ABSTRACT

BILLINGSLEY, KATRINA YVETTE. Love Jones: A Phenomenological Study of Diverse Black Romantic Love Relationships. (Under the direction of Dr. Marc A. Grimmett).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the phenomenon of Black love by interviewing a diverse sample of African American couples. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What is Black love? (2) What is unique about Black love? and (3) What makes Black love endure? Historically, there has not been a balanced representation of these relationships. Traditionally, African American heterosexual marriages have been reported as the norm and as overwhelmingly ending in divorce. Additionally, Black Americans are presented as least likely to marry, and if they do, they marry later in life, and the marriage is not likely to endure. It is important for diverse and enduring Black American love relationships to be included in the literature.

There has been concern among scholars about the rising divorce rate, decrease in marriage, and high relationship instability among African Americans (Pinderhughes, 2002). The implication is that African Americans do not have stable, healthy or enduring love relationships. The purpose of this study was to change the narrative and provide a balance to the reality that is Black love.

The sample included five African American couples and one interracial couple. There were three heterosexual married couples, one married gay couple, one married lesbian couple, and one heterosexual cohabiting couple. Each couple had been together for at least 10 years. The longest relationship was 23 years with the 10 years being the minimum length of time together.

Data was collected using the qualitative research method of interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA) to understand the phenomenon of Black love. IPA was
chosen because the method allowed for studying the couples’ experiences with Black love. In reporting the findings from an IPA study, it is necessary to provide thick quotes to report the findings. That method was important in this study because it gave voice to the sample, allowing for a better understanding of participant experiences. A semi-structured interview was used in addition to a brief demographic survey.

The findings included the clusters Love, Black Love and Personal Love. The themes that emerged for the Love cluster were “children and family”, “uniqueness”, “doing the work”, “evolving” and “unconditional”. The themes that emerged for the Black Love cluster included, “love is love is love”, “cultural awareness”, “children and family”, “a beautiful struggle”, “movies and television”, and “spirituality and religion”. The Personal Love cluster included “boldness”, “spirituality and religion” and “friendship” as emerging themes. The clusters and themes provided a look into how these couples understand the phenomenon of Black love within their love relationship. The study’s findings also provided a look at the intersectionality of identity for several of the couples in the study. The study shared that for many couples of color, particularly African American couples, there is an added layer of responsibility because of their racial identity. However, the gay and lesbian couples are also faced with an added barrier because of their racial identity and sexual orientation.

This study examined the phenomenon of Black love and provides a view of enduring love relationships that are not often seen or heard of outside of African American communities. By gaining understanding and exposure to diverse African American love relationships, counselors and counselor educators can become more empathetic in working with these couples. Counselors and counselor educators will need to understand their position of privilege and power and how self-awareness can impact the helping relationship with their
clients. They should also have an awareness that struggle does not always mean the end of a relationship. Therefore, the implications for theory, practice and future research were evident. Black love relationships must be added to the conversations that impact theory, research and practice.
Love Jones: A Phenomenological Study of Diverse Black Romantic Love Relationships

by
Katrina Yvette Billingsley

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Counseling & Counselor Education

Raleigh, North Carolina
2016

APPROVED BY:

_______________________________  ________________________________
Dr. Marc A. Grimmett            Dr. Edwin Gerler
Committee Chair

_______________________________  ________________________________
Dr. Lisa Bass                    Dr. Angela Smith
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Black America, a community I am proud to be a part of. This work is also dedicated to my mother, Florence Billingsley, and my Billingsley family.
BIOGRAPHY

Katrina Y. Billingsley was raised in Oakboro, NC. Katrina earned her bachelor’s degree in Political Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a master’s degree in Counseling with a concentration in Career Counseling from North Carolina Central University. Since receiving her master’s degree, Katrina has continued to work in higher education, community mental health, and private practice.

Katrina is a member of the American Counseling Association, Licensed Professional Counselors Association of North Carolina, and North Carolina Counseling Association. She is a 2016 National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) Fellow. She is a Licensed Professional Counselor Associate for the state of North Carolina. She enjoys traveling and spending time with her family and friends.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you Jesus from whom all blessings flow for the direction, focus, and anointing to complete – at times – this very daunting task! A heartfelt thanks to each couple represented in this study. Their love stories and commitment to their relationship and families give me hope and inspiration in this dark world.

I would like to thank my very supportive chair, Dr. Marc Grimmett! Thank you for seeing the vision and encouraging me each step of the way. Thank you for your mentorship and respect from day one. Thank you to the other members of my dissertation committee for their transparency and input as we worked to define the framework for the study. Dr. Edwin Gerler, Dr. Lisa Bass and Dr. Angie Smith were the best committee members I could have asked for. Thank you for believing in me! Thank you for your support and your gentle way of delivering feedback.

To my mom, my champion and best person I know, Florence Billingsley, thank you for your unfailing love, prayers and encouragement that have helped me throughout my life and especially during this process.

To my big brother and sister-in-law, Kerry and Andrey Billingsley, thank you for your continued support and for sharing your beautiful family with me. To my nephews, KJ, Tristan and Jalen, thank you for believing that your Aunt T rocks! I have loved every minute of loving you and being your aunt.

To my lifelong friends who are like family and are my best friends: Kim, Liz, Kisha, and Chená, thank you for the love, laughter, hugs and your ability to hustle along with me. To the amazing surrogates who love me as their own child, my godmother, Sharon F.
Greene. Thank you for always being there when I needed you. To Donna and Bart Corgnati, thank you. The relationship we have nurtured mean so much to me. Thank you for our many Friday night talks on race and all things over wine and amazing food.

To my counselor education family, Donte, Rasha, Robert H., Jill, Nick and Lynn, thank you for the continued support and encouragement. I appreciate the good times inside and outside the classroom. I deeply appreciate everyone’s commitment to me and my journey to complete this work of love.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................. ix
LIST OF FIGURES ............................................................................................................... x

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................... 1
  Black Love ....................................................................................................................... 2
  Background of Problem ................................................................................................. 3
  Conceptual Framework ................................................................................................. 5
  Purpose of Study ............................................................................................................ 6
  Importance of Study ....................................................................................................... 8
  Method ........................................................................................................................... 9
    Research Questions ..................................................................................................... 10
    Definition of Key Terms ............................................................................................ 10
  Summary ....................................................................................................................... 13

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ............................................................................. 14
  Peer Reviewed Journal Articles on Black Love Relationships ....................................... 14
  The Consequences of Marriages for African Americans: A Comprehensive Literature Review ................................................................................................................. 20
    Selected Books on Black Love Relationships ............................................................... 21
    Commentary on Black Love Relationships* ................................................................. 22
  Social Media on Black Love Relationships .................................................................... 23
    Blogs ......................................................................................................................... 23
    Instagram© ................................................................................................................. 24
    Facebook© ................................................................................................................. 24
    Twitter© ..................................................................................................................... 25
    Youtube© ................................................................................................................... 25
  Television Shows and Movies on Black Love ................................................................. 26
    Television Shows ...................................................................................................... 26
    Movies ...................................................................................................................... 29
  Black Magazines on Black Love Relationships .............................................................. 29
  Popular Culture Websites on Black Love Relationships ............................................... 31
  Summary ....................................................................................................................... 33

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY ................................................................................. 34
  Research Design ............................................................................................................ 34
    Research Sample ....................................................................................................... 35
    Participants ................................................................................................................ 36
    Procedure ................................................................................................................... 38
    In-depth Interviews .................................................................................................... 39
  Data Collection ............................................................................................................. 39
    Demographic Survey .................................................................................................. 40
  Data Analysis ................................................................................................................ 41
  Trustworthiness ............................................................................................................ 41
  Role of the Researcher ................................................................................................. 44
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Description of Participants

Justin and Dana Kennedy
Love story
Family of origin considerations
Current family status

Jesse and Kelly Coleman
Love story
Family of origin considerations
Current family status

William Watkins and Barbara Douglas
Love story
Family of origin considerations
Current family status

Jordan and Lauren Phillips
Love story
Family of origin considerations
Current family status

Bryson Bell and Mason Patterson
Love story
Family of origin considerations
Current family status

Whitney Greene and Sabrina Davis
Love story
Family of origin considerations
Current family status

Findings

Cluster 1: Love
Theme 1: Children and family
Theme 2: Uniqueness
Theme 3: Doing the work
Theme 4: Evolving
Theme 5: Unconditional

Cluster 2: Black Love
Theme 1: Love is love is love
Theme 2: Cultural awareness
Theme 3: Children and family
Theme 4: A beautiful struggle
Theme 5: Movies and television shows

Cluster 3: Personal Love
Theme 1: Boldness
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2: Spirituality and religion</th>
<th>91</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Friendship</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS</strong></td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cluster 1: Love</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cluster 2: Black Love</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cluster 3: Personal Love</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Research Findings and Additional Impressions</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Theory, Policy, and Advocacy</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Future Research</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Statement</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>REFERENCES</strong></td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDICES</strong></td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Informed Consent</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Interview Guide</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Recruitment Email</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Participation Email</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Debriefing Email</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. *Couple Demographics* ................................................................. 37
Table 2. *Linkage Between Questions and Research Questions* ......................... 40
Table 3. *Cluster One: Love* ........................................................................ 70
Table 4. *Cluster Two: Black Love* ............................................................... 81
Table 5. *Cluster Three: Personal Love* ......................................................... 92
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Findings by Research Question................................................................. 66
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an introduction to the research study aimed at understanding the phenomenon of Black love. This chapter will provide a statement of the problem, rationale for the study, and additional information to support the research study. It is the intent of the study to explore the lived experiences of diverse African Americans who are currently in love relationships.

Social, racial and historical factors stress the male-female relationship for African American men and women beyond what other ethnic groups face (Pinderhughes, 2002). Africans in the Americas were forbidden to marry, forced to hide their love relationships, and engaged in secret ceremonies to demonstrate their love and commitment to each other (Hopkins & Hopkins, 1994). This was the case until after the Civil War when the Reconstruction period started (Franke, 1999). Marriage between African Americans and White Americans were not fully legalized throughout the United States until 1967. However, all states did not adhere to the law at that time (Interracial Marriage, 2003). In 1964, 64% of African American adults were married compared to 32% in 2004 (Dixon, 2009). For the first time since the 1960s, there has been concern among scholars about the rising divorce rate, decrease in marriage, and high relationship instability among African American (Pinderhughes, 2002). There appears to be an imbalance in the representation of Black American love relationships. Because of these daunting statistics, more focus needs to be on the positive aspects of African Americans love relationships. Gaining exposure and understanding of diverse love relationships of African Americans will help change the narrative currently surrounding Black Americans. Providing a diverse understanding of love
and relationships for African Americans will empower and prepare couples with more endurance and tools for stability.

**Black Love**

Black love is a concept that has gained momentum and is being discussed on a variety of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. However, there is no clear understanding or definition of Black love. A basic definition of Black love is love shared between two individuals who identify as African American. Some people do not believe there is such a thing as *Black love*. Ziyad (2015) defined Black love as black children, forgiveness, sacrifice, uncompromising and loving of all things Black. He also believes that Black love is unlimited. The need to inform African Americans and others about the reality of successful Black love relationships is a current concern. The United States is experiencing a movement in protest to racial disturbance similar to the 1960s and the Civil Rights Movement. A new era has emerged, and people are shouting “Black Lives Matter,” again very similar to the times of “I’m Black and I’m Proud,” a time when Black Americans were finding their racial identity. It is now time to focus on the one aspect that has supported generations through a multitude of distress, which is the love that exists between African Americans. This love has birthed families and sustained millions when it felt as though America had turned its back on the people who built it. Therefore, it is the purpose of this study to understand the phenomenon of Black love by studying diverse romantic love relationships in the African American community. According to Orbe (1997), “[L]ove is shaped by culture and a time in which it is expressed…love changes over the course of history and of individual lives it evolves in surprising ways” (as cited in Gupta, Pillai,...


Punetha and Monah, 2015). Black Americans have taken to social networking sites to emphasize and demonstrate their love for self and their African American brothers and sisters. Through this demonstration of protest, Black Americans seek to change the narrative and the opinions about this culture of individuals.

**Background of the Problem**

To understand the need for academic exploration related to Black love, it is important to view the backstory. Media and pop culture, along with research in all fields, portray African Americans in a negative light (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). The perspective is usually from a deficit viewpoint regarding what is lacking in African Americans and their relationships. According to Dixon (2009), Black people marry less and Black people divorce more than any other group of people in America. Though this information may be substantiated, many African Americans have enduring love relationships (Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012). In addition, African Americans are often completely left out of the conversation because when America gained its independence, Black people were still slaves, and the country was designed by White men in power. The influence of a patriarchal White society continues to reign today in every area of society (hooks, 2004). Black love relationships are rarely acknowledged in movies or in primetime television shows. The most common couples on television and in movies are heterosexual White American couples. Orbe (1997) references the “muted group theory” in the Gupta et al (2015) article, which suggests that the “needs of minority groups, such as African Americans are more likely to be overlooked than the needs of dominant groups” (p.278). Early studies on love and romantic relationships have focused on White Americans (Gupta et al, 2015). News reports
promulgate information that can mislead someone to believe that African Americans are not lovers of themselves or others (Sanders, 2012). African American men are portrayed as violent and absent from their families. African American women are depicted as loud, angry and promiscuous and are usually single mothers (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). In a recent study reported by Essence magazine (2016) only 41% of Black women see themselves depicted as real beauties. Black women are very rarely seen as the beautiful leading lady who is desired by the leading man in television or in film. Primetime television is less likely to feature African American men or women as leads (Rosenberg, 2013). In the current cycle of programs on primetime television, including the major networks (NBC, CBS, ABC) the majority of current television shows have less than 10 African Americans in a positive lead or supporting roles (Derakhshani, 2015).

As a result of the stereotypes and current practices described above, African American identities and the use of social practices and policies have been used to justify and legalize inequality (Pinderhughes, 2002). Faced with these inequalities and injustices experienced by many Black people there has been increased anxiety, conflict, confusion, and contradictions within the social systems in which they live (Pinderhughes, 2002). These are ongoing stressors that other groups of people do not have to live with and fight against. The message is reaffirmed when officers are not held accountable for their actions toward Black men, women and children who are being killed (Juzwiak & Chan, 2014). Normalizing a person’s existence and changing the narrative will help Black Americans, clinicians and others gain a better understanding and appreciation for Black lives and Black love.
Intersectionality created by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) is a way to think about identity and its relationship to power. Individuals with multiple layered identities are often forced to align with only one identity when they all are important. Concern exists for individuals who have several identities that can be used against without recognizing the whole identity of a person. Intersectionality concerns are essential for individuals of color and those with other marginalized identities including gender, sexual orientation, transphobia and others. It is important for couples with these multiple identities to be understood and acknowledged.

**Conceptual Framework**

Johnson and Loscocco’s *Black Marriage Through the Prism of Gender, Class and Race* (2015) was the model used to reframe how Black marriages are dissected and judged. The model questions the traditional White middle class framework for marriage and its relevance to African American marriages. The White model of marriage suggests pathology for African Americans (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015). A quote by Patricia Hill Collins (1990) frames the section on the social institution of marriage in the Johnson & Loscocco (2015) article, which states “in general, everything that the imagined traditional family ideal is thought to be, African American families are not” (p.145). Love relationships in the African American community are judged according to a system that was never established to benefit them. Looking at the relationships through the prism of gender, class, and race evokes questions about whether or not this protocol is the appropriate standard for Black people. The model questions whether or not marriages within the African American community have a chance at success based on this standard. Perhaps redefining and describing love
relationships with cultural considerations will lead to a better understanding and representation of Black love. This model undergirds what is perhaps a glimpse into why relationships in the traditional form have not worked for many African Americans. Reframing how people understand their wants, needs, and desires for a relationship and not using a prescription outlined by society could change the cycle of divorce and unstable relationships for African Americans. Not only does the institution of marriage, as it has been historically defined, not consider African Americans, there has been no consideration for other relationships that do not include only a man and woman. Defining, describing, and understanding the meaning of Black love for a diverse group of Black Americans may create a new culturally specific formula for love.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research study was to understand the phenomenon of Black love by studying diverse African American love relationships using a strengths-based approach. The intent was to contribute to the literature about Black American love relationships by defining, describing and understanding the phenomenon of Black love within diverse African American communities. It was also the intent of this research study to challenge the negative narrative that surrounds Black Americans (Reese, 2015). Holmberg, Orbuch, & Verdoff (2004) suggested that narratives aid in helping African American couples determine what their relationships mean and grasp a better understanding of the relationship (as cited in Chaney, 2010).

The message from the literature on African American marriages and love relationships is that they are unhealthy and pathological (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015).
Research specific to African American marriages have a “problem-oriented or deficit perspective” (Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012, p. 937). In daily conversations and on various social media platforms, the conversations about love relationships between Black men and women, inter-racial love relationships that include an African American and the lack of love relationships for Black women are ongoing (Blay, 2015; Chappell, 2015; Wells 2015). In the literature, the focus has also been on the African American woman and her inability to find a mate and become married (Dixon, 2009). It is also the impression, for many that African American men do not want to marry African American women and have a preference for White American women (Wells, 2015). Moreover, it was important to understand and describe unique love relationships within African American communities. There are copious amounts of relationship research, yet the interest in diverse African American relationships is limited. The primary relationship research available about African Americans focuses on the demise of marriage between a man and a woman (Blackmon, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon & Roberts, 2005). It is time to acknowledge that there is diversity in the way African Americans express love in their romantic relationships.

This study will examine enduring loving relationships by interviewing a variety of African American women and men sharing their love stories. In the spirit of anti-oppressive, pro-liberation research, it is imperative that we add to the literature and body of knowledge with findings that support a strengths-based perspective on African Americans and their love relationships (Grimmett, 2014). Highlighting relationships that have endured many obstacles faced by Black couples is especially important. It is also necessary to present a diverse perspective on how Black Americans love by understanding that all Black Americans are not
the same. Showing the diverse love relationships of African Americans is essential to complete the picture of Black love. The findings from this research study will make a contribution that encourages individuals and couples within African American communities to understand and define for themselves what love means for them. Last, this research will help to fill a significant gap in our American culture about Black love relationships in African American communities.

**Importance of the Study**

Love relationships are very important to the wellbeing of individuals. Knudson-Martin and Huenergradt (2010) suggest that, “mutually supportive intimate relationships have the potential to heal old wounds and promote health and resilience” (p. 369). Healthy relationships benefit society and help individuals function better. Johnson (2011) believes that healthy relationships lead to better lives. The belongingness hypothesis contends that humans “have a basic psychological need to feel closely connected to others, and that caring, affectionate bonds from close relationships are a major part of human behavior” (The Need to Belong, 2012). This hypothesis is directly linked to the Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) which states that people grow because of the relationships they are in because “mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth fostering relationships” as cited in Duffey and Somody, 2011, p. 226.

There is a need to present Black love in a way that is representative of African American communities. African American communities, at large, along with counselors and others, need a knowledge base that includes diverse African American love relationships. Though still rare, when African American love relationships are studied or portrayed in
popular culture, the focus is on heterosexual married couples. Love relationships exist, however, between committed individuals who are unmarried yet, cohabitate and live as a family (Chaney, 2014). Because these individuals are unmarried, their love relationship narratives are often overlooked and left untold. This is also true for interracial, gay, and lesbian couples (Calabrese, Rosenberger, Schick, & Novak, 2015). Their voices are needed in the conversation about Black love just as the voices in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter movement embraced a diverse representation of Black Americans (Blumberg, 2015; Teaching Tolerance, 2016).

Being able to provide a research study that will help counselors position themselves as advocates for diverse couples is necessary. The American Counseling Association (ACA) has adopted the new Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (2015) allowing counselors a multilevel framework for social justice advocacy. This research coupled with the competencies will

**Method**

The purpose for this research project was to understand Black love by studying diverse African American love relationships using a strengths-based approach. The study was qualitative with a phenomenological approach to understand the characteristics of Black love through the exploration of diverse African American love relationships. In addition, this approach sought to define the concept of Black love from a romantic standpoint. The sample consisted of six couples for a diverse representation of Black love. The study included two married heterosexual couples, one married heterosexual inter-racial couple, one married gay couple, a married lesbian couple, and one cohabitating heterosexual couple. The couples
were recruited from African American communities by word of mouth, predominantly African American organizations to include graduate chapters of fraternities and sororities in addition to churches and other identified sources. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter were also used to solicit participation.

The majority of the couples were recruited using email used to disseminate information to the researcher’s social network seeking potential participants. Individuals who found out about the study and were interested emailed the researcher to inquire about their eligibility for the study. The researcher also called and emailed information about the study to the LGBTQ Centers in Durham, NC and Raleigh, NC.

If there was interest from potential participants, the researcher replied with two additional emails. One email contained additional information about the study. A second email contained questions that the individuals could answer to determine if they were qualified to participate in the study. Once the individual determined eligibility for the study and it was confirmed by the researcher, another email was sent with the informed consent, along with information to secure an interview time and location. If the couple did not qualify for the study, they were thanked for their time.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What is Black Love?

