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# Analysis of Marital Expectations in African Immigrant and United States-Born Married Couples

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### Abstract

The current phenomenological qualitative study aimed to understand marital expectations in married African immigrants and United States-born (U.S.-born) married couples. Eighty-five African-born immigrant and U.S.-born couples from a predominately Seventh-day Adventist sample residing in the U.S. completed the Marital Expectations Questionnaire (MEQ). We analyzed data collected in response to the first question. Data analysis revealed 12 codes associated with four themes related to marital expectations: (a) Care and Support; (b) Love and affection (c) Commitment and (d) Shared Values. We present implications for marital relationships and future research.

### Keywords

Marital Expectations, African Marriages, Qualitative Research

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## **Analysis of Marital Expectations in African Immigrant and United States-Born Married Couples**

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As population demographics continue to change in the United States, individuals are exposed to cultures different from theirs. Some of the demographics are influenced by the arrival of new immigrants. As part of acculturation, immigrants change the ways they view the world, and these changes affect various aspects of their lives, including their marriages.

Marital expectations seem to affect the experiences of individuals in marriages. The disappointment from unmet expectations of spouse's behavior change can affect one's appraisal of the behavior. Eventually, this behavior can negatively affect the marriage (Dixon, Gordon, Frousakis, & Schumm, 2012). Hall (2006) explored young adults' meanings of marriage and found that their expectations were based on belief systems built over time, some of which emanated from their childhood experiences in their families. Some of the marital expectations were that entry into marriage is a voluntary act for partners, including monogamy, and parenthood. The cited research indicated that marital expectations play an important role in how individuals experience marriages. In the following section we discuss marriages in the United States and Sub-Saharan Africa along with the benefits of marriage.

### **Marriages in the United States (U.S.)**

Research in the United States reveals the existence of racial and ethnic differences in marital quality and divorce (Bulanda & Brown, 2007). Using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, Bulanda and Brown found that Black couples exhibited lower marital happiness and interaction, with more marital problems, more arguments, and greater perceived instability than did White couples. Black couples also were more likely to divorce than White couples. Mexican American couples seemed to have equivalent marital quality and

divorce outcomes as White couples, although they represented an economically disadvantaged minority group (Bulanda & Brown). Structural factors, including education and employment, and cultural factors, such as the importance of family in Mexican American marriages, seemed to affect the quality of marital happiness and satisfaction among the respondents. In the U.S., currently most individuals marry solely for love and fulfillment, and young people have higher marital expectations when they enter marriages (Campbell & Wright, 2010; Coontz, 2007). These marital expectations include romantic ideals such as passionate, exciting marriages, which are difficult to achieve, leading to dissatisfaction and eventually divorce (McNulty & Karney, 2004). More recent trends in American marriages indicate that fewer Americans are marrying, and those that do marry are waiting longer to get married. Marriage is increasingly viewed as a socioeconomic class divide in America as low-income couples view marriage as unattainable (Gibson-Davis, 2009). It is not entirely clear what role marital expectations play in emerging American marriage trends, but it is likely that expectations based on parents' failed marriages, or other environmental attributes play a role.

### **Marriages in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Although marriage remains a universal institution in many African cultures, this seems to be changing. An examination of the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data analysis for 1992, 2000 and 2006 revealed a change away from marriage in Namibia. Cohabitation was prevalent in individuals less than 30 years, occurring more among the urban, educated and employed. Marriage occurred later after the age of 30 for both males and females, a significant change from 20 years earlier (Pazvakawambwa, Indongo, & Kazembe, 2013). Comparisons with DHS data analyses from other countries in the region show similarities with South Africa. However, Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia show marriage patterns dominated by the married group. Child marriage plagued some sub-Saharan African countries, and was associated with maternal and child morbidity and mortality. To protect children's rights, two major international agreements were signed – the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC, 1989), and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC, 1990). All African countries except one (Somalia) ratified CRC. However, the effects of these ratifications on child marriage prevalence depend on the consistency between minimum age at marriage, minimum age for parental consent for marriage, and minimum age for sexual consent (Maswikwa, Richter, Kaufman, & Nandi, 2015). These were findings from data analysis (from 12 sub-Saharan African countries) from Demographic Health Surveys (DHS) and from the Child Marriage Database at McGill University. Findings from the analysis showed that consistent minimum marriage age laws protect against the exploitation of girls (Maswikwa et al., 2015).

The AIDS pandemic brought the gender role debate in marriages to the center. In Zimbabwe marriage is still the universal institution, although alongside exist the tolerance for male infidelity in some communities. This is prevalent due to historical polygyny, the practice of having the first wife choose subsequent wives for the husband, with the first wife being the senior wife (Cook, 2007). Although not practiced widely, polygyny has evolved into a marriage between one man and a woman, with a permanent relationship with one other woman. In this era of AIDS this endangers the lives of married women due to the power imbalance in negotiating for safe sex (Christiansen, 2013). Zimbabwe is a paternalistic society that values marriage and the family as crucial to building a strong nation. However, with the AIDS pandemic superimposed on other national problems, renegotiating the balance of power and gender roles in marriages are necessary to maintain the marriage institution.

