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COMMITMENT IN MARRIAGE: AN INFLUENCE  
FOR MORAL GROWTH

by

Shelly E. Powell

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

Psychology Department

Brigham Young University

August 2009

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate's committee, I have read the thesis of Shelly E. Powell in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographic style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements, (2) its illustrative materials, including figures, tables, and charts are in place, and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

COMMITMENT IN MARRIAGE: AN INFLUENCE  
FOR MORAL GROWTH

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Marriage continues to be one of the most important relationships to today's Americans (Fowers, 2000), generating numerous studies on the physical, emotional, mental and financial outcomes of marriage (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Yet, little research has been done to explore the moral outcomes of marriage. Examining how marriage may contribute to individual spouses' moral development is compatible with recent studies on marital virtues that aim to provide a more complete as well as less individualistic view of marriage (Hawkins, Fowers, Carroll, & Yang, 2007). This study adopts a moral personality approach to examine marriage's role in adult moral development. Taking a moral personality approach when studying marriage's influence allows for a broader understanding of moral development that includes character virtues and identity constructs. In order to examine how marriage may exert such a moral influence, it is necessary to focus on aspects of marriage that are characteristically different from those of other relationships. Commitment is one aspect of marriage

thought to set it apart as distinct from other relationships (Adams & Jones, 1997). This study examines how commitment may play a role in the moral development of individual spouses themselves. The purpose of the present study was to examine, using qualitative methods, how married individuals experience commitment and how that commitment may be associated with a greater motivation to be moral. Couples were interviewed on how they experience commitment in their marriages. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using grounded theory methods. Themes that emerged were organized into the following seven categories: (1) What marriage means; (2) What commitment in marriage means; (3) Examples of the influence of marriage; (4) Moral traits and the influence of spouses; (5) Themes relating to identity; (6) Commitment, challenges, and personal growth; and (7) Other influences on moral development. Themes are discussed in terms of their relation to past literature and how they might be integrated into a conceptual model. Implications for practitioners and suggestions for future research are given.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| INTRODUCTION .....  | 1  |
| LITERATURE REVIEW .....                                       | 3  |
| Benefits of Marriage .....                                    | 3  |
| The Next Step: Examining the Moral Outcomes of Marriage ..... | 5  |
| A Moral Personality Approach .....                            | 6  |
| Character, Traits, and Virtues .....                          | 8  |
| Moral Identity .....  | 9  |
| The Interpersonal Nature of Morality .....                    | 11 |
| The Influence of Relationships on Moral Development .....     | 11 |
| The Marriage Relationship .....                               | 14 |
| Marriage is Different from other Relationships .....          | 15 |
| Commitment in Marriage .....                                  | 16 |
| Marital Commitment and Individual Development .....           | 19 |
| The Present Study .....                                       | 20 |
| Researcher Biases .....                                       | 20 |
| Contributions of the Present Study .....                      | 21 |
| METHOD .....  | 22 |
| Participants .....  | 22 |
| Procedure .....   | 23 |
| The Interview .....   | 24 |
| Analysis .....  | 24 |
| RESULTS .....   | 29 |

|  |    |
|--|----|
| The “Core Category” .....                                      | 30 |
| Themes that Provide Context.....                               | 31 |
| Category 1: What Marriage Means.....                           | 31 |
| Category 2: What Commitment in Marriage Means.....             | 35 |
| Themes Relating to the Research Questions.....                 | 40 |
| Category 3: Examples of the Influence of Marriage.....         | 40 |
| Category 4: Moral Traits and the Influence of Spouses .....    | 47 |
| Category 5: Themes Relating to Identity .....                  | 53 |
| Category 6: Commitment, Challenges, and Personal Growth .....  | 55 |
| A Notable Exception.....                                       | 65 |
| Themes Relating to Additional Findings .....                   | 66 |
| Category 7: Other Influences on Moral Development.....         | 66 |
| DISCUSSION.....  | 68 |
| The Findings in Relation to Past Literature .....              | 68 |
| Discussion of Context Themes .....                             | 68 |
| Discussion of Marriage Influences and Moral Development .....  | 69 |
| Discussion of Additional Influences .....                      | 74 |
| A Proposed Model .....   | 76 |
| Processes of Moral Development during Marital Challenges ..... | 76 |
| Implications for Practitioners.....                            | 79 |
| Limitations .....  | 81 |
| Suggestions for Future Research .....                          | 82 |
| CONCLUSION.....  | 83 |

|                  |     |
|------------------|-----|
| REFERENCES ..... | 84  |
| APPENDIX A ..... | 94  |
| APPENDIX B ..... | 95  |
| APPENDIX C ..... | 96  |
| APPENDIX D ..... | 99  |
| APPENDIX E ..... | 104 |

## LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Table 1 Moral Traits Compared to Traits Found in Present Study .....             | 48 |
| Table 2 Challenges to Marital Commitment .....                                   | 56 |
| Table 3 Ways Couples Discussed Responding to Challenges .....                    | 57 |
| Table 4 Challenges Experienced when Feeling Especially Committed to Spouse ..... | 60 |
| Figure 1 Ways Couples Discussed Responding to Challenges .....                   | 78 |

## INTRODUCTION

Despite recent trends of high divorce rates and increased cohabitation, marriage continues to be one of the most important relationships to today's Americans (Fowers, 2000). Such strong interest in marriage has generated numerous studies on the physical, emotional, mental and financial outcomes of marriage (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Evidence continues to support the claim that marriage benefits individuals in a multitude of ways. Given the interest in such a variety of marital outcomes, the present study now focuses on the possible moral outcomes of marriage, specifically in terms of how marriage may contribute to individual spouses' moral development. This topic is, to my knowledge, new to the literature. Yet, it is compatible with recent studies on marital virtues that aim to provide a more complete as well as less individualistic view of marriage (Hawkins et al., 2007). Understanding how marriage may contribute to individual moral development may bridge the marriage and morality literatures.

The morality literature has recognized how other types of relationships may influence moral development. These relationships include parent-child (Eisenberg & Murphy, 1995), peer and friend relationships (Carlo, Fabes, Laible, & Kupanoff, 1999), all of which are salient types of relationships in the lives of children and adolescents. The present study, in contrast, focused on a traditional adult relationship: marriage. Examining the role that the marriage relationship plays in moral development requires attention to questions regarding how moral development may continue into adulthood. Such questions are best understood from a moral personality approach that accounts for change across the lifespan. The moral personality approach takes a broader understanding of morality that includes a wide array of personality factors, such as emotions and

identity (Lapsley, 1996). Moral personality scholars have also shown recent interest in character virtues similar to those labeled as marital virtues. These may include loyalty, generosity, humility, etc. (Hawkins et al., 2007; Walker & Pits, 1998). Examining how marriage may influence the development of such traits in the lives of individual spouses will portray a more complete view of marriage as well as contribute to understanding adult moral development in marriage. In order to examine how marriage may exert such a moral influence, it is necessary to focus on aspects of marriage that are characteristically different from those of other relationships.

Perhaps one of the most significant factors that makes marriage different is the type of commitment that is involved. Entering into a serious commitment is one of the unique opportunities that marriage provides. This strong level of commitment sets marriage apart from other intimate relationships (Adams & Jones, 1997), which perhaps makes commitment a key tool in understanding how marriage contributes to continued moral development. Marital commitment may be one of the main mechanisms through which married individuals experience moral growth. Commitment may be related to how dedicated spouses are to working through situations of conflict, how accountable they feel to their spouse, and in short, how motivated they are to making things work. When commitment is present, transformative changes may occur that improve the quality of the relationship (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). Commitment is often discussed in terms of how it contributes to the success of the relationship, but the question remains open as to how marital commitment changes spouses themselves. In attempting to answer this question, we will look at the moral outcomes of marriage when commitment is present. The purpose of this study is to examine, through qualitative methods, how married

individuals experience commitment and how that commitment may be associated with other moral virtues.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Benefits of Marriage

Researchers have been providing evidence for decades on how marriage may benefit individuals. Marriage seems to be a strong predictor of emotional, mental and physical health, and financial stability. The literature on these phenomena is rich and abundant and will only be briefly reviewed here to provide background for the purposes of this project (for a more complete review see Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Marriage has been shown to be highly related to health and longevity. Unmarried people have been shown to be more likely than married people to die from all the leading causes of death, namely heart disease, stroke, pneumonia, cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, car accidents, murder and suicide, and married individuals are shown to live longer on average (Fowers, 2000; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Other research has found that couples who report more positive spousal interactions have a lower likelihood of suffering from periodontal disease, rheumatoid arthritis, and cardiovascular problems (Kiecolt-Glasier & Newton, 2001). Positive interactions and marriages of high quality seem to enhance functioning of the immune system (Kiecolt-Glasier et al., 1993). Not only has marriage been associated with lower rates of illness in general (Fowers, 2000), but it has also been noted for its healing influence when individuals are recovering from surgical cancer treatment (Goodwin, Hunt, Key, & Samet, 1987).

Several studies have also linked marriage with emotional and mental health benefits. Married individuals generally have lower rates of mental illness and better

psychological health (Gove, 1990). They are especially less likely to experience anxiety and depression and are less likely to commit suicide (Fowers, 2000). Surveying several studies, Waite and Gallagher (2000) found that widowed and divorced individuals have been shown to be three times more likely than married individuals to commit suicide. Simon (2002) analyzed data from the National Survey of Families and Households, first in 1987-88, and then again in 1992-94. Evidence suggested that married individuals reported less depressive symptoms than never married, separated, divorced or widowed individuals.

Marriage also appears to be one of the strongest predictors of happiness. When adults were surveyed about whether they were happy with their life in general, the following percentages of adults responded affirmatively: 15 % of those separated, 18% of those divorced, and 22% of those who were widowed, single, and co-habiting. Yet, 40% of married people affirmatively said they were happy with their life in general (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). In a longitudinal study conducted by Marks and Lambert (1998), people substantially experienced improved mental health when they married. Those that separated or divorced experienced a deterioration in their mental health. Researchers controlled for physical health and measured mental health over eleven different dimensions.

In addition to the various health benefits, married people experience greater financial well-being. According to the 2007 Current Population Survey of the United States Census Bureau, the mean income for married couple families in 2006 was \$88,808 compared to \$42,460 for single men living alone and \$31,581 for single women living alone. In a longitudinal study (Gadalla, 2009) that followed men's and women's incomes



over a five-year period during and after a divorce or separation, researchers found that both men and women experienced a drop in their incomes, the most dramatic drop being for women.

In summary, married individuals, on average are healthier, happier, more mentally stable, and financially better-off than individuals who are not married. The present study expands the body of research on marital outcomes by focusing on the possible moral outcomes of marriage.

#### The Next Step: Examining the Moral Outcomes of Marriage

Better physical, emotional, and mental health and better financial well-being all seem like nice bonuses to getting married, but are they the reasons why people get married? They may certainly come across as additional considerations to add to the list of reasons to marry versus reasons not to, but for some individuals there may be a deeper issue at hand. Researchers (Fowers, 2000; Waite & Gallagher, 2000) have tried to demonstrate that marriage is often seen as a mechanism for personal satisfaction. While marriage may, indeed, be personally satisfying, to view it only as a means for individual fulfillment is a perspective that has not helped couples achieve successful marriages (Fowers, 2000).

In a similar vein, Hawkins et al. (2007) propose that many models of marriage are too individualistic. To address this issue, they have taken a “spousal strength” approach to marriage. This approach emphasizes the various character strengths that marriage partners may contribute to the marriage in terms of how they account for overall marital quality. According to these scholars, studying marriage from a spousal strength perspective may provide a more complete portrayal of marriage. They discuss various

virtues that are important to good marriages, such as generosity, loyalty, sacrifice, devotion, maturity, humility, willingness to sacrifice, etc. Hawkins et al. (2007) states that spousal strengths such as these deepen our understanding of how marriage partners further the quality of their relationship as well as how they benefit from their marriage. In alignment with this research, the present study focuses on commitment as a primary quality and virtue that uniquely characterizes marriage. By doing so, a deeper understanding of how committed partners experience moral growth in marriage may be obtained.

Gaining this understanding will help the marriage literature expand the possibilities for developing new models of marriage. These models may grow and develop from research, such as the present study, on moral outcomes of marriage, and reach beyond the “personal satisfaction” models of marriage. When marriage is not immediately satisfying to couples, due to various challenges and obstacles, an alternative, less individualistic perspective may be offered. Couples may benefit from evidence that could show that overcoming challenges together has the potential to restore and even strengthen the quality of the marriage relationship and foster overall personal growth and moral development in individual spouses.

#### A Moral Personality Approach

To understand the links between marital commitment and moral development, a conceptualization of moral personality and how it fits in with the present study is essential. Understanding what moral maturity entails is necessary in order to understand how it may be fostered by marriage. The following information demonstrates how moral personality differs from past approaches to morality and how it is appropriate for the

present study, as this approach allows for the most broad and complete understanding of moral maturity.

Moral psychology has undergone several developments over the years. Beginning with Kohlberg (1969), moral maturity has been understood as the ability to understand moral issues and utilize principled moral reasoning. He described his approach as “cognitive developmental,” in which moral development entails increasing one’s refinement in the ability to reason whether given actions are right or wrong. Kohlberg thought that having an understanding of moral principles would be inherently motivating and should compel one toward moral action.

Although Kohlberg’s theory of moral development has been highly influential, the field has since then been full of controversies concerning how to define and assess morality. Campbell and Christopher (1996) claim that moral psychology’s most prevalent perspectives have been too restrictive in their definitions of morality and have thus ignored issues such as the development of the self and personal values. The consequence, according to Campbell and Christopher (1996), has been an unnatural split between moral development and personality development. In response to such critiques, a growing number of morality scholars are moving toward a moral personality approach (Lapsley & Narvaez, 2004).

A moral personality approach means that moral maturity is no longer seen only as sophistication in moral reasoning, as a more encompassing concept that includes cognition, emotion, and personality constructs, such as virtues, traits and character (Lapsley, 1996). As scholars have attempted to integrate morality with personality, two distinct approaches have been taken, one focusing on a social cognitive approach, and the

other on trait and dispositional constructs (Narvaez, Lapsley, Hagele & Lasky, 2006). The social cognitive approach is interested in the accessibility and activation of knowledge, such as moral constructs, and in how individuals differ in their accessibility of such knowledge (Narvaez et al., 2006). Focusing on traits and disposition has yielded research on different dimensions of moral personality, such as brave, just, and caring (Walker & Hennig, 2004). Past research on traits and virtues is most relevant to the present study in that it overlaps with marital virtues research and relates to questions about how marriage influences the development of moral attributes.

### *Character, Traits, and Virtues*

The field has recently experienced a great interest in returning to matters of moral character and in attempting to conceptualize them as psychological constructs. Although focusing on traits and virtues has received criticisms over the years, it highly resonates with the general public and those not formally trained in such psychological matters (Lapsley & Lasky, 2001). Hence, researchers have begun to examine lay conceptions of morality, i.e. the general population's views on morality. Some notable examples of work that examines lay conceptions of morality include Walker and Pitts (1998) and Lapsley and Lasky (2001).

