td>Parks, Recreation &amp; Tourism Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Campus Box Number:</td>
<td>8004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Email:</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Annette.Moore@ncsu.edu">Annette.Moore@ncsu.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Phone Number:</td>
<td>919-445-572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Fax Number:</td>
<td>919-445-3887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Faculty Sponsor Name and Email Address if Student Submission:</td>
<td>Karla Henderson / <a href="mailto:Karla.Henderson@ncsu.edu">Karla.Henderson@ncsu.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Source of Funding? (required information):</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Is this research receiving federal funding?:</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. If Externally funded, include sponsor name and university account number:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. RANK:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student; Undergraduate; Masters; PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (specify):</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the principal investigator, my signature testifies that I have read and understood the University Policy and Procedures for the Use of Human Subjects in Research. I assure the Committee that all procedures performed under this project will be conducted exactly as outlined in the Proposal Narrative and that any modification to this protocol will be submitted to the Committee in the form of an amendment for its approval prior to implementation.

Principal Investigator:

Annette C. Moore * 16 Feb 2011  
(typed/printed name) (signature) (date)

As the faculty sponsor, my signature testifies that I have reviewed this application thoroughly and will oversee the research in its entirety. I hereby acknowledge my role as the principal investigator of record.

Faculty Sponsor:

Karla A. Henderson * 16 Feb 2011  
(typed/printed name) (signature) (date)

*Electronic submissions to the IRB are considered signed via an electronic signature. For student submissions this means that the faculty sponsor has reviewed the proposal prior to it being submitted and is copied on the submission.

Please complete this application and email as an attachment to: debra.paxton@ncsu.edu, or send by mail to: Institutional Review Board, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (Administrative Services III). Please include consent forms and other study documents with your application and submit as one document.

For SPARCS office use only

Reviewer Decision: (Exempt or Exempt Review)

☐ Exempt  ☐ Approved  ☐ Approved pending modifications  ☐ Table

Expedited Review Category:  ☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4  ☐ 5  ☐ 6  ☐ 7  ☐ 8a  ☐ 8b  ☐ 8c  ☐ 9

Reviewer Name  Signature  Date
Appendix A - IRB Application (Continued)

North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board for the Use of Human Subjects in Research
GUIDELINES FOR A PROPOSAL NARRATIVE

In your narrative, address each of the topics outlined below. Every application for IRB review must contain a proposal narrative, and failure to follow these directions will result in delays in reviewing/processing the protocol.

A. INTRODUCTION
   1. Briefly describe in lay language the purpose of the proposed research and why it is important.

       The purpose of this research is to investigate the role of recreation in the lives of low-income committed couples (e.g., married or cohabiting). This research will provide insights into a traditionally understudied population. Understanding the role of recreation in the lives of low-income couples will advance the body of knowledge in our profession, and may also provide information helpful for recreation professionals to better provide services to strengthen relationships between partners.

   2. If student research, indicate whether for a course, thesis, dissertation, or independent research.

       Dissertation Research

B. SUBJECT POPULATION
   1. How many subjects will be involved in the research?

       20 - 30 couples (40 - 60 individuals)

   2. Describe how subjects will be recruited. Please provide the IRB with any recruitment materials that will be used.

       Subjects will be recruited through connections researcher has in the community (Food Pantry at a local church, Learning Centers in 2 public housing communities); word of mouth/ snowball technique as well.
       (See attached recruitment announcement distributed to potential participants.)

   3. List specific eligibility requirements for subjects (or describe screening procedures), including those criteria that would exclude otherwise acceptable subjects.

       Potential participants will be recruited through agencies that serve low-income populations in Raleigh. Because these agencies require participants to meet low-income standards, initial income screening will begin in these organizations. Recruitment flyer will be distributed to eligible potential participants via these agencies. Recruitment materials will specify couples must be married or cohabiting. Potential participants will contact PI via phone to set up an interview. PI will review specifics related to the interview during the scheduling telephone conversation. (See attached sample telephone script.)

   4. Explain any sampling procedure that might exclude specific populations.

       Purposive sampling is appropriate for this study given its exploratory nature. Participants will be selected for inclusion in this study based on their interest and eligibility.

   5. Disclose any relationship between researcher and subjects - such as, teacher/student, employer/employee.

       None

   6. Check any vulnerable populations included in study:

       [X] minors (under age 18) - if so, have you included a line on the consent form for the parent/guardian signature
       [ ] fetuses
       [ ] pregnant women
       [ ] persons with mental, psychiatric or emotional disabilities
       [ ] persons with physical disabilities
       [X] economically or educationally disadvantaged
       [ ] prisoners
       [ ] elderly
       [ ] students from a class taught by principal investigator
       [ ] other vulnerable population.

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Appendix A - IRB Application (Continued)

7. If any of the above are used, state the necessity for doing so. Please indicate the approximate age range of the minors to be involved.