## Benefits of Marriage

Benefits of healthy marriages exist for both parents and children in the United States. For example, when compared to unmarried parents, married couples make more money (Dakin & Wampler, 2008), live longer (Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldstein, 1990), experience fewer mental and behavioral health problems (DeKlyen, Brooks-Gunn, McLanahan, & Knab, 2006), and access public assistance less (McLanahan, 2009). Additional relational benefits of healthy marriages include partners feeling a sense of togetherness (Markman & Rhoades, 2012), satisfaction in shared activities (Halford, Markman, & Stanley, 2008), and greater levels of sexual satisfaction (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Children from two-parent households experience benefits when compared to counterparts from divorced families (Amato, 2000; Kim, 2011). For example, children from intact parent relationships are more likely to grow up in stable relationships themselves (Amato, 2000). Many of the benefits extended to children may be the result of coordinated parenting efforts from couples with higher levels of parental alliance.

For African women, marriage helps to improve social status. For example, in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa women generally cannot own land or other immovable property on their own. Marriage provides them with this ability and protects them from exploitation or other injustices to which they otherwise might be exposed. Marriage also protects women from violence, especially when it is related to sex as with rape, and from being forced to engage in sex for monetary exchange between men and women. Unemployed or poorly paid unmarried women in South Africa were victims of this kind of violence (Hunter, 2005). Thus, marriage can help to protect the woman because other men know that attacking her could mean that the attacker would have to contend with the husband and both families. Additionally, children born in marriages are more secure emotionally and economically due to the fact that they have a stable environment as community members (Basu, 2000; Nwoye, 2000; Timaeus & Reynar, 1998). Children from married couples do not suffer from the stigma of being offspring of unmarried parents (Mamwenda & Monyooe, 1997).

The differences between U.S. marriages and sub-Saharan African marriages is that the former are based mainly on love and individual satisfaction while the sub-Saharan African marriages, although they may be based on love, heavily involve marriage negotiations and family arrangements that include *Lobola*, bride wealth (Ansell, 2001). U.S. marital couples rely on each other for emotional support while sub-Saharan African married couples rely on the extended family for emotional support, and even have a designated go-to person whom they consult during times of disagreements or conflict. This person helps them navigate the marital challenges they face (Ansell, 2001). A similarity between U.S. and sub-Saharan African marriages is that both groups look forward to marital happiness, and some look forward to raising children together. Due to the aforementioned differences, however, sub-Saharan married couples do lose some of the extended family support systems they rely on to help them in their marriages after migrating to the U.S.. This raises a question regarding marital expectations as they arrive in the new environment for their marriages to survive. Thus, this study aims to understand marital expectations in U.S. born and sub-Saharan African immigrant married couples.

## Epigenetic Model of Marital Expectations

Juvva and Bhatti (2006) stated that spouses enter the marital union with various expectations. These expectations morph as the marriage progresses, and they extrapolated the original Epigenetic Theory from biology to explain the process. In the Epigenetic Theory in biology the individual develops through structural elaboration of a simple fertilized egg. In

extrapolating to marital expectations, five types of marital expectations emerge. These include (a) Expectations of each other as spouses (e.g., sex); (b) Expectations from the marriage (e.g., the increased status of married women in sub-Saharan Africa); (c) Expectations from partner's family (e.g., expanded social network, influence of in-laws); (d) Expectations from the institution of marriage (e.g., mutual and shared responsibilities towards each other's family of origin); and (e) Expectations of the *ideal partner* – this is the concept of partners matching in material and non-material aspects.

This model situates marital expectations within societal systems. Marriages occur within socio-cultural contexts. Consequently socio-cultural contexts influence marital expectations.

## **Theoretical Framework**

We used the theoretical framework of Juvva and Bhatti (2006), and Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) Social Exchange theory as the base for conceptualizing this study. Juvva and Bhatti conceptualized marital expectations as being embedded within the socio-cultural fabric, based on the experiences of both partners in the marriage. These expectations also include those of the in-laws of both partners (as in sub-Saharan African countries) as well as those of the spouses, such as sex, companionship, and the ideal partner. Religious, socio-cultural and legal sanctions regulate marriage.