Walker and Pitts (1998) examined common notions of morality that are at work in everyday life. Participants were asked to free list attributes that describe a "highly moral person." A new group of participants then rated each trait on how central is was to being a highly moral person. Next, participants engaged in a sorting task, sorting the descriptors into groups of similar descriptors. A hierarchical cluster analysis suggested six main clusters: (1) Principled-Idealistic, (2) Dependable-Loyal, (3) Has Integrity, (4)

Caring-Trustworthy, (5) Fair, and (6) Confident. Lapsley and Lasky (2001) conducted a similar study in which they looked at descriptors of a “good person.”

Several traits identified in both studies as prototypic of the “highly moral person” and the “good person” overlap with traits that have been identified as marital virtues. As researchers identify traits that cluster together into possible moral personality types, it is possible to gain further understanding of what marital virtues may cluster together, or which traits may accompany and enhance marital virtues. Understanding the link between moral traits and marital virtues also helps in identifying the connection between marriage and moral development.

### *Moral Identity*

Another central aspect of moral personality is moral identity. Terms such as “moral identity” and “moral self” refer to the fundamental concept of how a person’s morality is related to his/her self-understanding. For example, “One has a moral identity to the extent that moral notions, such as being good, being just, and being fair, are judged to be central, important, and essential to one’s self-understanding” (Lapsley, 1996, p. 227). This statement exemplifies how the moral identity literature may draw upon moral traits, such as being good, just and fair. Moral identity also relates to a person’s self integrity, meaning that the strength of the moral identity is related to how strongly a person is committed to living in accordance with those virtues that are seen as central to his/her self (Lapsley, 1996, p. 227).

One model that has been noted to be particularly useful when describing moral identity is Blasi’s model of the moral self (Blasi, 1984; Hardy & Carlo, 2005). This model suggests four steps for how the moral self might develop. Step 1 involves an

individual constructing cognitive moral structures through social interaction and role-taking and developing an understanding of social reality. In step 2, these constructs then come to influence the individual's ideals. In step 3, these ideals influence the construction of the ideal moral self, which then becomes central to the person's self-understanding and then leads to action. Step 4 is when this ideal moral self becomes the source to which one turns when making moral decisions. Judgments are based on their self-integrity to judge and act in accordance with their ideal moral self.

There is still much that is not understood about moral identity formation in general, including moral identity development in adulthood. However, the identity status model (Marcia, 1966) may be helpful in understanding some of the issues behind the broader concept of identity formation in general. Hardy & Carlo (in press) note that the identity status model may encompass moral principles in terms of how exploring and committing to various moral principles may contribute to a strong moral identity. Drawing upon Marcia's (1966) work on identity statuses, recent research has begun to explore identity development processes among adults that were once applied primarily to adolescents. Identity status involves how thoroughly an individual has explored his/her identity options in combination with how strongly a person has committed to a particular identity. The process of exploration and commitment may be repeated on different degrees and to different extents throughout life. Adolescents may initially explore and commit to a particular identity, and then these commitments may be reexamined later in adulthood in terms of how the exploration and commitment played out (Kroger, 2002).

Identity change in adulthood has also been described in terms of identity consolidation, meaning that as an individual transitions from adolescence into adulthood,

the individual consolidates his/her adolescent identity with the social demands of adult life (Pals, 1999). According to Pals (1999), this may involve an individual investing in new roles, responsibilities and contexts, including marriage. Pals (1999) examined marriage as a context for identity consolidation, considering marriage an identity investment in new roles and responsibilities. Married women were asked such questions as “Have you changed as a result of marriage? If so, how?” The present study is similar in that marriage is viewed as a possible context for identity development and personal growth in general for both men and women, and how linkages to moral identity are made.

#### *The Interpersonal Nature of Morality*

Up to this point, much of the literature cited has related to perspectives on the processes and perceptions of what it means to become and be a moral person. It is important to here highlight the relational, interpersonal nature behind the definition of morality that will be used in the present study. Some of the traits that describe the “Highly Moral Person” (Walker & Pitts, 1998) and the “Good Person” (Lapsley & Lasky, 2001) are traits that only make sense when directed toward another human being, such as “helpful,” “selfless,” and “faithful.” An individual needs someone to be helpful to, someone to be selfless for and someone to be faithful to. When understood from this perspective, interpersonal relationships can be viewed as significant influences in the development of one’s moral personality as individuals interact, learn from each other, and exercise those moral attributes with each other.

#### The Influence of Relationships on Moral Development

Of special interest to the present study is how social relationships themselves affect moral development. In earlier research, peers have been viewed as the primary

source of moral development in children, focusing mainly on moral reasoning (Walker, 1999). Research has then been extended to include family interactions as an additional source of moral development in children, recognizing ways that interacting with parents and siblings could promote moral development.

Peer relationships are seen as significant influences on prosocial and moral behaviors, especially during adolescence (Carlo et al., 1999). Peers are usually equal in relationship power and social status, as opposed to the hierarchical difference that exists in parent-child and other adult-child relationships. This allows peers to apply and receive prosocial behaviors on a socially equal basis (Carlo, 2006). Peers may influence prosocial and moral development through reciprocal interaction, feedback and communication (Youniss, 1994), and by offering support (Belle, Burr, & Cooney, 1987). Some research (Berndt, 1999) has suggested that friends are able to motivate and influence behavior by providing opportunities to model prosocial behaviors that are observed as friends interact. Berndt (1999) suggested that stable and positive friendships may affect the extent to which friends influence each other.

The parent-child relationship is another type of relationship recognized as having an impact in children's moral development. Parents may provide information to children through their own actions and example, through various discipline methods, and other verbalizations and interactions (Eisenberg & Murphy, 1995). The parent-child relationship is a reciprocal relationship in which children may interpret and evaluate parents' behavior and then reciprocally influence how the parents respond (Dunn, 2006; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). For example, parents' interactions with children during discipline may help children internalize prosocial behaviors and moral values. This may



occur through example, teaching, reinforcement of appropriate behavior, etc. (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Moderate correlations have also been found between parents' and children's views on forgiveness (Mullet, Girard, & Bakhshi, 2004). Parents may communicate concepts of forgiveness through education and forgiveness practices in the family.

Peer and parent-child relationships have been studied in terms of how they contribute to children's moral development. The influence of these relationships is usually not examined in the opposite direction in terms of how they influence the adult involved. Research that accounts for the influence of marital interactions on the moral development of spouses themselves does not exist in the literature. Much of the past literature is partly a product of biases and assumptions that have permeated the field of psychology, and by extension, moral personality. One of these assumptions is that personality traits are enduring and become solidified into adulthood (Costa & McCrae, 1997). Conceptualizing personality in this way implies that there is little change past adolescence. Although most prior work on relationships and morality focuses on children and adolescents, some scholars offer an alternative view, mainly that personality may change and adapt throughout the lifespan (Caspi, Roberts, & Shiner, 2005). For example, some researchers such as Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, and Stephens (2003) have examined moral development among individuals in emerging adulthood. Adopting the perspective that personality may adapt throughout the lifespan removes theoretical limitations on personality change and expands the theoretical possibilities for how moral personality may develop throughout adulthood. Particular adult experiences, such as marriage, can then be further explored.

## The Marriage Relationship

Although research has not examined how the marriage relationship may be associated with moral personality outcomes, some studies have looked at select behaviors influenced by marriage. In one longitudinal study, (Leonard & Mudar, 2003), couples were assessed at marriage and then again at their first anniversary. Wives reported fewer instances of heavy drinking and fewer instances of drinking that led to intoxication. Husbands reported that they had fewer friends they considered “drinking buddies” at the time of their first anniversary as compared to the time they were married. Both wives and husbands reported that their peer network overlapped more. In a similar longitudinal study, Leonard and Homish (2005) found that marriage may likely have an influence related to a decrease in marijuana substance abuse. They found that husbands were more likely to not use marijuana if their wives did not.

In addition to examining such behaviors, other studies recognize opportunities that marriage encompasses that may result in other positive outcomes. For example, Boldizar, Wilson, & Deemer (1989) stated that marriage provides unique opportunities for role-taking and conflict resolution as spouses engage in joint-decision making. Engaging in role-taking and conflict resolution may encourage individuals to develop empathy as they take on the perspective of their spouse. Perspective-taking has been recognized as a key component in developing human empathy (Decety, 2005). Empathy has often been connected to other marital virtues, such as forgiveness (Burchard et al., 2003; Worthington, 1998), which is viewed as fundamental to successful marriages (Fincham et al., 2007).

Marriage may also act as a social support for spouses during times of stress.

Social support in marriage may include communication, being responsive to and fulfilling a partner's needs, and focusing on friendship in the marriage (Sullivan, Pasch, Eldridge, & Bradbury, 1998). Social support may be an essential factor in helping couples resolve conflict (Sullivan et.al, 1998).

### *Marriage is Different from other Relationships*

Marriage is different from other relationships cited above simply because of the differences in power and authority as well as romantic interest. To explain this more fully, marriage is different from a parent-child relationship because spouses are roughly equal in age and ideally in power and authority in the relationship. Marriage is different from peer relationships because marriage introduces a romantic interest as well as a level of intimacy that is qualitatively different. Perhaps the most comparably similar relationships to marriage are other romantic relationships, such as those between couples who cohabit without the marriage contract.

Some studies show that the relationships of couples who are not married but cohabit are different. For example, Kline et al. (2004) found that couples who co-habited before they were engaged or married experienced more negative interactions and experienced lower interpersonal commitment after marriage than those who waited to cohabit until engagement or marriage. Differences were most marked between the group that cohabited before marriage or engagement and the group who cohabited only after marriage. Researchers also found that both groups who cohabited before marriage experienced less positive interactions than the group that waited until after marriage. This provides evidence that marriage is different from other intimate relationships.

From the research cited above, it seems that marriage has the potential to exert a positive influence on individuals. Some of the important characteristics of marriage that may contribute to these benefits include a sense of permanence, residing together, a shared productivity, and a socially recognized sexual union where children may be reared (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Doherty, Carroll, and Waite (2007) suggest that several other important qualities of marriage stem from those mentioned above, such as a specialization of labor in the family, economic advantages, a sharing of resources, etc.

What do all of these factors have in common? They are the result of two individuals joining their lives together through a strong, formal commitment. The characteristics of marriage mentioned above are likely to occur because the spouses have made a promise to each other that is legally binding, a promise to live their lives together working for the other's well-being (Doherty et al., 2007). What makes these benefits of marriage effective? Both spouses have made a commitment, which means that each spouse can potentially have confidence in the other to carry out actions that sustain the goals of the union. The proposed study intends to look at the experiences within such commitment and examine whether there is a deeper meaning associated with a continual effort to improve oneself. Does being in a committed relationship contribute to an individual's desire to improve oneself through developing moral virtues?

#### Commitment in Marriage

Commitment is possibly one quality of marriage, as well as a moral virtue (Lapsley & Lasky, 2001), that uniquely characterizes marriage. For example, marriage provides an opportunity to enter into a serious relationship/commitment in a way that differs from other relationships/commitments. Marriage is markedly different from dating

or cohabiting simply because of the legally binding aspect. According to Adams and Jones (1997), commitment may be especially prominent in marriage because there exist interpersonal, social, and legal issues that are usually not present in other intimate relationships. Commitment has also shown to be greater among married couples than among dating couples, with commitment increasing across stages of dating up to marriage (Stanley & Markman, 1992). When considering this evidence, commitment stands out as an important construct to consider with regards to moral outcomes in marriage. Because commitment is unique in marriage, focusing on commitment will foster understanding of how marriage, as opposed to other relationships, may result in moral outcomes.

Couples have reported that commitment is central to their marital success (Adams & Jones, 1997), but examining commitment becomes complicated when considering the several different ways in which it has been defined. The first complication concerns the referent to which one is committed. One can be committed to the marriage relationship itself, to keeping one's promises/ marital vows, or to one's spouse as a person with value (Adams & Jones, 1997). Research is unclear as to whether these differences with regards to the referent of commitment actually reflect important distinctions in the processes of commitment between spouses.

Another complication relates to understanding what commitment actually entails. Commitment has been conceptualized as having a moral element in the sense that commitment entails spouses feeling a moral obligation to keep their marital vows and uphold marriage as a sacred institution (Adams & Jones, 1997). Stanley and Markman (1992) have distinguished between two dimensions of marital commitment. One

dimension, *personal dedication commitment*, is described as a desire to maintain or improve the quality of the relationship for the joint benefit of the marriage partners. A second dimension, *constraint commitment*, refers to commitment that is maintained because of pressure from forces that make terminating the relationship difficult. These dimensions are not seen as necessarily independent from one another, and in fact, what might be personal dedication today may turn into constraint tomorrow, according to this view. For example, two people may feel personal dedication as they exercise a desire to be with the other person in a marriage relationship, but as they enter into the marriage, legal constraints are placed upon them that make ending the relationship much more complex and difficult.

Amato (2007) has introduced another perspective on commitment, suggesting that the construct of marital commitment still lacks development both theoretically and empirically. According to Amato, one may question whether it is really commitment for a spouse to remain in the marriage merely because of constraint. Rather, commitment can best be observed when it is tested, such as when spouses are faced with unhappiness or tension in their marriage. Amato (2007) notes four possible responses and corresponding levels of commitment that spouses can display in the face of unhappiness. One response would be to simply leave the relationship. This would show an absence of commitment. A second response would be to remain in the relationship but to either disengage from one's spouse or deny that a problem exists. This would show a minimal level of commitment. A third response would be to stay with one's spouse and trust that the relationship will improve. This shows a stronger level of commitment. A fourth response

would be to actively work out disagreements and aim to make the marriage satisfying again. This shows the highest level of commitment.

Commitment is important to understand because it may also be related to nurturing other virtues. For example, relationships in which spouses are highly committed are also often characterized by greater accommodation, and more effective problem solving (Adams & Jones, 1997). Accommodative behavior (Rusbult, Bissonnette, Arriaga, & Cox, 1998) occurs when spouses put greater priority on the long-term stability of the relationship by sacrificing their own short-term well-being. Accommodation may also include accepting the faults of a spouse, forgiving a spouse, or dispelling the desire to retaliate when a spouse has done something hurtful (Amato, 2007).

Forgiveness and sacrifice in connection with commitment each have potential to enable an individual to meet the challenges or problems that arise with his/her marriage partner. By exercising sacrifice, forgiveness, and commitment, a marriage relationship may experience qualitative, transformative relationship change, in that even spouses in unhappy marriages may exercise these virtues in a “self-repair” manner to bring about improvement (Fincham et al., 2007). Thus, commitment can be instrumental in effecting relationship change.

#### *Marital Commitment and Individual Development*

When studies, such as the research cited above, look at the effects of commitment, it is often in terms of how commitment affects the marriage relationship. For example, researchers are interested in commitment’s potential to further the understanding of marital quality and stability (Amato, 2007). In addition to understanding ways in which

commitment may affect a marriage relationship itself, the question remains as to how commitment may affect the individual. For example, the exploration that occurs during dating and the commitment that occurs as couples enter into a marriage might parallel the exploration and commitment processes outlined in the identity status model (Marcia, 1966). Similarly, marital commitment may be related to the personal investment in marriage that Pals (1999) referred to during identity consolidation. These are only some of the possible connections that might be drawn between marriage and how it could affect the individual. This study examines how commitment in marriage may influence the individual in terms of one's personal growth and moral personality.