2. What is unique about Black romantic love?

3. What makes Black romantic love endure?
Definition of Key Terms

The following terms will be used in this study.

1. The definition for **marriage** has evolved over time. Marriage is a socially or ritually recognized union or legal contract between spouses that establishes rights and obligations between them, between the couple and their children, and between the couple and their in-laws. The definition of marriage varies according to different cultures, but it is principally an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually sexual in nature, are acknowledged (Spaht, 1988). For example, Jada Pinkett Smith and Will Smith, both African American actors, married in 1997.

2. Gates and Higginbothom (2004) define **African American** or **Black American** as a human subject identified as a part of an ethnic group of Americans. Many African Americans are descendants of slaves forced to leave Africa and brought to America. African Americans or Black Americans were stripped of their rights and historically have been economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged. Will and Jada Smith would both be considered African American or Black American. The terms will be used interchangeably because it is common for members of the group to use a variety of terms to self-identify.

3. **Interracial marriage** is the term used to describe marriages that take place between people who are from different racial or ethnic groups. **Intercultural marriages** are defined as marriages between people who come from two different cultural backgrounds (Interracial marriage, 2003). Iman, a Somali-American fashion model, married David Bowie in 1992. David is a White English singer and songwriter.
4. According to Tays (2001), **love** is “when you know your significant other’s physical, emotional, and intellectual limitations and how they vary from your internal love model, and still feel that the loss of that person would mutilate you because they have become such a part of you” (p.22).

5. **Cohabitation** is defined by Chaney (2014) as “couples who live in the same home, are not legally married to one another, and share a “marriage-like” relationship” (p.218). This concept is closely related to domestic partnerships (see below).

6. A **domestic partnership** is when two people of the same or opposite sex live together and share a domestic life but are not married or joined by a civil union. In some states, domestic partners are guaranteed some legal rights, like hospital visitation (Domestic partnerships, 2016). This concept is closely related to cohabitation (see above).

7. It was the purpose of this study to define **Black love**. The basic definition is love shared by two individuals who identify as African Americans. Black love is also love shared between an individual who does not identify as African American and someone who does identify as African American. Black love as defined by Ziyad (2015) is Black children. Black love is forgiveness. Black love is sacrifice. Black love is uncompromising. Black love is unlimited and loving of all things Black.

8. The term **romantic** was used in this study to distinguish between a relationship between partners who have committed to share their lives together versus a relationship between friends or family members.
Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to the study outlining the background of the problem, a conceptual framework, the purpose, and the importance of the study. There was also a brief overview of the methodology used in the study. The research questions that guided the study were provided along with a list of definitions for key terms that were used in the study. The next chapter provides the literature review that supports the study and need to research Black love.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter two provides an overview of literature relevant to understanding Black love and relationships in African American communities. The research study’s purpose was to understand Black love by studying diverse African American love relationships using a strengths-based approach. The chapter is organized using the following sections: (a) peer reviewed journal articles, (b) books, (c) social media on Black love relationships, (d) television shows and movies, (e) urban or Black magazines and (f) other popular culture online media sources. The chapter concludes with the rationale for the study and a summary.

Peer Reviewed Journal Articles on Black Love Relationships

The research on Black love is limited in providing a definition or a variety of views on the topic. Specifically, the literature is incomplete in providing basic exposure to information about Black love. A literature search of online research databases included ProQuest, PsychINFO, PsycARTICLES, and ERIC using the terms “black love”, “black love relationships”, “African American love relationships” and “African American love.” The search yielded over 91,000 results. However, after filtering through the results and eliminating irrelevant journals and other outdated materials, the search results narrowed. This process was conducted several times.

Less than ten articles were relevant to the purpose of this study. A few the articles showed up several times during the search. For example the following articles are an example of the articles that reappeared, “I used to Love Him: Exploring the Mis-Education about Black Love and Sex” (Utley, 2010) and “Developmental and Ethnic Issues
Experienced by Emerging Adult African American Women Related to Developing Mature Love Relationships” (Tyson, 2011).

“Love Experiences of Older African Americans: A Qualitative Study” (Gupta et al., 2015) explored the romantic love experiences of older African Americans and was very specific in the title using the words “love” and “African Americans”. Though the article examined the love experiences of a specific group within the African American population, their references did not include a seminal piece or any specific articles related to love experiences of African Americans. The researchers explored the meaning of love for older African Americans. The sample consisted of 15 men and women: seven were married, three widowed, two divorced, and one who never married. They ranged in age from 70 to 100 years old. The participants defined love as “respect, trust, giving to and helping your partner” (Gupta et al., 2015, p.283). Other themes emerged including love as being spiritual, valuing each other and companionship, and no display of public affection. This study also explored answers to the question of how they learned to love and to what extent they believe that race or culture influenced their views on love. Though, the participants never used the term Black love, they expressed that there was a difference for African Americans. One participant confirmed that love relationships between African Americans are not valued or even viewed from a positive perspective by stating, “different cultures have heard about the African American love life…very negative” (Gupta et al, 2015, p.285).

Another qualitative study solicited insight from 31 African American adult women ages 18-29 (Tyson, 2011). The author gathered data by conducting five focus groups to answer the question, “What challenges are faced by emerging adult African American
women while attempting to develop and sustain a mature love relationship?” (Tyson, 2011, p.41) The study, “Developmental and Ethnic Issues Experience by Emerging Adult African American Women Related to Developing a Mature Love Relationship” shared insight from the women concerning their goals and characteristics for a mature love relationship. (Tyson, 2011) The findings included the need for commitment, stability, honest communication, fidelity and trust, protection, and someone who will help gather the load. The women shared how their values surrounding the development of an enduring love relationship changed as they matured. Study participants were able to share their perspective on interracial dating, negative stereotypic images of Black women, and the idealized images of Black love. Specifically, the 31 women felt pressure to live up to the “idealized image of ‘black love’ seen in popular African American media, particularly magazines” (Tyson, 2011, p. 49).

Chaney’s (2014) article, “No Matter What, Good or Bad, Love is Still There” addressed the importance for a discussion about cohabitation because more and more people are using it as a “pathway or alternative to marriage” (Chaney, 2014, p.217). Additionally, few scholars have examined cohabitation among African American couples. Cohabitation for African Americans, when compared to White couples, is less likely to lead to marriage and more likely to lead to single parenthood (Chaney, 2014). The purpose for Chaney’s (2014) research was to understand what makes Black men and Black women commit to each other because it can help offer more stability among cohabitating couples. The author concluded that the same rigor found in scholar’s work to find strategies to stabilize marriages among African Americans is needed to help relationships for those who chose to cohabitate. The intent for Chaney’s (2014) research was for “all Black couples, regardless of their motivation
Stacy: “No matter what, good or bad, love is still there” (p.242).

“Pleasure, Affection, and Love Among Black Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) versus MSM of Other Races: Countering Dehumanizing Stereotypes via Cross-Race Comparisons of Reported Sexual Experience at Last Sexual Event” purposed to describe “pleasure, affection and love experienced by men who have sex with men” (Calabrese et al, 2014, p.2001). The study was conducted to “counter the traditional perception of Black men as aggressive, animalistic and hedonistic in their sexual behavior” (Calabrese et al., 2014, p. 2001). The sample consisted of almost 22,000 men, and almost 800 of them were African American (3.7%) ages 18-87 with a mean age of 39. Pleasure and attention were common for Black MSM during their last sexual encounter. Men whose last sexual encounter was with a main partner shared they “felt love for, perceived love from, and verbalized love to that partner” (Calabrese et al, 2014, p. 2010). This study is important because love is a real experience among all groups of people who are in a love relationship. This research is supportive of same-sex relationships and normalizes romantic love for African American gay men.

Stanik, McHale and Crouter’s (2013) article, “Gender Dynamics Predict Changes in Marital Love Among African American Couples” examined “the implications of gender attitudes and spouses’ division of household labor, time with children, and their trajectories of love in a sample of 146 African American couples” (p.795). The results revealed “an overall significant linear decline in love as a function of couples’ marital duration” (Stanik, McHale, & Crouter, 2013, p.803). This decline was moderated by gender roles. Couples with
more egalitarian roles within the marriage reported stability of their love for one another. In addition, couples who spent equal amounts of time with children reported positive love.

“I Used to Love Him: Exploring the Mis-Education About Black Love and Sex” examined Black love relationships as defined by hip-hop legend Lauryn Hill (Utley, 2010). The song “I used to love him” from her 1998 album, The Mis-Education of Lauryn Hill, was considered the “quintessential break up song” (Utley, 2010, p. 291). The author argued that in spite of the album’s progressive nature, the song itself is pornographic and submits the wrong idea about love to African American communities. Utley (2010) suggested that the song “perpetuates stagnant, patriarchal, dominant-submissive ascetic patterns that discourage women from recognizing the power of erotic within themselves” and specifically “a worldview of immobility and domination within the context of love relationships” (p. 305). The author suggested that there is a need to define, develop, and embrace love that is different for African American women than other groups of women.

“African American Inter-Gender Relationships: A Theoretical Exploration of Roles, Patriarchy, and Love” offered three theoretical perspectives hoping to enrich the discussion of African American inter-gender relationships, a relationship between people of the opposite sex (Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye, 2015). It is important to understand each person’s role within the relationship by communicating expectations. The authors posited that role ambiguity creates conflict between men and women in relationships. Not acknowledging the role of patriarchy creates additional conflict. There is a way to engage in egalitarian relationships within this patriarchal society. Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield & Okundaye (2015) stressed “a serious examination of the significance and importance of
various aspects of love is critical to any discussion concerning couples and families” (p. 632).

In addition, “a complete discourse on the relationships of African American women and men cannot be held without including aspects of love” (Lawrence-Webb et al., 2015, p. 633).

According to the authors, patriarchy, role, and love have been left out of the conversation, and without them, the complexity and richness of African American relationships are lost. The authors agreed with bell hooks that love warrants increased attention and serious examination by researchers as:

- the feeling and sense of lovelessness being expressed and experienced in the African American community between women and men…and between varying communities (heterosexual, lesbian and gay, elderly, Generation Y, etc.) is perceived as though it is a normal phenomenon” and thus, “various aspects of love warrant increased attention and more serious examination by researchers. (Lawrence-Webb et al, 2015, p. 633).

Wanzo’s (2011) “Black Love is Not a Fairytale” addressed “how the heterosexual African American woman’s romantic imagination has been idealized and derided” (p. 3). Her purpose was to get away from celebrating the pathologizing of professional Black women. Wanzo (2011) suggests that it is important to have conversations about marriage even though all African American women do not have a fairytale desire to marry. In addition, a real conversation about single women, specifically single African American women, is needed. It is highlighted that the funding and resources related to healthy relationships and healthy living are targeted more toward married couples. To leave out diverse relationship options is a disservice for all people because everyone has the same need to pay for healthcare, childcare, food, shelter, etc., causing more harm than good for society (Wanzo, 2011).
The literature reviewed here represents the limited research available on diverse love relationships. The next section represented a comprehensive literature review on the consequences of marriages for African Americans.

**The Consequences of Marriages for African Americans: A Comprehensive Literature Review.**

This comprehensive literature review includes scholarly articles, reports, and books focuses on the consequence of marriage for African Americans (Blackmon, et al., 2005). The Institute for American Values, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening families and civil society in the U.S. and the world funded the research study. Four main questions are addressed in the literature review: (1) What are the economic, psychosocial and health-related consequences of marriage for African American men, women and children?; (2) Do the consequences of marriage differ for Blacks and Whites?; (3) If racial difference exist, what explains these differences? and (4) What are the policy implications of these findings? There were 10 major findings that suggested that being married for African Americans benefits men, women, and children at varying degrees. One theme that emerged from the review is that there are different definitions of family and specifically that family is more than marriage between a man and a woman and does not always mean something negative (Blackmon et al, 2005). It is not always family structure that matters most, but it is the quality of interaction between family members, socioeconomic status and other factors.

Reviewing popular books was another avenue used to explore love relationships among Black Americans. There are a variety of authors of books who seek to help change the message about African American love relationships. Several of those books will be reviewed.
Selected Books on Black Love Relationships

The books selected for this section were relevant to the topic, Black love. The first book was an anthology and brought together voices of famous and everyday individuals, with varied and similar experiences related to love as African Americans. Where Did Our Love Go: Love and Relationships in the African American Community (2013), was edited by Gil L. Robertson, IV. Divided into three parts: Single, Married and Divorced, there are male and female perspectives on the concept of love within the confines of a committed relationship, or the lack thereof, in which there was a yearning for romantic love. A common thread throughout the book was hope and the resounding need for love in African American communities.

Another book, The Obamas and a (Post) Racial America (2011) was edited by Gregory S. Parks and Matthew W. Hughley. The book dedicated one chapter to the love relationships of African Americans. The chapter by Phillips, Brown, and Parker (2011) entitled “Barack, Michelle, and the complexities of a Black ‘Love Supreme’” begins by recappping the marriage between Raymond Pace Alexander (1897-1974) and his wife Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander (1898-1989). Both were accomplished African Americans, yet most compelling was their representation of “so many healthy African American marriages and families” (Parks, G.S et al, 2011, p.136). Most people have never heard about this couple or others similar to them because it is not the norm to display successful African American love relationships. Our modern day couple, Barack and Michelle Obama, provides a different perspective on what Black love looks like, and “although some may continue to assert that the African-American family is weak and pathological, others view it as resilient and
adaptive as it has sustained an entire people group for more than 300 years in an oppressive and racist society” (Parks, G.S et al, 2011, p.137).

This section included books that focus on love relationships for African Americans and the endurance of those relationships. The next section will focus on social media as the new form of communication for clusters of people around varying topics. The section will highlight various social media platforms and provide information relevant to the concept of Black love.

**Commentary on Black Love Relationships**

*Black Love Under Siege* (2008) a commentary by Susan Taylor, former editor-at-large of *Essence*, shared a historical focus on the struggles of Black people in America dating back to the days of slavery. Taylor believes there has been a political agenda to keep Black Americans oppressed by starting with the family. This agenda has, specifically, been carried out by the incarceration of Black men who outnumber all other ethnic groups (Taylor, 2008). This limits the pool of available Black men for marriage to African American women. “In 2007, the number of incarcerated Black men reached a new high: one million Black men are on lockdown” (Taylor, 2008, p.182). The author poses the question of whether or not people can love each other when they live in a world that does not love them. She continues, “love may seem like a luxury when in fact it is the very bridge that will carry us across our days of challenge and into a life worth living” (Taylor, 2008, p.182). Taylor’s overall point in this commentary is that in spite of the multiple layers of oppression, “partnerships are our strength, the glue that holds families and communities together…all the mighty forces arrayed against us would be rendered powerless in the face of mutual Black love” (Taylor,
For Taylor, Black Americans must love fully and deeply the person they are and the person they are with by healing, blessing, and prospering. In addition, Black Americans must continue to build a healthy commitment of staying together through forgiveness and kindness.

**Social Media on Black Love Relationships**

Social media is a platform where many Americans and individuals around the world have the freedom to express themselves. Social media is defined as “internet based tools and platforms that increase and enhance the sharing of information” (Social Media Defined, 2014). These platforms include Blogs, Tumbler, Pinterest, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, among others. Most social media interfaces are available as free download software (i.e., application or app) for smartphones and tablets, or can be accessed via the Internet.

**Blogs**

A blog is defined as a “frequent, chronological, publication of personal thoughts and web-links” (Digital Marketing Reference Newsletter, 2016). A Google search for “black love blogs” resulted in 193,000,000 page views known as “hits”. These blogs include advice for Black Americans who are dating (www.blackloveadvice.com), specific blogs for Black women in relationships (www.relationships.classyblacklady.com), and blogs from the single black male perspective (www.singleblackmale.org).

One specific blog example is the Black Love Forum (http://www.blackloveforum.com) which seeks “to invoke an atmosphere of change in the movement to restore black relationships to a place of honor, harmony, and prosperity.” The movement seeks to encourage healthy relationships through a variety of events, education,
and mentoring activities. To achieve the desired change, there must be discussions, solutions and action.

**Instagram®**

Instagram (2016) defined itself as a “fun and quirky way to share your life through a series of picture”. In a recent search on January 21, 2016, there were over 800,000 posts for the hash tag ‘Black love’ (#blacklove). The hash tag “Black love is beautiful” (#blackloveisbeautiful) displayed 34,000 posts, and “Black love matters” (#blacklovematters) produced 17,000 posts. Additionally, there is a minimum of 17 accounts dedicated to black love such as “Black love is Black power” (blackloveisblackpower), “Black love is dope” (blackloveisdope), “Asian Black love” (Asian_black_love) and “Black love documentary” (blacklovedoc).

**Facebook®**

Facebook is an online social networking service whereby individuals can create personal webpages or webpages of support for causes or people. In a recent Facebook search, there was a minimum of four pages dedicated to Black love. For example, “Black love”, “Real Black love”, “Black Love Matters” and “Love Black, Think Black, Buy Black”. Those pages serve as a way to express one’s thoughts and feelings about issues related to Black love. PhD Singles is also a Facebook group for single African Americans who have a PhD or who are in pursuit of a PhD. This group seeks to bring together and offer support to doctoral educated African Americans who are in search of love.
Twitter®

Twitter is another social networking service allowing users to send and read 140-character messages known as “tweets” (Twitter, 2016). Tweets can be re-tweeted and shared to show support or provide awareness for a variety of topics and causes. Popular topics on Twitter “trend”, which means there is a large number of people “discussing” that topic at a specific time (Twitter, 2016). There are numerous accounts that show support for Black love such as @blackcouples. During the research for this study, the hash tag #blacklove was trending in support of a new FYI network series by the same name. This show was dedicated to helping African American women find love. Additionally, the hashtag highlighted pictures of couples representing Black love (Hashtag, 2012).

YouTube®

A recent YouTube exploration yielded 64,000,000 results when using “black love” as the search topic. Videos include individuals sharing with the world their ideas of what Black love means to them, along with others who show their support for making relationships stronger within the Black community. One video entitled “Ebony Affection: A Black Love Documentary” (2011) highlighted conversations between African American men and women about the concept of Black love and what it means to them. In addition, there were conversations about dating and commitment among African Americans. This documentary had received almost 12,000 views since October 2012.

ManUpTV (2014) published, What is Black love?, a web series that seeks to answer the question by interviewing a variety of people within African American communities. This episode initially aired in 2014 and had received over 3,000 views. This video appeared to be
more intentional about helping people understand Black love and its relevancy. They believe Black love is relevant to the personal as well as public wellbeing of African Americans.

Also on YouTube, *Black Love Series: Putting Love Back Into Our Relationship: Part I & Part II* was posted by Knowledge for LIFE (Know4LIFE) in 2011. The episodes included a community of married individuals talking about their experiences as married couples and providing strategies that will help younger African Americans gain the love they desire. They also shared how important it is to model what a successful relationship looks like for single individuals. Married couples from Muslim and Christian communities shared their stories and views on Black love, relationship growth, and Black families. The common goal for this group of people was to help build successful relationships and healthy communities.

Social media provides a variety of avenues for individuals and groups of people to share their thoughts and feelings around diverse topics. Social media has been at the center of communication about Black love. The next section includes a look at the representation of Black love in television and film.

**Television Shows and Movies on Black Love**

**Television Shows**

Black love relationships have rarely been celebrated within popular American culture (Atlanta Black Star, 2014). In the 1970s, the 1980s and part of the 1990s, there were a variety of television shows that had Black characters. Three of those television shows will be reviewed in this section. The first series is *Good Times* with a nuclear family of five headed by James and Florida Evans (Evans, Lear, & Monte, 1974). The National Broadcasting
Company (NBC) ran this series from 1974-1980 about an African American family living in the ghetto of Chicago with the will to overcome their daily struggles (IMBD, 2015). James and Florida were passionate and open with their love for each other. They verbalized their love for each other and for their children. The couple supported each other and worked hard to ensure their children had what they needed, which was not always easy for them to do. The show allowed for physical touch and affection between a Black husband and a Black wife.

_The Jeffersons_ (2016) included George and Louise Jefferson was on television from 1975-1985. The show was unique because the main characters were a married African American man and woman who had, as indicated in the lyrics from the show’s theme song, “made it” and moved out of the ghetto to their “deluxe apartment in the sky”. This show also included an interracial couple, Tom and Helen Willis, who were friends of the Jeffersons. Tom and Helen were one of the first interracial couples that included an African American, on television when the show aired (Nittle, 2016).

Almost ten years later in 1984, also on NBC, _The Cosby Show_ appeared, and the relationship between Cliff and Clair Huxtable became the quintessential relationship that many African Americans idealized (Hopkins, 2012). Cliff was a doctor, and Clair was a lawyer raising their five children in Brooklyn. This show ran for eight years and was regarded as TV’s biggest hit in the 1980s (Havens, 2000). Even today, 32 years later, the relationship between Claire and Cliff was referenced when individuals were asked to identify a famous African American couple that epitomizes Black love (EmarjayFilms, 2012). Additionally, Dwayne and Whitney in the spinoff show _A Different World_ (1987-1993) are
another couple that epitomizes Black love, especially for a young couple coming of age in a college setting and falling in love (Hope, 2015).