Thibaut and Kelley (1959) viewed interpersonal attraction as the dependence individuals have on the relationship, and the interdependence between the driving forces of rewards and costs associated with remaining in a relationship. If individuals perceive the rewards outweigh the costs, they remain in relationships, but may leave if the costs outweigh the rewards.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The goal of this phenomenological study was to further understand the expectations of married African immigrants and United States-born (U.S. -born) married couples. The research question asked: What marital expectations do African immigrant married couples and U.S.-born married couples possess? In response to this question, participants provided rich and thick information using their own voices to describe marital expectations they held. The researchers hope that these findings will contribute to a richer understanding of cross-cultural and gender differences in marital expectations among African immigrant and American married couples.

## **Participants, Constitution of Data, and Situation**

Phenomenological approach informed this study, specifically transcendental phenomenology. We chose this approach because it seeks to understand the essence and possible essence of individual's experiences. It also seeks to understand meanings people attach to their subjective experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological approach provided the most appropriate means of examining marital expectations through participant experiences. Participants' responses to open questions allowed them to provide in depth information using their own voices to share their marital expectations. There are no standardized methods for conducting phenomenological studies. Understanding phenomena and lived experiences can take several forms (Wertz, 2005). Husserl (1913, 1962, cited in Wertz, 2005) stated that *intuition of essence* or the *eidetic reduction* is a qualitative research procedure used to understand the true nature of things. It is neither inductive nor deductive. Husserl developed a procedure called *free imaginative variation* during which one starts with a concrete example,

such as a statement to describe an experience about which the researcher wishes to understand the essence. The researcher imagines the different variations of this experience, and excludes all that can happen by chance. At the end of the process the researcher obtains the essence of the experience. This can be based on as few as one individual or as many as needed to reach saturation of the experience. We chose to use open-ended questions in our study given the context of the larger study and data collected. This allowed us to reach saturation and thus understand phenomena under study.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

Epoché is the bracketing of researchers' experiences to prevent researcher biases from interfering with observing and working with qualitative data with an open mind. To immerse oneself effectively in epoché, researchers must participate in researcher reflexivity which follows here. The primary researcher is a sub-Saharan African who migrated to the U.S. with her family. She noticed that among the sub-Saharan African immigrant married couples sometimes there was tension as couples tried to balance new expectations related to changing roles in the new environment in the U.S. From these casual observations she developed the desire to study how marital expectations affect marital satisfaction, and compare those between U.S.-born and sub-Saharan African immigrant married couples. As a sub-Saharan African immigrant the first author observed the challenges marital couples faced, especially as immigrants in the United States. This seemed to affect marital expectations and marital satisfaction. In reviewing of literature, we found scant research on the relationship between marital expectations and marital satisfaction. One of the co-authors is a Jamaican who migrated to the United States as a child and studies couple and marital stress. Two co-authors are U.S. born and also research couple and family stress. All researchers were married at the time of the study and needed to bracket our own preconceived notions of marital expectations given our diverse cultural backgrounds. This study provided a good opportunity for collaboration in understanding marital expectations from participants from diverse cultural backgrounds.

### **Participants**

A total of 170 individuals (85 couples) contributed qualitative data for this study, but three individuals were excluded from the analysis because they were immigrants from other parts of the world. Typically, more in-depth information is needed for phenomenological studies. However, in this study, we asked open ended questions on the qualitative section so we needed more participants to reach saturation, since we did not have the opportunity to reach saturation through depth during a qualitative interview with a small sample size (Wertz, 2005). According to Wertz, phenomenological studies utilize either depth (with few individuals responding to questions) or breadth (more individuals responding to open questions) to reach saturation. This enables researchers to understand the essence of the meaning of individual's experiences.

The data were from a larger study that included quantitative and qualitative data. The participants were from six states in the Midwest, West, and Pacific Northwest United States. There was an almost equal number of men ( $n=84$ , 50.3%) and women ( $n=83$ , 49.7%) in this study, with a mean age of 46.44 (SD = 14.64). The participants averaged 19.34 years of marriage.

Table 1. *Participants' Demographic Information*

	Immigrants		American		All	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Population</b>						
Age	40.65	9.76	47.66	15.29	46.44	
14.64						
Years of Education	16.33	3.16	14.91	2.83	15.21	
2.98						
Years Married	14.43	10.10	20.65	15.19	19.34	
14.51						
<b>Gender</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>%</b>
Male	16	47.1	68	51.1	84	
50.3						
Female	18	52.9	65	48.9	83	
49.7						
<b>Ethnicity</b>						
White/Non-Hispanic		2.9	112	84.2	113	
67.7						
Hispanic		-	4	3.0	4	2.4
Black/Non-Hispanic		97.1	4	3.0	4	2.4
Native American		-	13	9.8	13	7.8
<b>Religious Affiliation</b>						
Baptist	1	2.9	2	1.5	3	1.8
Catholic	1	2.9	2	1.5	3	1.8
Evangelical Christian	1	2.9	-		1	0.6
Mormon	-		10	7.5	10	6.0
Protestant	2	5.9	5	3.8	7	4.2
Seventh - day Adventist	25	83.5	105	78.9	134	
80.2						
Other	-		-		9	6.8

Table 1 (Participant Demographic Information) presents additional data for all participants and data by participant group (African Born and U.S.-born). Most of the participants ( $n=134$ , 80.2%) were Seventh-day Adventists, and shared similar beliefs.