#### The Present Study

The purpose of this study was to examine (1) how married individuals experience commitment in their marriage and (2) how that commitment may be associated with participants' desires to be a moral person. Because this study aims to get at the experiences of individuals, a qualitative approach using interviews was applied. Interviews were conducted with spouses separately about how they experience commitment in their marriage. The qualitative interview has been recognized as a "uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the experiences and lived meanings of the subjects' everyday world" because it allows subjects to describe their experiences in their own words (Kvale, 1994, p. 70).

#### *Researcher Biases*

Qualitative research recognizes bias as inherent in the research process, and so rather than attempting to avoid them completely, reflexivity and articulation of those biases is seen as one way to minimize research bias (Daly, 2007). In order to recognize



these biases and to increase theoretical sensitivity, the following description outlines my own biases and assumptions as the primary researcher. I view humans as agentic beings who are capable of affecting change in their lives. Being married myself, I view marriage as valuable in personal living and as important to society, and it was assumed that it would be important to those individuals who desired to participate in this study. It was anticipated that participants who experience greater levels of commitment would include more discussion of moral virtues that they are striving to develop as well as more discussion on influences that their marriage has had on their desire and ability to develop those attributes. It was also anticipated that individuals who experience greater levels of commitment would also discuss ways in which their marital commitment contributes as a motivation or influence to act morally in contexts outside of marital interactions. One hypothesis for why this may occur is that, as spouses become more committed, they hold themselves more accountable to each other for their actions, recognizing the consequences that their actions may have on their spouse and their marriage relationship. As spouses experience commitment in their marriage and feel accountable to each other, spouses may find that their marriage relationship contributes to their behavior in contexts outside of direct marital interactions, such as when they are alone or in the presence of individuals other than one's spouse. Along with outlining various assumptions and biases, attempts will be made to remain open to new possibilities, including those that contradict what has just been described.

#### *Contributions of the Present Study*

This study may contribute to the literature in the following ways: (1) Commitment will be better understood. A qualitative study allows for dimensions and processes of

commitment to emerge that quantitative research has either not yet fully accessed or has not yet clearly understood. (2) Morality research will gain insight into how marital commitment may influence and even motivate individuals to act morally in a marriage relationship as well as in contexts outside of marital interactions. (3) Marital research and morality research will be bridged. These research areas have much to offer each other. One example of the overlap in marital research and morality research is seen by the fact that research in marriage has more recently advocated approaching marriage in terms of moral virtues, such as integrity and commitment, that spouses exercise within the marriage relationship (Fowers, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2007). This study bridges marital research and morality research by providing insight into the processes that occur within marriage that affect the spouses themselves, particularly in terms of their moral development, moral commitment, and sense of accountability to their spouse as a motivating factor.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

In accordance with grounded theory methods (Daly, 2006), a purposive sample was sought. This means that a sample of individuals who are likely to experience the phenomenon of interest, namely a high level of marital commitment, was sought. The practice of theoretical sampling (Daly, 2006), also guided decisions on who to interview. This means that the completeness of ideas and perspectives from participants also guided sampling decisions.

Participants were ten married couples recruited from Utah County and Southern California. Average age was 32.3 years. The average age of male participants was 30.9

years; of female participants, 33.7 years. Eight couples were Caucasian, one couple African, and one couple Hispanic. Five couples identified themselves as Latter Day Saints, three couples and one spouse as Evangelical/Christian, one spouse as Jewish, and one couple as Spiritual/Non-denominational. The range of time married was from 8 months to 5 years (see Appendix A for a table of demographic information on age, ethnicity, and religious affiliation). Marriage between a man and a woman was of interest to this study, and all couples were in their first year of marriage. Marital status was the main criteria for participation in this study. Divorced and remarried individuals were excluded from the study because their experience with marital commitment may be qualitatively different from individuals who are in their first marriage. After conducting various pilot interviews with couples of varying lengths of marriage, it was concluded as most appropriate to the study to focus on couples more recently married. These couples demonstrated a greater ability to reflect on the changes they have experienced while transitioning from single life to married life.

### *Procedure*

Participants first provided informed consent and then completed a questionnaire regarding basic demographic information such as age, sex, number of months/years married, etc. (see Appendix B for a copy of the demographics questionnaire). Then, the researcher conducted live interviews with married couples, interviewing spouses separately (see Appendix C for a copy of the semi-structured interview questions). Since the focus of the present study was on the experience of the individual (and not necessarily the relationship), separate interviews were deemed more appropriate than interviewing couples together. As some researchers have suggested (LaRossa, Bennet, & Gelles, 1981;

Valentine, 1999), interviewing spouses separately allows individuals greater freedom to discuss their own views as well as greater freedom to discuss their marriage partner. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed using Olympus DS-40 Digital Voice Recorders and compatible Olympus transcribing equipment. Following the interview, participants signed a release form granting the researcher permission to use their interview quotes to demonstrate the findings of the study. Participants were then debriefed as to the aims of the study and were given the opportunity to ask the researcher questions.

### *The Interview*

The interview followed a semi-structured format. The questions were designed to allow participants to first reflect on any changes and similarities in life that they had experienced since being married. Participants then discussed what their marriage and commitment mean to them in general. Questions were designed to then solicit experiences that could provide evidence for how strongly the participants experience commitment in their marriage. Interview questions were also designed to understand any potential processes that participants undergo when they feel commitment in their marriage, specifically in terms of how commitment and moral development might be related. Last, interview questions were designed to guide participants to discuss goals and virtues that they may have been striving to develop and whether their marriage relationship contributes to any such efforts.

### *Analysis*

The transcribed interviews were analyzed based on modified grounded theory methods, recognizing the role the researcher plays as well as the participants in

constructing the data (Chamaz, 2006). Grounded theory allows for several different perspectives on the meaning that may emerge between interviewer and interviewee (Daly, 2006). Findings result through the interplay among the participants, the data, the researcher, etc. (Guba & Lincoln, 1995). With that perspective, the present study approached the data with flexibility and openness to other interpretations during analysis.

Analysis generally occurred in the following stages as suggested by Daly (2006): (1) Open coding and the creation of concepts; (2) Creating categories; (3) Making linkages in the data; (4) Creating the theoretical storyline. These stages represent the steps taken when analysis is the main focus of the study, but in grounded theory, it is useful to be aware that analysis occurs implicitly throughout all stages of the research project as research questions are articulated, as interviews are transcribed, and at all decisions in the study (Daly, 2006). Biases and assumptions are unavoidable during such analysis, which necessitates the use of certain strategies in order to enhance theoretical sensitivity. This is necessary throughout the project because, as Strauss and Corbin (1990) discuss, researchers come to the study with assumptions, experience and knowledge that may bias a researcher to view the data through one particular theoretical lens. These biases need to be challenged in order to facilitate viewing the data in fresh perspectives. To increase theoretical sensitivity during analysis, this study added “searching for disconfirming evidence” as a sub-stage to stage (3) Making linkages in the data.

Rather than rigidly adhering to a set of procedures, Strauss and Corbin (1990) promote being flexible and creative within a grounded theory research design to appropriately adapt to the circumstances of the project. To make appropriate adaptations,

the study made use of multiple coders throughout these stages, a method commonly used in grounded theory to enhance qualitative analysis through such means as clarifying codes (Berends & Johnston, 2005) and providing greater methodological rigor. Research assistants who were to serve as coders were first trained in qualitative research and, more specifically, in grounded theory. Pilot interviews were used for training research assistants as coders by applying coding strategies through practice before applying them to the actual data.

*Open coding and the creation of concepts.* To begin open coding, interviews were first completely read through to gain an intuitive understanding of the interview as a whole (Kvale, 1994). A sample of interviews was divided between research assistants to be studied and thoroughly understood. Research assistants engaged in open-ended coding to identify emerging themes throughout the interviews. The data were allowed to guide the creation of a coding scheme rather than to use one provided by a preconceived theory. During this stage, the research team remained open to what the data would reveal. According to Daly (2006) “This is essentially a creative process whereby we allow our reading of the data to invoke or provoke a set of meaningful labels” (p. 230). These meaningful labels were developed into preliminary codes that were intended to account for all meaningful segments of data. Research assistants met to discuss preliminary codes that each coder identified from their sample interviews. A comprehensive list of codes was compiled based on discussion. Codes were then evaluated and compared against the sample of interviews, focusing on completeness and clarity. Revisions were made as necessary.

*Creating categories.* The research team then created categories for the codes to provide organization to the coding scheme and to anticipate drawing meaningful connections later between codes. The structure of the interview influenced the creation of these categories. The interview provided a preliminary structure to the collection of data in that certain sets of questions were related to particular research questions. The creation of coding categories was influenced by these research questions. However, new categories were also created that were not part of initial research questions. The process of identifying, discussing, comparing, categorizing and revising codes occurred several times among members of the research team until a coding scheme was agreed upon to use for the next stage of coding. Discussion and training followed to promote a common understanding of what codes meant and how to apply them.

*Making linkages in the data.* This stage in analysis is also referred to as axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and involves breaking down the data into meaningful units and examining relationships within and between categories (Daly, 2006). To begin this phase of analysis, the coding scheme was entered into the coding software, QSR\*NVivo 8.0. Each coder was trained in the use of this particular software, which served as the tool for primary coding. QSR\*Nvivo 8.0 was chosen because it allowed for flexibility as well as sensitivity to the coding process and because it was compatible with the study's design for analysis. It was especially useful for the organization and management of large amounts of interview data. The program also allowed for continual revision of codes, which occurred frequently, especially as final labels for codes were reserved to be made until later on in the analysis. This was to ensure that each code appropriately represented the content of the interview labeled under that code. NVivo

also provided flexibility for interview text that did not seem to fit anywhere in the coding scheme. These instances were simply copied into a separate folder that was specific for “in vivo” codes that had not yet been incorporated into the existing coding scheme. These instances were returned to later on and the coding scheme was revised to appropriately account for the data. This helped coders remember that the coding scheme was not a finished work, but a work in progress.

Once the coding scheme was set up, research assistants were assigned to be primary coders for particular interviews. Each coder was assigned to “spot check” other coders’ work. All coders were assigned similar amounts of data to code and were rotated to check each other’s work. Similar to Berend’s and Johnston’s (2005) method for multiple coders, a coding log was kept that included notes on disagreements, which were discussed during research meetings. The coding scheme was revised as necessary.

Coders also focused on searching for disconfirming evidence or in other words, on “falsifying emergent findings” (Gilgun, 2006). According to Gilgun (2006), searching for disconfirming evidence involves making it a point to look for instances that contradict emerging findings. In order to accomplish this in the present study, a code was created labeled “Contradicts emergent findings.” Having this code provided a way to label, organize, and re-examine instances in the interviews that seemed to disconfirm preliminary findings. Any text placed under this code was carefully examined. Research assistants considered alternative perspectives and interpretations of emergent findings based on insights gained from examining possible disconfirming evidence.

*Creating the theoretical storyline.* Once coding was complete, coding labels were re-examined and revised to more descriptively reflect the themes that arose in the



interviews. The most frequently occurring and most salient themes were then identified. Categories and codes were more closely examined to understand possible connections and processes relating to marital commitment and moral development. The remaining results and discussion section will expound on this phase by describing the various findings and possible explanations.

## RESULTS

In accordance with grounded theory, the themes discussed are seen as emerging from and grounded in the data (Straus & Corbin, 1990; Chamaz, 2007; Daly, 2006). One of the benefits of the interview method is that data is rich in meaning (Kvale, 1994). Findings are able to emerge from within a thick and rich context of participants' own personal dialogue. The primary researcher recognizes her own role in the interpretation on these themes and thereby participates in their creation (Chamaz, 2006). That is to say that the following themes represent one possible interpretation. Quotes from participants are used to let the data speak for itself as evidence for the interpretations described below.

Several themes emerged that address how married individuals experience commitment in their marriage and how that commitment may be associated with a motivation to be moral. First, a "core concept" that attempts to encompass all other themes is discussed. Second, themes are discussed that provide context to understanding what marriage means and what commitment in marriage means to this sample of couples. Third, themes directly relating to the research questions are described. These themes address evidence of ways in which the marriage relationship exerts an influence on individuals in general and on their moral personality. The role of marital commitment and how it is related to moral personality is also discussed. Finally, additional findings that

are not directly related to the research questions but still provide insight on influences on moral development are discussed. The entire interview was considered candidate data to draw upon for each theme. In other words, quotes presented often represent participants' responses to a direct question, such as "what does marriage mean to you," but the entire interview was considered as evidence to address the particular theme "what marriage means."

All names have been changed and any personally identifying information has either been changed or omitted. In order for the reader to keep track of couples, false names have been created so that the names of couples start with the same letter. Couples' names were changed as follows: (1) Adam and Alice, (2) Bill and Barbara, (3) Carl and Cary, (4) Dan and Denise, (5) Eric and Erin, (6) Frank and Frances, (7) Gary and Gwen, (8) Larry and Linda, (9) Martin and Melanie, (10) Norman and Nancy. Quotes occasionally have been minimally edited for grammar to enhance readability and understanding while still preserving the meaning.

#### The "Core Category"

A "core category" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) is a primary theme under which all subsequent themes could fall under, its purpose being to express the essence of the study's findings. The core theme for this study was: *Individuals progress toward a moral, possible self through opportunities to develop and exercise moral attributes within marriage, mainly through the influence of one's spouse, through regular expressions of commitment to spouse and during times of challenge in marriage.* The term *possible self* (Wurf & Markus, 1991) is meant to describe the person the individual desires to become. This statement is also meant to express the various ways that marriage affords an

individual opportunities to develop moral attributes, especially those that are central to who they are and who they want to become.

#### Themes that Provide Context

Participants were asked to describe what marriage means to them as well as, more specifically, what commitment in marriage means to them. These and other interview questions were designed to provide contextual information for further themes that describe how the marriage relationship and commitment may influence moral development. Having this context available enhances the depth of meaning and understanding of these other themes. “What marriage means” and “what commitment in marriage means” are discussed below.

It is therefore important to note that, although themes described below are generally separated into two sub-sections, they are not at all exclusive. Various participants expressed the opinion that the meaning of marriage cannot be discussed without also talking about commitment. The last theme described in this section, *Marriage and commitment involve a continuous choice to love one’s spouse*, describes one of the especially prominent areas of overlap.

#### *Category 1: What Marriage Means*

*Marriage is a pivotal, life experience.* Concepts grouped under this theme included the following ideas: marriage means happiness, a lasting (life-long and/or eternal) commitment, creating a family, and progressing and working together with one’s spouse. The following quote from Gary demonstrates the concept of a pivotal experience, in that marriage is viewed as a central experience in one’s life. When asked what his marriage means to him, he said:

In brief, it means everything to me. From adolescence on it was something that I really looked forward to, something that I believed and trusted would be a pivotal moment or experience, and although there are periods of trial in a marriage relationship, it still holds true that that is the most important thing in my life.

What it means to be a husband is - and this is something I don't do in practice as well as I would like, but it's something that is/should be the center of my life and of everything that I do. That and being a father are probably the two most important key roles in my life and even in a large extent to my existence.

It is perhaps appropriate to start with this theme because when something is viewed as pivotal, central, etc., the assumption is that it affects other aspects of life. Gary recognizes that he may not always act in accordance with this view, but this quote reflects his desires. He views his roles as husband and father as important to his very existence. When marriage is viewed as "pivotal," other aspects of life should be positioned around the marriage relationship, and Gary confirms this interpretation by saying that being a husband should be the center of everything he does.