The absence of couples that represent Black love sends a message to everyone whether or not they are cognizant of it (Orbe, 1997). What we do see in popular culture is a celebration of everything that is European (Wanzo, 2011). We also see Black American men and woman engaging in relationships that are not normally healthy by most standards. Reality television shows in which Black Americans are the main focus, such as the Love & Hip Hop series and the Real Housewives of Atlanta and others, depict relationships that are tumultuous.

Interracial relationships between Black women and White men have recently taken center stage in popular shows such as Scandal and How To Get Away With Murder. Both shows were created and produced by an African American woman. However, both relationships are problematic, portraying both as mistresses for White men. In the fall of 2014, Blackish premiered and portrays a positive Black American couple and family. The show also gets to the core of issues surrounding Black love and culture. Most recently, the network FYI launched a new series titled #BlackLove. The series follows five African American women on their quest to find love. The ladies are assisted in their search for love by a psychotherapist and a certified dating coach. What sets this series apart from others is that the women are sincere in their attempt to find love by participating in activities that are reflective and help them understand their wants and needs in order to find the right fit. There is no drama from the women, and they appear to have each other’s best interest at heart and are cheering each other as they find love, one by one.
Movies

In an interview with Stacy Jae Johnson (2013) of Sister2Sister magazine, Lee Daniels, the producer of The Butler, shared, “[I]t’s time to see [Black love]. There aren’t any films out here that I recall on a big scale that show us in a way that needs to be shown… We need more of that”. There appears to be an overrepresentation in movies of African American single mothers and the absence of Black fathers portrayed as the norm. For example, in the movies Baby Boy (2001), Boyz in the Hood (1991), Precious (2009), and Hustle and Flow (2005), African American men are seen as not only absent, but also unavailable because of imprisonment and being emotionally detached (Dixon, 2009). Black women are portrayed as loud, abusive, settling for any romantic partner, and are neglectful of their children. However, this is not the full representation of Black America, Black families, or Black love in the United States. Such movies as Love Jones (1997), The Best Man (1999), Love & Basketball (2000) and more recently The Best Man Holiday (2013) purposely illustrate Black love from a positive, strengths-based perspective.

This section reviewed television and film geared towards African Americans. Those television shows and movies have historically been the main sources in which Black Americans were able to see themselves. Additionally, Black magazines have a long history of providing a balanced look at love relationships for African Americans. Several of those magazines will be reviewed in the next section.

Black Magazines on Black Love Relationships

During the search on Black love relationships, there were hundreds of articles from magazines. There were many duplicate articles from Black magazines, specifically Ebony,
Essence and Jet magazines. Jet, Essence and Ebony magazines consistently portray Black love in a positive light. Each year, these magazines display Black love in their effort to remind, expose, and affirm that Black love really does exist. John H. Johnson founded Ebony and first published Ebony on November 1, 1945 followed by its sister magazine, Jet, in 1951.

Seventy years later, after redesigning to keep up with the changing times, the Ebony website (http://www.ebony.com) features a section on Love/Sex (Ebony, 2016). Additionally, Jet magazine’s website (http://jet.com) has a love section. Jet and Ebony magazines are historically African American publications, and the section is provided to help Black Americans navigate the complexities of love. Jet magazine has a long history of celebrating Black love through wedding and anniversary announcements in their weekly/biweekly publications. Once a year, Ebony highlights married African American couples during the month of February to celebrate Black love. Weekly, Jet magazine celebrates Black love by featuring a newly married couple alongside a couple celebrating their anniversary. Most recently, Ebony magazine’s (February 2016) theme was “Hold on to Black love”.

Essence magazine started in 1968 with the motto, “Where Black Women Come First” (Essence, 2016). Essence started primarily as a fashion magazine and has evolved into a resource for African American women and the many issues they face. One main section of this magazine is also about love and relationships and helps women navigate that portion of their lives. Essence magazine devotes a portion of their website to love, providing marriage successes tips, advice on relationships, and more (Essence, 2016). The reality is that the majority of consumers of these magazines are African Americans, thus limiting who sees the
intimacy, love, and romance between Black people. Black magazines have a long history of highlighting enduring love relationships between heterosexual married couples. The next section focuses on popular culture websites that have expressed interest in the Black love topic.

**Popular Culture Websites on Black Love Relationships**

There have been several websites attempting to define Black love. For example, the website *MadameNoire* (http://madamenoire.com), a lifestyle guide for Black women, featured an article entitled “What is ‘Black Love’?” The writer questions the importance of defining Black love and understanding why there is a need to “cling” to the idea of Black love. The truth is that others outside of the African American community such as Dr. Drew and Anderson Cooper talk about Black love and are also trying to understand and define it (Williams, 2001).

Another website, *VSB* (http://verysmartbrothas.com), a daily digital magazine providing commentary, essay, and humor on popular culture, race and sex, featured the essay “So what exactly is ‘Black Love?’” (Jackson, 2013). The author, Panama Jackson, points out that most cultures do not label their love, yet Black Americans feel the need to do so. According to Jackson, many within Black communities question the concept of *Blackness*. For example, whether someone is “black enough” has historically been an ongoing argument for many. Thus blackness is always been deemed as complicated and will always be according to Jackson (2013). In summary, the author feels black love is just a concept. It is the “ideal of strength shared between two people attempting to reach a common goal…which would explain why we care so much about the idea…” (So what exactly is ‘Black Love’, 2013). It is
the shared history, in spite of the many differences that exist among African Americans, that causes many to coin the term.

The last article described in this section is from the RaceBaitR website, (http://racebaitr.com). The goal of this website is to increase the ways in which race is expressed and defined with hopes of creating a world free of racism and the oppressions that accompany it (Ziyad, 2015). The article “What is Black Love” showcases a variety of definitions of love from the likes of Bruce Lee defining love as friendship that caught on fire to the Bible and its I Corinthians 13 definition of love. Ziyad, (2015) defines Black love as Black children and giving them room to grow while empowering them to love and be loved. Black love is forgiveness in giving oneself and others the benefit of the doubt and refusing to pathologize Black behaviors. Black love allows Black people to be individuals and not allow one mistake by any one of us to color all Black people. Black love is sacrifice of oneself and one’s situation when it means others will not benefit. Ziyad (2015) suggests that Black love is uncompromising and loving all things Black including “the poor Black folks, the queer ones, the trans ones, the women, the uneducated, the disabled, the voiceless, the imprisoned, the drug dealers, the drug addicts, and the ones who did you wrong” (What is Black Love, 2015). Finally, according to Ziyad (2015) Black love is unlimited because the people who love do not give up. It knows and has experienced hurt, heartache, racism, oppression and brutality, but it continues to grow, protect and commit.

Popular culture websites were reviewed in this section. Those websites have provided space for conversations and opinions on the topic of Black love and enduring Black love relationships. The next section will summarize all the literature highlighted in this chapter.
Summary

Black love is important to many in the African American community as displayed in the various modes of delivery in which they express thoughts and feelings about Black love. It is the job of academia to take what is important to a large community of people and apply the rigor of research to give voice to those communities. This chapter outlined the literature, from diverse sources, relevant to understanding love relationships in the African American community, including peer-reviewed articles, books, social media, television and movies, magazines, and popular culture websites. The next chapter will outline the methodology that will be used to gather data on Black love from a diverse cohort of individuals who are in love relationships.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research study was to understand the phenomenon of Black love through the lived experiences of diverse African American love relationships. A positive strengths-based approach was utilized to elicit a narrative that would give a more comprehensive understanding about African American love relationships. This chapter will discuss the research design for the study, the role of the researcher, recruitment of the participants, the interview content, and logistics of the study protocol.

Research Design

This research study incorporated a qualitative phenomenological approach to gather data from six diverse African American couples. A phenomenological approach is focused on the “study of experience” (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009, p.11). The study’s purpose was to understand the human experience of Black love by interviewing a diverse group of African American couples and learning about their current love relationship.

Interpretive phenomenological approach (IPA) strategies were employed to gain insight from the participants about their experiences with Black love. Semi-structured interviews were designed to answer the study’s research questions. Utilizing open-ended questions allowed for a deeper understanding of the participants’ lived experience (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). It was not the intent of the study to prove or test a theory. Moreover, it was the purpose of the study to understand Black love by exploring each couple’s personal love relationship experience. Along with their understanding of their identity in America, couples shared their experiences and their personal understanding of Black love.
The phenomenological approach was appropriate for this study because it is a “live, dynamic activity” (Smith & al, p. 33) and seeks to understand the essence of a specific concept by individuals who have explicit insight into that concept. This research study focused on a small group of participants and used semi-structured interviews to capture their experience as a part of a Black love relationship. Because results from a qualitative study are more descriptive than predictive, the description of the relationships and their experiences are essential for this research study and understanding Black love.

The small sample allowed for examining the similarities and differences between couples. Rich, detailed analysis of the data “allows the researcher to present original problems, mechanisms, or experiences” (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p.9). The researcher was able to engage in the data in a way that simulated the reality of being a part of the participant’s experience. The researcher was also able to engage in theory to draw conclusions and themes from the data collected. The hermeneutic circle strategy was utilized and permitted for analyzing the data in parts and as a part of the whole for a more thorough understanding. Processing through the data in a back and forth matter allows for deeper interpretation. Moving back and forth from part to whole and whole to part suggests a shifting along the circle. Interpretation of the data is the foundation of IPA in order to make meaning of the data gathered.

Research Sample

The study was designed to interview a sample of African American couples currently in romantic love relationships. The sample was also designed to include individuals who did not identify as African American if they were in a love relationship with an individual who
self-identified as African American. Therefore, the units of analysis for this study included African Americans and others. Criterion sampling was used to recruit participants because there were restrictions on who could participate. Recruitment was targeted specifically to African Americans who were currently in love relationships for at least 10 years. To participate in the study, the following basic criteria had to be met: 18 years or older, speak and read English, together for at least 10 years in a marriage, gay or lesbian relationship, interracial relationship or identified as a cohabitating couple. Anyone who did not identify as African American must have been a part of a relationship with a person who identified as African American. The study did not limit participation by restricting whether or not participants had children or had a particular social economic status.

Participants

It is recommended that in an IPA research study the sample size for novice research should not exceed six participants (Smith et al, 2009). There were six couples that created the sample size for this study. Five African American couples and one interracial couple completed the sample. Gay and lesbian couples were represented in this sample as were heterosexual couples. There was one couple who identified as unmarried and cohabitating. Table 2 provides a visual representation highlighting the diversity in couples and includes their pseudonyms, ages, and number of children, their highest level of education, location, relationship status, sexual orientation, and collective family income. The couples represent the diversity of love within African American couples which includes who they love and how they chose to express that love.
Table 1

**Couple Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Racial Identity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th># Children</th>
<th>Relationship Status</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Family Income**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>Black Male</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>White Female</td>
<td>34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cosmetology license Masters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesse</td>
<td>Black Male</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>GA</td>
<td>Bachelors HS Diploma</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Black Female</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>GA</td>
<td>Bachelors HS Diploma</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>Black Male</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Cohabitating</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>Masters Degree Bachelors</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>Black Female</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>OH</td>
<td>HS Diploma PhD</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Black Male</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Masters Degree Bachelors</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>Black Female</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryson</td>
<td>Black Male</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason</td>
<td>Black Male</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>HS Diploma</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitney</td>
<td>Black Female</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabrina</td>
<td>Black Female</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* PhD: Doctorate of Philosophy, HS Diploma: High School Diploma

*Total time together is a committed relationship; Gay marriage was legalized in 2010 in Washington DC.

**Approximation based on a salary range
**Procedure**

Approval to conduct this research study was received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to conducting this study. The approved informed consent form is included as Appendix A. Participants were recruited by posting information about the study on social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. The majority of participants were recruited by email and by word of mouth. Emails were sent to my social network and included over 100 individuals. The emails contained content previously approved by the IRB committee and can be viewed in Appendices D and E. Once individuals replied to express their interest in the study, an email was sent that included information to determine if they were eligible (Appendix E). If they responded back positively and met the criteria, a response email was sent to establish the interview date, time, and location. This email also included the informed consent for their review. Each interview was conducted face-to-face at an agreed upon location. The majority of the interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes.

At the start of the interview, the purpose of the interview and confidentiality was explained. If either partner had questions about the form or the process, time was taken to answer their questions. Once each participant felt comfortable with the answer, they signed the form. Each partner was then asked to complete a demographic survey included in Appendix B. Each form was labeled with a number and a letter of the alphabet to indicate the couple and the individual completing the survey. Once the surveys were completed, each couple was then reminded that the interview would be audio and video recorded. Couples were also reminded that they would receive a $25.00 gift card at the completion of the
interview. In-depth interviews were then conducted with each couple.

**In-depth Interviews**

Each interview was conducted with each couple utilizing the interview guide approved by IRB and is outlined in Table 1. The prescribed questions used were created to answer the research questions that guided the study. The research questions were designed with the belief that the data gathered would shed light on the phenomenon of Black love. The three research questions were focused on the participant understanding of his or her experiences. There were 17 interview questions that were used to help answer the research questions. The interview questions were designed to focus on the couple’s experiences and their understanding of the phenomenon of Black love. Congruent with the IPA qualitative research style, open-ended questions were used to help couples process the concepts of love, Black love, and their individual love relationship. The questions used were also designed as a way to investigate the concept of Black love.

**Data Collection**

For this study, multiple sources were used to collect data that would explain the phenomenon of Black love. Utilizing multiple sources establishes triangulation. Triangulation helps to understand the phenomenon in a more detailed way. Smith et al (2015) suggest that collecting data requires the researcher to be open-minded, flexible, patient, and empathetic and willing to enter into and respond to the participants’ world. The researcher informed participants that the length of the interview could vary. Additionally, it was important for the interviewer to establish rapport with the couple to ensure safety and a level of comfort that would help with answering the questions.
### Table 2

**Linkage Between Research Questions and Interview Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is Black love?</td>
<td>• Describe your love relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How do you define love as an African American currently in a love relationship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• When you hear the words “Black love” what comes to mind for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you think is the difference between love and Black love?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How did you learn to love?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What role does &quot;love&quot; play in making your relationship work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What strategies do you use to &quot;stay connected&quot; or &quot;in love&quot;?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• When you hear the words “Black love” what comes to mind for you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What do you think is the difference between love and Black love?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How did you learn to love?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What role does &quot;love&quot; play in making your relationship work?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What strategies do you use to &quot;stay connected&quot; or &quot;in love&quot;?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is unique about Black romantic love?</td>
<td>• What is the one thing that keeps you happy in your relationship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Based upon your experiences in this relationship think of the worse thing that has happened, describe it, and describe how you recovered from it. How has the worst thing affected your relationship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What are the characteristics of a healthy African American love relationship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How has race or culture influenced your views about love?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What makes Black romantic love endure?</td>
<td>• To what extent do you believe that race or culture influenced your views about love?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Did you have a role model for a healthy relationship growing up? If so, who was the role model? What was the message about love relationships?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Was the type of relationship you could be in defined for you by others?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Describe the family dynamics in your family of origin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o What impact have these dynamics had on your love relationship?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How did your culture or family dynamics impact the type of relationship you chose?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Demographic Survey

The demographic survey was used to establish a framework for understanding the individual and the couple. The demographic information requested included year of birth,
number of years in relationship or married, gender, ethnicity, number of children, social economic status, and employment status. This information was used to compare similarities and differences between participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The information gathered was also used to provide a comprehensive written description of the couples.

**Data Analysis**

The researcher collected data from a diverse representation of African Americans who were in a romantic love relationship. The method used to analyze the data for this study was the constant comparative method, which suggested analyzing data as it is received. The researcher used this method during the interview and during the coding process. During the interview, notes were taken to ensure no relevant information would be lost.

The texts from the interviews were analyzed line by line, isolating words and phrases to create clusters and themes. Interpretation of data occurred by analyzing the couple’s individual data. Data was also analyzed and interpreted between couples to cross match data received from all couples. The data was then organized according to the clusters using a coding process. Next, the data was interpreted using a psychological lens, interpreting data using theories and concepts to illuminate understanding of the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Personal experiences from the data were highlighted and underlined for further understanding. Significant statements were developed into a list that would later be used as support for the themes identified. Answering the “how” and “what” of the experience was relevant for understanding the essence of participant experiences.

**Trustworthiness**

It is important in all research to ensure that the study is of quality and that its validity
is established. Smith et al (2009) emphasize Yardley’s approach to establishing quality and validity of the research process of interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA). There are three broad principles for establishing quality and validity: *sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour*, and *transparency and coherence*.

Sensitivity to the context was established early in the process for this study. The choice of using IPA as a research method reflects the need for context sensitivity. Also, utilizing a high level of skill during the interview process supports sensitivity toward the context. The process used from the beginning to include production of a quality interview to the analysis of the data demonstrates context sensitivity.

The way in which the data is reported establishes the quality and validity of the study. A good IPA study will contain a “considerable number of verbatim extracts from the participants’ material to support the argument made, thus giving participants a voice in the project and allowing the reader to check for the interpretations being made” (Smith et al, 2009, p. 181). This study is supported by quotes from participants and supports the interpretative process used. The claims made were appropriate to the sample analyzed in this study. Sensitivity to the context was also established in this study by the researcher’s awareness of the literature and its relevancy to the topic.

Yardley’s (2008) second principle to establish quality and validity is through *commitment and rigour*. Commitment through the IPA process is shown through the researcher’s attentiveness to the participants. Attention paid to the collection of data and to the analysis of the data is important. There was a personal commitment to this study and to the participants. It was important to be considerate of the couples’ schedules, establishing
interview times and following through to meet at the established time and location. Time was taken to establish rapport with each couple, ensuring that they were comfortable in sharing their love stories. Utilizing counseling skills during the interactions with participants from beginning to end was important. I was empathetic toward the participants, created a safe environment for them to share, and allowed for high quality interview content. Data analysis was thorough and systematic. The analysis was not only descriptive but also interpretative. Information gleaned from data analysis provides readers with new information associated with the themes that emerged. Yardley’s (2008) third principle is transparency and coherence and refers to how clearly the stages of the research process are described. This study includes details on how the participants were selected, the scheduling of interviews and the steps used in analysis of the data.

Last, an independent audit strongly supports establishing validity in a qualitative research study. The researcher solicited the assistance of two auditors for this study. Their task was to check the final findings to ensure it was “plausible and credible” in terms of the data collected and that there was a clear step-by-step process (Smith et al, 2009). The auditors were two doctoral level individuals who have conducted qualitative research studies. Additionally, the researcher checked with members to ensure the information presented accurately represents their contribution to the study. Study participants were emailed a completed transcript of their interview. The participants were also emailed a copy of their couple descriptions. They were asked to verify the accuracy of the data gathered from their interview and demographic surveys. Couples did not respond back about the accuracy of the transcriptions.
External validity, also known as transferability, is the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. It was not the purpose to ensure that the information gained from the study could be applied to other or larger groups of people. It was most important that the researcher provide “rich, thick descriptions” about Black love from the couples’ perspectives (Creswell, 2013, p.252). Detailed descriptions of the couples and their responses allowed “readers to transfer information to other settings and to determine whether the findings can be transferred ‘because of shared characteristics’” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252).

**Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher was to lead the research study from beginning to end. It was the duty of the researcher to gather the required data, analyze the data, and make meaning of the findings (Patton, 2002). I served as the primary instrument in conducting interviews with each couple.

My experience as a Licensed Professional Counselor Associate serving as a counselor assisted in conducting interviews with the couples. Because of my professional counseling background, I was able to develop a rapport and trust with each couple. Counseling skills were used to actively engage in the interview process by utilizing active listening. The prescribed list of research questions shown in Appendix C were used as a guide while also asking appropriate and relevant follow-up questions for clarity. Additionally, I used my skills as a counselor to interpret the body language of the participants and allow the participant space when necessary. Allowing the participant silence when necessary was important to ensure safety and minimize harm.
My role was emic and etic while conducting this research study. My role was emic because I identify as an African American, heterosexual female, and this demographic information is aligned with some of the participants in the study (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation). The etic role was that I have never been married, I have lived as part of a domestic partnership, and I have never identified as lesbian or participated in a same sex romantic relationship. The participants were ensured that the information gathered from their interview would be used to provide a positive assessment of their experience. The interview questions were not designed to be intrusive or cause any harm for their relationship. It was also not my intention to judge them. I was there to gather data for research purposes.

My beliefs about cohabitation and gay and lesbian relationships were expressed to allow couples to feel comfortable sharing their experiences. Everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or relationship status, should have the right to love and marry whomever he or she desires. I expressed my belief that individuals should be free to live their lives in the matter in which they choose.

Although I approached each interview eager to hear and experience the information they had to share on the topic, bracketing was suspended. My assumptions emerged in various places throughout the study. I was able to acknowledge the assumption to myself, refocus my attention on the couple, and be present with them for the duration of the interview. I was intentional about honoring each couple and their experience.