### Instruments

The Marital Expectations Questionnaire (MEQ, Ngazimbi, 2009) was developed based on the Epigenetic Model of Marital Expectations (Juvva & Bhatti, 2006). In our literature review, we did not find a suitable instrument to measure marital expectations for sub-Saharan African immigrant and U.S. – born married couples. Thus, the need arose to develop the appropriate instrument. We designed the Ngazimbi-Daire Marital Expectations Questionnaire (MEQ; Ngazimbi, Daire, Soto, Carlson, & Munyon, 2013) based on the Epigenetic Model of Marital Expectations (Juvva & Bhatti, 2006). Samples for the studies on which the Epigenetic Model is based were from India. Most cultures in India are socially and economically communalistic, and some share similar beliefs (such as the movement of dowry from one family to another in marriage) to some sub-Saharan African cultures (Goody, 1973; Mamwenda & Monyooe, 1997). The difference is that among Indian cultures dowry and bride move to the groom's family, whereas in sub-Saharan African cultures the bride moves to the



groom's family, while the bride wealth moves to the bride's family (Srinivasan, 2005). This theory relates to the development of basic social systems such as marriage, from the start of marriage through its different stages of the life cycle (Juvva & Bhatti).

The MEQ consists of a qualitative section and a quantitative section. The primary author constructed four questions to explore the content and quality of participants' own and their parents' perceived marital expectations, and how meeting their spouses' marital expectations contributed to happiness. The quantitative section consists of (a) rating 10 marital expectations on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, and (b) Ranking the 10 expectations from 1 to 10, with 1 being most important and 10 being least important. The MEQ was tested with five couples to ensure that questions were clear and participants understood them as intended. The researcher also noted the duration of completing questionnaires. Based on the pilot testing, no changes occurred. For a complete discussion of the MEQ the authors refer the reader to Ngazimbi (2009), and Ngazimbi, Daire, Soto, Munyon, and Carlson (2013). The authors present only the results of the qualitative analysis for the first question: (a) What expectations do you have of a marriage partner?

## Procedures

Before data collection for the study began, the primary researcher obtained approval through the Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research Committee at the university where the research was conducted.

The primary researcher used a purposive sampling method to identify churches with both African immigrants and U.S.-born married potential participants. Purposive sampling ensures that researchers will reach the appropriate participants (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Letters were sent to faith-based leaders with large African immigrant congregations and large U.S.-born congregations in six states (two in the Midwest, one in the West, and three in the Pacific Northwest met the criteria) to inquire about their interest in helping to identify potential participants in their congregations. The researcher then sent a letter to those faith-based leaders who expressed interest in helping, outlining the purpose of the research, confidentiality and anonymity issues, and potential data collection dates and times to take place in the various churches. The identified populations were more open to this research as they had ongoing programs to strengthen families. This was in line with their beliefs (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2008).

The primary researcher travelled to all the sites and collected data using research packets containing the informed consents and survey instruments that included the MEQ. The primary researcher distributed envelopes containing smaller marked envelopes to spousal pairs. Males took the envelopes marked *X.1 Male*, while females took the envelopes marked *X.2 Female* to complete in a predetermined order. *X* represented a number between 1 and 250. Because a number set denoted a spousal pair, this eliminated the problem of mix-ups. The researcher asked the participants to complete the questionnaires in this order: They completed the qualitative section first, then the quantitative section, then finally the demographic section. The questionnaire was also constructed in that order.

The researcher asked all the spouses to go to two different parts of the room (one for males, and another for females) to ensure that couples did not discuss their responses. This was possible due to the large size of the fellowship halls. There was adequate furniture for all participants to sit comfortably as far away from each other without sharing their responses. The primary researcher had an assistant at each of the sites who assisted with ensuring that participants recorded individual responses. After the spouses completed the forms, the researcher asked them to replace the instruments in individual envelopes and seal them.

Spouses had to place the two sealed envelopes in the bigger envelope. The focus here is on the qualitative part of the study.

Participants completed the questionnaires in 30 to 45 minutes. The open response items occurred at the beginning of the MEQ, with three quarters of a page space allocated for each response. There were no legibility issues as participants had at least graduated from high school.

## Data Analysis

Transcendental phenomenology informed data analysis. Data analysis included the following four phases. First, researchers transcribed and color-coded data according to collection regions. In the semantic analysis process they listed all the words used by participants in answering the question about their expectations of a marital partner. Next, the primary researcher and two other researchers discussed their experiences related to marital expectations. The researchers were from sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States. This discussion brought to light their biases related to marital expectations, and bracket those (Moustakas, 1994).