*Marriage means faithful companionship expressed through support and service.*

This theme encompasses several elements because each one seemed closely connected to each other as participants often referred to each of these elements when describing marriage. Marriage is not only faithful companionship, but there is a special kind of companionship that is defined by how it is expressed and lived out in the lives of these couples. Concepts that fall under this heading include the idea that spouses should be completely faithful to each other. Maintaining trust is vital to faithfulness as well as maintaining a committed, monogamous relationship. Participants frequently described the

need to create a relationship where each spouse provides support in the other's decisions and in fulfilling the other's needs. Companionship is reflected in this theme as participants discussed marriage in terms of having one's "best friend" closely and intimately available to trust and love more than oneself. The concept of support was also referred to in terms of providing service to one's spouse. Serving one's spouse implies going beyond the usual expectations of support. Below is a quote from Frank that expresses some of these ideas.

Having someone else there with me all the time everywhere we go, and knowing that someone else is kind of relying on me for some support. It's exciting to be able to offer that, I guess. Having opportunities to serve, and being married is a lifetime and eternity of serving each other. That's exciting for me.

In this statement, Frank discusses the importance of companionship, having his wife with him, relying on him for the support and service he is excited to offer. Carl mentions fulfilling his wife's needs and being faithful to her:

I guess my role is to do all I can to provide for my wife, make sure that her needs physically, spiritually and emotionally are met, and that I'm not doing anything – you know, if there's something within my ability to change to give her those, I should be doing those. And just to have that complete faithfulness to her.

*Marriage means equal partnership.* Participants frequently expressed the opinion that marriage means a partnership in which both spouses are viewed as equals, having equal influence in the marriage. This idea can be exemplified in the following quote by Gwen:

I feel like we are equals, in that we do things, you know, we make decisions together. I support him in his schooling, and we make all of our decisions together as far as going on for school and what jobs will do and where we'll live and just everything. It's a partnership and I just try to support him in doing what he does, and he supports me in what I do. And so it's a good partnership.

*Marriage is different and unique from other relationships.* Participants discussed views on marriage in terms of how it is unique and different among other types of relationships. This theme supports and enhances this concept as it was discussed earlier in the introduction. The following quote from Gary clearly articulates this concept that marriage is different.

I believe that I was a husband before I was a father, and my primary allegiance is to my wife, and that my primary focus and energy and respect or whatever it may be is to her first, followed closely by the children. In other words...before we had kids we were husband and wife, and once the kids go and leave, we're going to be husband and wife. That's something that is never going to change, although the kids come and go or whatever the case may be, that's the center of our lives followed closely by being a father and a mother, or being a brother and sister, or whatever other relationships may exist.

As previously discussed, marriage is unique from other relationships, such as co-habiting, non-married relationships. Gary here mentions that the relationship between husband and wife is fundamental; it will remain despite changes that may come from being a parent, a sibling, or from having any other relationship.

*Category 2: What Commitment in Marriage Means*

How couples view commitment is an essential part of this study. It is important to understand how couples conceptualize commitment in order to examine the assumption that commitment is one possible aspect of marriage that sets it apart from other relationships. Themes that emerged under this category provide insight into why commitment in marriage may play a role in influencing individuals' personal growth. Themes also address previous questions from past research about the referent to which one is committed (Adams & Jones, 1997), such as whether one particular type of referent is more salient among relationships when commitment is high.

*Being committed to one's spouse and his/her happiness by showing unconditional, selfless love.* Using the words that various participants, such as Dan and Frank, used, being committed to one's spouse means being committed to his/her happiness. It also means unconditional love for one's marriage partner. For example, physical beauty fading or challenges arising are not allowed to distract from the commitment one has for his/her spouse. Often in connection with love, spouses discussed selflessness, self-denial, and sacrifice because to these participants, loving one's spouse often includes giving up one's own desires for the good of one's spouse as well as for the health of the marriage. One wife, Melanie, discusses the decision to leave her job to be with her husband as he starts a graduate program in a new location:

One good example is when we were coming here, I was working; I'm a registered nurse. So it was a tough decision for me to make to quit my job and follow him. I stayed there trying to maybe influence my employer to give me a leave of

absence, but they didn't approve of it. So because I'm committed to him, I love him, I just quit my job and followed him because of commitment.

*Commitment means keeping marital vows with complete fidelity.* Couples expressed that commitment means keeping marital vows by being faithful, by being sexually exclusive with one's spouse. Below is an example from Martin.

One of the examples I'm going to give you is that when I was asked, "Martin, do you promise to take Melanie to be your wife?" I said I do...She's the only one, my wife, that I can share love with. So that means commitment to me because I am only there to her. Not anyone else but her. I don't have anyone else where I can go to for sexual relations or whatever else, but from her. So I am committed to her from the very day that we were united in marriage.

Other participants described the need to place further clarifications on what it means to be faithful. For Erin, it also means placing boundaries on her interactions with friends of the opposite sex. For her, this ensures that she does not cross what she called the more basic level of faithfulness to her spouse. She said:

I mean, there's the obvious commitment in being faithful as far as not having affairs or sleeping around with other people. So I mean obviously that's kind of the basic level, but I think even beyond that- I think constantly being conscious of the fact that your conduct should be different as a married person, and that it's not ok to even be overly friendly with somebody that's not your spouse. Before I was married, I think it was just fine if there were three or four different guys and they liked to be kind of flirty, I didn't feel bad at all. But I think once you're married, I think it can be really dangerous to even have just a friendly relationship, even



where both of you understand that the other is married. Even in those cases, I think it's important to not encourage that kind of behavior, and just to keep things within a safe environment.

*Commitment to staying married by persevering through difficult times.* Past research on commitment (Adams & Jones, 1997) has recognized that the referent to which one is committed may be the marriage itself. This concept came up among participants but with one additional qualifier: commitment means staying married (commitment to the marriage) by persevering through difficult times. For example, Nancy discusses her commitment to staying married, and for her, persevering relates to not giving up on the marriage.

I think the big thing is commitment means there's no way out. I think if you go into that, there's no way out, this is it. This is forever, this is 'til one of us dies, this is it. It's hard to be able to persevere through those hard times to get to the other side. I think a lot of people have a tendency to give up too soon. I think that's what commitment means, is that you're never going to give up. You're just going to persevere through the good and the bad.

*Marriage and commitment involve a continuous choice to love one's spouse.* To express this theme more fully, marriage and commitment within marriage involve a choice that is initiated with the act of getting married but is a continuous effort to live up to that choice on a daily basis. Participants articulated that this is ultimately a decision to continue to love one's spouse. Participants described times when loving one's spouse is more difficult, but continuing to love and be available for one's spouse involves an effortful choice. Consider the following quote from Linda:

My marriage is a choice. I never felt like I was somebody who had to get married, that needed to have somebody else around. I've always been really independent, so I always knew that if I ever got married it would absolutely be a choice... I don't need him to breath, to survive, but I want him in my life, and I choose to have him in my life. It's one of those clichés that you wake up every morning and you choose to love that person, so maybe it's not every morning, but our marriage is a choice. It's a choice that we made two and a half years ago that we're not changing, that's the decision and its final.

She expresses how this daily choice may be understood as a continuation of the choice that was first made to get married. Larry discusses the choice to love in terms of commitment and how it requires a constant effort. Not only does he choose to love his wife, but in the quote below, he expressed how he chooses to stay committed to make his situation “wonderful.”

Well, commitment in anything requires hard work, it requires dedication, not being willing to let things slide even a little bit. Commitment to me is a constant effort, and a constant choice. I don't necessarily just wake up every day and just think, “Oh this is great, my marriage is wonderful.” I chose to love my wife, and in so doing I choose to make my life and my marriage wonderful, and I choose to make it work, and I choose to be committed to it.

*Additional observations.* There was a variety of responses regarding what commitment in marriage means, and those listed above only reflect the most common ones. Some insight can also be gained here to answer the question of what the referent is when an individual is committed in his/her marriage. Majority of responses could be

categorized as being committed to their spouse as a person with value (see Adams & Jones, 1997). For example, one husband, Adam, said, “Commitment is being – I guess what is coming up for me is being there for Alice.” Adam continues to discuss being there for her and supporting her. The second most common referent to which one was committed was to keeping marital vows, and lastly to the marriage relationship, as in the institution of marriage. One additional finding was that a few participants stated that commitment in marriage means being committed to God.

The interviews also address issues that attempt to distinguish between commitment as a process and its consequences, a line that has been blurred (Adams & Jones, 1997). Commitment is a process that does not begin with marriage. Participants reflected on changes from before and after marriage and often discussed experiences they had while dating and then compared those experiences to their married life experiences. Frank tied commitment to how setting boundaries during dating helped provide structure later on in the marriage when he said:

Well, I guess, just about commitment. When you set boundaries and set goals and discuss things and have open communication at the start of your marriage or the start of your dating process, it really helps set structure in the family after marriage. It really improves yourself as an individual and improves the couple just knowing that this person will always be there for me.

As couples date and as the relationship develops into something more serious, commitment is strengthening. There seems to be a qualitative change in the commitment when the relationship is made more solid by entering into a marriage. As couples define and strengthen their commitment, there may be consequences, such as greater security in

the relationship, but those consequences may continue to help strengthen the commitment in a reciprocal manner.

### Themes Relating to the Research Questions

Themes emerged that describe ways that the marriage relationship contributes to change in an individual's life, specifically in terms of influencing priorities, goals, and personal growth. To first address how commitment in marriage may relate to an individual's moral growth, themes are discussed that provide evidence that marriage does exert a fundamental influence in the lives of couples. Next, themes relating to moral traits that participants want to develop are discussed as well as themes relating to participants' moral identity. Themes are finally described that draw connections between challenges, commitment and moral personality as well as what other qualities of marriage may be involved in exerting an influence in the lives of individuals.

#### *Category 3: Examples of the Influence of Marriage*

*Shift in priorities from academic/career success to maintaining a strong marriage relationship.* Participants often discussed ways that their goals and priorities had shifted since being married. Participants discussed how, prior to marriage, academic or career success was extremely important to them. Then after marriage, the priority became the relationship, one's spouse, and having a family. This affected what participants devoted their time to, for example. The following quote is an example from Cary.

It's not that school has become less important but it's in the time that I give it. It has become less a priority to working with my husband on things or spending the time that he needs to be with me, and stuff like that. And also, a lot more shift has gone towards our spiritual growth together.

For Cary, marriage provided purpose and meaning in life that was more essential than other things. Cary shows a focus on her husband and an interest in developing herself with him.

*Marriage helps individuals refine personal improvement.* Participants also discussed how shifting their priorities to the marriage and their spouse influenced their ability to refine their personal growth. Below are two examples from participants who experienced such a change. The first quote from Frances expresses how her goals have become more refined:

I think that now the goals are different because we're working on littler things. Before it was stop swearing. Now, the goals are like say one kind thing about somebody every day. They're more refined and more simple. I've finished that problem, now I need to move on to the more specific problem, and then once that's fixed then I go more specific like "Only say good things about people." Things like that.

For Frances, instead of eliminating an undesirable habit, she is now setting a goal to actively do something positive. Another husband, Gary, discusses a similar refinement, the progression from preserving himself to actively improving:

Being married has opened up the door to really improving who I am and making progress on instead of just preserving myself in whatever way I could.

These participants describe how their views on personal improvement are more refined after being married. They are able to focus on finer goals. Gary says that marriage opens the doors to allow for this type of focus. These quotes represent a process in which

individuals progress from eliminating the negative or just surviving toward taking a more active role in effecting positive change in their lives.

*Spouses strengthen each other's individual desires to achieve goals.* Participants frequently discussed how their spouse was a “driving force” motivating them to improve and achieve their goals. Even if the goals were the same before they got married, the desire to achieve them was strengthened after marriage. Often this was because they wanted to make their spouse happy, provide for a family, etc., but participants occasionally spoke about it being motivating to just have their spouse there for them.

Consider the following quote from Carl:

I think the goals would be the same but my desire to accomplish them wouldn't be the same. I think I wouldn't have as much accountability to do as good in my classes. Ever since I've met Cary, I've done really well.

In the following quote by Dan, he also links this stronger desire or “ambition” to actually achieving the goals. His wife is a motivating factor to the point where Dan feels he is more productive with his goals. About this, he said:

I don't think that they would, to be honest. I think that maybe I wouldn't have as much ambition to become better, but I think I'd still have the same goals...But I think yeah, having her helps a lot to push myself even farther. So I think I can achieve the goal I want faster with her, whereas without her, I think it would just take a longer time, because I don't have that push, I don't have someone there always to motivate myself.

When marriage helps individuals refine their goals for personal improvement, it may contribute to how likely the personal improvement is to actually occur. Wurf and

Markus (1991) stated that self-directed growth occurs when individuals have goals that are relevant and self-defined. The above findings suggest that marriage helps individuals make meaningful goals while also increasing their desire to achieve them. Participants like Dan explained how their actions reflected this stronger motivation.

*Marriage brings quality of life changes.* For this sample of participants, there were several changes that occurred after being married that related to how their quality of life changed. For many participants, life became more stable, structured and calm/peaceful. Other participants experienced increased happiness, fulfillment and gratitude. Some participants noticed a change in their spiritual health and/or their social health. Below is a brief quote reflecting each of these quality of life changes:

*Feeling more stable, structured and calm/peaceful:* Frank expressed feeling more calm since being married and better able to deal with stressful situations. He said:

I'd say I'm a lot calmer now. I don't know. I wasn't a *wild child* either growing up, but I think I'm a little bit more calm now anyway. When stressful situations come up, I seem to deal with them better.

*Happiness and fulfillment:* Frances described struggling with depression and how her relationship with Frank had influenced her. She stated, "I'm a lot more happier now. Life is fulfilling and enjoyable and I learn something new every day, and I'm improving."

*Increase in social and spiritual health:* Gary described how his relationship with Gwen was associated with his spirituality and faith in God. He said:

Falling in love with Gwen and having her reciprocate that emotion really strengthened my faith that God really did care about me as an individual and that I

could be blessed with this really positive physical, emotional, romantic, spiritual relationship, even, with someone that I cared about.

Gary also tied in this spiritual health to his social health when he said:

Gwen has helped me to be a little bit more open, a little more accepting of the idea of interacting with other people, and it also coincides slightly with spiritual health. I believe that being cheerful, and trying to be a reasonably social person correlates with having a healthy spirituality.

*Feeling more grateful.* For Alice, her experience was that marriage helped her to change her focus from wanting material things to just being grateful for her present circumstances. She relates this change to marriage when she says:

Before we got married, I really, really was focused more on material things. Really focused, I gotta get outta this house and outta this neighborhood and we need to, and I need, and it's fine to go into some debt. I mean, just all that kinda...After we got married, all of a sudden, it just kinda hit me. It just kinda hit me that life really truly is not about material things. Even though I heard people say that all my life...I didn't really get it, until...there's just something after we got married that I just started to become more grateful for what I had right then and there.

*Marriage brings greater independence and responsibility.* Participants discussed how marriage was often accompanied by a need for greater independence, in the sense that a person becomes more independent from parents. Also discussed was the greater responsibility that comes with marriage. That responsibility may have included



supporting a spouse and family, paying the bills, worrying about insurance, etc. The following wife, Denise shared her thoughts on this subject:

And I've noticed that I became a lot more independent very quickly. And before, I always felt like I was mature and independent, but then it's just like, oh it's just kind of forced upon you in ways that I wasn't expecting. But it helped me to grow a lot. And now that I'm used to it, I enjoy it and I like having that independence.