**Ethical Consideration**

Qualitative research requires attention to ethical consideration throughout the process of conducting a research practice. The first consideration is to do no harm. It was not the
intent of the study to cause any harm. On the contrary, the study was designed to create an atmosphere of love by asking questions that required the couples to focus on the love they have for one another. Thus the risk of unanticipated harm was reduced.

Each participant was given an IRB approved informed consent to sign before the start of the interview. Additional questions were answered to provide clarity and comfort for those who needed it. The couples were also informed that the data they provided would be transcribed by an approved online service, and their confidentiality was assured. Audio files of the interviews were uploaded for transcription. The files are located on a locked computer in the researcher’s office. Each participant was given a pseudonym that accompanied the lettering of the demographic survey given by the researcher. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

Summary

This chapter discussed the research design that was used to gather data for this study. The chapter includes the reasoning for the research design, data collection and analysis, recruitment and description of the participants, the role of the researcher, and the establishment of trustworthiness. Chapter Four will reveal the findings of the research study. The chapter will include a thorough examination of the couples and the clusters and themes that emerged from the data.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter will discuss the findings of the current research study and how the findings were used to explore the phenomenon of Black love. The findings from this study will be presented and will include couple participant descriptions. The demographic questionnaire that was administered along with data gathered during the interview was used to provide a comprehensive description of each couple. Data was analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkins, 2009). This qualitative study was conducted to answer three research questions.

1. What is Black love?
2. What is unique about Black romantic love?
3. What makes Black romantic love endure?

Description of Participants

The sample for this study consisted of five diverse African American couples and one interracial couple. At least one partner identified as African American or Black American. The romantic love relationships are categorized as married and heterosexual, cohabitating and heterosexual, interracial and heterosexual, gay and lesbian.

The sample includes couples from North Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, and Ohio. Each couple was required to be 18 years or older and were also required to read and speak English. Each relationship has longevity of 10 years as married or cohabitating. The gay and lesbian couples were not required to be married for 10 years; however, they needed to have been a part of a committed relationship for at least 10 years. The rationale was to be inclusive to gay and lesbian couples. Marriage was recently legalized in Washington DC in 2010 and in the
entire United States in 2015 (Chappell, 2015). Thus, their relationship status is combined with being in a long-term commitment and marriage.

The average age of the couple participants was 43 years old. The average length of the couples’ relationships was 15 years. All but one couple has at least one child. Three couples have children living in the home. Five of the 10 participants have a high school diploma as their highest level of education. Two participants have a bachelor’s degree, two master’s degrees, and one doctoral degree. The study included eight participants who identify as heterosexual and four participants who identify as gay or lesbian. Following are descriptions of each couple that participated in this study.

**Justin and Dana Kennedy**

The Kennedys are an interracial couple from North Carolina. Their city is small, and the population is majority White Americans. The interview was conducted in Dana’s parents’ lake house. Justin and Dana have been together for 18 years and married for 12 years. They have two elementary aged sons. Sharing space with Justin and Dana felt very warm and inviting. The overall impression from this couple was that no matter what comes their way, they will fight to keep their love alive.

Both Dana and Justin are gainfully employed and work full-time. Justin is an African American, heterosexual man who is 39 years old and the eldest of three children. He grew up in a two-parent household where both parents worked full-time. He is a high school graduate working in a blue-collar job. Of the two, Justin is more reserved and quiet, allowing his wife to do a lot of the talking for the interview. Dana is a White American, heterosexual female who is 34 years old. Dana also grew up in a blue-collar, two-parent household and has a
younger sister. Dana graduated from high school and later enrolled in school to obtain her license to become a hairstylist.

**Love story.** When asked to tell their love story, Dana jumped at the opportunity. She explained that because of her job, she is always telling her clients how she met Justin. Dana and Justin met one Friday night while hanging out in a local popular hangout. At the time, Dana was only 15 years old, and Justin was 20 years old. He was more concerned about her age than he was about her racial/ethnic identity. However, he proceeded to get to know her, understanding that there could have been legal implications for dating someone underage. However, Dana knew that Justin’s race would be an issue for her family who would not approve of the two of them dating. Justin had relatives who dated outside of their race, so race was not a concern for him.

Dana explained that she and Justin dated for four years before she told her parents about the relationship. She explained that, “everybody else in Shelby County” except her family knew that she was dating a Black guy. She knew that her parents would not approve of the relationship, and that kept her from telling them. Dana recalls one Father’s Day telling Justin, “My dad’s gonna come over after church today.” And he said, “Well I’ll go visit my daddy for a little while.” She was very intentional about not telling him that he had to leave. However, it was at the moment, as he was pulling out of the driveway to leave her house that she decided she would never chose her family over Justin again.

When asked what love meant to her, Dana expressed that for Justin, she “was willing to walk away from everything she had ever known.” She believed he would fulfill all of those things that her family had fulfilled before. She knew that she was happier with him
than she had ever been before her relationship with Justin. Dana believed she would never be happy without him. She told her parents that if they made her choose them over Justin, they would not get the Dana they have known. The Dana they were used to, she relayed telling them, was “Dana with Justin”. If Justin were erased from the equation, they would have a different daughter. She knew she would not be happy without him. When asked about the meaning of love, Justin shared that love was primarily protection of his family. It was his responsibility to make sure nothing egregious happened to his wife or his children.

**Family of origin considerations.** When asked why they would not approve of her relationship with Justin, Dana stated that the primary reason was because her parents were afraid of what other people would say. Elaborating, Dana shared, “No one ever said, we don’t like him because he’s Black. It was a lot of, what are other people going to say?” Additionally, her father worked around African American men whom he heard talking negatively about White women; he was afraid that no White man would want his daughter after she dated a Black man. Justin shared that Dana’s father “…works at the foundry, and he always heard how the guys, you know the black guys at the foundry talked about, you know little young white girls, you know that was his image of a Black man.”

Dana recalls, as a young girl, her grandmother telling her, “God made enough White people for White people and enough Black people for Black people.” Therefore, she expected that her family would not embrace the relationship. Four years into the relationship, Dana finally decided to tell her parents about the relationship because she needed to move back home with them. She refused to move in with her parents without them knowing about the relationship. They responded exactly the way she expected, and for two years, they lived
as though Justin did not exist. She would leave home to visit Justin, but they never talked about him or the relationship. After Dana moved out, she and Justin decided to get married, and it was important to her parents for her to inform her grandparents and great grandmother about the relationship. Surprisingly, when sharing with her great grandmother, Dana’s mother expressed, “...he treats her like the queen she is.” After, going to therapy with her parents and working through their issues, Dana and Justin moved forward with getting married. Surprisingly, Dana’s family attended their destination wedding. Justin’s family knew about the relationship from the beginning, and they always embraced Dana. The couple laughed about the memory of his mother saying Dana must really be special because he “...brought her in the house when everyone was home.” Justin was never told to only date African American women. By having an uncle who often dated White women, Justin was exposed to interracial relationships throughout his life.

**Current family status.** In 2016, Dana and Justin share a story of love that includes their two sons and two dogs. Dana’s family accepts their marriage and their children. They have embraced Justin and love him. Justin refers to Dana’s grandfather as “a best friend”. The entire family vacations together, and the race related tensions that were very much prevalent early on in their relationship are no longer evident within Dana’s family.

**Jesse and Kelly Coleman**

The Coleman’s are an African American heterosexual married couple living in rural Georgia. They are the parents of three African American male children. The two younger children live in the home full-time, and the oldest child attends college full-time in another state. Jesse and Kelly have been married for 23 years and have been a part of each other’s life
for 28 years, the majority of their lives. They married when Jesse was a sophomore in college and both were 20 years old. It was very apparent that Jesse and Kelly had been together for a long time. They were very comfortable with each other, and it was easy for them to engage in the interview process together by sharing in the telling of their love story. According to Kelly, she and Jesse are opposites yet compatible, and that sentiment was evident.

Jesse is 44 years old and was born in a small town in North Carolina. He was raised primarily by a single mother and speaks of a larger family unit that helped raise him. He is the eldest of two children. He has a master’s degree and holds a leadership position as a school administrator. A job opportunity for Jesse took them away from their home state over 10 years ago. Kelly is an African American female and is also 44 years old. She was born and raised in the same state as Jesse. She has two siblings, and she is the middle child. Kelly grew up in a two-parent household where both of her parents worked. Her parents have been married for 47 years. Kelly has a bachelor’s degree and works full-time as an educator.

**Love story.** When asked about their love story, Jesse took the lead; however, they both shared in pulling the pieces of their story together. Jesse and Kelly’s story started when they met as sophomores in high school. Jesse’s best friend, who was Kelly’s cousin, introduced them at a church event. Jesse was interested in having a relationship with Kelly from the very beginning. However, it took Kelly a little time to come to terms with how she really felt about Jesse. Their love matured by writing letters and talking on the phone. Kelly and Jesse did not see each other often because they lived 30 minutes from each other. Duplicatively, Jesse would visit Kelly, saying he was there to visit her older brother.
After graduation from high school, Jesse went to a four-year university located several hours from his hometown. Kelly moved closer to Jesse to attend community college and to continue their relationship while living with her aunt. Nearly a year into the school year, Kelly moved back home because her mother lost her job and was unable to continue to fund her education. It was at this point that she realized that she really loved Jesse and wanted to be with him. Hence, she found a full-time job and an apartment and moved back to be closer to Jesse. Jesse’s moment of clarity that Kelly was the love of his life happened after undergoing a second operation for a football-related injury. Kelly was the only one with him for his second surgery that year. She left the hospital to get food, and it hit him that she was definitely the one. She literally was taking care of him. Coming from a single parent home, resources were limited, and when he needed her, she was always there to help out.

When asked what love meant to them, Kelly shared that loving her husband means, “loving him more than she loves herself.” Her perspective is that she loves him the way he deserves to be loved. It is easy for her to love him because she receives the same in return. Jesse expressed his love for Kelly as being “unconditional”. He will always be there for Kelly, and there is nothing he will not do for Kelly and his children.

**Family of origin considerations.** Soon after realizing that Kelly was the one and what that meant for him, Jesse proposed, and she said “yes”. Jesse and Kelly went to the justice of the peace and were married with Jesse’s mother as their only witness. Several months later, they had a wedding ceremony, which was very important to Kelly’s parents. Otherwise, according to both Kelly and Jesse, the wedding would never have happened. There was no opposition to the two getting married so young. However, there was more
conversation about making sure they handled themselves appropriately, which meant for their families that there was to be no living together without marriage.

**Current family status.** Kelly and Jesse have three sons whom they love very much. Kelly sacrificed for her family by putting her desires to continue her education on hold while Jesse secured his license to be a teacher and fulfill his dream of coaching high school football. After this dream was realized, he was able to obtain his master’s degree in hopes of advancing in his career and continue to provide for his family. Although Kelly has always worked, it was only in 2013 that Kelly was able to realize her dream of receiving her undergraduate degree.

**William Watkins and Barbara Douglas**

William and Barbara are a cohabitating, African American, heterosexual couple from Ohio. William and Barbara have been together for 17 years. They have no children together. Barbara is a 57 year-old female and was born and raised in Ohio. Barbara has been married before but only for a few years. She has a son and one granddaughter. Barbara has a high school diploma and has worked in local government for over 20 years. William is 59 years old and was born in Georgia. At the age of five, his family moved to Ohio. William has a high school diploma and completed two years of undergraduate school. He shared that he went to college on a track scholarship, and after he was injured, he stopped attending school. William has never been married and has no children. Both are employed full-time. William takes great pride in his work and has a supervisory role.

William and Barbara had the shortest interview of all the couples in the study. However, their love and commitment to each other was evident through their nonverbal
communication with each other. The laughter shared between the two was comfortable and appropriate. There were moments of stolen glances of Barbara from William that felt as though this couple was new to love though they have been together for 17 years.

**Love story.** Barbara’s neighbor was William’s mother and the person who introduced the couple. William said his mother described Barbara as a nice lady, and she wanted her son to meet her. Once they met, they both were immediately attracted and interested in each other. Barbara, however, never verbalized how she felt; instead, she would call William and ask him to help her with things around the house. He never hesitated, and anytime she called him to help her with the various household chores, he would oblige. Soon, he began courting her by cooking, bringing her breakfast, and making it known that he was interested in her romantically. Several weeks later, he invited her to his nephew’s party, and they have been together ever since.

When asked what love means to them, Barbara and William were in unison with their answers. Love for this couple means having a “great level of trust”, commitment, and loyalty. Love also means being attracted to each other.

**Family of origin considerations.** William was raised by his mother and has never met his father. He is the middle child and has two sisters. William and Barbara are very close to their families. They shared that sometimes it is hard to establish boundaries when it comes to helping their families. There have been times when William had to step in and remind Barbara of keeping the boundaries in place. This can be hard for Barbara who comes from a large family with seven siblings. Barbara is the guardian of her sister who was diagnosed with a bipolar disorder. She was raised in a two-parent household, and family was at the
center of everything for them. Both parents are now deceased. Barbara’s father was a preacher, and religion is important to both William and Barbara. William was recently baptized.

Current family status. William and Barbara are considering marriage. They shared that there has been no pressure to marry. However, they would like to make it “right”. William wants to make Barbara an “honest woman”. Barbara referenced having a granddaughter and wanting her to have a good example. They refer to each other as “wife” and “husband” and feel it is time to make marriage their new reality.

Jordan and Lauren Phillips

The Phillips are an African American, heterosexual couple who have been married for almost 11 years. Lauren and Jordan have two small children, five and two years of age. Jordan and Lauren both shared, with enthusiasm, their love story. Their engagement was recorded and included Jordan reciting a poem to Lauren. They watch the video every year on their anniversary as a reminder of the love they shared and continue to share for each other.

Interacting with Lauren and Jordan felt very comfortable. They welcomed me into their home and allowed me to interact with their small children. Their space felt like home. Their interaction was calm and sweet. This couple has a connection that runs deep and is multi-layered.

Jordan is a 34 years old male from the eastern part of North Carolina. Jordan has a doctoral degree and has spent the majority of his professional career as a public school educator. He is now an administrator and misses teaching and working directly with children. Jordan grew up in a home with his mother and father. His schools prior to college had been
predominately African American students. At the age of eight years old, his sister was born. Jordan vividly recalls never going to daycare, staying at home with his dad until he was seven years old. Jordan shared that this was the time in his life that his love of music nurtured. A special bond was established between his father and him. Jordan’s parents have been married for 35 years despite having a rocky start as he remembers witnessing a lot of arguing when he was younger. Jordan also shared that until his grandmother passed away recently that his grandparents were married for 66 years.

Lauren is also 34 years old and is currently attending school full-time as a doctoral student. Lauren is from a small rural and predominantly White town in North Carolina. She is currently working as a graduate research assistant to dismantle racism in her local community. Lauren speaks sincerely about her experience with racism that started at the age of five years old. Lauren considers herself, as does Jordan, an activist for social justice. She, too, has spent most of her professional career as a public school teacher in North Carolina. Lauren grew up for most of her formative years in a two-parent household. She was 15 years old when her parents divorced. She is a middle child and has an older sister and younger brother.

**Love story.** Jordan and Lauren were excited to tell their love story. Their story began in high school when they went on a college visit. However, they did not begin to date until their senior year in college after being “best friends” for the first three years. Lauren and Jordan shared common friends who always questioned why they were not a couple. Although there was some interest, they refused to admit it and held tightly to their friendship. Jordan and Lauren gave each other advice on their individual relationships, had classes together,
engaged in campus activities together, and socialized with the same group of friends. They were eventually challenged by their friends to go on a date. Their friends paid, and that was the beginning of their journey as a couple. Jordan and Lauren confirmed their commitment to dating each other at one of their favorite pastime activities, a basketball game that went into triple overtime.

**Family of origin considerations.** Lauren expressed that her family dynamics did not emphasize love in the traditional sense of hugs and saying the words “I love you”. She and her siblings knew their parents loved them because they provided for them and made sure they supported them at their extracurricular sporting events. Love was also expressed by correction, attempting to make them better by telling Lauren and her siblings what changes they should make. Lauren viewed her parents as partners who shared in the responsibility of being parents and nothing more. There was no semblance of a functioning romantic love relationship. There were no expectations for her future love relationship. Lauren expressed that she has had to learn to be a wife to Jordan and not just be his friend. It was not enough to be his friend; she needed to dig deeper and become his partner in a more intentional way. This meant that Lauren had to find resources such as books and other married women who could help her understand and live out her experience as a wife.

Jordan’s experience was very different as he comes from a family that honors and respects the institution of marriage. It was the expectation of his family that he would marry and that he would marry an African American woman. His community was predominantly African American, and he witnessed the celebration of African American culture and people.
**Current family status.** Lauren and Jordan both expressed that the Black love interview was very timely for them. They have been through a lot of transitions in the last five years and realized their relationship was under distress. Lauren and Jordan were both feeling that they were not getting what they needed from their partner. For a long time they have been able to depend on their friendship to get them through. This felt different for them, and they chose to engage in therapy together. They were pleased to report that the therapy had helped. Lauren and Jordan continue to parent their children while managing very busy lives. They have resumed working together giving, workshops on a variety of topics. Lauren and Jordan love working together because they are passionate about the same issues, and their individual energy compliments the other partner. They are affirmed as couple when they work together.

**Bryson Bell and Mason Patterson**

Bryson and Mason are an African American, gay, married couple living in central Virginia. They have been together for exactly 10 years. One year after meeting, Bryson and Mason had a commitment ceremony. Five years later in 2012, they were married in Washington DC when gay marriage became legal there. Bryson and Mason are a fun couple who are full of energy. When Mason is talking, Bryson beams and smiles at how passionate he is. The energy that surrounds the two of them is electric and sweet.

Bryson is a 38-year old male from rural Virginia. He is college educated and works as a store manager. He has an 18-year old daughter and was married to her mother. After being married for several years, Bryson decided he no longer wanted to be in the relationship and started dating men. Bryson shared that he always felt he was different from his friends
because he liked cooking, cleaning, and doing more things that were traditionally associated with being female. Bryson was born to parents who were married. However, when he was eight years old, his parents split up. His grandmother became their guardian.

Mason was also raised in a rural town in Virginia. He is 35-years old and works as a store attendant. Additionally, he writes, acts and produces plays; he creates floral arrangements for weddings and considers himself very creative. Mason has a 12-year old son that many of his family members do not know about. He has never openly shared this information because he lives a private life. His son lives in the same state, and he sees him on occasion. Mason was never married; however, he was in a long-term relationship with a woman. Mason’s mother was his primary guardian growing up. They lived with other relatives, including aunts, uncles, and cousins throughout his childhood. Mason shared his sexual identity with his mother, and she accepted and loved him. Before his mother passed away, she encouraged him to share his sexual identity with his brother.

**Love story.** Bryson and Mason started dating in 2005 after being introduced by a mutual friend. They both had been living heterosexual lifestyles. Bryson and Mason engaged in a secret affair, as Bryson was still married when he met Mason. They struggled with living openly gay and continued to have relationships with women. Bryson reunited with his wife, and Mason continued to date a woman he had previously dated. The two couples double-dated, and the women eventually became friends. Unfortunately, when it was discovered that Mason and Bryson were together, it did not fare well. After a while, the situation resolved itself, and they are all considered friends.


**Family of origin considerations.** Being gay was never the expectation for either Mason or Bryson as they come from traditional and religious families. There appears to be a conditional acceptance by Mason’s brother in that he loves him but does not fully understand his life. Mason shared that his brother came to their commitment ceremony but did not understand why they had to get married. Although he did not fully understand or agree, he participated in the wedding. Bryson’s brother and immediate family accept his chosen lifestyle.

**Current family status.** Bryson and Mason are happily married and have created a beautiful home and life together. However, they are not completely “out” as gay men to everyone in their lives. There are select family members and friends who do not know that they are gay and married. Bryson and Mason are active in Bryson’s daughter’s life. Bryson and his ex-wife were able to forgive each other and co-parent their daughter. Mason and Bryson have strategically selected the people who are a part of this part of their lives. Bryson and Mason have a support network that works for them. According to them both, they are an anomaly as it is very rare to find two gay men in a committed love relationship for 10 years.

**Whitney Greene and Sabrina Davis**

Whitney and Sabrina both identify as African American and as lesbians. They have been together for 19 years and have been married for six years. Whitney and Sabrina dated for one year while commuting to see each other and nurture their relationship. Together, they have created a beautiful home. Sabrina is the more talkative of the two and easily shared her thoughts and feelings about her love for Whitney and their relationship. The two complement each other. There is a comfort about their relationship. Their love appears to be easy and
peaceful. Each woman has fully accepted her partner for who she is. They are able to laugh about their differences and tell stories of coming to understand and embrace those differences.

Whitney is 50 years old and is originally from South Carolina and moved to North Carolina for a job. Whitney works in manufacturing and has a bachelor’s degree. When the two met, Whitney was living in another city in North Carolina. Whitney was raised in a two-parent home and has a younger sister. She explains that her family is not expressive in showing love for each other. As long as they can see each other and know everything is fine, then that is enough. Whitney recalls having a very quiet conversation with her family about her sexual identity in her 20s.