## Results

The researchers followed four steps to reach identified themes. These were (a) epoché (or bracketing), (b) horizontalization and clustering horizons into themes, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) synthesis of meanings and essences.

### The Four-Step Process

In bracketing (or epoché), researchers separated their perceptions and experiences related to marital expectations. This process enabled the researchers to approach data analysis without judgement or preconceived ideas (Moustakas, 1994).

The second phase, horizontalization, was derived from the word horizon – horizons are limitless. One can never exhaust the number of experiences as they interact with an experience. In horizontalization, researchers considered the list of words. Researchers removed irrelevant and repeated words, resulting in a list of different words. This resulted in horizons, where every voice must be represented. Some examples from the horizons included (a) provider, (b) protector, (c) unconditional love, (e) companionship, and (d) similar beliefs.

The researchers clustered the horizons with similar meanings (textural meanings, Moustakas). In this article, the researchers used a horizontal cluster of meaning interchangeably with the term *code*. An example of a horizontal cluster with similar meanings included (a) provider, (b) caring, (c) nurturer, and (d) supportive. The next step clustered the horizons into themes. The last step organized the horizons and themes into a coherent textural description of the phenomenon.

Imaginative variation was the third step in the research process. This step consisted of examining themes and horizons and imagining possibilities of meanings. The focus was on the essence of the experiences and perspectives of the participants, not on facts related to the data. Three researchers individually reviewed the data and recorded their findings. They then shared and discussed their findings. Finally, they agreed on common emerging themes.

The final step of Synthesis of Meanings and Essences consisted of the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement. The unified statement contained the essence of the experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). The essence was similar to the distillation of the understandings

of the phenomenon, based on the previous step and the common understandings researchers reach.

The research question of interest from the MEQ asked: What are the experiences of African immigrant married couples and U.S.-born married couples as it relates to marital expectations? The goal of the qualitative research was to understand shared lived experiences in marital expectations of the two participant groups. Additionally, the goal of the qualitative research was to further understand the expectations possessed by both groups. Researchers identified four themes that emerged from the data: (a) Care and Support, (b) Love and Affection, (c) Commitment, and (d) Shared Values.

<b>Table 2: Four Themes of Marital Expectations with Related Codes</b>	
Themes	Codes (Horizontal Clusters of Meaning)
Care and Support	Caring and Nurturing Friend Raise Children Together
Love and Affection	Romantic Partner Loyalty Loving
Commitment	Long-Lasting Relationship Good Communication Joint Decision-Making and Teamwork
Shared Values	Loves God Good Character Common Values (Religion, Culture, & Beliefs)

Table 2, Four Themes of Marital Expectations with Related Codes, shows the relationship between themes and codes for all participants in the study.

*Care and Support*

*Caring and nurturing, friend, and raise children together* constituted the theme Care and Support. The most recurring code among all participants was caring and nurturing. The African immigrants had responses such as: (a) “He is supportive,” and (b) “I expect her to cook for me and be hospitable.” U.S.-born participants’ responses included: (a) “Active member in caring for and raising the family,” and (b) “Being there for one another in times of sadness and happiness.”

The code *friend* had the following quotations associated with it for African immigrants: (a) “I expect long-term, long-lasting, friendship,” and (b) “Companionship and friendship.” Among non-immigrant participants, the code *friend* was related to language such as: (a) “Life partner who shares joys and trials of life,” and (b) “Marriage is not just living together, but a passionate union of two best friends who share the joys and sorrows of life each step of the way.”

The code *raise children together* connected to the following responses from the African immigrant participants: (a) “Have children, especially boys,” and (b) “Be willing to raise a family.” Among the non-immigrants, the following quotations were related to the code *raise children together*: (a) “To share the responsibilities of parenting,” and (b) “To help with the care and training of the children.”

### Love and Affection

The theme Love and Affection consisted of the following codes: *romantic partner*, *loyalty*, and *loving*. *Loving* was the second recurring code among all participants. The quotes associated with *loving* among African immigrants were the following: (a) “Lover,” and “Love our children.” Among non-immigrant participants, the code *loving* was associated with the following quotes: (a) “This relationship requires emotional and physical intimacy,” and (b) “Love me unconditionally.”

Among the African immigrant participants the code *romantic partner* was connected to the following responses: (a) “A lover,” and (b) “Willing to satisfy in a sexual relationship.” The non-immigrants had the following responses associated with this code: (a) “I expect my partner to plan their life around our union,” and (b) “Sexual partner.”

The code *loyalty* was related to the following phrases among African immigrants: (a) “I expect to have a lifetime friend who is always there for me, and I for her,” and (b) “Be faithful, mutual faithfulness to marriage vows.” Among the non-immigrant participants, they provided the following: (a) “Loyal,” and (b) “To uphold marital vows.”