This wife shared her opinion that having the independence and responsibility has helped her grow. Her expressions of now being accustomed to and even liking the independence provides an example of one way in which marriage provides a context for personal development. It creates a need for individuals to grow to meet the needs that independence and responsibility place on the. One particular participant, Carl, discussed the burden and the greater responsibility sometimes felt, and the challenge that it was for him to deal with.

I just want to go back and live with my parents and not have any responsibility (laughs). I guess it's more of a run- it's not a run away from Cary as much as it is just a run away from the responsibilities that come with being married. You know I just wish I could be done with them all sometimes. And those are kind of the sad thoughts that come to my mind. And, you know, I try to say a prayer and I try to think, "Ok, you know, I'm committed to this forever." Having the eternal perspective I think makes all the difference in a marriage. You know, it's like- I didn't commit to her through the good times, I committed to her through eternity.

This quote shows how this participant relies on his commitment to his wife as a resource of strength when dealing with his challenges and burdens of responsibility.

*Marriage brings a deeper sense of companionship.* Several participants related feelings and examples of how meaningful it was for them to have a constant companion in their spouse. Responses under this theme ranged from descriptive, in which participants described how they spent most of their free time with their spouses, to expressions of how significant it is for them to have this kind of companionship in their lives. This theme seemed especially important to husbands. Majority of responses coded under this theme came from husbands. Here is an example from Carl:

I think the big thing is just knowing that somebody else is just as committed to me as I am to them. I know I dated a lot, and I always felt in every relationship before my wife, that they didn't really give as much as I was giving. My wife is the first one that really gave as much attention and love to me as I felt I was giving. And just that equal response of I can't say I love her more than she loves me. I think it's really equal. And that's what I think gives me so much strength is knowing this, that need to feel needed, and it's completely filled by that.

From the above quote, we can see that Carl feels something more equal and more fulfilling in his relationship with his wife than he has felt before. Consider the following statement from Frank:

Whenever my friends would come to me with something, I'd be like, "Oh, you'll figure it out." Whereas now, if I have a problem or my spouse does, we can work on it together and understand each other rather than leaving them to figure it out on their own.

We can see that Frank appreciates the companionship with his wife when he needs to work out a problem. He sees it as something they can work out together. There is something more meaningful in his spouse's support than the superficial answers his friends would provide: "You'll figure it out."

#### *Category 4: Moral Traits and the Influence of Spouses*

*Traits that individual spouses desire to develop over the next five years.*

Participants were asked to reflect on the kind of person they want to be in five years. They discussed life goals as well as attributes they wanted to develop (or continue to develop) in themselves. Many of the goals included things like becoming financially secure, buying a house, advancing in career, becoming more involved in the community, etc. There were several attributes that participants discussed wanting to develop in themselves. To account for all the traits that participants discussed, provided below is a comprehensive list of all the attributes that were mentioned across interviews. This list was compared to lists of attributes generated by two previously cited studies, one by Walker and Pitts (1998) that generated a list of prototypic descriptors for the "Highly Moral Person," and another study by Lapsley and Lasky (2001) that generated a list of prototypic descriptors for the "Good Person." Both lists are meant to reflect traits of a moral person. Including similar terms noted in the table below, 72 percent of the list that was produced in the present study overlapped with the "Highly Moral Person" list, and 39 percent overlapped with the "Good Person" list. In the table, a "yes" indicates the trait was found on the particular list. When the traits are similar but worded differently, the trait that was used in the study is provided. Refer to the table below.

Table 1

## Moral Traits Compared to Traits Found in Present Study

| Traits from Present Study<br>(In alphabetical order) | Highly Moral Person | Good Person    |
|--|---------------------|----------------|
| Achieving  |                     | Over-achieving |
| Active   |                     |                |
| Acting on faith                                      |                     |                |
| Active listener                                      |                     | Listener*      |
| Authentic  |                     |                |
| Better communication skills                          |                     | Communicates   |
| Caring   | Yes                 | Yes*           |
| Christ-like  |                     | Christian      |
| Confident  |                     | Yes            |
| Considerate  | Yes                 | Yes*           |
| Controls Anger                                       |                     |                |
| Creative   |                     | Yes            |
| Dependable   | Yes                 | Yes*           |
| Determined   |                     | Yes            |
| Diligent   |                     | Yes            |
| Easy going   |                     | Yes            |
| Encouraging  |                     |                |
| Forgiving  | Yes                 | Yes*           |
| Friendly   | Yes                 | Yes*           |

---

|                                |             |                 |
|--------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Fun-loving                     |             | Fun             |
| Genuine                        | Yes         | Yes*            |
| Give best effort               |             |                 |
| Giving                         | Generous    | Generous        |
| Goal-oriented                  |             |                 |
| Grounded                       |             |                 |
| Handle stress better           |             | Handle problems |
| Hard-working                   | Yes         | Yes             |
| Honest                         | Yes*        | Yes*            |
| Humble                         |             | Yes             |
| Kind                           | Yes         | Yes             |
| Less stubborn                  | Stubborn ** |                 |
| Loving                         | Yes         | Yes*            |
| Optimistic                     |             | Yes             |
| Outgoing                       |             | Yes             |
| Patient                        |             | Yes             |
| Relate well to people          |             |                 |
| Reliable                       | Yes         | Yes*            |
| Respectable                    | Yes         | Yes*            |
| Responsible                    | Yes         | Yes*            |
| Righteous                      | Yes         |                 |
| Selfless, willing to sacrifice | Yes         | Yes             |
| Sensitive                      |             | Yes             |

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| Service-oriented | Community-minded |          |
|------------------|------------------|----------|
| Social Skills    |                  | Sociable |
| Spiritual        |                  |          |
| Trusting         |                  | Yes*     |
| Trustworthy      | Yes              | Yes*     |
| Understanding    | Yes              | Yes      |

Note: “Yes” indicates it was found on that specific list. When traits are similar but worded differently, the term used in the study is provided.

\*Indicates trait was among the top 20 traits rated as most prototypical.

\*\*Indicates opposite term

This list shows that there seems to be more overlap with the “Good Person” list (Lapsley & Lasky, 2001). One could then infer that participants are thinking in terms of becoming a “good person” more readily than becoming a “moral person.” This could likely be because the “good person” prototype is broader than the “moral person” prototype. However, both lists reflect prototypical traits of a moral character.

Although there is less overlap with the “Highly Moral Person” list, there is evidence that other traits found by Walker and Pitts (1998) are also at work in the lives of the participants in this study. These include traits that are evidenced throughout the interviews but may not be direct responses to what attributes they want to develop over the next five years. For example, “Faithful to spouse” is the trait rated second for prototypical of a highly moral person. Themes earlier described how faithfulness and fidelity to spouse are especially significant to participants in defining marriage and commitment. Some of the other traits rated as most prototypic of the “Highly Moral

Person” include “concerned about doing right,” “has clear values,” and “has strong beliefs,” (Walker & Pitts, 1998). Based on the articulation of opinions, beliefs and short narratives that occurred all throughout the interviews and are reflected in the quotes presented, one could conclude that the participants included in this study are concerned about doing right, do have clear values, do have strong beliefs, etc. For example, when Melanie related her thoughts on being responsible for her actions, she mentions that it is important for her to do things which reflect good morals. She stated, “When I’m committed to my husband, whether he’s here or not, I have to do things which are of good morals; I can say that whether he’s here or not.” Another example can be seen in Nancy when she reflects on her desire to be a better person and how being better includes her spouse and family. She says:

We might not be what the other one wants in certain areas right now but knowing that in five, ten years from now, that will change and be different. We’re always striving to be better people, to be a better couple, a better family, better all-around.

*Spouses support and facilitate each other’s individual development of moral attributes.* Often, participants referred to ways in which they felt supported by their spouse in developing specific attributes. The support may be direct or indirect. Support may be involvement in helping a spouse set and keep goals, or it may be simply setting an example and valuing the same attribute. To Dan, honesty was a particularly important quality to develop in himself and to have in his marriage. He compares lying in a marriage to poison in that it can spread and harm the relationship. When reflecting on whether his relationship with his wife affected his honesty, he said the following:

I think it helps. I mean, our base with each other - being honest with each other does help us to be honest in our dealings with other people. Just like that analogy with the poison, the more you lie, the easier it is to lie in the future, and if you're lying with each other, how much easier is it to lie with "Joe Shmo" or whatever. So I think it helps to have that honesty in the house, in the family, in the marriage, and it just translates to everyday life.

This quote exemplifies how Dan's relationship with his helped him to be more honest in every aspect of his life. He discusses how being honest with his wife helps him to be honest with others. This suggests that the support he receives from his wife translates across different contexts in his life. Alice described how Adam's example inspires her desire to develop the same quality in herself. She says, "I'd like to be more...like, Adam has this really giving heart. I'd like to be more like that. I'm not as giving as he is, you know?" Later when describing how Adam contributes to her personal development, she describes his support and encouragement:

He always encourages me to grow into new directions. I've never been with anyone like that, who's so...so wants me to just try new things, try cutting my hair short, 'cause I never have, I've always been afraid of it. So I did, and that was really freeing. He's really supportive of things that free me up from any past rigid beliefs like try it a different way and just walk into it and see how it feels. You can always change if you don't like it. Yeah, he's amazing that way. Always pushing me to grow and supporting me, not pushing me in a bad way.



*Category 5: Themes Relating to Identity*

*Continuity and change in sense of self going into marriage.* When asked to reflect on similarities and changes going into marriage, participants sometimes described how they felt like they were the same person throughout. Below are two examples:

Gary: So, I feel like I'm still fundamentally the same person that I've always been but there has been improvement in certain categories.

Carl: There's probably the similar in the sense that I still feel I'm me. I think a lot of people expect that they're going to be a different person when they're married. I still have the same personality traits. I didn't all of a sudden wake up and change in any way. So just about everything feels the same, there's a lot more comfort.

Both participants feel that they were the same person and had the same personality going into marriage. Still, both participants refer to change as well. The first mentions improvement and the second mentions more comfort. Participants' dialogue seemed to suggest processes of continuity and change although participants themselves did not articulate the changes. This perhaps reflects how change is a process and how the influence of marriage on constructs such as personality may be gradual.

*Self-integrity.* Although not a very common theme, some participants discussed reasons relating to self-integrity that explain why it is important for them to develop certain attributes. Self-integrity entails the degree to which a person is committed to living in accordance with what he/she views as most important and central to his/her sense of self (Lapsley, 1996). One wife, Melanie, was describing why she felt it was

important for her to be creative, to control her anger, and to be a better communicator.

The following statement from her demonstrates self-integrity.

They are [important] because in the end I will feel good about myself. I will not have feelings of guilt, why I acted in a certain way. I'll feel good.

These qualities are important for her to have so that she will feel good about who she is, in other words, because these qualities are important to her sense of self, she must develop them, demonstrating her sense of integrity. Alice expresses a similar concept when she says, "I would like to like give because I just want to, not out of any sense of shoulds." It is most important for her to be what she calls "authentic" by acting in a way that is true to what she values. Blasi (1980) defines integrity as the "capacity to invest one's life with the meanings that are personally understood and accepted and to act in ways that are consistent with one's normal insights" (p. 40). He states that integrity, or personal consistency, is a necessary element in theoretically describing the bridge between moral judgment and moral action. Integrity and self consistency may help individuals act upon their views of what is important and moral.

*Influence of the "socially perceived self."* The term "socially perceived self," in this context, refers to the person that other people perceive the individual to be. This type of concept has been referred to in past literature as one's public self consciousness. The public self is considered one facet of a person's self that may be involved in processing information about the self that others observe and evaluate (Nasby, 1996). Some participants referenced ways in which their peers and co-workers view them or have seen them change. For some, this may affect how they perceive their own development, such as for Adam:

I know that there's been a lot more people at work that have seen changes in me [since being married], that I'm more relaxed, more easy going. So, that's a huge, huge movement, and I think it's settling me down, rounding me down, not quite as a feeling of stress as much.

For Nancy, it was motivating for her to know how her friends, co-worker and husband viewed her character in that it influenced her to desire to develop those attributes that the others see in her.

What I want to see happen in the next five years is to become the person that I feel my friends and co-workers already see in me. They see the dynamic personality, the person who's there to encourage, to love and respect. Sometimes I don't feel that or I don't see that. I still see the wickedness in me. Just to believe that I'm this person that other people see, that my husband sees, and to become a better person in the long run, someone that people can count on, someone who is not going to be negative, not cause drama, not have a wickedness about them, and patience. I need better patience.

*Category 6: Commitment, Challenges, and Personal Growth*

*Tests and challenges of commitment and how individuals respond.* Examining challenges and obstacles and how spouses respond to those challenges provides possible evidence of how strongly couples experience commitment in their marriage. This aligns with the theoretical perspective that commitment can best be understood when it is tested (Amato, 2007). In order to examine this, participants were asked to describe a time when they felt their commitment being tested or challenged. This question was not only to learn about the extent to which their commitment is at work in the relationship, but also to

provide further information for making possible connections between commitment and morality. Below is a table that lists all of the challenges that participants discussed as well as a table listing ways in which they responded to their challenges.

Table 2

Challenges to Marital Commitment (listed in alphabetical order)

---

|  |
|--|
| Addiction                                      |
| Being away from family                         |
| Cheating on spouse                             |
| Confessing something painful to spouse         |
| Considering divorce                            |
| Decision to not have children                  |
| Depression                                     |
| Differences in interpreting religious doctrine |
| Different parenting styles                     |
| Feeling frustration with spouse                |
| Feeling jealousy or resentment toward spouse   |
| Feeling weighed down with responsibilities     |
| Financial burdens                              |
| Getting “cold feet” before wedding             |
| Health or Physical Pain                        |
| Little things like not putting stuff away      |
| Long distance relationship                     |
| Loyalty to extended family v. spouse           |

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Differences in personal standards

Not consenting or not consulting spouse

Poor communication

Questioning spouse's love and commitment

Questioning whether relationship is right

Worrying things will never get better

---

Table 3

Ways Couples Discussed Responding to Challenges (listed in alphabetical order)

---

Acknowledging spouses intentions to resolve conflict

Allowing spouse to make his or her own decision

Assuming things are understood between you and spouse

Avoiding question of divorce

Avoiding to resolve the challenge

Choosing to learn from challenges

Compromising

Counseling

Developing boundaries

Increase communication

Justification

Keeping things in perspective

Measuring the opportunity cost

Outside support group

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---

Reflecting on spouse's character

Remembering love for spouse

Remembering one's commitment

Remembering a spiritual confirmation

Reminding oneself of how they fell in love

Resolving challenges one step at a time

Showing trust despite the difficulty to

Recognizing spouse's strong feelings on the matter

Taking time to be grateful

---

All but five participants were able to identify an experience when they felt their commitment being tested or challenged, and those that could not think of a time were still able to identify an obstacle that they had faced since being married. Spouses usually discussed different challenges, but there was occasional overlap. Referring back to Amato's (2007) description of four different responses to challenges and the level of commitment they show, it was concluded that all couples in this sample demonstrated high levels of commitment. Occasionally, participants described a situation in which their response was to avoid or justify the situation, which shows lower levels of commitment, but such responses were never the final response. Usually, participants transitioned their response to a more positive, more committed action. Participants also demonstrated a willingness to stay with their spouse, trusting the relationship would improve, which reflects the third response described by Amato (2007). Other couples showed affirmative efforts to address challenges while having the specific goal of making the situation better

to enhance the marriage, the fourth response described by Amato (2007). Both responses show strong commitment with the fourth response showing the highest level. The original intent of this study was to try to categorize couples according to level of commitment as evidenced by their response to challenges, but it was concluded that commitment is more complex. Couples may demonstrate different levels of commitment during different challenges. The experiences of this sample reflect a process of growth and development as couples learn what commitment is while they practice it in their marriages and as challenges arise.