Sabrina is 48 years old and is originally from North Carolina. Right before meeting Whitney, she relocated back to North Carolina from Boston where she had studied and earned her master’s degree. Sabrina is a scientist working for the federal government. She, too, is from a two-parent home and has two siblings. Sabrina’s mother passed away when Sabrina was a teenager. She recalls having a very close relationship with her mother and always being able to tell her anything.

**Love story.** Sabrina and Whitney found themselves online, in a chat room on AOL® (America Online) together. After connecting in this chat room, they decided to continue their conversation in a private conversation online. Whitney and Sabrina spent months getting to know each other by chatting online and talking on the phone before choosing to meet face to face. They shared that their conversations lasted for hours at a time. It was easy to share and talk with each other because they have a lot of shared experiences. Whitney and Sabrina’s
first date was five months later, and they chose to see the movie *Love Jones*. Whitney and Sabrina’s relationship was long distance for over a year. They believe that their shared experiences have really made their relationship “easy”. Sabrina and Whitney both grew up in a two-parent household with at least one sibling. They both had very similar desires for a relationship. Both Whitney and Sabrina love their families and fantasized about one day having a family very similar to what they grew up in.

**Family of origin considerations.** Sabrina and Whitney have a variety of shared experiences that they believe have attributed to the success of their relationship. A part of that shared experience includes being accepted by their families for who they are. Sabrina recalled advice from her mother when she was younger encouraging her to wait for the right one. At the time, Sabrina had not revealed her sexual identity yet, and the advice worked to her benefit. Sabrina’s older sister supported her without reservation when she chose to reveal her sexual identity. Her sister was not surprised at the news. The position from Whitney’s family was to be who you are and without wavering. If that is who she was, then that was fine.

Sabrina and Whitney shared that when they decided to live together and commit to each other, no one had a problem with it. However, as soon as marriage became legal in Washington DC and they decided to get married, some extended family members and friends did not approve and chose to not be a part of that experience with them.

**Current family status.** Whitney and Sabrina have established roots in urban North Carolina in a quiet community that they have called home for almost ten years. They have close relationships with each of their families. Whitney and Sabrina have opened up their
home to family members in need, including Whitney’s mom when she became ill. Sabrina and Whitney find joy in traveling and spending time together. They do not have a lot of peers who identify as lesbian and are in a committed love relationship. Whitney and Sabrina do not have children. They are surrounded by a host of family members and other people’s children, and that is enough for them.

This section contained descriptions of the six couple participants in this study on Black love. The couples’ diversity was shared through their personal accounts of their lived experiences representing the varied ways that African Americans live and love in America. Findings are presented in the section that follows.

Findings

This section will provide the findings from the research study. Interviews conducted provide data on the phenomenon of Black love. Answers to the prescribed list of interview questions allowed clusters and themes to emerge. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What is Black love?
2. What is unique about Black love?
3. What makes Black romantic love endure?

The interview questions were designed to help participants process their lived experience with Black love and their current love relationship. Each interview started with the researcher asking the couples to share their love story. This allowed each partner to think about love in a way that may not happen daily. The intention was that the couples would not only share a story about how they met, but that it would help provide understanding for how
they fell in love, what it felt like, and what that transition meant for them. Exploring their love experience would set the stage for asking more specific questions about their experience with Black love.

To take a massive amount of data and make sense of it all, it was necessary to formulate themes from the notes taken and the transcribed interviews. Mapping allowed the researcher to make interpersonal connections and identify connections and patterns (Smith et al, 2009). These patterns became clusters of information related to a larger group of information. From the clusters, more specific themes emerged that would connect the data back to answering the research questions and understanding the phenomenon of Black love.

Figure 1 below provides a visual for the connection between the research question, cluster, and themes. The clusters and themes that emerged from the data support each couple’s position on Black love. The clusters were “love,” “Black love” and “personal love.” The themes that support the love cluster include “children and family,” “uniqueness,” “doing the work,” “unconditional,” and “evolving.” The cluster of love and its theme provides an understanding of what love means conceptually for these couples. Additionally, the themes allow for dissection of the love that is shared between the partners. The Black love cluster included the themes of “children and family,” “cultural awareness,” “love is love is love,” “a beautiful struggle,” “movies and television,” and “spirituality/religion.” The Black love theme and its clusters help to understand what Black love is for the couples in this study. “Boldness,” “spirituality and religion,” and “friendship” emerged as themes for the personal love cluster. Personal love involves focusing on the love that is shared between the couple that helps their love and relationship endure.
Figure 1: Findings by Research Question

Cluster 1: Love

To understand the concept of Black love, it was important to begin by asking the couples about love. They were asked to define love for them as it aligns with their current love relationship. Each couple was asked to conceptually think about the meaning of love. There were comments from a few such as, “Wow, you don’t really talk about what love really means.” The themes that emerged from the discussion on love were: (a) children and family, (b) unique, (c) commitment, (d) unconditional and (e) evolving. Love, for these couples, varied with some overall common themes. Love is comprehensive for the couples represented in this study. The meaning of love is complex and simple. For the couples with
children, it was somewhat difficult to speak about love without including their children when explaining their understanding and execution of love. Love also means for these couples being in a position to protect one’s partner and children. Meeting the needs of one’s partner was also very important. Those needs may be financial; however, it was also very clear that meeting the emotional needs of one’s partner, by demonstrating attributes such as caring, kindness, and respect, were necessary and important.

Additionally, there were some sentiments that emerged significantly specific to certain couples. Mason, an African American male, has been in a gay marriage for 10 years and spoke about the indescribable nature of love, boldly declaring that if you “can define love, then it’s not really love.” Sometimes love is indescribable. Sometimes love is so something that has ever been experienced or expected and is so awesome that the words are not there to fully describe it. The reality of one’s great relationship may take the words away. The fact that your dream is now your reality, especially for gay and lesbian couples, is vast. Mason expressed that love is, “…indescribable…just knowing what I would do for him and there’s nothing in this world I would not do.”

Discussion with the couples involved understanding their meaning of love. Below are the themes that emerged. The themes associated with the “love” cluster include: children and family, unique, commitment, unconditional and evolving.

**Theme 1: Children and family.** Children and family include the couple’s biological children and family who are a part of their intimate community of love and support. It was evident that family was very much a part of their definition when talking about love. Jesse, a Black, 44 year old, heterosexual male, shared that “love is loving your partner and your
children more than you love yourself, being selfless and putting their needs above your own.”

Love for many of the couples in this study includes recognizing that what you have is much bigger than the two people sharing this moment in time. Being an example to friends and family is a part of the love they share. As expressed by the couples in this study, love is not something that can be contained to two individuals. By working together, Lauren and Jordan, an African American couple married for 10 years, share their love with the world as demonstrated below by Lauren

…we're supposed to be connected, like, we're supposed to work together. We've realized that, we keep saying that we even really want to actually work back together, because we thought we were really strong at Portsmouth together, when we were teaching. We were like; we're supposed to be together when we work, because we can do some powerful, dynamic things when we work in the same space. All marriages can't work like that. We work really well. When he went downtown, we did a program…we planned this PD for teachers together. And so that kind of like started, like, us doing this kind of anti-racism work together, so this is kind of how we're coming back. But we find our way back, back to each other.

Couples with children exalted their children as an extension of the love they have for each other. Lauren postulated that their children,

add to our relationship, like, they are an extension of our love. They are visible, walking around representations of our love…we talk about this is the best thing we’ve ever done, like when we created, like, oh, this is the best thing that we’ve ever partnered on, these two right here.
For the men in the study, being able to protect and provide for their families was very important. Jesse, who has been married for 23 years to his high school sweetheart, suggested that being raised by a single mother and seeing her work every day, providing for the family, was a true expression of love. He stated, “Going to work every day, you’re demonstrating your love for your family. Coming from a single parent home he learned that “caring about and loving your children…learning how to love your children, how to be respectful with your children even though it was a single parent home.”

For some of the couples with children, being an example to their children on what love means and how to demonstrate your love is essential. The participants also indicated that it was their intent to leave a legacy of love for their children. It is very important that their children are taught and shown love in a way that prepares them for what they may face later in life. Jordan declared that not only are they parenting their current son and daughter, but the way they parent now will impact how their children will parent. Jordan stated, “We're not just raising, you know, kids, we're raising future parents.” And Lauren echoed by responding, “Yes. We're raising, future husbands and future wives, so you have to be thoughtful.”
Table 3

Cluster 1: Love

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children and Family</td>
<td>Children and family are an important part of love. Loving their children and families includes protecting and providing for them. Being kind, respectful and caring are important as a parent and partner.</td>
<td>“…they (kids) also add to our relationship, like, they are an extension of our love. They are visible, walking around representations of our love. Like, we talk about, this is the best thing we've ever done, like, when we created, like, oh, this is the best thing that we've ever partnered on, ever partnered on, these two right here.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique</td>
<td>Proud of the love relationship that has developed. They believe there is no other relationship quite like their own.</td>
<td>“I don't think, if I had to, if I had to put money on it, I don't think, I don't think my parents have what we have. I also think that there’s probably a lot of other couples who don't have what we have.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing the work</td>
<td>Doing whatever needs to be done to ensure the relationship endures. Being committed, faithful, honest and spending quality time together.</td>
<td>“I think you have to have a great level of trust. Commitment, and loyalty.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unconditional</td>
<td>Loving your partner more than you love yourself. No matter what happens or what their partner does, the commitment to loving each other through those situations. Relationships contain a spiritual element that helps in loving unconditionally.</td>
<td>“…I define love as caring for with the over-the-top care for every aspect of my family, my wife, children, in providing for them as well as being there, demonstrating for them unconditional love and that no matter what, we're always here for each other, we're going to go above and beyond, but it is, love is a action word.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolving</td>
<td>Relationships are ever changing. As each partner evolves and matures so does the relationship.</td>
<td>“…I think that love is always evolving. I mean, if it's a true love relationship, it evolves. It does not stay the same. If it stays the same, then I think you have to look at, take, you have to take inventory of what you really do have.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Justin and Dana, the only interracial couple in the study, also believe that love and their love, specifically, is bigger than them. The love they share is important and serves as an example to their children. It is important for them that their children know how to define love and what to look for when seeking an intimate love relationship. Dana explains,

If we don't love each other, and if we don't love each other in front of the two children that we have brought into this world, they're not going to learn how to love other people if you don't tell someone you love them.

According to Barbara, “Love to me also includes family.” Barbara and William have been living together for 17 years and are now discussing marriage. One reason they are now exploring marriage is because of Barbara’s granddaughter. Barbara wants to “pull that respect in” and be an example to her granddaughter. During Barbara and William’s interview, their family and family dynamics surfaced with almost every question. It appears their love is defined by the close relationship they each have with their respected families. William and Barbara spend a fair amount of time engaging with family socially and taking care of family members who are in need.

Love for Justin means protecting his wife and his children. He stated, “Protection is my number one…you can mess with me, you can walk all over me, but you mess with her or them two down there (i.e., his children), you got trouble…” Dana interjected into the story that when they travel, “I’m not allowed to sleep on the side of the bed in a hotel room closest to the door because if they come in they have to get him first.”
Theme 2: Uniqueness. Uniqueness in the context of love for the couples in this sample means that there are no other couples that can compare to the love they share and the quality of their relationship. The couples in this study believe that there are no other couples like them. They believe they have something special. Specifically, Jordan referenced growing up in a two-parent home and seeing his parents struggle to make their marriage work. Ultimately, he saw them succeed, and still, he wanted more for his love relationship. The 10 years that Jordan shares with Lauren is different than what his parents have after 35 years of marriage.

Dana, a White, heterosexual female, shared that she remembers her parents going to therapy when she was a teenager and witnessing them do the work to keep their love and relationship alive. Even today, Dana’s parents are together; however, she does not believe their love can compare to what she has with Justin. She believes the relationship and love she has with Justin is greater than what she has ever witnessed in her parents or any other couple. Dana believes what she and Justin have together caused people’s heads to turn. Dana explains that where they are from, interracial couples are usually not married, and because she and Justin are “an interracial couple in this area, who got married and then had their babies,” it makes them standout and represent a different way of loving. Dana believes the way she and Justin love each other has caused her entire family to embrace their relationship and accept Justin as a part of their family. Additionally, Dana shared, “I don't think, if I had to put money on it, I don't think my parents have what we have. I also think that there's probably a lot of other couples who don't have what we have.”
Kelly, who has been married for 23 years, specifically noted that the relationship she shares with Jesse is unique and is

…like none other. I mean, it’s not like my mom and dad’s relationship, it’s not like my grandfather and my grandmother’s relationship. I mean, it’s not like anything that I’ve ever witnessed before because Jesse and I, we are, we’re so compatible, and then we’re so opposite.

When discussing their friends, Sabrina and Whitney, a lesbian couple who have been together for 19 years, described not having a lot of friends who identify as lesbian and who are in committed long-term relationships,

What I think is also interesting about us is that the closeness that we have in our relationship, we wonder also what has happened to some of our other lesbian friends because it seems like it has always been so difficult for them to maintain- We're the odd people out. We're still together. We used to have, but everybody moved. That was the one thing we're probably the only ones that stayed here. The rest of them moved. Our lot is probably 80/20 straight. We don't have a big gay community.

Theme 3: Doing the work. The couples, in this study, were asked what strategies they use to stay connected and in love. Being committed to the relationship and to your partner is necessary, and it requires doing the work to make the relationship endure.

William and Barbara, as the only non-married couple in the study, work to stay connected and ensure their love endures by spending quality time together. They like to attend parties and gatherings with their family and friends. One story told by Barbara was that William had been invited to an all-male event, but he was adamant about including
Barbara because he enjoys her company and likes being with her as much as possible. He exclaimed, “Anything I got a part of, she has a part in it. It’s good.” Communication was also very important for William and Barbara. They shared that when there is a disagreement, it is very important that they are able to talk through things calmly.

Whitney and Sabrina also emphasized the importance of not taking their partner for granted and doing the things that keep the relationship thriving. Whitney shared that “after 19 years, we still do date night. We still don't take holidays and birthdays for granted. You make sure that you do the little things that you're supposed to do and not getting on anybody's nerves.” Sabrina shared,

Romantic dinners, all of those things, are absolutely important because you want to feel that connection. I think that is a lot of it, and also having a healthy sex life is also very important. Being able to talk to your partner about how you feel is also important. I think that is one of the things that I love about Whitney. I don't feel like I have to not share anything with her. I feel comfortable with sharing how I feel. If I don't like something, I don't mind telling her. I think that's what you have to do in order to actually be able to sustain a healthy sexual relationship. I just think that is very important.

Bryson and Mason, a married gay couple, shared that they are very purposeful about doing things together. There have been very rare occasions when they have spent the night apart from each other. Bryson cooks dinner and will wait for Mason to come home so they can share their meals together. He waits regardless of how long it takes Mason to arrive. They, too, enjoy their time together. They engage in extra-curricular activities together such
as acting in plays that Mason writes and produces. This is outside Bryson’s character, but he enjoys participating because it is something Mason enjoys, and it allows them to spend more time together.

Most couples have a specific date night, or they try to commit to a date night and spend quality time together. Dana expressed that her mother is as “committed to our date night” as are Dana and Justin. Once a month, her mom takes the boys for a sleepover, giving the couple an opportunity to have a full night out. “You know, my mom and dad, especially my mom, she's into the fact that we have date night…unless she's got something that she's got to do, she'll keep the kids and they do it overnight.”

Jesse and Kelly reflected how quality time together has evolved for them because it was scarce when their children were younger and living away from extended family. As their children have gotten older, they not only commit to spending their time together as a couple and take weekend trips alone, they also spend time together grocery shopping and traveling to various ballgames for their boys or other students. They have also committed to family vacations, sometimes several times a year. Jesse shared, “A part of showing that caring and kindness, that respect for what we do every day deserves an opportunity for us to experience something, um, when it comes to relaxation, vacation, so on.” After 23 years of marriage, Jesse and Kelly still emphasize the importance of communicating effectively with each other and being expressive of their love for each other. Kelly is intentional about staying connected with Jesse,

I tell my husband every day that I love him. I know that when he hears me say, “I love you” that he knows that I love him because I demonstrate it in my actions…I
will try to touch him in some form or fashion every day because I feel like that's part of the way we stay connected is through touch and through hearing "I love you," that's the way I like to stay connected.

Lauren and Jordan, a couple that started off as best friends and then evolved into marriage, are searching for a working system that will allow date nights to be more consistent for them. It has been difficult because their current developmental stage in life includes a lot of transition, and with two children under five years old, there are extensive childcare responsibilities. However, they spoke of other ways of staying connected and in love, which includes praying together and engaging in an online study of the Bible together. They try to engage in the Love Dare challenge as often as possible. Love Dare is an attempt for partners to out love each other by engaging in activities that demonstrate intentional love. This was a strategy shared with them in pre-marital counseling. Out-loving the other is basically engaging in activities or finding small ways to show your partner that you love them and are thinking of them. According to Lauren,

One of the things that helps us to remain in love, will remind us of our love, is on our anniversary, watching our wedding DVD, which also includes our proposal, so it's like this recommitment to remember when, and reminding ourselves, how do we remain in love? And always going back to trying to out love each other every day, like bringing something we haven't done in a while, like, one of us always brings it back, though. We've done the love dare.

**Theme 4: Evolving.** The couples in this study spoke directly of love being a process and an ever-changing phenomenon between two people. Mason and Bryson shared a
traumatic situation between the two of them causing both of them to learn a valuable lesson about love and their love for each other. Communication was a challenge for the two of them, causing them to be more reactive without thinking things through and expressing their thoughts and feelings to their partner. Bryson, shared that, “it taught us a big lesson on definitely not to try to hurt each other and that it taught us to, we have to walk away, calm down and talk about it later.” Reflecting back on the situation, they understand how they have grown and are now better able to communicate their needs to each other.

Kelly expressed that the love she and Jesse have now has definitely evolved from what they had at 20 years old:

I mean I think that love is always evolving. I mean if it's a true love relationship, it evolves. It does not stay the same. If it stays the same, then I think you have to take inventory of what you really do have.

Sabrina spoke about the evolution of their love after 19 years:

It's just my love for her. I think that's the one thing because it makes everything else possible. Just in a nutshell. When we were falling in love with each other, we were able to embrace our differences, our likes, and make it something that was just truly us. I think that is what has really kept us together. We evolve. We're changing all the time, but that love between us keeps us together and keeps us grounded. I think that is the most important thing. There is not a day that goes by that I'm not grateful for her.

Specifically about their evolving and learning each other, Sabrina responded:

It has to be because we change by our life experiences. The fact that we were committed to one another and we were committed to working through whatever
together, it was just natural for us to build on it. I think that's the thing. You have to build on it in your relationship. It is so funny because of the fact that I think about some of things, just little silly things like she loves raw onions. I can't stand raw onions. She doesn't eat raw onions around me. The person that she is. That love is just what keeps us together.

Lauren and Jordan’s love has grown from friendship to learning to love each other as husband and wife. Friendship love is different than what is needed to sustain a marriage. According to Lauren,

… I think, like, love is diverse, right? So there's like, this romantic love, there's this friendship love, there's this parent love, there's a wife love, there's a wife who takes care of the home love, and a wife who romantically loves, right? Um, and I think you kind of have to have all of those different parts of love. Like, you just can't have one, or you can't just have two. Love has to be diverse in your home, um, and I think at different parts in our marriage, different sectors of love is higher, and so as long as there's some type of love present, well, it might not be romantic love, which is harder, I see you loving the kids. I see you taking care of; you cleaned all the dishes out the sink, right? Like, you have to have all of those love, acts of kindness as a part of love has to be visible in your home, at some point, because all of those other kind of loves are not going to happen, always.

**Theme 5: Unconditional.** Love is also unconditional, as defined by the couples in this research study. By definition, unconditional means there are no conditions or limits. When interviewing the couples, it was evident that unconditional was the adjective best used
by them to describe their love. When asked what love means to him, Justin shared that love was caring for each other, looking out for the person you love, and making sure they are happy. Dana explained love as being with someone who protects her and someone she can talk to about anything. Justin has been her shoulder to cry on; when she is happy and jumping up and down, he too is happy and jumping up and down. Quoting Dana:

He would, you know, always somebody there for me to talk to, to protect me. If I'm crying, he's the shoulder. If I'm jumping up and down, he's, you know, he's jumping up and down too. It's doing everything together.

Dana knows that no matter what she decides to do, Justin always supports her. Love for her is “doing everything together.” Dana describes Justin, “He is my best friend.” Jesse and Kelly absolutely believe that love is unconditional. They agree that love for them is about “loving your partner more than yourself.” Kelly shared that she can “love him the way that he deserves to be loved, and I do love him more than I love myself.” Jesse defines love as,


caring for with the over-the-top care for every aspect of my family, my wife, children, in providing…demonstrating for them unconditional love and that no matter what, we're always here for each other, we're going to go above and beyond but it is, love is a action word.