Low-income couples are the population of interest for this study because their lived experiences are the essence of this research. Participants will be intentionally recruited through agencies for which they must be considered low income to receive services.

C. PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED

1. In lay language, describe completely all procedures to be followed during the course of the experimentation. Provide sufficient detail so that the Committee is able to assess potential risks to human subjects. In order for the IRB to completely understand the experience of the subjects in your project, please provide a detailed outline of everything subjects will experience as a result of participating in your project. Please be specific and include information on all aspects of the research, through subject recruitment and ending when the subject’s role in the project is complete. All descriptions should include the informed consent process, interactions between the subjects and the researcher, and any tasks, tests, etc. that involve subjects. If the project involves more than one group of subjects (e.g. teachers and students, employees and supervisors), please make sure to provide descriptions for each subject group.

Participants will be recruited through agencies for which they must be considered low income to receive services. Informational flyers will be distributed at a local food pantry and at 2 learning centers located in public housing areas. The flyer will give a phone number which potential participants may call to schedule a time and place for the interview. (See supplemental information attached.) At the onset of the interview, the PI will review the informed consent forms with couples, answer any questions they may have, secure signatures of both partners, and provide them with signed copies of the informed consent forms. The interviews will be conducted, beginning with the PI stating the date and time of interview, the interview couple’s number (as assigned by the PI), as well as first names (only) of the couple being interviewed. Throughout the interview, the interviewer (PI) may refer to the interviewee by first name, but will refrain from including last names. First names will be used during the interview to assist with establishment of rapport with the couple. At the conclusion of the interview, the couple will be reminded that the PI may contact them for a follow-up interview if deemed necessary for clarification or additional information. Pseudonyms will be assigned to each participant in the study. The key to which participant corresponds with which pseudonym will be kept in a locked file drawer in the PI’s office. If a follow-up interview is required, the PI will remind participants of the continued confidentiality of the study and their participation in it.

2. How much time will be required of each subject?

Interviews of couples will take 1 - 2 hours to complete. Participants may be contacted for a follow-up interview, which may take an additional hour to conduct.

D. POTENTIAL RISKS

1. State the potential risks (physical, psychological, financial, social, legal or other) connected with the proposed procedures and explain the steps taken to minimize these risks.

No risks are anticipated.

2. Will there be a request for information that subjects might consider to be personal or sensitive (e.g. private behavior, economic status, sexual issues, religious beliefs, or other matters that if made public might impair their self-esteem or reputation or could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability)?

No

a. If yes, please describe and explain the steps taken to minimize these risks.

b. Could any of the study procedures produce stress or anxiety, or be considered offensive, threatening, or degrading? If yes, please describe why they are important and what arrangements have been made for handling an emotional reaction from the subject.

No, procedures should not produce stress or anxiety, or be perceived as offensive, threatening, or degrading.
Appendix A - IRB Application (Continued)

3. How will data be recorded and stored?

| Interviews will be recorded on digital recorders. Transcripts of interviews will be made. Participants' actual names will be replaced with pseudonyms during the transcription phase, to assure confidentiality of participants. |

| a. How will identifiers be used in study notes and other materials? |

| Pseudonyms will replace actual participant names during transcription process. These pseudonyms will be used for all publications or presentations of study information. |

| "F" will be used to identify female in the couple. "M" will denote the male. Participants will be identified by pseudonyms in any publications or presentations. |

| b. How will reports be written, in aggregate terms, or will individual responses be described? |

| Participants will be identified by pseudonyms in any publications or presentations. Direct quotes from participants will be identified with these assigned assumed names. Some descriptors of the individuals may be used (i.e., wife in a couple married less than 5 years; cohabiting male), but will be generic enough to not be traceable to a particular individual. |

4. If audio or videotaping is done how will the tapes be stored and how/when will the tapes be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

| Interviews have been transcribed and rechecked for accuracy in transcription. Copies of audio tapes may be retained (without personal information) as raw data for future research use. |

5. Is there any deception of the human subjects involved in this study? If yes, please describe why it is necessary and describe the debriefing procedures that have been arranged.

| No deception will be involved. |

E. POTENTIAL BENEFITS

This does not include any form of compensation for participation.

1. What, if any, direct benefit is to be gained by the subject? If no direct benefit is expected, but indirect benefit may be expected (knowledge may be gained that could help others), please explain.

| By engaging in the novel experience of being interviewed together, couples may experience elevated relational satisfaction. They may gain a renewed sense of connectedness by describing past and current shared recreational experiences. They may experience an indirect benefit of satisfaction in knowing the information they share may benefit other couples in the future. |

F. COMPENSATION

Please keep in mind that the logistics of providing compensation to your subjects (e.g., if your business office requires names of subjects who received compensation) may compromise anonymity or complicate confidentiality protections. If, while arranging for subject compensation, you must make changes to the anonymity or confidentiality provisions for your research, you must contact the IRB office prior to implementing those changes.