Frances, one of the more recently married wives, reflected on her belief that she and her husband hadn't experienced great trials in their marriage yet. She explained that she felt that their commitment would help them through trials that may come in the future.

Knowing that I haven't gone through any difficult trials yet, I'm at the beginning of my marriage, but I know when those do come that we have that commitment. I know that despite what I do or what he does that we will always love each other and it's going to be work, but we have that commitment. So, that's just a really big security blanket, knowing that no matter what we go through we're going to go through it together.

Experiencing challenges also seems to be related to feelings of being especially or strongly committed in the marriage. This particular theme and how it relates to tests and challenges of commitment are discussed below.

*Feeling especially committed during times of challenge.* When asked to reflect on a time they felt especially committed to their spouse, participants sometimes referred to

times that were free from conflict or argument, times of serving each other, feeling good emotionally, after a religious activity together, during unpredictable moments of connection, during reflections of how far the couple has come, etc. In addition to these positive examples, there was a salient commonality among these experiences. Strong feelings of commitment often occurred when another difficulty or challenge was being met. Eight participants shared various experiences that they identified as challenges or difficult experiences as well. These challenges are listed below.

Table 4

Challenges Experienced when Feeling Especially Committed to Spouse.

---

|   |
|---|
| During illness of spouse                          |
| Facing a job relocation                           |
| Overcoming temptations to be unfaithful to spouse |
| Supporting spouse through death of a parent       |
| Supporting spouse through graduate school         |
| Through financial difficulties                    |
| Through communication about addiction issues      |
| Unhappiness of spouse                             |

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Eric describes one example of feeling especially committed to his wife, and how it is during those times when she needs something from him that he feels an increase in compassion for her.

[When] Erin's had a really hard day, and that way, I just really feel a great deal of compassion, trying to comfort her if something bad has happened. Although



maybe, I'd like to believe that it's almost always there, maybe the times where I feel it at its zenith are when Erin needs comforting or something like that.

Challenging experiences are seen as both times of testing for commitment as well as times of feeling especial commitment. Perhaps there is something unique about the challenges, how it ties to commitment, and how those moments foster growth and development within individuals. Overcoming challenges together as a couple often includes the opportunity to exercise forgiveness, empathy, selfless love, etc. It is as if the challenge provides the opportunity for spouses to reflect on their commitment because if the marriage is to work, the situation requires commitment.

This is one finding that was unexpected. It was not anticipated that challenges would be seen as times of feeling especially committed. It is possible that those memories could retrospectively be viewed in a more positive light than how they were viewed during the experience, but there is still something valuable in the experience that the participants gain from these challenges.

*Ways couples regularly experience commitment in their marriages.* In addition to showing commitment during challenging times in the relationship, spouses provided several examples of ways they regularly experience commitment in their marriage. These examples provide almost an operational definition of commitment in that they are outward, observable actions that spouses perform for each other. The several examples that spouses described are outlined under the following five headings:

*Expressions of love and validation.* Participants frequently said that they experience commitment by saying "I love you" often, by showing physical affection, by

verbally validating one's spouse, by not using sarcasm, by showing unconditional acceptance, through love and support and by giving time and attention.

*Showing trust and being trustworthy.* This was a topic that participants frequently referred to as a way to show commitment. Linda's explanation is given below of how trust is important to the commitment she experiences:

The way that I experience commitment... and he's really good at this. I think he's very trustworthy. If I can trust him to do what he says he's going to do then I kind of experience that as he's not lying and I'm not undermining that commitment. So, even if it's a small as, "I'll do the dishes today" or "I'll pick the dog food up," and he does it, then that kind of fulfills the trust that I have in him and the trust that we have in commitment, I guess.

*Facing goals and challenges together.* Couples described that they experience commitment in their marriage by setting and reaching goals together, facing challenges together, by just having a committed mindset, standing by each other and expressing encouragement. Alice appreciated Adam's willingness to understand her when she is upset. About this, she said:

Ok, I know he is committed because when I get moody or upset or he pushes my buttons and I get just angry, he is really good at kind of laughing at me to defuse it and then following up and saying "Hey, let's talk about what is going on". So that the next time, we have a better way to navigate it. And so I've learned to do the same with him. And to me, that is a big commitment thing.

*Making efforts to make spouse happy.* Some of these efforts that participants described included making deliberate efforts to improve and by doing what was

frequently referred to as the “little things.” The “little things” were things like doing the dishes before going to bed, making food that one’s spouse likes, remembering birthdays, going on dates together, saying sorry, saying “thank you,” and just being there every day.

*Fulfilling financial responsibilities.* The examples that participants described that were listed under this heading were providing for the family, providing monetarily for spouse’s needs. This theme was expressed by wives whose husbands

Many of these regular expressions and ways of experiencing commitment seem to incorporate the expression of moral traits. For example, as spouses show they are trustworthy, they must exercise trustworthiness. Making efforts to make one’s spouse happy may require an individual to be caring, thoughtful, etc. Showing financial responsibility requires a spouse to act responsibly. Each of these traits can be found on the “Highly Moral Person” (Walker & Pitts, 1998) and the “Good Person” (Lapsley & Laskey, 2001) traits lists.

*Additional observations.* One thing to note is that, when asked to describe what commitment means to them or to describe ways they experience commitment in their marriage, a few participants said things like, “This may not be the best example, but...” Only referencing those smaller actions did not seem to express it fully for these participants. One participant in particular, Adam, said the following:

Committed. Showing commitment to each other. I guess there’s examples that one could give, cooking, how we’re talking, how we communicate, what we say, how we say it, sharing money, having sex, doing all those things can give examples of what commitment is, but I mean, you could have that with anybody, and that’s not what commitment is.

Adam was not convinced that those examples really express what commitment is. They are just actions, and for Adam, they represent things that either have been done or could be done with other people. He continues to describe what he feels is the real issue when he says:

It's a lot of the same stuff that we do with everyone, helping somebody, giving somebody money, I mean, all of those acts. There isn't really anything different to do with anybody that already hasn't been done with anybody, but it's the feeling and, I think, intensity and the duration that goes along with that, and commitments can be short-term or long-term, but I think that the commitment you're talking about in marriage, at least for me, is much more, more deeply involved and deeply committed, deeply engaged for a longer period of time. So, as far as acts are concerned, they could be with anybody else would do, open her car door, make dinner, all those things are examples of what the commitment is, but it's what goes on behind that, the why, and what that allows it to extend that. It's what allows someone to be with somebody, even when things are uncomfortable, finances are tight or misunderstandings come about, or health issues come up or all those things; still staying by somebody would be what the commitment is.

Some of the words that stand out in his description of commitment are “intensity and the duration,” “more deeply involved,” “deeply engaged.” Adam’s response reflects the attitude of really *being* with his wife, showing that he is committed to her as a person that has value (see Adams & Jones, 1997).

### *A Notable Exception*

Although couples were varied in their responses, the findings suggested that the participants were generally cohesive in their experience with being in a committed marriage. However, there was one couple that stood out as somewhat unique among the sample, Bill and Barbara. This couple was similar to the rest of the sample in that they had similar day to day ways of experiencing commitment in their marriage. They had challenges and issues to work through, as most others did. Barbara, for example, was one of the participants who saw a challenge as an opportunity to show extra consideration to her husband, Bill. This couple differed from the rest of the sample of couples in how they lived out their marriage. They put fewer boundaries on interacting with individuals of the opposite sex, divided up responsibilities of raising children differently, and they were not of the opinion that their spouse had as great an influence on their personal character. Both spouses felt satisfied with their current self, and did not express much that they wished to change. However, both mentioned the desire to grow personally by improving in their roles as husband and wife, mother and father, etc.

Independence seemed to be an important quality to have in marriage. Barbara seemed to highly value independence as well as did her husband did, although perhaps to a lesser degree. Valuing independence in the marriage seemed to encourage the couple to view personal change as something completely up to the individual. Trust also appeared to be a necessary element to maintaining the marriage because of the independence each spouse had in their personal lives.

Because this couple seemed to differ from the other couples in the ways referenced above, a closer look at their interviews was implemented in order to

disconfirm emerging findings and consider the initial findings from a new perspective. Doing so revealed some of the finer points in the influence marriage may or may not have in the lives of individual spouses. This couple did not explicitly desire to change and develop new attributes, but both Bill and Barbara did mention attributes that they had developed or strengthened in the past because of changes that occurred with getting married. They discussed ways that marriage created a need for change. For example, Bill said:

I guess I became more responsible because I had to...I had people relying on me...Before we were married, if I did something, it really only affected me, whether it was with career or just life in general I could do stuff, and less consequences. But then when we were married, I had to think about other people before I acted.

#### Themes Relating to Additional Findings

##### *Category 7: Other Influences on Moral Development*

*The influence of being a parent.* Participants who were parents occasionally discussed the influence of having children. Sometimes this influence was expressed as a commentary on how the marriage relationship changes. Other times it related to how having children also influences their desire to develop certain attributes. For Gwen, being a mother has influenced how she sees herself and how she wants to be. She says:

I want to be a good mother, I want to do the things for my kids that I know that they need, as far as teaching how to be good people, and good examples and stuff. You definitely learn more about yourself being a parent and you see more faults,

more bad things come out as well as good. It's given me more goals as far as how I want to be with my kids.

Barbara describes how having children has changed the commitment in her marriage. She experienced having children as a challenge to the commitment and one that requires more effort from her as an individual and from her with her spouse.

I thought it would just be one joyous thing all together and that's not true, and now it's still not that way. So that was part of the change of commitment. So now you really - I really have to - *we* really have to make the effort.

*The influence of religion and faith.* Participants frequently discussed their religious beliefs and practices all throughout the interview. References were made to God/Jesus Christ, prayer, temples, spiritual confirmations, and religious texts. The quote below is one example from Nancy that shows the connection between her religious beliefs and her commitment to her spouse.

As a married couple you have to make that choice every day to die to yourself, to choose to love this person, no matter what they do, if they're having a bad day, to choose to love them unconditionally every day. That's kind of what Jesus did for us. No matter how wicked or sinful we were, he chose to love us. I think that some people think that love is just a feeling, and feelings come and go. If I *felt* like loving my husband, he wouldn't get the best wife, because I don't always feel like loving my husband. I have bad days, he has bad days, but I *choose* to love him like Christ chose to love us.

## DISCUSSION

From the themes outlined above, it was concluded that there are qualities of marriage that do have the potential to contribute to individual adult development, and specifically to moral development, but the extent to which it occurs or even how it occurs may strongly depend on the individual's approach to commitment. These findings may not generalize to a wider population, such as to couples in distress who may have different experiences. However, by examining the experiences of couples with high levels of marital commitment, such as those in the present study, connections may be made that are common to others because they also take part in the human experience. In order to discuss the findings in a connected and comprehensive manner, this section will (1) provide further understanding of how the findings align with previous literature, (2) integrate the themes into a succinct theory of how commitment in marriage and moral development are related, and (3) offer implications for practitioners, discuss limitations, and offer suggestions for future research.

### The Findings in Relation to Past Literature

#### *Discussion of Context Themes*

Themes that provided context were (Category 1) What Marriage Means and (Category 2) What Commitment in Marriage Means. Some of the findings listed under these themes coincide with previous work on the meaning of love in healthy, familial relationships. Noller (1996) explained that when average persons think about love, they tend to think about responsible, companionate love, which usually involves care and concern for the other person. The themes above similarly describe marriage in terms of loving, caring and supporting one's spouse. Participants discussed each of these factors as



being extremely important, even essential to their marriages. The themes that emerged go a step beyond this by describing marriage as a pivotal experience where love and concern for spouse are central to an individual's life.

Because there is overlap between marriage, commitment, and love, one of the themes to emphasize was that *Marriage and commitment involve a continuous choice to love one's spouse*. Other scholars have also recognized that commitment is important to the cognitive aspect of love in that love is not just about feelings for someone that ebb and flow but rather, it includes a conscious decision (Sternberg, 1986; Murstein, 1988). By contrast, the perspective that love is out of one's control is a perspective that is less likely to lead to a stable relationship environment (Noller, 1996). As couples fall in love, their commitment is likely to increase, but the reverse is also possible. As couples commit more strongly to each other, their love is likely to strengthen and carry them through both the good times and the bad (Noller, 1996). This research supports the present findings as evidence on how marriage, commitment and loving one's spouse are all involved in a cyclical, perhaps simultaneous process in which each one affects the other.

#### *Discussion of Marriage Influences and Moral Development*

Themes under this heading were (Category 3) Examples of the Influence of Marriage; (Category 4) Moral Traits and Influence of Spouse; (Category 5) Themes relating to Identity; and (Category 6) Commitment, Challenges, and Personal Growth.

Many of the themes that were under the heading *Examples of the Influence of Marriage*, especially the quality of life changes, hearken back to some of the benefits of marriage previously outlined in the introduction. Participants, such as Frank and Frances,

discussed being less depressed, better able to handle stressful situations, and being happier, supporting the claims that married people enjoy better mental health and happiness (Fowers, 2000; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Examples of improved social and spiritual health also relate to topics recently examined in the literature. Shapiro and Keyes (2008) found that married individuals seem to have a social well-being advantage over individuals who co-habit while unmarried. Spirituality has also been linked to marital satisfaction (Hatch, James, & Schumm, 1986), and spiritual commitment has been recognized as among the most important characteristics of long term first marriages (Fenell, 1993). When individuals are already spiritually inclined, such as participants in the present study, marriage may be an influence for greater spiritual health. Because these particular findings align with past literature, it was concluded that the sample of participants in the present study were generally experiencing some of the well-documented benefits of marriage, which suggested that marriage was having what could be considered an expected influence in their individual lives.

Themes relating to moral traits showed that the participants valued traits that are central to being a good, moral person. Traits listed represented those qualities that were important for them to develop in their own selves. Participants often associated the development of those traits with the influence of the marriage relationship and one's spouse. Participants seemed to value developing such traits in the marriage as well as in their personal identities. The present findings suggest that marriage may help facilitate the development of these virtues. This facilitation may occur as spouses feel encouraged and supported by their spouse to develop such attributes. This facilitation could be

explained by a few different options. One way to explain this could be that having a committed relationship with one's spouse affects an individual's set of possible selves. Many of the themes relating to the moral growth of participants resonate with the concept of *possible selves*. Possible selves are the selves that an individual would like to become, as well as the selves an individual wishes to avoid becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are viewed as fundamental to self-initiated growth and change (Wurf & Markus, 1991). When individuals marry, there is an opportunity to redefine who they are as they go through identity consolidation processes (Pals, 1999). As changes such as those described in the findings occur in marriage, such as having a deeper companionship with someone, taking on greater responsibility, etc., an individual may experience changes in him/herself, such as feeling more secure or feeling the need to become more considerate. Individuals are able to reflect on who they are and who they wish to become as well as who they wish to avoid becoming. Couples in the present study had the chance to reflect on who they wish to be in five years. As individuals considered their possible selves, they consider those attributes that they want to develop in themselves.