Bryson and Mason shared a story of literally putting one’s life on the line for their partner, and they represent an example of unconditional love that has no limits. Mason spoke directly of putting his life on the line for Bryson, “There’s nothing in this world that I would not do. We’ve been in situations where I stood in front of a gun to block the bullet to make
sure he wouldn’t get shot.” Barbara points out that she believes there is nothing she cannot
depend on William to do for her, “not worrying about anything, knowing he’s going to be in
my corner no matter what.”

Therefore, love is expansive and has varied meanings for all the couples. However,
“children and family,” “unique,” “doing the work,” “unconditional,” and “evolving”, were
the common themes that emerged from the data about love.

Cluster 2: Black Love

The second research question purposed to define Black love asked about the
uniqueness of Black love. This question was designed to determine if there was anything
different between love and Black love. Understanding whether or not there was a difference
between love and Black love would provide an opportunity to understand from the
participants’ points of view how they process and apply the concept to their lives and
specifically to their love relationship. The themes that emerged in defining Black love, the
second cluster, included: love is love is love, cultural awareness, children and family, a
beautiful struggle, movies and television, and spirituality and religion. Cluster two and its
theme are charted below.

Theme 1: Love is love is love. When initially asked if there was a difference between
love and Black love each couple automatically answered that there was no difference.
However, for the majority of the couples, it did not take very long to decide that there is such
a thing for them as Black love. Each couple in this study that believed Black love was real
shared a story about race or discrimination. Justin, who is married to a White American
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love is Love is love</td>
<td>There is no difference between love and Black romantic love. Love is a human component that is believed to be the same for all people.</td>
<td>“I don't think there's a difference. I think love is love. I don't really think it's to be defined as white love, black love. I don't think there's a difference.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Awareness</td>
<td>Cultural awareness involves understanding and appreciating Black culture.</td>
<td>“But I think that black love is being culturally aware of who you are, what you are and every issue that goes along with being a black female or a black male in today’s society.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family and Children</td>
<td>Children and extended family are a part of the culture that is defined by a shared history. Responsibility as parents to teaching children about their history.</td>
<td>“Probably a shared history and a shared experience. Two people ... When you say &quot;black love&quot;, it is of culture. It's of family. It's of experience that you share together.” (Whitney) “I've always wanted to have the relationship that my mom and dad had, and that they created a life together. They really built a family around their relationship, and I've always wanted to definitely have that.” (Sabrina)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Beautiful Struggle</td>
<td>The love shared by African American men and women is a wonderful, beautiful experience. External conflicts (i.e., discrimination and racial injustices), however, cause, a struggle.</td>
<td>“I'm black and we're already dealing with the black on black balance, we're doing it with the cops killing blacks, and I'm gay. And now people walk into clubs just shooting up gay clubs. So, yeah, man, it's a struggle for me to walk in the world today as a black gay man.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movies and Television Shows</td>
<td>There are specific Black movies and television shows that have long represented love and the positive side of African American life.</td>
<td>“I think I felt like a friendship could work as the foundation for a relationship, based off of Martin and Gina, but also Love and Basketball. You know, like, that was a movie where you saw the couple grow up together and become more, and, and that was [my wife’s] favorite movie too. But, you know, it made sense, and I think that influenced, uh, the type of relationship I chose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality/Religion</td>
<td>Spirituality and religion are important components of Black love and for many African Americans are at the root of their identity. Being in tune with a higher power</td>
<td>“Black love is religion, for us, in this house, black love is religion.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
woman, stated, “Whether it's black, white, interracial, whatever it is, I just think, I hear love first.”

Jesse believes that there is no difference in love when approached from a spiritual and Christian perspective; he believes, “honestly, initially, I guess, I'd say, there's no difference if you're looking at it in the spiritual sense of, you know, we all strive to have Christ-like love.” Additionally, Jesse shared, “I think that's what Black love is because a lot of love is the same regardless when you talk unconditional love, loving your s-, husband, your, I mean, I don't think nobody that's African-American can love their wife any more than somebody that's Caucasian.”

**Theme 2: Cultural awareness.** Black love is “being culturally aware of who you are, what you are, and every issue that goes along with being a black female or a black male... in today's society” as stated firmly by Kelly. For many Black Americans, issues of race are a daily occurrence as explained by several couples represented in this study. The love, support and understanding of one’s partner are necessary for the sample represented in this study. According to Mason who is married to another African American gay man, “Black love matters. So Blacks have to go through a little bit more to love…Black gay love…definitely hard to love somebody because of the pressures outside of my love.”

Jesse, a Black man married to a Black woman, noted that Black love is being aware of his family’s racial identity and being prepared to love them if something occurs because of their Blackness. He believes, “Black love is understanding and recognizing that you have to love your kids, you have to love your wife so much that you prepare them for what they may face in this world because they are Black.” Additionally, he stated:
There are going to be some things that you’re going to have to address with your children, or even your spouse solely because of the color of your skin, and I’ve had this conversation with colleagues who are White and about how fair is it that I have to have a conversation with my children about how they’re supposed to act when they’re pulled over by the police or that somebody makes reference to them as a n****r or make a judgment of their character and they don’t even know them.

Cultural awareness is honoring the ancestors who were punished for loving. For these couples, that means making sure they do everything in their power to make their love last. According to Lauren and Jordan, Black love is “learning our history and learning it together.” That may also include visits to museums and watching documentaries about Black people. Being culturally aware includes “sitting with that (info from documentaries) and thinking about what we are going to teach our kids.” Being culturally aware is thinking about what you will pass on to the next generation “purposefully about our people, about ourselves, about our struggle, about what we value.” Lauren believes that Black love is “…connecting our struggle, its connecting our culture and loving it up on each other…like our skin color and being appreciative of them.” This means affirming your partner in a racialized way such as accepting and being supportive of the natural hair adorned by several of the female participants in the study. Black love is “the best” as described by the oldest participant in the study, an African American man who grew up in the 50s and has seen an evolution of a racialized America. He went on to share, “I don’t discriminate, but I chose to love Black…because it’s who I am.”
Cultural awareness also includes the African American gay and lesbian community. You cannot talk about Black love and the realities and the struggles and prejudices that sometimes come with it without talking about Black gay love. When dissecting the commitment to love someone of the same sex it’s “much harder, there’s more obstacles, it’s harder, and you have to love differently” according to Bryson. Being a Black gay man is being aware and accepting that you have several identities that are not fully accepted in America, are not fully accepted in some communities within Black America, and for some, are not fully accepted in their own families. When asked what comes to mind when they hear the words Black love, Whitney shared that it is “probably a shared history and a shared experience. Two people ... When you say "Black love", it is of culture. It's of family. It's of experience that you share together.” Jordan, a heterosexual Black male, as advocate for all things Black, shared that awareness extends to the struggle of others who love differently than you:

Yeah, I was just thinking about what you were saying about um, different groups of people and not being able to love, how that still exists today as far as, you know, certain people aren't allowed to love, or have to face certain ridicule from their families, communities, churches, um, because of who they choose to love. And, and there are a lot of, um, and a lot of times, not always, but very often that is still connected to skin color, especially with interracial couples and gay couples.

**Theme 3: Children and family.** According to the couples in this research study, Black love cannot be addressed without talking about family and a larger community. Black love includes family and friends who are rooting for your marriage or committed love
relationship to work. Lauren communicated that Black love envelops the larger community of friends that she and Jordan have in common and are essential to their love relationship:

And, it's a history, it's being proud of our people, it's going home to show people, like, we're still together, and being, you know, having our Black friends look up to us, and knowing that our marriage, other people are pulling for us, pulling for us to be successful. And I'm pretty sure there's some people who aren't pulling for us. I don't know them, but what I do know, but what I do know is that a lot of people believe in us, and pray for us, and want us to be successful.

Black love also includes those family members that are still your family even when they don’t accept who you are, your lifestyle or whom you love. Mason shared that he “turned my back on family, I turned my back on my friends, I turned my back on everybody to walk and hold your hand because you’re who I love.”

Black love is the children with whom you are charged to prepare to understand and embrace their identity as a Black person living in America, a society that does not always embrace and celebrate their Blackness. Lauren speaks to breaking the generational cycle of harm:

By the way some people didn’t know how to love their kids. So telling kids, telling our kids every day that we love them, giving our kids hugs every day, making sure, that some of the things we may or may not have received, like, we’re trying to break that cycle, and so its owning, being conscious of all that stuff.

According to Barbara and William, family is the epitome of Black love, and sometimes it is very hard to separate family from your love relationship. Sabrina and
Whitney do not have children, but they believe in family. Sabrina shared that when she thinks of Black love, it takes her back to the life her mother and father created for her and her siblings:

Well, I've always wanted to have the relationship that my mom and dad had, and that they created a life together. They really built a family around their relationship, and I've always wanted to definitely have that. It seemed like I was able to find that with Whitney. It was just such a nice opportunity to do this. It was so funny that her family is very similar to mine in reference to the number of siblings. I have two, but she has one as far as that layout. I think that it's all about family. It's all about being able to share those common experiences like Whitney was saying. It is also ... For me, finding a black woman that I really enjoy being with and that I was attracted to was just fantastic because I've had other relationships. It was never easy.

**Theme 4: A beautiful struggle.** A beautiful struggle includes the beautiful love shared by Black Americans coupled with the injustices and racism that is faced because of their racial identity. Black love is appreciation for all things Black to include skin color and tones, culture, and the ability to defy stereotypes. Each couple participating in this research study and who believed there was a difference between love and black love spoke of the external struggle common for African Americans. According to Jordan, “I'm just thinking, black love is...appreciation for, your skin color, your culture in the midst of the larger culture that doesn't appreciate it as much.”
The struggle was never about their relationship but more about what it means to be Black in America. When walking outside their doors and having to deal with the reality that Black Americans are not always celebrated. According to Jordan:

But as opposed to struggle, I'll say challenge. It's so much beauty involved, it's a lot of positives, but, it's also a lot of challenges…One of the things we learned early in our marriage is, we, we really started to understand why a lot of couples do get divorced. I mean, because we looked at each other, and we was like, you know what? I bet this was the point right here.

There is very little representation of Black love on mainstream television or in pop culture. What one does see is a negative portrayal of Black men and women. Black people being killed are portrayed continuously in the mainstream news cycle. The weight of that is heavy. For the participants of this study, the weight is extremely heavy as they strongly identify with those individuals, and they experience racism or micro aggressions on a daily basis. So, the overall theme is that Black love is a “beautiful struggle” which is taken from the Hip-Hop artist Talib Kweli as mentioned by Lauren and Jordan in their interview. A beautiful struggle encompasses all that is wonderful about Black people and Black love such as “music, poetry, art and rhythm” and includes being a safe space for all things Black. Black love is “revolutionary” according to Lauren, “And black love is music and poetry and rhythm, because Jordan is really big on music, hip hop, particularly like writing poetry. He proposed with a poem.”

Mason shared about the struggle that is associated not only with Black love, but also Black gay love:
It's a different type of love. So I have to love you even more because if I decide to hold your hand and walk in the mall, I definitely have to really put my love out. I really have to say what, what our rule was in our relationship. I have to say, hey, it's me and you against the world.

Mason and Bryson spoke about being Black, gay, men in America. Living with two marginalized identities makes their Black love a struggle. Jesse and Kelly shared stories about their two older Black male children’s experiences with racism and how those experiences changed them. Racism has changed how they parent their children and how their children now interact, react, and engage with the world. Growing up in the 1950s, William and Barbara experienced first-hand what it meant to be Black in America before equal rights were enforced.

Whitney and Sabrina have a different experience because not only are they Black women in America, but they are also gay women. Whitney shares their experience in the context of what was required to feel secure in their relationship before they were married, I'd say it is a challenge. Before we could get married, you had to find a lawyer. You had to make sure that you secure your assets. You have to make sure that in times to go to the hospital, I could actually get in the room, and not be put out.

Even though their marriage is legally recognized in all 50 states, they still feel the need to take added precautions. Sabrina shared,

Just the thought of Whitney being sick, and then somebody in her family saying, "You can't be there." I'm like, "No, that's not going to happen." In those circumstances, you really do have to prepare differently. You have to think differently.
about everything. Even though we are married and it's legal in the state, when we travel, we still carry copies of our marriage license. Also, power of attorney and health directive because we don't want to have anybody say, "You can't make decisions if something happens." Or that I can't see her or she can't see me.

**Theme 5: Movies and television shows.** Black movies and television shows presented the positive perspective of Black Americans in love relationships and seeing others with whom they could identify from a cultural perspective. Almost every couple in this study made reference to a movie or television show that included Black love relationships. Specifically, Black love for them was represented in movies and TV shows from the 1990s and early 2000s such as *Poetic Justice, Love Jones, The Cosby Show, Martin,* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air.* Jordan’s perspective on Black love when referencing movies and television shows also included the aforementioned. He spoke about learning from these various shows and movies and said that those shows “encouraged me that black love is possible, it was helpful to grow up and see these examples of these couples that were living, loving and thriving together, and I think that influenced me to believe in black love.” He added in reference to *The Cosby Show,* “The influence that *The Cosby Show* had on me in believing in you know, black man, black woman, a doctor, a lawyer, raising these kids and you this is possible.” Jordan describes seeing Black couples who were happy together and having fun:

I think I felt like a friendship could work as the foundation for a relationship, based off of Martin and Gina, but also Love and Basketball. You know, like, that was a movie where you saw the couple grown up together and become more, and, and that
was [my wife’s] favorite movie too. But, you know, it made sense, and I think that influenced, uh, the type of relationship I chose.

Even Justin who struggled with whether or not there is a difference between love and Black love and settled on there being no difference referenced *Poetic Justice* and “movies like that” when asked what he thought of when he heard the words *Black love*.

Black love was a cluster that emerged from the data. The themes related to Black love were presented in this section. The next section will provide the findings related to the personal love cluster that emerged from the data.

**Cluster 3: Personal Love**

Personal love emerged as a cluster that lends itself to explaining the phenomenon of Black love. When asked to describe their love relationship as it currently exists, the couples described their relationships as bold, sacred, ever evolving, and thoughtful. Table 5 outlines the personal love cluster and its themes.

**Theme 1: Boldness.** Boldness is the ability to love your partner with courage and confidence. Boldness was a theme that was relevant for traditional couples whose relationships are more readily accepted because that is the norm, as well as the gay and lesbian couples represented in this study. After 23 years of marriage, Jesse and Kelly described their relationship as “…bold...” Kelly explained what she meant by boldness:

> When I say bold, I mean we don't care what anybody else sees when they look at Jesse and Kelly, because we are who we are, and we love the way that we love, and there are no rules to the way we love each other. You know? What you see is what you get with us. And, if you like it, you like it, and if you don't, you don't.
Jesse expounded on the concept of boldness and living in a new place and not having a generational connection to where they live, which is rural and predominately a White community:

And I would say too that with our children, I think the fact that we've been placed where we're not necessarily a part...that there's a boldness of, what she just said, this is who we are. We take pride in, in being the Coleman's, we want our children to be proud of who we are, but also humble to know that you're in a place to help others but we don't have to take anything from anybody.

However, for Mason and Bryson being Black, gay men in America requires a certain kind of boldness “especially when you walk out your door everyday and you chose to let the world in on your whole identity.”

Couples expressed that their relationships were special and different from what they witnessed growing up. They felt that there was no other relationship that compared to what they have, specifically when reflecting on their parent’s relationships. Dana, a White woman who loved a Black man, exercised boldness the moment she made the decision to walk away from everything because she believed “he was going to feel all those things that, that my family had been fulfilling.” She was ready and “willing to walk away from everything I had ever known.”

**Theme 2: Spirituality and religion.** For the couples in this research study, love was expressed as something that was sacred. Love must be nurtured between partners. Love is intimate and unique to how these couples identify their relationship. Couples expressed
Table 5

**Cluster 3: Personal Love**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boldness</td>
<td>Ability to be confident and courageous in their love for each other.</td>
<td>“It is bold, it is forgiving, it is sacred. I think it is definitely God ordained. When I say bold, I mean we don't care what anybody else sees when they look at Jesse and Kelly, because we are who we are, and we love the way that we love, and there are no rules to the way we love each other. You know? What you see is what you get with us. And, if you like it, you like it, and if you don't you don't.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality and Religion</td>
<td>A connection between the partners that supersedes human understanding. There is a common vision and commitment to a higher power.</td>
<td>“We pray together. So I started reading the New Testament, and trying to be rededicated, to focus on, what was Jesus doing, and so then we kind of talked about, well, we don't have time to talk, but what if we start a Google document? So we have this Google Doc.... And so we'd both read the same chapter, type a reflection, read each other's respond to it, and so we have this ongoing document. That's how we can communicate on the spiritual level, because we don't necessarily have the time to always talk...we're doing that to make sure we keep God first, reflecting on His word, how we keep Him a part of our marriage. I really feel like that helps us to grow and love each other.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>A mutual attachment between two people who support each other and share experiences.</td>
<td>“Yeah, like, that's the whole foundation, and I mean, it's the friendship. We've talked about other challenges we face but, I mean, what it comes back down to is that we respect each other, we love each other, and we can always find a way to come back to liking each other, when we might not be feeling it at the time, we can get back there.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the importance of their faith in making their relationships thrive. Kelly indicated that it is love that helps you to forgive your partner and love them through the faults and transgressions that may occur. Lauren and Jordan noted for them that religion is important in keeping their love fruitful and keeping them connected. William shared that he was recently baptized and that was very important for him and Barbara. Jordan shared:

She talked about things we do to connect spiritually. I think, to remain in love, I think um, in thinking about the love dare, that book in particular, some of the things that it guides you to do, like for example, one love dare it to make a list of all the things that you love about your spouse, make a list of all the things that frustrate you about your spouse or whatever, but in making that list of all the things you love about your spouse, it really, if you're in a space where you've been in conflict, or there's been a lot going on, you're frustrated, but just having to sit and consciously think about, these are the things I love.

**Theme 3: Friendship.** The last theme that emerged for the personal love cluster was friendship. These couples have been together for an extended period of time, and friendship has become a very necessary part of the relationship. For some couples, the intimate love relationship evolved after they had established their friendship. These couples have found everything they need in a friend in their partner. They are able to share every aspect of their lives together. Kelly shared:

I demonstrate it [her love] by the way I act as his wife and my role as his wife. I demonstrate my love for him by, um, being that emotional support for him, by being that friend, you know, that he needs, by being the mother that he wants for his
children.

Dana said of Justin, “He is my best friend.” For Jordan and Lauren, being friends is how they arrived at a marriage. According to Justin, the one thing he needs to make sure his love endures is friendship, and Lauren wholeheartedly agreed:

Yeah, like, that's the whole foundation, and I mean, it's the friendship. We've talked about other challenges we face but, I mean, what it comes back down to is that we respect each other, we love each other, and we can always find a way to come back to liking each other, when we might not be feeling it at the time, we can get back there.

According to Sabrina, her relationship with Whitney exemplifies love and friendship:

There is no other person that I would want to be with. There is nobody I would want to wake up next to every day, to spend time with, to share live experiences with. Someone that I trust implicitly and having all of that wrapped up in one relationship is just fantastic. It just makes life so much easier. All of the above. The chemistry is there. All of the things that you hope to have in a relationship, we definitely had it.

The themes associated with personal love by the couples represented in this study were described in this section. The next chapter will include the discussion linking the research and the findings together to explain the phenomenon of Black love.

**Summary**

The chapter describes the six diverse couples that were interviewed for this study on Black love. The findings were outlined according to the research questions, clusters, and themes that supported the purpose of the study. The research questions for this study were:

1. What is Black love?
2. What is unique about Black romantic love?

3. What makes Black romantic love endure?

The clusters that emerged were “Love,” “Black Love,” and “Personal Love.” The themes for “Love” included: children and family, uniqueness, doing the work, unconditional, and evolving. The themes for “Black Love” were “children and family,” “cultural awareness,” “love is love is love,” “a beautiful struggle,” and “movies and television.” The “Personal Love” themes were “bold,” “spiritual and religion,” and “friendship.” Each cluster and theme was supported by direct quotes from couple participants.

The final chapter will include a discussion about the findings from the interviews conducted for this study on Black love. The discussion will include a connection between the literature that was reviewed and the conceptual framework used to support the study.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter provides a discussion of the findings elicited from the research study on Black love. This discussion will be used to compare the findings from the data to the conceptual framework and the literature used as the foundation for this study. It was determined from the data analysis that for the majority of these couples, Black love is real. The data garnered three clusters: Love, Black Love and Personal Love, each with accompanying themes.

There is controversy surrounding the concept of Black love. Some people believe that it is a real phenomenon, and others believe that it is not real. It was the intent of this study to interview a diverse representation of African Americans and garner their perspective. At its most basic definition, Black love is simply the love shared between African Americans or between an African American and someone who does not identify as such. This study was to determine if there was a deeper meaning of Black love.