### Commitment

The codes classified under this theme were *long-lasting relationship*, *good communication*, *joint decision-making*, and *teamwork*. Among the African immigrant participants the code *long-lasting relationship* was linked to the following responses: (a) “Not to be feared by her, but have a lifetime friend that is always there for me,” and (b) “Commitment to working things out.” Among the non-immigrants, the participants had the following responses: (a) “Be best friend and permanent partner”; (c) “Long-term commitment,” and (b) “To be faithful forever, and to work on growing closer and more in love with each passing year.”

The language associated with the code *good communication* among African immigrants included the following: (a) “Open communication, commitment to working things out,” and (b) “To understand one another and agree in decision-making.” Among non-immigrant participants, the following language was associated with *good communication*: (a) “Discuss everything, even if we don’t agree, and come to some type of agreement,” and (b) “Confidant, open to sharing thoughts and feelings.”

Finally, the last code among all participants was *Joint Decision-Making and Teamwork*. Few African immigrant participants made statements related to this code. The code was prevalent among the non-immigrants. Their responses were: (a) “I expect my partner to support me fully and to share with me and consult with me in most big decisions in the family,” and (b) “Be an equal partner in running our house.”

### Shared Values

The codes classified under this theme were *Loves God*, *good character*, and *common values*. African immigrant participants had the following phrases associated with the code *Loves God*: (a) “Fears God,” and (b) “One who helps me to grow spiritually and emotionally.” Among the non-immigrants, the participants had the following phrases connected with the code *Loves God*: (a) “Christ-follower, healthy, no tobacco/alcohol,” and (b) “To help provide a loving, caring Christian home.”

*Good character* responses related to this code included the following from African immigrants: (a) “Honor, respect, cherish,” and (b) “Honesty and trust.” Among the non-

immigrants, participants' responses related to the code *good character* included: (a) "Productivity, honesty, and motivation," and (b) "Truth and sharing of responsibilities."

The code *common values* was associated with the following among African immigrant participants: (a) "Keep family customs and values," and (b) "Share my faith and beliefs." Non-immigrant participants said the following: (a) "Christian values," and (b) "Share similar religious convictions."

In answer to the research question, the authors identified four themes: Care and support; Love and affection; Commitment; and Shared values. These were distilled from clusters of horizons with similar meanings.

## Discussion

Qualitative analysis of the data elucidated the participants' marital expectations and illuminated similarities and differences between African immigrant married couples and U.S.-born married couples. The four themes that emerged from the phenomenological transcendental analysis of the 12 codes during the qualitative data analysis (Care and Support, Love and Affection, Commitment, and Shared Values) are now explored.

### Care and Support

Cramer (2006) investigated couples involved in romantic relationships. He found that emotional support broke down into care and listening. He suggested that care is the emotional support that was most related to marital satisfaction. African immigrant and U.S.-born couples identified the code *Raise Children Together* under the theme Care and Support. This is consistent with Timaeus and Reynar's (1998), Basu's (2000) and Mbiti's (1969) findings that children are highly valued in sub-Saharan marriages and contribute to their stability. If a couple is able to have children, it serves as a stabilizing factor for the marriage and a core expectation.

### Love and Affection

The theme emerged from the codes *Romantic Partner*, *Loyalty*, and *Loving*. The codes that emerged during data analysis were consistent with expectations from the Interdependence Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). This theory states that individuals create and maintain relationships based on the anticipated good outcomes they expect as benefits from relationships. *Loyalty* emerged as another code for one of the marital expectations. This was particularly true of couples from Utah, which has a large Mormon population. Additionally, Seventh-day Adventists represented a larger percentage of the participant sample. Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs) believe in the sanctity of marriage as well as faithfulness to one's spouse (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2008). Utah has a large population of Mormons, and some practice polygamy (Ertman, 2010), which is at variance with what SDAs believe. This study's findings supported those of Whisman, Dixon, and Johnson's, (1997) review of ethnographic studies from over 160 countries worldwide suggesting that infidelity was the single most common cause of marital dissolution. On the other hand, according to the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2008), SDAs believe marriage is for life unless adultery occurs. Consequently, they view loyalty as important, especially when they perceive the presence of threats in the environment. Despite the findings of previous research pointing out the prevalence of polygyny in sub-Saharan Africa (Cook, 2007; Timaeus & Reynar, 1998), the African couples did not specify loyalty as an expectation. It might be possible that they felt insulated from polygyny because it is not legal in the United States, and it might also be because practicing SDAs made

up 80.2 % of the sample, a faith that does not espouse plural marriage. SDAs lead a life of temperance that includes abstaining from immoral living, tobacco, alcohol, and unhealthy eating habits (Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2008).