Whether they develop those attributes may depend on several factors, some of which may be their self-integrity and moral identity. The extent to which a person has self-integrity may be involved with how strongly they feel the need to align their current sense of self with those traits that are most central to the possible self they want to become. How an individual conceptualizes his/her possible selves may play a role in the development or strengthening of a moral identity (Hardy & Carlo, in press). Themes relating to continuity and changes in sense of self and self-integrity are also supported by past literature. Maintaining a sense of continuity in one's identity has been recognized as

an important part during processes of self-change. Chandler (2003) has examined this concept among adolescent age groups from various backgrounds. Chandler found that adolescents who lacked a sense of self-continuity were at a higher risk to commit suicide. Dunkel (2005) showed that self continuity has positively correlated with identity commitment. Past research shows that maintaining continuity during continued identity development is an important part of identity. Maintaining a sense of self-continuity may help couples face identity change and development in the midst of marital changes with a sense of stability.

Themes that discuss commitment during challenges provide evidence for at least two ways that commitment in marriage may be related to moral growth: through the day to day interactions and regular opportunities to interact and through the greater challenges that require greater commitment in order to maintain the marriage quality. The usual, day to day interactions that include spouses doing the “little things,” such as making the bed, making a lunch for a spouse, and saying “I love you” often, are viewed to be regular expressions of commitment that contribute to commitment maintenance in the relationship. Regular expressions of commitment may be one way that spouses exercise moral virtues, by helping each other, caring for each other, showing responsibility and building trust, etc on a regular basis. Greater challenges, such as depression, addiction, etc. play a different role in the commitment process as spouses take time to respond and deal with those challenges. These may provide couples with opportunities to grow because the situation demands it. Participants discussed how there were certain attributes they had already further developed in marriage, such being more considerate, simply because they needed to. Challenges that couples face may require forgiveness, patience,

understanding, selflessness, and many other virtues to be exercised if the couple is to overcome the challenge. These findings suggest that commitment is a process, and that process contributes to how and when moral virtues might be exercised.

Surra and Hughes (1997) also observed similar process of commitment among premarital partners. During the first commitment process that was identified, commitment is driven by the relationship in terms of how much time is spent together, activities done together, and how comfortable partners are with each other. The second commitment process is driven by events, such as meeting a partner's parents, getting along with a partner's friend, etc. This type of commitment process can lead to greater fluctuation in commitment while dating (Surra & Hughes, 1997). This may demonstrate one difference in couples who are married versus those who are not. Married couples in this sample experience commitment through regular activities, such as spending time together and through various event that are seen as challenging experiences. Rather than viewing these as two separate commitment processes, these seem to be two different dimensions of a more integral process in marriage. Regular expressions of commitment are necessary to maintain the relationship, and the challenges provide a time of testing and growth in overcoming them. Both dimensions can potentially lead to a stronger commitment and both may lead to opportunities to strengthen moral traits, as described in the previous paragraph.

How couples respond during a challenge and the extent to which they prioritize their relationship above other things may relate to self-regulation. Self-regulation involves one's ability to exercise self-control (Rawn & Vohs, 2006). When an individual has strong self-regulating abilities, it may lead to stronger relationships and more self-

sacrifice as an individual puts his/her partners' needs first and may even be related to how committed partners are to each other (Rawn & Vohs, 2006).

It would seem from the themes of this study that part of developing and strengthening a moral self is having opportunities to do moral things, opportunities that are richly available in marriage. Being married puts each spouse in the wake of consequences of the other's decisions. Participants discussed times when they considered how their actions would affect their spouses, whether they would approve, whether it would contribute to their happiness, for example. This emphasizes the interpersonal nature of morality. In marriage, there is always someone to be kind to, to care for, to help and support.

#### *Discussion of Additional Influences*

The two themes under this heading were (Category 6) The Influence of Being a Parent and (Category 7) The Influence of Religion and Faith. Parenting was not a main topic in the present study, and yet, participants who had children would refer to how their children affect the marriage relationship, how it affects the relationship commitment, and how it also influences their desire to develop certain attributes. In past literature, the role that parenting plays in the moral development of children and adolescents has received extensive attention (Dunn, 2006; Eisenberg & Murphy, 1995; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Researchers have also observed ways that parenthood affects marital satisfaction, showing that parenting satisfaction is positively correlated with marital satisfaction (Rogers & White, 1998). Yet, just as the influence of marriage on individual spouse's development had not previously received attention, the influence of becoming a parent has not yet examined in terms of how it affects that parent. It may be possible that having

children also influences individuals' possible selves (Wurf & Markus, 1991) as parents consider they type of person they desire to be for their children. This may likewise influence the development of virtues that they desire to develop to become that possible self.

Participants in this study also discussed their religious and spiritual beliefs when discussing their views on marriage, commitment, and the person they want to become. The couples of this sample came from Christian and Jewish faiths, so it may not be surprising that couples frequently referenced their religious beliefs and the influence of their faith. In past studies, religious involvement has been shown to increase fidelity in marriage (Dollahite & Lambert, 2007), which is the second most prototypical trait in a "highly moral person" (Walker & Pitts, 1998). Religious beliefs and practices have been recognized in as helping couples to prevent and resolve problems and to reconcile with each other after the problem (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). It is possible that religion and faith contribute to helping spouses overcome challenges that arise in their relationship. Walker and Pitts (1998) have also examined the overlap between the "Highly Moral Person," the "Highly Spiritual Person," and the "Highly Religious Person." They found that while being a moral person does not necessarily need to involve spiritual or religious characteristics, being a highly religious or spiritual person does require demonstrating moral traits. Participants' spirituality may also contribute to their overall moral growth and demonstration of various moral traits.

## A Proposed Model

This next section attempts to draw the findings together into a cohesive explanation of the various ways that marriage and commitment may contribute to individual spouses' personal growth and moral development.

### *Processes of Moral Development during Marital Challenges*

The core concept stated earlier, which encompasses and unifies all other themes, provides a starting point for building a conceptual model that describes couples' experience of moral development while being in a committed marriage relationship.

*Individuals progress toward a moral, possible self through opportunities to develop and exercise moral attributes within marriage, mainly through the influence of one's spouse, through regular expressions of commitment to spouse and during times of challenge in marriage.* This statement is meant to reflect simultaneous relationships rather than cause-and-effect relationships. The proposed model discusses the various points of the core concept. The following description helps to integrate the findings and the literature described into one account of how these influences interact in the lives of individual spouses.

Couples go through initial processes of defining and strengthening their commitment as they date and then marry (Surra & Hughes, 1997). After marriage, several changes occur, such as having more responsibility and experiencing a deeper sense of companionship. Marriage and its accompanying changes help individual spouses to reflect on who they are and who they want to be. In other words, they reflect on their possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). As individual spouses consider the type of person they desire to be, they may begin to work toward a possible self. Spouse may



influence one's personal improvement by acting as a support, an example to the other, by providing a reason to change (i.e. to make spouse happy), or even by just being a constant and encouraging presence in the other's life. Then, as couples face challenges together, they draw upon their commitment to guide how they respond to such challenges. The commitment may occasionally be strong enough to inspire the individual to reframe the challenge into an opportunity and an overall productive experience. In either case, these challenging experiences require moral (and marital) virtues to be exercised if the marriage relationship is to be sustained. This provides individuals with the opportunity to learn, develop and exercise such attributes. Having a strong sense of commitment already in place helps individual spouses to demonstrate such attributes. In addition to times of challenge, regular expressions of commitment help spouses to engage in simple, unselfish acts that may strengthen and sustain commitment as well as provide a context that nurtures moral growth. At all points in this process, individuals may be reflecting on who they are and who they want to become. They may be reflecting on the attributes they desire to develop and strengthen within themselves, and this sense, their moral identity and self-integrity may also guide how they respond in a relationship challenge.

One additional factor should be considered in this process, that of personal choice. Participants viewed marriage and commitment as a continual choice to love one's spouse. Part of that choice may also include choosing to allow the influence of a spouse to be at work in one's personal development. Just as Bill and Barbara viewed self changes as a personal responsibility, the extent to which the process above occurs may depend on how open spouses are to a spousal influence. Choosing to be open to the influence of a spouse

may maintain the personal responsibility while still allowing for a potentially positive influence in one's life.

Figure 1

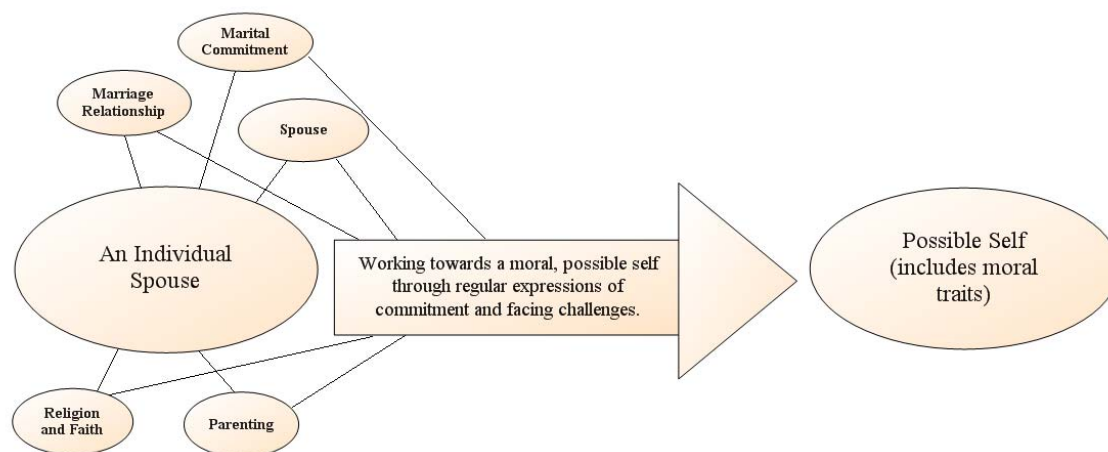


Figure 1 shows the individual spouse and his/her progress toward a possible self as he/she experiences regular expressions of commitment and faces challenges. As an individual works toward this possible self, other influences, such as the marriage relationship, one's spouse, marital commitment, religion and faith, and engaging in parenting, affect both the individual and his/her actions that progress toward the moral, possible self.

This conceptual model provides only a possibility, and it is recognized that couples are varied in personality, background, experience, marital quality, etc. When commitment is not present in a relationship, poorly defined or limited, couples' experience may be different, perhaps drastically different. However, it is important to research positive constructs as well as negative, and the present study contributes to understanding more fully some of the positive constructs of marriage. Because there is a conceptual distinction between negative influences and positive influences, researchers

recognize that having a good marriage is more complex than simply having an absence of problems (Fincham et al., 2007). Examining examples of strong commitment provides different information than that provided by examining relationships of lesser commitment quality.

### *Implications for Practitioners*

The purpose of research that underscores the benefits of marriage is often seen as providing individuals with further reasons to choose marriage when making difficult relationship decisions (Wells & Zinn, 2004). With that in mind, one point of clarification may be needed here. It is hoped that this research will bring something more than just one more benefit of marriage to tip the scale. Rather, it is hoped that readers will find a richer, more meaningful perspective on marriage that does not focus on personal satisfaction. As seen from the present study's findings, marriage includes challenging times that require effort and perseverance. Marriage requires selflessness. That is not to say that marriage does not bring personal satisfaction and individual benefits. It certainly has that potential. But once two individuals are *already* committed to each other, perhaps the greatest outcomes are achieved when individuals act unselfishly for their spouse.

This has significant implications for practitioners in that it may be important to lessen the emphasis on individualistic values of personal satisfaction to couples and individuals seeking marriage counseling. Richardson (2005) evaluated how various assumptions, such as an emphasis on the individual as an autonomous, isolated being, have downplayed the importance of other worthwhile values, perpetuating the very problems that individuals seek therapy for.

Practitioners could consider how to improve methods for helping clients understand what commitment in marriage entails and helping couples strengthen their level of commitment. Such considerations would benefit from future research, but this study provides evidence for an association between commitment and moral development that may help to further current models. The findings of the present study suggest that challenges have the potential to become experiences of feeling especially committed, and those moments provide spouses opportunities to develop and exercise moral attributes. A curriculum might be developed that informs couples about moral and marital virtues that may enhance their marriage as well as enhance their personal development within marriage. Just as practitioners have assisted couples in communication training (James, 1991), therapists may engage couples in programs that seek to foster moral virtues in the marriage relationship. It has been suggested (Fowers, 2000) that practitioners have generally avoided or been uncomfortable with using such a moral vocabulary. However, Fowers (2000) for example, has written extensively on the virtues of friendship, loyalty, generosity, and justice and has been a proponent of fostering the practice of virtues in marriage, claiming that therein lies hope to strengthen marriages. The findings of the present study show various ways that marriage provides a context for moral growth, and future studies may more closely examine the reciprocal relationship between marriage and moral development.

These findings show that challenges do not necessary represent relationship problems, which may encourage practitioners to more carefully consider why couples seek marital therapy. Doss, Simpson, and Christensen (2004) reported that there have been no systematic studies examining the reasons why couples seek marital therapy.

Many questionnaires used on couples seeking marital therapy may tend to focus on “what’s broken” instead of “what’s working” (Doss et al., 2004). By focusing couples in on “what’s working,” i.e. the positive qualities of their marriage, therapist may be able to help couples recognize and further develop their own spousal strengths in the marriage.

### *Limitations*

The sample was purposefully limited to couples who had been married less than 10 years. Therefore, the findings in the study may not represent the depth of experience of couples who have been married longer. This sample was composed couples who were still in the formative years of their marriage, which was appropriate for the present study because these couples were better able to reflect on the changes they experienced transitioning from single life to married life. However, studying couples in their formative years of marriage limits the scope of understanding how processes of marital commitment unfold over the course of several years.

Like any research method, there are strengths and inherent limitations. A qualitative study was performed in order to understand a topic that was new in the literature. Yet, there are limitations in the conclusions that can be drawn. The particular grounded theory method that was utilized does not lend itself to predicting any cause and effect relationships. It has been proposed that the processes of commitment and the influence of commitment in marriage on moral growth are simultaneously affecting each other. In order to more clearly understand the processes and changes that occur over time, a longitudinal study would be appropriate.

### *Suggestions for Future Research*

This study emphasizes various influences on adult development within family relationships that have not been fully explored, such as the marriage relationship, the main focus of the present study, and parenting, an additional finding. This study does not claim to completely understand the complexities of moral development within marriage and would encourage future research to use this study as evidence that there are influences at work in marriage that couples could learn to use to for the enhancement of their personal and relationship development. To build off of the present study's findings, future research could more closely examine how marriage might influence individuals' conceptions of their possible selves. Because possible selves have been noted for potentially playing a role in the development of a moral identity (Hardy & Carlo, in press), this would make the link between marriage and moral growth stronger and more clear.

One area for future research could include parenting and how becoming a parent influences a person's growth and moral development. Past research has examined how the parent-child relationship influences the child's moral development, but future research could look at the reverse. Findings from this study showed that individuals often feel motivated to become a better person and to develop particular attributes for the sake of their children.