1. Describe compensation

| PI will secure gift cards from area businesses to give to subjects as a thank you for their time at the conclusion of their interview. |

2. Explain compensation provisions if the subject withdraws prior to completion of the study.

| Participants must complete interview to receive gift card. |

3. If class credit will be given, list the amount and alternative ways to earn the same amount of credit.
Appendix A - IRB Application (Continued)

G COLLABORATORS
1. If you anticipate that additional investigators (other than those named on Cover Page) may be involved in this research, list them here indicating their institution, department and phone number.

DNA

2. Will anyone besides the PI or the research team have access to the data (including completed surveys) from the moment they are collected until they are destroyed.

Only the PI, academic advisor and dissertation committee will have access to the transcripts of data. Pseudonyms will replace actual participant names on the transcripts prior to sharing these data with committee members.

H. CONFLICT OF INTEREST
1. Do you have a significant financial interest or other conflict of interest in the sponsor of this project? No

2. Does your current conflicts of interest management plan include this relationship and is it being properly followed? DNA

I. ADDITIONAL INFORMATION
1. If a questionnaire, survey or interview instrument is to be used, attach a copy to this proposal.

2. Attach a copy of the informed consent form to this proposal.

3. Please provide any additional materials that may aid the IRB in making its decision.

J. HUMAN SUBJECT ETHICS TRAINING
*Please consider taking the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), a free, comprehensive ethics training program for researchers conducting research with human subjects. Just click on the underlined link.
Appendix B - IRB Approval Letter

From: Deb Paxton, IRB Administrator
North Carolina State University
Institutional Review Board

Date: 03/02/11

Project Title: Role of Recreation in Lives of Low-Income Committed Couples

IRB#: 1923

Dear Ms. Moore:

The research proposal named above has received administrative review and has been approved as exempt from the policy as outlined in the Code of Federal Regulations (Exemption: 46.101 h.2). Provided that the only participation of the subjects is as described in the proposal narrative, this project is exempt from further review.

NOTE:
1. This committee complies with requirements found in Title 45 part 46 of The Code of Federal Regulations. For NCSU projects, the Assurance Number is: FWA0003429.

2. Any changes to the research must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

3. If any unanticipated problems occur, they must be reported to the IRB office within 5 business days.

Please forward a copy of this letter to your faculty sponsor, if applicable.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Deb Paxton
NC State IRB
Appendix C - Informed Consent Form

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: Understanding the Role of Recreation in the Lives of Low-Income Committed Couples
Principal Investigator: Annette Moore
Faculty Sponsor: Karla A. Henderson

What are some general things we should know about research studies?
- You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation is voluntary.
- You may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty.
- You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study.
- Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate.
- This consent form gives details about the research in which you are being asked to participate.
- Please ask if you do not understand something in this form, and the researcher will give you more information.
- You will keep a copy of this consent form.
- If at any time you have questions about your participation, please ask.

What is the purpose of this study?
- The purpose of this study is to understand the role of recreation in the lives of low-income committed couples.

What will happen if we take part in the study?
- You will be asked questions related to your relationship and what you do for fun together.
- The interview will be digitally recorded, and will take 1-2 hours to complete. A follow-up interview of 1-hour may be needed.
- Interviews may be conducted in participants’ home, or at a mutually agreed upon public location.

Any Risks to us if we participate? No foreseeable risks are associated with this study.

What kinds of benefits will we get?
- Couples who are interviewed in this study may feel satisfaction in having shared this novel experience together.
- Knowledge gained through this research may help recreation professionals provide services that may support or enhance couple relationships.

What kind of compensation will we get?
- You will receive a $50 gift card from an area merchant when you complete the interview.
- If you do not complete the interview, you will not receive the gift card.
- You will not receive any additional gifts for participating in a follow-up interview.

Will our conversation be kept confidential?
- You will not be identified by name or with enough details that someone could identify you.
- Interview recordings will be typed up, and you will be assigned a different name. This new, assumed name will be used in all oral and written reports, to assure that your real identity remains unknown by others.
- The information gathered will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law.
- Data will be stored securely in a locked file drawer in a locked office on the NC State campus.
- Copies of the audiotapes will be kept on a password protected computer for possible future research use.

What if one or both of us are NCSU employees? This interview will not affect your job in any way.

What if we have questions about this study?
- Contact the researcher, Annette Moore, at NCSU Box 8004, Raleigh, NC, 27695 or at 919.515.0572.

What if we have questions about our rights as a research participant?
If you feel you have not been treated according to what this form said, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514).

Consent To Participate
"I have read and I understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled."