Participants

It was very important to include various representations of love from African American communities. Couples in this sample were in love relationships with, mainly, other African Americans. A gay couple and a lesbian couple, a cohabitating heterosexual couple, a married heterosexual couple, and an interracial couple represented diversity for this study. The interracial couple included one partner identifying as African American. There are supporters of Black love as a real phenomenon who do not believe that interracial couples should be included in the definition of Black love. This is a very small sample of diversity of
love for Black Americans. I propose that there are many variations of how Black American
couples express and live out their love on a daily basis.

**Findings**

There were three clusters that emerged from the data to include “Love,” “Black
Love,” and “Personal Love.” Through the data clusters, I was able to answer the research
questions that guided this study. The understanding and defining of Black love, the
uniqueness of Black love, and what makes Black romantic love endure all emerged from the
couples’ perspectives on love, Black love, and their personal love relationships.

The literature review for this study was underscored by the lack of academic research
supporting African American love relationships and the concept of Black love. However,
there is support for Black love in other sources intended for Black Americans such as books,
electronic magazines, social media platforms, etc. These additional sources support the belief
that Black love is a real concept experienced by Black Americans. The findings of this
research study support that Black love is real to the majority of the couples in the study.
Eighty-three percent of the couples in this study believe that Black love is real and shared
their thoughts on why the concept resonates with them.

Additionally, there are different schools of thought on the subject of Blackness. Some
people question why Black people have to add or distinguish the “Blackness” of everything
such as Black hair, Black music, Soul food (a byproduct of Black) and others, and Black
love. Even within the study, one couple did not commit to believing that Black love was a
real phenomenon, though one partner wrestled with it and slightly committed to the notion of
Black love being real, perhaps not in his situation, but he could understand that there is a real
struggle in society for Black Americans. The interracial couple who witnessed first-hand at the start of their relationship the struggle of being together because one partner was African American did not feel Black love stood alone. This attitude I find interesting, although I understand wanting their love in its purest form to be at the forefront. The clusters and themes will be discussed in the following sections along with the conceptual framework and literature reviewed.

**Cluster 1: Love**

The common themes around the concept of love included “children/family,” “uniqueness,” “commitment,” “evolving,” and “unconditional”. The model used as the conceptual framework for this study was Johnson and Loscocco’s (2015) *Black Marriage Through the Prism of Gender, Race, and Class* (BMTTGR). The model questions the traditional White middle class model of marriage and its creation to benefit White men. Marriage was only between a man and a woman. The purpose of the institution of marriage projected a “he versus she” dynamic. The model is posited to question couples’ ability to have a successful marriage when those dynamics are in place. Additionally, the authors speak directly to the pathologizing of African American marriages and families. Johnson and Loscocco (2015) also believe that the institution of marriage needs to be redefined to support all couples, including gay and lesbian couples. Because of this White middle class perspective on marriage, it is postulated that many Black marriages have ended in divorce because of an unrealistic expectation of marriage that does not take into consideration the varied needs of diverse couples.
Data from this study supports this portion of the model because the couples were diverse and how they chose to love was diverse. These couples have also been successful in defining for themselves what love means. The average length of marriage and commitment for these couples was 15 years. In recent years, many Americans have fought to legalize marriage for gay and lesbian couples. Two of the couples identify as gay who have been together for at least 10 years. The longest amount of time together was 19 years for the lesbian couple. Gay marriage became legal in Washington, DC in 2010. Relationship longevity does not appear to be affected by race, gender, or sexual orientation for these couples. The partners in each of these relationships have a voice and benefit from the commitment they have made to each other. These relationships represent an egalitarian approach in how they manage their love. Couples shared their ability to recognize roles in their marriage. One husband talked about washing and folding clothes while his wife was more comfortable cooking for the family, though he also cooks for the family. It was evident that most of the couples were aware of their partner’s love language, and they work to be respectful and honor the needs of their partner. Therefore, redefining one’s approach to marriage appears to be successful for these couples.

The BMTTGR model specifically focuses on the issues of marriage as it relates to gender and redefining for women the purpose and role of marriage. One point from this article is that Black mothers take on the role to educate their children on how to navigate a racist world. This resonates with the couples in the study, but it is apparent that the responsibility is on both parents to ensure their children are prepared for an unfriendly world. However, one mother shared that her son was called a ni****, and she has had to rethink
how she will parent him. Her goal is to help him heal and understand how and why something like that could happen to him. The fathers in these relationships spoke of their overwhelming commitment to their wives and their families.

BMTTGRG was appropriate for this study because it makes known the skewed data directly related to the reporting of marriage life for African American couples. Sexism and racism are considered non-issues when discussing the state of marriage. Blame is placed on the individuals charged with protecting it “from a variety of external assaults that stem from structured racism” and “attention from the real “culprit,” the patriarchal (and racist) institution of marriage” (2015). When defining Black love for the couples in this study, racism and discrimination were at the forefront of discussion. It is evident that all relationships have their struggles. However, African American couples have an additional burden to bear while making their relationships work. None of the couples spoke of a “burden” other than the ones that are inflicted on their psyche because of racial injustices in America. Some partners have witnessed first-hand racism, and others have children or family members who have been discriminated against. Racism, discrimination, and for Black women, sexism, are real and have to be addressed within the marriage, partnership, and the family. Otherwise, the impact could be detrimental to the longevity of the relationship. The intersectionality of identity for these couples has been expressed as reality and needs to be met with intention to help them navigate in society.

Wanzo (2011) addresses America’s focus on a fairytale version of love when it is not everyone’s reality. She specifically addresses the needs to stop pathologizing African American women who may not marry and speak to the bigger concern that all people need to
have policies that support them regardless of their relationship status. Policies surrounding healthcare, food, and shelter have real implications for all Americans.

Redefining love relationships with actual considerations to diversity will lead to a better understanding and representation of Black love. Alleviating the prescribed formula outlined by society could change the cycle of divorce and unstable relationships for African Americans. The data from this study supports that nontraditional relationships of Black Americans are just as happy and healthy as couples in traditional heterosexual marriages. It would also be necessary to reform policy to recognize other forms of relationships as worthy to be protected by laws.

Cluster 2: Black Love

The common themes around the concept of Black love included: love is love is love, children/family, cultural awareness, a beautiful struggle, movies/television, and spirituality and religion. Social media is the biggest proponent of Black love. The various platforms allow Black Americans to express their thoughts and feelings about their love. As reflected in the literature review, magazines such as Essence, Ebony and Jet emphasize the positive side of African American love relationships, as does this research study. However, these magazines are limited in focusing on the diversity of love within African American communities.

One digital magazine, VSB, published an article by Panama Jackson (2013) who suggested that Black people are the only ones who feel a need to label their love or categorize their Blackness. One couple in this study supported this thought that love is love,
and nothing more needs to be added to it. Overwhelmingly, the other couples in this study embraced the notion of Black love and had a lot to share on the topic.

The closest definition for Black love comes from Ziyad (2015) who suggested that Black love is Black children, forgiveness, sacrifices, uncompromising and unlimited. These themes on Black love from Ziyad (2015) are supported by the findings from this research study. The themes for Black love include: children and family, cultural awareness, a beautiful struggle, movies and television, and spirituality/religion. These themes align closely to Ziyad’s definition when dissected closely.

Ziyad (2015) believes Black love is Black children, and the couples in this study expressed the importance of Black children and teaching them about their heritage. Also, as parents, it was important for them to make sure their children are prepared and resilient against whatever they may face because of the world that does not always support Black Americans. Cultural awareness also aligns with the belief that Black love is Black children. Cultural awareness embodies loving all things that are recognized as Black, learning about and appreciating the history of Black Americans, and teaching those things to your children because it prepares them for the now and the future. Additionally, there were several YouTube videos that emphasized the importance of community for Black love. One video, *Black Love Series: Putting Love Back Into Our Relationship: Part I & II* (2011) spoke specifically to the family unit and preparing their children to become parents and supporting them in their growth and readiness to become active citizens. Married couples from the Muslim and Christian communities shared the importance of modeling healthy relationships to their children.
Findings from this study also support the Blackmon et al. (2005) study on family. They concluded that family is more than marriage between a man and a woman and does not always mean something negative. It is not always the family structure that matters most, but it is the quality of the interactions between family members, socioeconomic status, and other factors. Each couple in this study has created a family to include biological children, grandchildren, and extended family. For this sample, they define for themselves what family means. For some, that includes children, and for others, it does not.

Ziyad (2015) states that Black love is forgiveness. For the couples in this study, forgiveness is aligned with the “beautiful struggle” theme they expressed. To deal with all that impacts Black couples, forgiveness is necessary to move forward. Black love included movies and television programming that is aligned with forgiveness. It depicts African Americans from a position of strength, love, and power.

One overarching theme from the findings about Black love is that it is a beautiful struggle. Ziyad (2015) suggests that Black love is sacrifice. This notion aligns with the “beautiful struggle” theme, as relationships are a sacrifice. Putting your family and spouse first means sacrifice. Black love encompasses all that is great and wonderful yet also all the struggle and disappointment, discrimination, and injustices that come with being Black in America. Black love is not about the romanticizing of love but more about the additional factors that are synonymous with being African American. The beautiful struggle includes forgiving, sacrifice, being uncompromising and unlimited. For the study’s couples regardless of what they have endured, it is the love of their spouse that helps them continue day by day.
All of the couple participants in this study were aware of the racial injustices that occur daily in America. Because of their sensitivity to these issues, the majority of them deemed it necessary to distinguish between love and Black love. For these couples, being Black in America adds an extra burden to their relationship. For the gay couples, their sexual orientation added an additional layer of struggle that is, again, an external complication. For many of them, they have personally endured racist comments or discrimination. If they have not, they have friends and family members who bear witness to these issues faced by Black Americans. Because of the social constructs in which they live, it is necessary for the couples in this sample to apply an extra layer of love onto their partner as well as on their children.

One couple in the sample did not support that this reality constitutes identifying Black love as an individual stand-alone phenomenon. Black love means being culturally aware of the history one comes from as well as being aware of what is happening in their reality. This awareness helps them understand, grow, and protect each other. Black love realizes that the things that happen in America to Black Americans is not always fair, nor does it make sense. With that knowledge, they are prepared to give their partner an extra dose of love and understanding. Black love is being aware that the woman you love may be struggling with her natural hair, and because it goes against what is deemed as beautiful in America, her partner is prepared to acknowledge her as a racial being by affirming her Blackness and reaffirming, if necessary.

Black love for the couples represented in this study means that their children and family are vital to their relationship and how they live their lives. It is necessary to cover each other in a deeper, stronger love because of what they have endured or may endure when
they interact with society and individuals who are different and choose to treat them differently. Because of the afflictions endured by Black Americans, Black love is defined as a beautiful struggle. This struggle comes from outside of the relationship and is because of the social and political climate that has existed in America since the first African was brought here. However, it is a part of their reality and has to be dealt with. Black love is a safe space to be one’s unique self.

The movies, television programs and magazines utilized for this study support the data retrieved from the interviews conducted for this study. For one, when couples hear the words “Black love,” they immediately think of movies and television shows that have positively portrayed Black love relationships. This study also validates that Black love is real and should be on display for the world to understand and learn from. Black love is defined as the display of Black love relationships witnessed in movies and television programs from the 1990s to the early 2000s. Black people in love were witnessed, and Black Americans were in roles that uplifted their communities. This display of Black love encouraged young, Black men and women to define for them what was possible. It was possible to go to college, find your soul mate, and live happily ever after. Black love, through movies and television, was seeing a nuclear family living in harmony without struggle and believing you could live a life similar to that. Black love was exhibited in situation comedies such as *Martin*, where a Black man and a Black woman loved each other, had fun together with a group of like-minded individuals who looked like them. Being Black was not the exception in these movies and television shows; it was the norm, normalizing African Americans in such a way that made Black love desirable and achievable.
Cluster 3: Personal Love

The common themes around the concept of Black love included boldness, spirituality and religion, and friendship. The study conducted by Gupta et al. (2015) explored romantic love relationships of African American older adults. They found that these elders, all over 70 years old, value emotional intimacy. No one in this study on Black love was over the age of 70. However, the exploration of love in both studies connects these two bodies of research. The elders in the aforementioned study also expressed knowledge that there is a negative perception about African American love relationships by people outside the Black community. This study acknowledges those negative perceptions about African American love relationships; however, it does not dwell on the negative, but focuses on what is positive about Black love relationships.

Several books were reviewed for this study. One specifically, *The Obamas and a (Post) Racial America* (2011) focuses on President and First Lady Obama as a representation of what has existed in the Black community for decades. For so long, there was no representation of Black love at the national level, and now there is. This book chapter also positions the Black family as resilient and adaptive as it has sustained an entire group of people for 300 years in an oppressive and racist society. Thus, it continues to be the duty of Black Americans to uphold each other in the name of Black love.

Tyson (2011) addressed what African American women need in their love relationships such as a commitment, honest communication, fidelity, trust, and someone to help carry the load. These are directly in line with how the participants described what love meant for them. Utley (2010) warns against having the wrong idea about love. The
relationships presented in this study presented a look at the good and bad times in their relationships and having to love and sometimes forgive their partners. For one particular wife, she had to learn to love her husband because she never witnessed love in action growing up. She has been a great friend to her husband but needed to execute her identity as a wife.

Lawrence-Webb et al. (2015) and Stanik et al. (2013) suggest that addressing the issues of patriarchy, role, and love are important to the success of love relationships. The emphasis of egalitarian roles and the role of love in relationships must be discussed within the relationship. As addressed earlier, the couples interviewed engaged in egalitarian relationships. Each partner was invested in making the relationship work by understanding what their role was, being expressive in what they needed, and sharing that with their partner. Couples, in this study understood to varying degrees the systems of institutional racism. However, the focus on patriarchy itself was not at the forefront of the conversation. I assume Black Americans tend to focus more on racism than patriarchy; though, in some ways they are tightly aligned.

The findings of this study both support and contradict previous research utilized as the foundation for African American love relationships (Phillips, Wilmoth, & Marks, 2012). African Americans are engaged in enduring love relationships. The relationships represented in this study include the traditional concept of love and the revised concept of a committed long-term love relationship. African Americans are a part of the traditional representation of love represented by marriage between a man and a woman. However, African Americans are not monolithic and, therefore, have varying ways of expressing their love and commitment to
each other. The relationships in this study support the traditional and nontraditional representation of love among African Americans.

One premise of this study was to emphasize that love endures for Black Americans, though there has been very little research that supports the narratives of these individuals. The traditional concept of love relationships in America is marriage between a man and a woman, yet for many African Americans, love is represented in other ways. This representation includes love between a man and a woman who have chosen not to be married and marriage or a long-term committed relationship between two men or between two women. Although the representation of love is not the same as prescribed by mainstream society, it does not mean their love is not as real or not as important. As indicated by the data in this study, couples with long-term committed relationships of at least 10 years included married heterosexual couples, a heterosexual cohabitating couple, an interracial couple, a gay couple, and a lesbian couple. The average length of time for these couples is 15 years together. However, three couples exceeded the average, and one couple has 23 years together in holy matrimony. The lesbian couple represented in this study has 19 years together, and as soon as marriage between gay and lesbian people became legal, they were married in Washington, DC in 2010. This group is committed to defying the belief that ‘Black Americans marry less and divorce more than any other group in America” (Dixon, 2009).

The article by Calabrese et al. (2014) seeks to counter the traditional perception of Black men as aggressive, animalistic, and hedonistic in their sexual behavior by interviewing gay men about their last sexual encounter. Their study found that in their last sexual encounter, the men felt love or perceived love from their partner. The male participants in
this study, regardless of sexual orientation, would fall in line with this study. Sex was not the focus for the couples. Couples were free to talk about sex, and they did. However, it was never perceived as aggressive, animalistic, or hedonistic.

Chaney (2014) postulates that cohabitating is less likely to lead to marriage for African Americans when compared to their White counterparts. The one couple interviewed for this study shared that after 17 years of being and living together, they desire to marry. One reason was because they believed marriage was a sign of respect, and it would send a positive message to Barbara’s granddaughter. Because this couple is older, average age of the couple is 60, and the mean age of the couples in her study was substantially lower, which could contribute to the difference in committing to marriage.

Overall, portions of the literature utilized for this study reminds us that love is real for African American couples. However, it also reiterates that Black love is only relevant to Black communities. People may struggle to define what it is, but because of the shared experiences of Black Americans, there is an understanding of its realness.

**Summary of Research Findings and Additional Impressions**

The data gathered from this research study reflects the understanding of Black love according to the sample of five African American couples and one interracial couple. The couples in this study shared their lived experiences and how they understand love. The couples shared examples to answer the research questions that guided this study.

The first research question’s purpose was to define Black love. According to the sample, Black love is defined by understanding the meaning of love that is shared between the partners/couples in this study. “Love” emerged as the cluster to explain what Black love
is, and the themes that emerged were “children and family,” “uniqueness,” “commitment,” “evolving,” and “unconditional”. The second research question was “What is unique about Black love?” It was the intention to explain that if Black love was a real concept for these couples, what makes it different from love or love shared by other groups of people who identify differently as racial or ethnic beings. The cluster that emerged from this question was “Black Love.” The themes that emerged were “love is love is love,” “cultural awareness,” “children and family,” “spirituality and religion,” “a beautiful struggle” and “movies and television.” The third research question to guide this study on Black love looked at what makes Black love endure. The cluster that emerged from the data was “Personal Love”. This cluster spoke directly to how the couples/partners govern their relationship. The themes that emerged were, “boldness,” “spirituality and religion,” and “friendship”.

The data from this research study on Black love revealed the complexity of love for couples identifying as African American. The data also revealed that this complexity is also true for those individuals who live with multiple identities such as gender, race, and sexual orientation. I would suggest that couples with multiple identities are more likely to face discrimination and social injustice, causing additional stress on their love relationship.

My overall impression from conducting this study is that Black love is real and endures for many Black American couples. It is with intention and commitment that relationships endure. Love for the couples in this study and specifically Black love is no fairy tale. There are real challenges that many of these couples have to endure that many people in society have never considered and who some believe are not real. This sample reflects, I believe, the reality of many other couples throughout the United States who are faced with
struggles beyond their control. It was evident that although these couples were able to verbalize their commitment and love for each other, that love is expressed in many ways for them. Sitting with each couple, I was able to witness their tenderness, care, understanding, and love for each other from their nonverbal communication. The atmosphere was safe and supportive. It was evident that each partner was believed and supported, almost as though they were a physical extension of each other. There appeared to be a reverence for each other with no judgment. There was respect and attention given when either partner was talking. There was humor, allowing them to laugh with and sometimes at each other. Overall, these couples represent love in its purest form. Love was evident in each couple regardless of sexual orientation. It was evident that these couples were intentional about whom they chose to partner with. In that intentionality, there are two individuals who are connected and who love wholeheartedly.

**Implications for Practice**

In 2015, the American Counseling Association released new multicultural competencies that now include a social justice component. The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) reflect the “intersection of identities and the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression that influences the counseling relationship” (Ratts, M.J., Singh, A.A., Nassar-McMillian, S., Butler, S.K., McCullough, J.R., 2015, p. 3). Further suggestions are that the counselor’s attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, skills and actions will provide a “multilevel framework for individual counseling and social justice advocacy” (Ratts, M.J., Singh, A.A., Nassar-McMillian, S., Butler, S.K., McCullough, J.R., 2015, p.3). It is important for counselors to understand their position of power and privilege
when entering into a helping relationship with clients. As well, counselors must be aware of their client’s privilege and power and how this impacts the counseling relationship. There may be moments when the counselor is in a position of power, and there may also be moments when the client is in the position of power. It is necessary as counselors to understand how one’s personal worldview can affect the helping relationship. Counselor self-awareness is important for the counselor to position herself as an advocate for marginalized groups. If the counselor assumes the position of the marginalized person and does not have perceived power within the counseling relationship, the counselor must understand how that position will impact their advocacy and intention towards the client.

Further discussion and understanding must be given to the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) that is reflective in the lives of many of the couples in this study and in society at large. It is necessary to understand the multiple identities that individuals live with that impact their lives on a daily basis. For example, Sabrina and Whitney share multiple identities to include, but are not limited to, being women, African American, and lesbians. It is important that counselors are aware and understand their full identities and the effect on their love relationships when interfacing with society at large. Additionally, Bryson and Mason also share multiple identities that can make living out their true selves difficult as African American, gay men. They highlighted the importance of understanding that Black gay love also carries a weight that those outside may not understand. A time when Black men are being murdered on a consistent basis is scary for them. In addition, their gay identity feels like they are increasing their chances of being harassed; however, it is important to
understand how these identities shape how they function in their relationship and in the world.

Data from this study highlighted areas of implications for a variety of entities that work with Black Americans, specifically those in committed love relationships. Information gathered from this study can be useful to those who are not in a committed love relationship but desire one. It is important for helping professions to understand the effects of discrimination and social injustices that contribute to emotional instability and may be a factor in the high divorce rates among African Americans.