Both groups associated love with sexual partnership. This related to Juvva and Bhatti's expectations of the marriage to provide sexual gratification as well as Thibaut and Kelley's *quid pro quo*.

### **Commitment**

This theme emerged from the following codes: *Long-lasting Relationship*, *Good Communication* and *Joint Decision-Making and Teamwork*. The findings from this study suggested appreciation of commitment as a marital expectation for the two cultural groups studied. It appeared from this study that good communication contributes to a long-lasting relationship and the smooth functioning of a team. Findings from Rehman and Holtzworth-Munroe's (2007) cross-cultural study demonstrated the existence of a strong association between communication behaviors and marital satisfaction. The U.S.-born individuals in this sample articulated in more detail thoughts about communication as a marital expectation. This was consistent with Rehman and Holtzworth-Munroe's research related to the importance of relationship communication. On the other hand, generally African immigrants placed less emphasis on communication as a marital expectation, and only the male participants articulated communication's importance. This might be related to the fact that usually sub-Saharan African males are more assertive in communicating their needs within marriages, than females (Ouattara, Sen, & Thomson, 1998).

Researchers identified joint decision-making and teamwork as a code only among African immigrants. The independent researchers involved in the verification were aware of the cultural significance of this code since females made the statements. Due to gender imbalances, women tend to be left out of decision-making in most sub-Saharan countries (Pettifor, Measham, Rees, & Padian, 2004; Ouattara, Sen, & Thomson, 1998). Additionally, being left out of the decision-making process also serves as a tool to oppress women in these countries. Thus, having women articulate this as an expectation, amidst cultural norms related to social acceptability about a woman's role, emphasized its importance to them. One woman even wrote her quotations in her native language (even though she had completed the questionnaire in English) to best capture her feelings regarding the importance of joint decision-making and teamwork as a marital expectation.

Both groups exhibited marriage longevity – an average of 19 years. This showed that the expectation of commitment was fulfilled. However, it is difficult to explain this stability as Thibaut and Kelley (1959) indicate that a number of forces may lead to the stability of the relationship. As stated earlier Seventh-day Adventists believe that the only grounds for divorce are adultery and domestic violence (Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 2008). The absence of these issues may lead to stable marriages.

### **Shared Values**

The final theme, shared values, emerged from the following codes: *Loves God*, *Good Character*, and *Common Values*. The shared values theme possibly resonated with this sample because of common religious beliefs. When children are born into a SDA home, parents teach similar religious beliefs, which they might hold in higher esteem than other local customs and beliefs. The norms are dictated by what SDAs believe about social relationships and mate selection. In short, most SDAs use their beliefs to guide their everyday lives. The sample from this study exhibited very similar shared values based on their beliefs.

It is important for researchers to be aware of and state their philosophical position (Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska, & Creswell, 2005). As a sub-Saharan African native, it is easy for the primary researcher to understand some of the participants' experiences. The other coauthors are from diverse cultures: Jamaican, and Euro-American. Having this diverse group enabled each to state his or her philosophical position and explore biases towards participants' experiences. It provided opportunities for a diverse team to immerse itself in the data and compare their understanding of the data from a diverse sample.

### **Similarities between African Immigrant Couples and Non-immigrant Couples**

The researchers identified similarities among African immigrant married couples and U.S.-born married couples by searching through all the horizontal clusters with similar meanings outlined in the previous section. The African immigrant couples and U.S.-born couples associated *Caring and Nurturing* as a source of support for spouses. Agreement existed between the two groups in the Care and Support theme, *Caring and Nurturing* and *Friend*, suggesting cross-cultural similarities in care and support as a marital expectation. Additionally, this also was the case for the *Loving* code.

### **Differences between African Immigrant Married Couples and Non-immigrant Married Couples**

Although the code *Caring and Nurturing* occurred similarly between the two groups, it appeared that the responses associated with each group were different. For example, among African immigrant couples, the code *Caring and Nurturing* was associated with care of the spouse and children, supporting the spouse and children, as well as care, support, and showing respect for extended families. This supports prior research regarding expectations of couples in sub-Saharan African countries include caring for extended family. On the other hand, the code *Caring and Nurturing*, among U.S.-born couples, focused on the nuclear family excluding the extended family. It included having the spouse as the protector and provider for the family, showing kindness and appreciation to each other, sharing in taking care of the children's finances and upbringing, and helping around the house. This finding was similar to that of Hall's (2006) study of the meanings young adults ascribe to marriage.

Another difference was in the code *Friend* between African immigrant couples and U.S.-born couples. Although the code occurred between the two groups, the language linked to its use was different. African immigrant couples described the qualities of a friend in their responses, while U.S.-born couples used the word friend or best friend. The use of descriptors of a friend relates to expectations associated with a spouse as a friend, who does what a friend is expected to do, in this case caring for the extended families (Juvva & Bhatti, 2006). This difference could be due to linguistic expressions based on different world views.