Participant’s Name (please print) ___________________________ Signature ___________________________ Date __________

Investigator’s Name __________ Annette Moore __________ Signature __________ Date __________
Appendix D - Guiding Questions

- How long have you been married or living together as a couple?
- What are some things you would say have kept you together for these years?
- Tell me about how you met and got to know one another.
- Describe for me some of the things you used to do together when you first became a couple.
  - *Prompt if necessary:* What types of recreation activities did you do for fun when you first came together as a couple?

  -- *Follow up:* Did you continue to do these activities once you moved in together / got married? Please explain.

- Describe for me some of the things you like to do together for fun now as a couple.
  - *Redirect their comments to recreation related activities if they mention only work-type activities.*

  - *Prompt if necessary:* How often do you do these activities?
  - *Prompt if necessary:* Where do you do these activities?
  - *Prompt if necessary:* How much ahead of time do you plan these activities?
  - *Prompt if necessary:* Who decides what you will do for fun?

- Explain to me what is important to you about doing these activities together.
  - *If necessary, specifically ask the other partner for his / her response.*

- What are some things that help or hinder you two enjoying time together?
Appendix D - Guiding Questions (Continued)

[The rationale for wording this guiding question in this way is to determine what
factor(s) emerge as most relevant to them, their first response.]

– If only give helps or hindrances, ask about the other.

– If only one partner give helps or hindrances, ask the other partner for his / her
response.

– Prompt if necessary and appropriate: In what ways do your work schedules affect your
doing things together?

– Prompt if necessary and appropriate: In what ways do children or others living with
you affect your doing things together?

• Tell me what kinds of things you each did for recreation as children;
  o What things you did for fun as a kid with your family?

• If appropriate: Tell me what has caused the change in activities you do together for fun
from what you used to do together to what you do now.
  – Explore the influences of children (if any reside with them) on their recreation and
relationship.

  -- Explore impacts of current economic condition (i.e., employment situation, changes in
income or expenses)

• Tell me how important having fun together is to you.
  -- Prompt if necessary to get at underlying value they place on shared recreation.

• Is there anything else you think I should know to better understand the role of recreation
in your lives and in your relationship?
Appendix E – Recruitment Flyer

**Couples needed for Research Study**

**Who:** Couples who have been married or cohabiting for at least 1 year

**What:** Participate in research study. Partners will interviewed together. Interviews may take 1 - 2 hours.

**Where:** In your home, in the Vineyard Café (3915 Western Blvd, Raleigh), or at a mutually agreed upon location

**Compensation:** Couples completing the interview will receive a $50 gift card to Food Lion

**Interested?** Please contact Annette @ 919.515.9572.

This study is being conducted as doctoral research through the Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism Management at NC State University. Participation in this study is voluntary, and will not impact your receipt of social services.
Appendix F – Overview of Couple Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple</th>
<th>Race/Culture</th>
<th>Years as Couple</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Living Together</th>
<th># of kids at home</th>
<th>Income Sources</th>
<th>Vehicle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sandy + Leroy</td>
<td>Bi-Racial Couple</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Neither work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shantel + Terrell</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>~1</td>
<td>Neither work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal + Cliff</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Neither work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearl + Pete</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah + Abraham</td>
<td>From Africa</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>He works + goes to school</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy + Lamont</td>
<td>Bi-Racial Couple</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>He works. She is on disability</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine + Jack</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>She grad school He works</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akila + Fabil</td>
<td>From Africa</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Both work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maude + Harold</td>
<td>Both White</td>
<td>53 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Both are retired</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia + Raphael</td>
<td>Mixed Hispanic</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Both work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha + Pedro</td>
<td>Hispanic / White</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Both work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lindsay + Mitchell</td>
<td>Both White</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>He works</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SaFire + Simon</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>1#</td>
<td>He works part-time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen + Richard</td>
<td>Bi-Racial Couple</td>
<td>21 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Both work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitzy + Dalton</td>
<td>Both White</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Both work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie + Rashon</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>He works part-time</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CeCe + Durrell</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Neither work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb + James</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Neither work</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naaz + Amir</td>
<td>From Middle East</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>He works</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lori + Eddie</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>He works part-time</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

~ Indicates preschool child in the home  # Indicates middle or high school child in the home
## Appendix F – Overview of Couple Characteristics (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple</th>
<th>Race/Culture</th>
<th>Years as Couple</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Living Together</th>
<th># of kids at home</th>
<th>Income Sources</th>
<th>Vehicle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jackie + Carl</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>2 + 1#</td>
<td>Both work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora + Dwayne</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>He picks up work periodically</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KK + Kavon</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Neither work; she is on disability</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloria + LeBron</td>
<td>Both Black</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>3#</td>
<td>Both work</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth + Daniel</td>
<td>Both White</td>
<td>28 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Both on disability</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

~ Indicates preschool child in the home  
# Indicates child in middle or high school in the home