Another suggestion for future research would be to examine marital commitment among divorced and remarried individuals. This study's sample intentionally limited the sample to include couples in their first year of marriage in order to maintain theoretical cohesion among the sample, meaning that all participants were similar with respect to the

phenomenon of interest, namely commitment in marriage. Future research could examine how divorce exerts an influence on the individual's sense of morality and could explore what people gain from that experience as they progress to a next marriage.

### CONCLUSION

Marriage is not only one of the most important relationships to today's Americans (Fowers, 2000), but perhaps is also a significant influence for change in adult's lives. Findings support the claim that marriage does influence personal growth and adults' moral personality. Commitment seems to be a significant factor in understanding how this might be possible. Having examined positive examples of committed couples, commitment may be understood as an on-going process during marriage that requires regular expressions of commitment and empowers couples to overcome challenges, which in turn strengthens the commitment. Opportunities are available to exercise moral and marital virtues, often because a successful marriage relationship requires it. As spouses interact, they may affect each others' desires to develop moral traits and may facilitate their development of such attributes. Understanding these processes in marriage and their connection to moral personality may lead to a deeper, less individualistic perspective on marriage, which can in turn, assist couples to strengthen their marriages and experience personal growth.

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## APPENDIX A

## Demographics of Participants' Age, Ethnicity, and Religious Affiliation

| Couple | Husbands |           |                       | Wives |           |                              | Length Married in years |
|--------|----------|-----------|-----------------------|-------|-----------|------------------------------|-------------------------|
|        | Age      | Ethnicity | Religious Affiliation | Age   | Ethnicity | Religious Affiliation        |                         |
| 1      | 25       | White     | LDS                   | 23    | White     | LDS                          | 2                       |
| 2      | 25       | White     | LDS                   | 21    | White     | LDS                          | 2                       |
| 3      | 27       | White     | LDS                   | 28    | White     | LDS                          | 5                       |
| 4      | 23       | White     | LDS                   | 21    | White     | LDS                          | 0.75                    |
| 5      | 28       | White     | LDS                   | 27    | White     | LDS                          | 5                       |
| 6      | 24       | White     | Evangelical           | 29    | White     | Protestant                   | 2.5                     |
| 7      | 33       | African   | Christian             | 31    | African   | Christian                    | 3.5                     |
| 8      | 33       | Hispanic  | Evangelical           | 37    | Hispanic  | Christian                    | 5                       |
| 9      | 55       | White     | Spiritual             | 41    | White     | Spiritual/Non-denominational | 2.5                     |
| 10     | 36       | White     | Jewish                | 36    | White     | Christian                    | 4.75                    |

## APPENDIX B

## Demographics

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity:

Religious Affiliation:

Level of education:

- High school graduate
- Some college
- College graduate
- Some graduate school
- Advanced degree

Family Background—Which of the following best describes your parents:

- Happily married
- Unhappily married
- Divorced
- Divorced and remarried (circle one: father, mother, both)
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

How well did you and your spouse know each other before you started dating?

- Not at all
- A little
- Pretty well
- Very well

About how long did you date before becoming engaged?

How long were you and your spouse engaged?

How long have you been married?

How many children do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

Anything else you would like us to know about you?

## APPENDIX C

### Commitment in Marriage Interview

Questions listed under the main questions numbered are only possible follow-up questions to be asked at the discretion of the interviewer, depending on whether the participant has already addressed those topics or whether they are relevant to the participant's previous responses.

1. Think about what life was like for you before you were married and then think about how it is now. Consider ways in which you are similar and ways in which you are different from who you were before you were married.
  - a. Will you give an example of a similarity? Of a difference?
  - b. How do you think your marriage had anything to do with these changes/similarities?
  - c. Can you give an example? What other circumstances besides your marriage might have led to these changes? Or Can you think of anything that you think has changed because you were married?
2. What does your marriage mean to you? Anything else regarding what it means for you to be a husband/wife?
3. What does commitment in marriage mean to you? What are ways you experience commitment in your marriage? How can your spouse tell that you are committed in the marriage? Can you give an example?
4. Can you describe a time when you felt your commitment was being tested or challenged? Describe the situation. What else were you feeling in that situation?

5. Can you describe a specific situation when you felt especially committed to your spouse? Were you feeling anything else at the time? Please describe.
6. Can you describe a time when you felt accountable to your spouse for the things you did, things you thought, or felt?
  - a. How strong was the feeling?
  - b. Where do you think those feelings of being accountable originate?
  - c. In times when you are not with your spouse, has there been anything in your behavior that would change if your spouse were present?
7. Describe what kind of person you would like to be in five years. Why do you want to be as you've described? What are you currently doing (or planning to do) to be that person? Where does your relationship with your spouse fit into this picture of who you would like to be?
  - a. You mentioned that you want to be more [patient]. How does your relationship with your spouse influence your desire to develop this attribute?
  - b. How do you think you're doing in being [patient]? In what ways has your relationship with your spouse had anything to do with progress you've made in becoming more [patient]?
  - c. Please describe a recent situation you have experienced that illustrates a struggle to either exercise that attribute or not (to be patient or not, for example).
    - i. In what ways was it a struggle to be [patient]?
    - ii. In deciding how to act or what to do, what did you consider?

- iii. What made those considerations important?
  - iv. What role did your relationship play in how you acted?
  - v. Why was your relationship an important consideration?
  - vi. Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently?
8. Refer back to the kind of person you would like to be in five years. Do you think any of your goals would be different if you were still single?
  9. Think about goals you had before you were married and then think about goals you have now. How are they the same? How are they different? (Why was marriage a goal?)
  10. Is there anything else that you would like to add to our conversation that I haven't asked about but that you feel is important to understanding your experience of commitment in marriage?

## APPENDIX D

## List of preliminary codes

1. Changes from before marriage to after
  - a. Deeper sense of companionship
  - b. Stronger motivation to achieve goals
  - c. Changes in behavior, attitudes and expectations
    - i. Changes in dating, more self-monitoring with members of the opposite sex
    - ii. Focuses more on spouse
    - iii. Different friends and different level of social interaction with them due to spending more time with spouse
    - iv. Changes in sexual relationship
    - v. Learn to compromise more
    - vi. Changes in religious Sunday routine
    - vii. Stronger expression of love (i.e. Saying “I love you.”)
    - viii. Becoming emotionally stronger, more firm, assertive
    - ix. Less self-centered
    - x. Learned to appreciate the differences in family backgrounds of spouse
    - xi. Doesn’t enjoy going out as much unless it is with spouse
    - xii. Better “Social Health”—this is an interesting one. One girl who described herself as very flirty said she had become more reserved. One girl who described herself as being very shy said she became more outgoing. Perhaps marriage helps people find their personal healthy social balance.
  - d. Feeling more secure with oneself
  - e. Continuity of identity/personality going into marriage
  - f. Greater independence and responsibility
  - g. Greater maturity
  - h. Life is more enjoyable
  - i. Spiritual health
  - j. Greater focus on relationships
  - k. Increase in religiosity
  - l. Shift in priority
  - m. More structure and peace in life
  - n. Change in relationship with extended family
2. Marriage means:
  - a. Complete Faithfulness
  - b. Strong support system
  - c. Redefining who you are
  - d. Marriage is a choice
  - e. A gift from God
  - f. Happiness
  - g. Companionship

- h. Doing what is expected
  - i. Meeting each other's needs
  - j. Pivotal experience
  - k. Service
  - l. Responsibility
  - m. Working on a common goal and progressing together
  - n. In a religious aspect: forever
  - o. Creating a Family
  - p. Trust
  - q. Commitment to each other
  - r. Being a wife
    - i. Being a mother
  - s. Being a Husband
    - i. Being a father
3. Commitment in marriage
- a. Commitment to spouse as a person
    - i. Love and Support—Meeting needs of spouse
    - ii. Complete Fidelity
    - iii. Being Selfless
  - b. Commitment to God (viewing yourself as accountable to God to keep your marital promises)
  - c. Commitment to staying married (not letting divorce be an option)
  - d. Commitment to the unity of marriage (commitment to decisions made together)
  - e. Commitment is a choice
  - f. Foundation of marriage
  - g. Feeling committed
  - h. Commitment to marital vows
  - i. Sacrifice for the other person
4. Ways couples experience commitment in marriage
- a. Doing the little things
  - b. With verbal expressions and communication
  - c. Showing physical affection
  - d. Giving time and attention
  - e. Showing trust in spouse, Being trustworthy
  - f. Validating spouse
  - g. Facing challenges together
  - h. Having a committed mindset
  - i. Setting and reaching goals
  - j. Making deliberate efforts to improve
5. Challenges couples face—These we will just list.
- a. Questioning whether relationship is right
  - b. Feeling jealousy or resentment toward spouse
  - c. Long distance relationship
  - d. Addiction
  - e. Depression



- f. Being away from family
  - g. Feeling weighed down with responsibilities
  - h. Confessing something painful to spouse
  - i. Worrying things will never get better
  - j. Little things like not putting stuff away
  - k. Cheating on spouse (during dating but it still affects the marriage)
  - l. Not consenting or not consulting
  - m. Financial burden
  - n. Health or Physical Pain
  - o. Poor communication
  - p. Music Choice
  - q. Differences interpreting doctrine
  - r. Getting cold feet before wedding or anticipation of marriage
  - s. Loyalty to extended family v. spouse
6. Responding to challenges (list)
- a. Reminding oneself of how they fell in love
  - b. Taking time to be grateful
  - c. Increase communication
  - d. Outside support group
  - e. Developing boundaries
  - f. Keeping the final goal in perspective
  - g. Justification
  - h. Showing trust despite the difficulty to
  - i. Assuming things are understood between you and spouse
  - j. Remembering one's commitment
  - k. Reflecting on spouse's character
  - l. Allowing spouse to make his or her own decision
  - m. Feeling guilty
  - n. Avoiding to resolve the challenge
  - o. Acknowledging spouses intentions to resolve conflict
  - p. Avoiding question of divorce
  - q. Measuring the opportunity cost
  - r. Compromising
  - s. Submitting to the other spouse and recognizing his or her strong feelings on the matter
  - t. Remembering spiritual confirmation
  - u. Resolving challenge one step at a time
  - v. Choosing to learn from challenges
  - w. Remembering love for spouse
7. Goals
- a. Continue career path, have successful career
  - b. Be a parent, have a family
  - c. Recover from financial loss
  - d. Buy a house
  - e. Overcome mediocrity
  - f. Become more involved in community

- g. Reach eternal life with spouse
  - h. Learn more about one's own religion
  - i. Supporting spouse and family
  - j. Improved relationship with spouse
  - k. Self improvement
  - l. Be someone the spouse and children are happy with
  - m. Become Christ-like
  - n. Make spouse happy
  - o. Be more outgoing with strangers
  - p. Finish School
  - q. Make the home the focus of attention
8. Attributes that spouses mention they want to develop
- a. Respectable
  - b. Trustworthy
  - c. Dependable
  - d. Reliable
  - e. Hard-working
  - f. Determined
  - g. Creative, achieving
  - h. Better communication skills
  - i. Optimistic, fun-loving
  - j. Goal-oriented
  - k. Give best effort
  - l. Outgoing
  - m. Humble
  - n. Less stubborn
  - o. Trusting of others
  - p. Kind
  - q. Considerate
  - r. Patient
  - s. Service-oriented
  - t. Selfless, willing to sacrifice
  - u. Honest
  - v. Spirituality
  - w. Acting on faith
  - x. More genuine
  - y. Able to relate well to others (go back and check on this)
  - z. Active listener
  - aa. Handle stress better
  - bb. Loving and caring
  - cc. Friendly
  - dd. Easy going
  - ee. Forgiving
  - ff. Diligence
  - gg. Understanding
  - hh. Fun-loving

9. Accountability
  - a. Accountability to spouse is just life
  - b. Following through, doing what you say you will
  - c. Complete disclosure
  - d. Not doing anything hurtful or harmful to spouse
  - e. Standing clean before spouse
  - f. Being honest with spouse and others
  - g. Reporting to spouse in financial decisions
  - h. Upholding personal standards
  - i. Discussion on feeling accountable but not acting on it
  - j. Hasn't thought much about it before
  - k. To overcome weaknesses for spouse
  - l. Related to commitment
  - m. Conscience or guilt
  - n. Feeling accountable for how time is spent
  - o. Trusting each other with information
  - p. Feeling accountable for thoughts
10. Ways the marriage influences other aspects of life
  - a. Responsibility carries over to other aspects of life
  - b. Choosing better friends
  - c. Motivation
  - d. Being more productive
  - e. Being more honest
  - f. Relating to others the importance of marriage
11. Feeling especially committed
12. Spouse's influence on goals
13. Changes due to becoming a parent
14. Evidence codes
  - a. Commitment
  - b. Accountability
  - c. Evidence of attributes you see spouses demonstrating
  - d. Evidence of Personal Growth
  - e. Relying on each other's strengths
  - f. Evidence of the marriage motivating a person to become better
15. Why marriage is a goal
16. Contradicts emergent findings

## APPENDIX E

## List of Final Coding Organization/Categorization

## I. THE “CORE CONCEPT”

“Individuals progress toward a moral, possible self through opportunities to develop and exercise moral attributes within marriage, mainly through the influence of one’s spouse, through regular expressions of commitment to spouse and during times of challenge in marriage.”

## II. THEMES THAT PROVIDE CONTEXT

## Category 1: What Marriage Means

- a. Marriage is a pivotal, life experience
- b. Marriage means faithful companionship expressed through support and service
- c. Marriage means equal partnership
- d. Marriage is different and unique from other relationships

## Category 2: What Commitment in Marriage Means

- a. Being committed to one’s spouse and his/her happiness by showing unconditional selfless love
- b. Commitment means keeping marital vows with complete fidelity
- c. Commitment to staying married by persevering through difficult times
- d. Marriage and commitment involve a continuous choice to love one’s spouse
- e. Additional observations

## III. THEMES RELATING TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

### Category 3: Examples of the Influence of Marriage

- a. Shift in priorities from academic/career success to maintaining a strong marriage relationship
- b. Marriage helps individuals to refine personal improvement
- c. Spouse strengthen each other's individual desires to achieve goals
- d. Marriage brings quality of life changes
  - i. Feeling more stable, structured and calm/peaceful
  - ii. Happiness and fulfillment
  - iii. Increase in social and spiritual health
  - iv. Feeling more grateful
- e. Marriage brings greater independence and responsibility
- f. Marriage brings a deeper sense of companionship

### Category 4: Moral Traits and the Influence of Spouses

- a. Traits that individual spouses desire to develop over the next five years
- b. Spouses support and facilitate each other's individual development of moral attributes

### Category 5: Themes Relating to Identity

- a. Continuity and change in sense of self going into marriage
- b. Self-integrity
- c. Influence of the "socially perceived self"

### Category 6: Commitment, Challenges, and Personal Growth

- a. Tests and challenges of commitment and how individuals respond
- b. Feels especially committed during times of challenge

- c. Ways couples regularly experience commitment in their marriages
  - a. Expressions of love and validation
  - b. Showing trust and being trustworthy
  - c. Facing goals and challenges together
  - d. Making efforts to make spouse happy
  - e. Fulfilling financial responsibilities
- d. Additional observations
- e. A notable exception

#### IV. THEMES RELATING TO ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

##### Category 7: Other Influences on Moral Development

- a. The influence of being a parent
- b. The influence of religion and faith