Regarding the *Good Character* code, gender differences appeared to exist within the two cultural groups. Researchers attributed this finding to the sub-Saharan African husband's family placing high value on their son to marry a woman with a good character. Society did not seem to have the same standard for expectations of good character for prospective husbands (Basu, 2000). Again this seems to be associated with gender imbalance, where expectations are different for females. The code *Good Communication* was another code in which there were differences between African immigrant couples and U.S.-born couples. Among the African immigrant couples husbands related to *Good Communication* than did the wives. This corroborated the findings of the importance of good communication to achieve marital satisfaction (Rehman & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2007). These qualitative differences could be attributed to cultural differences.

Among U.S.-born couples, Loyalty emerged as important among participants from Utah. This may be due to polygamy in that part of the country as there are a large number of Mormons in this region of the U.S. who may engage in this practice. The concept can also be related to Juvva and Bhatti's marital expectation of the *ideal partner*. For the code *Long-lasting Relationship* was mentioned by the U.S.-born couples who resided in the Pacific Northwest. The code *Romantic Partner* occurred related to responses from African immigrant couples. Researchers attributed this finding to the high importance in sub-Saharan Africa of ensuring that both partners fulfilled their conjugal responsibilities in marriage. Most communities identify a premarital counselor for the groom-to-be (who could be an uncle) and one for the bride-to-be, usually a paternal aunt (Mbiti, 1969). This did not occur among the U.S.-born couples. The code *Common Values* occurred in U.S.-born couples, especially among the Native American couples. This did not happen among African immigrant couples. Although the researchers identified *Joint Decision-Making and Teamwork* within African immigrant couples, this did not happen among U.S.-born couples. These differences could be due to qualitative differences between the two groups based on culture – norms, beliefs, and values. This probably highlights the importance of these differences as African immigrant couples navigate the new environment to ensure survival of their marriages. This area warrants further research.

### **Implications for Married Couples**

The findings from this qualitative inquiry illuminated similarities and differences in marital expectations that existed in a sample of U.S.-born and African immigrant married couples. Both groups resonated with the themes of *Care and Support* and *Shared Values*. Based on this finding, implications for couples are that (a) care and support seems to be a valued expectation for couples regardless of their values and beliefs; and (b) shared values are an important expectation among married couples. This might be helpful to strengthen the relationships of married couples. While all couples identified the importance of care and support and shared values within their relationship, African immigrant couples expanded expectations for care and support to extended families. This finding shows how culture affects meanings associated with phrases used in certain contexts.

Both U.S.-born married couples and African immigrants specified *joint decision-making and teamwork* as a marital expectation. This indicates that joint decision-making contributes to marital satisfaction. Another difference between the two groups was that U.S.-born married couples indicated equally across gender that open communication was a vital marital expectation, whereas among the African immigrants, only a few men indicated that this was an important expectation. As we previously mentioned, husbands are heads of households, and have the upper hand in most sub-Saharan African immigrant relationships. The husbands have the freedom to communicate openly. However, wives may not be able to communicate openly within marital relationships due to the gender imbalance. Consequently, African couples may not view open communication as an important marital expectation.

### **Limitations**

Limitations exist with respect to the homogeneous nature of the participants. Although they differed in nationality, the sample was mostly Seventh-day Adventist (SDA), older, college educated, and married over 19 years. Additionally, this sample had specific cultural and lifestyle prescriptions for behavior, which participants espoused. In spite of these limitations, the study identified some important cultural differences that can help those intending to marry within or outside the populations studied. Another limitation is that the sub-



Saharan African immigrants are at varying stages of acculturation. The findings from this study might not be applicable to the majority of sub-Saharan African married couples. Future research could explore marital expectations with younger couples. With understanding the impact marital expectations have on marital quality and stability, much can be learned from cross cultural analyses and impacts of acculturation.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to conduct a qualitative survey study to obtain a deeper understanding of marital expectations held by married African immigrants and U.S.-born couples. When sub-Saharan African immigrants live in the United States, they are immersed in cultures that are different from their own. We found some similarities and differences with respect to marital expectations between U.S.-born and African immigrant married couples. Care and support along with shared values appeared to be important marital expectations for both groups. The themes of joint decision-making, teamwork, and communication appeared more important for U.S.-born couples than the African immigrant group. However, differences existed within codes such as African-immigrant participants including extended family with immediate family within their expectations for care and nurturing. Additionally, U.S.-born couples emphasized loyalty more than their African immigrant counterparts. Future research should include a more diverse sample in religious beliefs, age, education and duration of marriage. Additionally, an examination of how expectations change or remain stable over time might also prove beneficial for marital expectations literature.

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