It is important to understand that when a Black American is socially conscious and aware of what it means to be Black in America, that awareness may cause some cognitive dissonance. They will need support to identify what is going on and work through the incongruence. There may also be African Americans who are not culturally aware of what is happening to them or around them, but their partner may be aware. In this situation, it is important to facilitate a conversation that benefits both parties.

Professionals working with African American clients should be aware of the uniqueness of Black love that many couples believe exist. It is important to understand that African American couples who are married or in committed love relationships have additional pressures that exist outside of their relationship. These added pressures could impact their relationship in a negative way. Some couples may or may not be aware of these added pressures. Helping couples become culturally aware of these outside issues could help couples work together to ensure the work is done to alleviate unnecessary stressors that impact their relationship. Working with couples to ensure each partner has a safe place to be
his or her unique self is very important to ensure that effective communication, appreciation, and support are in place.

Implications for best practices would include the awareness and sensitivity to understanding that for many couples Black love is real and so are the struggles that accompany it; seeking out information that could assist with the understanding of what Black love means to prepare oneself to help couples in distress, and increasing training for working with couples of color. Applying evidence based and empirically supported practices in clinical settings will help diverse love relationships endure.

As a counselor working with couples who identify as gay or lesbian, it is important to understand that just because marriage is legal for them does not mean marriage is widely accepted and that these couples will be embraced. In some cases, gay and lesbian couples do not feel safe to share their identity in public spaces. Additionally, for those who are open with their identity there are still barriers that they still must face such as traveling with their marriage certificates or power of attorney documents. Sensitivity to these and other concerns for minority couples is necessary to effectively engage in a productive counseling relationship.

**Implications for Theory, Policy, and Advocacy**

The theoretical framework for this study was *Black Marriage Through the Prism of Gender, Class and Race* (2015), which has been used to reframe how Black marriages are dissected and judged. The model questions the traditional White middle class framework for marriage and its relevance to African American marriages. The White model of marriage suggests pathology for African Americans (Johnson & Loscocco, 2015). A quote by Patricia
Hill Collins (1990) frames the section on the social institution of marriage in the Johnson and Loscocco (2015) article, stating, “In general, everything that the imagined traditional family ideal is thought to be, African American families are not” (p.145). Love relationships in the African American community are judged according to a system that was never established to benefit them. Looking at the relationships through the prism of gender, class, and race evokes questions about whether or not this protocol is the appropriate standard for Black people. The model questions whether or not marriages within the African American community have a chance at success based on this standard. Perhaps redefining and describing love relationships with cultural considerations will lead to a better understanding and representation of Black love.

Each couple represented in this study suggests that the conceptual framework supports their belief that Black love is real. Couples should be able to define for themselves what their relationship should be like. Also, it is important to understand that all relationships are different and do not fall in line with the traditional concept of marriage or love. Additionally, more focus and research needs to support diverse Black love relationships. The gap in the literature suggests that all ethnic groups and their relationships are homogenous. As indicated in this research study, African American love relationships are heterogeneous in sexual orientation, type of relationship, and concerns that are important to the couples.

As indicated in this research study, there is limited supportive policy and advocacy to help build healthy and strong relationships with the African American community. The majority of policies related to relationships are focused on strengthening families headed by married, heterosexual, two-parent households. Policies and advocates should be expanded to
include two couples diverse in their ethnicity and in the type of relationship they chose to have. Advocates and policymakers for diverse couples should include the helping professionals, politicians, educators, researchers, and the clergy. Advocacy includes understanding the struggle that may be faced by African American couples.

**Limitations of the Study**

All research has limitations that can impact the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. There are several limitations of this study that emerged. Limitations can be used to create research agendas for future study.

This study was limited by the selection of participants and their characteristics. Participation was limited by relationship status and by the length of that relationship. Only African American men and women who identified as married or cohabitating could participate in the study. The relationship needed to be at least 10 years in length. Other ethnic/racial persons could only participate in this study if they were a part of a relationship with an African American.

The research was also limited in that there were no additional coders to validate the findings in the study. Allowing for multiple coders would have increased the trustworthiness of the study. Two auditors were utilized to validate whether there was understanding, credibility, and consistency across all clusters and themes. Both auditors were doctoral level individuals who have conducted qualitative studies. Utilizing coders would have added to the strength of the study.
Recommendations for Future Research

Several recommendations for future research that come from this study. The overall recommendation is to simply add more research to the literature that represents Black Americans in a balanced way. Research that would give a voice to the individuals who are often left out of the conversation about love is needed.

Another recommendation would be to expand the research on the topic of Black love by conducting a similar study with a larger sample of diverse African American couples. Studies specific to heterosexual married couples from a positive strength based approach would balance the research that already exists. More research specific to gay and lesbian couples who identify as African American in committed love relationships would be an addition to the literature. For this group, the research gained would be relevant for African American communities and gay and lesbian communities. There is also limited research on cohabitating Black Americans; therefore, additional research would be advantageous in representing this community of lovers. Future research about Black love should include a survey on racial identity to better understand and support participants’ points of view on Black love.

Finally, it is important that research on the concept of love and how to manage relationships includes representation from Black Americans. This research on love should include gay and lesbian couples, as well. Incorporating these groups of people would normalize their love for a larger community of people. Research that is inclusive is good for all people.
Concluding Statement

This chapter included a discussion about the study of Black love. This research study was conducted to fulfill a personal and professional mission. As an African American woman living in the United States, it is important to change the narrative that surrounds my community. African Americans are associated with very negative stereotypes in mainstream culture. It is important for me to change the negative into a positive narrative because there is so much good in African Americans as individuals and as a whole.

Unfortunately, many African Americans’ lives are being taken for senseless reason. When this happens, the focus is always on justifying why it happened. The media finds an excuse coupled with a negative image of the individual to justify killing Black people. I believe those people who have lost their lives and the many of us that remain are so much more than the negative snapshot we see in the media. Because of these interviews and because of the many Black Americans I know and love, I believe that everyone has a love story that would be as powerful as the ones in this study.

Being able to interview these couples at this time in history meant so much to me. Each couple gave me hope that regardless of what people say about African Americans, there is another story. The love shared between these couples was real and resonated with me on a very deep level. Though there were some partners who were not able to express themselves the way society would expect, I was able to understand from their expressions and interactions with their partner that love is a reality for the couples.

The data from this qualitative study on Black love yielded data to distinguish between love and Black love. Black love is real. Black love is love. Yet it is very different. Black love
is not a romantic love. Although it is romance that brought two individuals together, Black love is not about the romance. For African Americans who are racially aware, Black love is about the struggle faced by Black beings everyday coupled with another person who understands the struggle of people of color in America.

The interviews from six diverse couples support that Black love is real and that there is a need for more conversation and research on the topic. Can people who are not African American encounter Black love? Can non-Black people fully understand what Black love means? If people can identify with the struggle and have empathy for Black Americans who have experienced injustice, then it is possible to understand why Black love is real for these couples and others.

There was so much interest and excitement around this study when talking to people in the African American community. However, when it was time to commit to the interview, it was very hard to get people to follow through. I believe some of that hesitation was because Black Americans are still very suspicious of research dating back to the Tuskegee experiment. Although this research would harm them, I believe people were more concerned about their privacy being protected. Additionally, many African Americans still believe that you do not expose your private sphere to people outside of the family, and although I had a shared history with them, they still were not comfortable participating.

Participation from heterosexual married couples was the most available; however, there was not enough room in the study to allow all of them to participate. It was important for the study to be balanced and represent each group that the study was designed to represent. Heterosexual, cohabiting couples were a little more difficult to find, as were
African American lesbian and gay couples. There appeared to be a drought of African American gay and lesbian couples in long-term relationships for 10 years or more. I thought living in the southern United States probably impacted the availability of gay and lesbian couples willing to participate in this study. Both the gay and lesbian couple shared that in reality, it is rare to find couples like them who have committed themselves to one partner for a substantial period of time. They both have very small peer groups. This impacts the ability to share their realities with the larger community.

The interview for the cohabitating couple was probably the least robust. This couple represented an older generation of African Americans. They were also one of the couples with the least amount of formal education. It was evident at times that the interview questions were hard to comprehend. Therefore, responses were not as in depth as some of the other interviews. Their love was evident not by what they said, but by how they framed their responses, their willingness to participate, and their interaction with their partner. Being in the room with them confirmed their commitment and love for each other.

It appears that people who really love each other and are vested in their relationship were more likely to participate in this type of study. Although each couple confirmed that marriage is a challenge and takes work, their love for each other allowed them to be vulnerable and focus on the love. I would attest that these relationships are probably healthier compared to others. I can understand if one’s relationship is not in a good place that it would be very difficult to discuss love, especially talking to a stranger about love. Strategizing how to get couples in less stable relationships into therapy or to even talk about and remember why they love their partner could be key to understanding how to help them and garner a
different perspective on Black love. One couple was very open that they recently had entered into therapy because they have had so much transition that they were losing themselves as husband and wife. They commented that they would love to engage in “these types of conversations” every few months because it would refocus them on what is important to each of them and on the success of their relationship. Conversations about love would allow people to redirect their energy from what may not be right with the relationship to what is most important and remember why they made the commitment in the beginning.

To be in the room with each couple, certain characteristics of their identities and interactions with each other connoted love. Each partner appeared to feel safe and comfortable. Their stories felt honest and genuine. Even when the content was not flattering, there was ease and a sense of realness about their love. There was also this feeling and a declaration that “We’re still here” and “We are going to make it”. The struggle to make sense of questions that were asked did not make the couples retreat. They committed themselves to the study and figuring out what love meant for them.

Romantic love relationship was defined in Chapter One as an intimate, love relationship between two people who are committed to each other. This was used to distinguish the type of relationships represented in this study. However, I found myself fixated on the storybook definition of romance that couples would be gushing with affection, holding hands with their partner. It was very apparent that these couples are attracted to each other, and physical touch and sex are important to their relationships. But sex and the physical display of attraction are not the primary focus for these couples. This observation is in direct opposition to stereotypes about Black Americans and the assumption that most are
hypersexual. These couples are focused, determined, committed, and are focused on the success of their relationship and family wellbeing.

Interviewing the gay and lesbian couple was very enlightening. In my personal life, I do not know of couples that have a committed long-term gay relationship. I was not sure what to expect, but I was open to the experience. In reality, there are many similarities. Both couples have created beautiful lives and homes together. They have family and friends. They work every day. They are making a positive contribution to society. The only difference is that they love someone of the same gender. Black gay love stories need to be told. Their reality needs to be normalized. I was taken aback that Mason and Bryson have limited their identity and relationship status to a select number of people in their lives. The intent supports the status of gay people in America. They are very aware that all people (family included) will not accept who they are, and they have chosen to not entertain those people. When traveling, Sabrina and Whitney carry their marriage license and other legal documents with them. They do this to ensure that there will be no problems if something happens to either of them. This parallels the historical experiences of Black people in America who carried freedom papers. Heterosexual couples have their own privilege as it relates to being married. The same is true for White Americans who never have to think about their racial identity.

Through this study, I wanted to promote a positive perspective on love for African Americans, and I think it happened. It happened because each couple was unique and true to themselves, their partners, their families, and their communities. Are these couples perfect? The couples shared their vulnerabilities that speak to their imperfect relationships. However, they are perfect for each other. They are perfect for this moment in time that they have
together. For some of the couples, the vision they have for their relationship will impact lives for generations because they believe it is their mission. Generations affected by these couples will include their families and many outside of their family while some of the couples may only impact their small community.

This chapter discussed the findings of the research study on Black love. It included the links between the conceptual framework and the literature that was reviewed for the study with the findings. There were several links between the literature and the data gathered. There were also some misalignments between the data and the literature and conceptual framework.
REFERENCES


Blay, Z. (2015, August 12). “7 things everyone should understand about interracial relationships”. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/7-things-everyone-should-understand-about-interracial_relationships_us_55c22c11e4b0f7f0beb1b5d.


Chapell, B. (2015, June 26). *Supreme Court declares same-sex marriage legal in all 50*


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fa2HsHi-_A

Retrieved from

of a Black “Love Supreme”. In Parks, G.S & Hughley, M. W. (Eds.), The Obamas
and a (post) racial America? (pp. 133-162). New York: Oxford University Press.

Phillips, T.M., Wilmoth, J.D., Marks, L.D. (2012). Challenges and conflicts...strengths
Studies, 43, 936-952.

Phenomenological Analysis in qualitative research psychology. Czasopismo
Psychologiczne Psychological Journal. 20, (1), 7-14. DOI: 10.14691/CPPJ.20.1.7


on television. The Howard Journal of Communications, 19: 241-257, 2008. DOI:
10.1080/10646170802218263


from http://www.socialmediadefined.com/what-is-social-media/


Appendix A: Informed Consent

Love Jones: A Phenomenological Study of Diverse Black Romantic Love Relationships

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have a right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in this study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

INVESTIGATOR
The student who is conducting this research is Katrina Billingsley, MA. The faculty member who is supervising the research is Marc A. Grimmett, Ph.D.

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH
The purpose of this study is to examine diverse African American romantic love relationships, using a strengths-based approach. This study is for African American men and women currently married or cohabitating. Individuals must be in a heterosexual or same sex relationship. The couple must be married or cohabitating for at least 10 years. Participants can also be heterosexual in an interracial relationship. Participants must be aged 18 and above. All participants must be able to read and speak the English language fluently.

DURATION OF PARTICIPATION
The interview is expected to last approximately 1 hour. The amount of time it will take to conduct the interview, however, will vary depending on your responses to the questions during the interview. The interview will take place at a private location that is convenient for you.

PROCEDURES TO BE FOLLOWED DURING THE RESEARCH
If you decide to participate in this study, the research team will contact you and your partner/spouse to schedule an appointment for the interview. At the time of the interview, the informed consent form will be reviewed with you and your partner/spouse. Each participant and the research team will sign the informed consent form prior to the start of the interview. Each participant will be provided with an opportunity to ask questions about the research study before, during and after the interview. Throughout the interview process, a research team member will request some information from each participant that is considered
personal and confidential as it relates to your love relationship. Basic demographic information (e.g. race/ethnicity, age) will also be asked of you to provide necessary contextual information needed for the study. Each participant may choose the information that he or she is comfortable sharing in the research study. As a couple, you may discontinue participation in the study at any time without penalty. The research team member will consult with you regularly to ensure that you feel safe and respected. Interviews will be conducted at the office or home of the participants.

The information that you share in this interview will be recorded in audio and video form for analysis and transcription. Selected audio and video clips will be used to create an educational documentary on the meaning of Black love from a positive perspective. The research team will notify participants if any part of their interview is selected for possible inclusion in the documentary. Selected parts of interviews will only be used with the participant’s written consent.

**RISKS**
No potential risks are anticipated for your participation in this study.

Participants will be interviewed as a couple. Participants will be asked about their relationship with their partner. The data collected will be used to make meaning of what Black love is for diverse relationships in the African American community. Couples will share their perspective on love by reflecting on their lived experiences.

**BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH**
As a participant in this research study, you may gain insight that helps you to better understand the concept of Black love. Additionally, you may gain information that can assist African Americans who are currently or would like to be apart of a healthy love relationship.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**
The information in the study records will be kept confidential to the full extent allowed by law. Data will be stored securely on the laptop computer of the Primary Investigator (PI) that is password protected. The video and audio recordings will be retained in case data needs to be revisited for accuracy checks, further analysis, reports and presentations. You will be assigned a code and pseudonym to protect confidential information and to organize and analyze the data. No reference will be made in oral or written reports, which would link you the study.

Any identifying information shared in this study will remain confidential. The results of this study may be published in research journals or presented at conferences but no true identifying information will be used in presenting this study.

**COMPENSATION**
At the end of the interview, each couple will be given a $25.00 gift card.
PARTICIPANT RIGHTS
If you feel at any time during this research that your rights have been violated, feel free to contact the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board at (919) 515-4514 or (919) 515-7515.

QUESTIONS ABOUT RESEARCH
If you would like further information about this research, you may contact Ms. Katrina Billingsley at (919) 641-7180 or kybillin@ncsu.edu and/or Dr. Marc Grimmett at 919-515-6358 or marc_grimmett@ncsu.edu.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS AND RESEARCH WITHDRAWAL
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate at any time and withdraw from the study. If you have questions that are not answered here, feel free to contact the above named investigator.

SIGNATURE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
By signing, I am agreeing that I have read and understand all of the above information. I agree to participate in the study until I decide otherwise. I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this form.

________________________________  __________
Signature of Participant                Date

________________________________  __________
Signature of Investigator               Date
Appendix B: Demographics Questionnaire

1. What year were you born?
   _______________________________________________

2. Please indicate your highest level of education completed and degrees.
   a. No high school diploma
   b. HS Diploma/GED
   c. Bachelor’s degree
   d. Master’s degree
   e. Professional (e.g., JD, MD)
   f. Doctoral degree (Ph.D., Ed.D)

3. Please indicate your current employment status.
   a. Employed
   b. Unemployed
   c. Retired

4. If employed or previously employed, please indicate your current occupation. If unemployed, please list your most recent occupation.
   _______________________________________________

5. Please indicate how many years have you been married to your current spouse?
   10 – 20
   21 – 30
   31 - 40
   40+
   Other______________________________

6. Please indicate how many years have you been in a relationship and cohabitating with your current partner?
   10 – 20
   21 – 30
   31 - 40
   40+
   Other______________________________

7. Please indicate your racial or ethnic identity.
   _______________________________________________

8. Please indicate your gender identity.
9. Please indicate your sexual identity (e.g., sexual orientation)?

10. Do you have children living in your home?
   a. No
   b. Yes
      How many? __________
      What are their ages? __________

11. Do you have other people living in the home?
   a. No
   b. Yes. If so, how many? ________________________________

12. What are their relationships to you?

13. Please indicate the amount you contribute to your annual household income?
   $0-10,000
   $10,001-$20,000
   $21,001-$30,000
   $31,001-$40,000
   $41,001-$50,000
   $51,001-$60,000
   $61,001+
Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. Describe your love relationship.
2. How do you define love based as an African American currently in a love relationship?
3. When you hear the words “Black love” what comes to mind for you?
4. What do you think is the difference between love and Black love?
5. How did you learn to love?
6. What role does love play in making your relationship work?
7. What strategies do you use to stay connected with your partner?
8. What strategies do you use to remain in love with your partner?
9. What are the characteristics of a healthy African American love relationship?
10. How would you describe your experience with “Black love”?
11. Describe the one thing that keeps you happy in your love relationship?
12. Based upon your experiences in this relationship think of the worse thing that has happened, describe it, and describe how you recovered from it.
13. How has the worst thing affected your relationship?
14. How has race or culture influenced your views about love?
15. Did you have a role model for a healthy love relationship growing up? If so, describe the role model?
   a. What messages about love relationships did you learn from the role model?
16. Describe the family dynamics in your family of origin.
   a. What impact have these dynamics had on your love relationship?
17. How did your culture or family dynamics impact the type of relationship you chose?
Dear Participant:

I am seeking African American men and women (age 18 and older) currently married or are in a committed love relationship for at least 10 years. You must have maintained your current relationship status for at least 10 years. This dissertation research study aims to understand the love experiences of African American couples. If you participate in this study, you will be interviewed in person with your partner for approximately 1 hour. The interview will be conducted at a time and location that is convenient for you and your partner/spouse. You will be given a $25 gift card for your participation. The interview will be audio and video recorded to ensure the information provided is accurately analyzed. Your confidentiality will be protected. Collected data will be locked in a secure location. This study meets the dissertation requirements for a Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision at North Carolina State University.

To participate in this study and/or as questions regarding this study, please contact Katrina Billingsley at 919.641.7180 or kybillin@ncsu.edu. Your participation in this study is appreciated and contributes to providing accurate and useful information about African American love relationships. If you are not able to participate, please forward this email to any African American couples who may be interested.

Thank you!

Katrina Billingsley. MA, LPCA
Appendix E: Participation Email

Thank you for your interest in participating in a North Carolina State University dissertation study on diverse African American romantic love relationships. To confirm that you meet the participant eligibility, please respond to the following questions.

1. Are you an African American currently in a love relationship with another African American?

2. Are you a non-African American currently in a love relationship with an African American?

3. Have you been married or cohabitating with your current partner for at least 10 years?

I am located in Apex, NC and I am willing to travel within 3-5 hours of North Carolina to meet for this interview. Please provide an optimal day of the week/time and your location. I can be contacted at kybillin@ncsu.edu or 919.641.7180.
Appendix F: Debriefing Email

The purpose of this study is to explore healthy, diverse love relationship experiences of African American couples. A factor that guides the purpose of this study is professional best practices. Due to research concerning this topic being limited, clinicians, practitioners and other health professionals may not have a clear understanding about their role in this issue. It is hoped that through this research, helping professionals will have more knowledge of diverse African American love relationship experience. In a few days, you will receive an email from the researcher with a copy of our transcribed interview. If you would rather your transcription be sent to you through mail or in person, those are options as well. Please take time to look over this transcription to verify accuracy then communicate all accuracy and/or inaccuracy to the researcher. Thank you for your participation.