

AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
COMMITMENT LEADING TO MARRIAGE

A Thesis  
presented to  
the Faculty of the Communication Department  
at Southern Utah University

In partial fulfillment  
of the Requirement for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Professional Communication

By  
D. Scott Sibley

Dr. Matthew H. Barton, Thesis Supervisor

April 2010

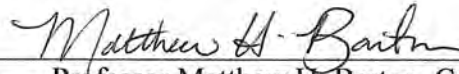
APPROVAL PAGE

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of Humanities and Social Science, have examined the thesis entitled:

AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
COMMITMENT LEADING TO MARRIAGE

Presented by D. Scott Sibley

A candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Communication, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.



---

Professor Matthew H. Barton, Committee Chair



---

Professor Arthur Challis



---

Professor Brian L. Heuett



---

Professor Kevin A. Stein

AN EXPLORATION OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
COMMITMENT LEADING TO MARRIAGE

D. Scott Sibley

Dr. Matthew H. Barton, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to research how newly married couples construct and re-construct commitment through events in courtship, where the understanding of commitment originates, and how couples communicate commitment in courtship and in marriage. This study was an extension of the research by D. J. Weigel (2003) on the construction of commitment. Fifteen newly married couples, 30 participants, were interviewed to gather data for the study. Through the use of grounded theory six different themes (friendship, gradual process, parental example, negative examples, planning for the future, and words of affirmation) emerged in the construction, origination, and communication of commitment.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful for the support and assistance I have received from so many people during this lengthy undertaking. I believe that it is the culmination of the efforts of many that have made this thesis a reality. I would like to thank Dr. Matt Barton for all of the assistance he rendered as my thesis committee chair and for his many revisions and suggestions throughout; Dr. Art Challis who initially helped me discover the idea for this thesis and his help as a member of the committee; Dr. Brian Heuett for helping me fine tune the idea and being a member of the committee; Dr. Kevin Stein for being instrumental in the selection of grounded theory for use in this thesis and as a member of the committee; Dr. Suzanne Larsen for her help and assistance especially concerning the literature review; Sage Platt for providing a location to conduct the interviews; for all of the married couples that participated in the research study; and to the rest of the faculty and staff in the Department of Communication at Southern University for providing a wonderful graduate education. Lastly I would like to thank my wife KaCee and my children Taryn, Trevor, and Landon for their amazing support, encouragement and assistance throughout the process.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

APPROVAL PAGE .....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Marriage.....	1
Marriage in the Media.....	5
Commitment .....	11
2. LITERATURE REVIEW .....	16
Individual Qualities.....	16
Couple Qualities .....	18
Communication.....	21
Environmental Factors .....	22
Ambivalence Toward Marriage .....	23
Sexual Permissiveness .....	25
Cohabitation.....	25
Research questions .....	27
3. METHOD .....	30
Grounded Theory .....	30
Design .....	32
Participants and Setting.....	33
Data Collection .....	34
Data Analysis .....	37
4. RESULTS .....	39
Construction and Re-Construction of Commitment .....	39
Friendship .....	39
Gradual Process .....	42
Origins of Commitment .....	45
Parental Example .....	46
Negative Examples .....	49
Communication of Commitment .....	53
Planning for the Future .....	54
Words of Affirmation .....	57

- 5. CONCLUSION.....60
  - Limitations .....69
  - Future Research .....70
  - Final Thoughts .....71
- 6. REFERENCES .....72
- 7. APPENDIX.....79
  - Interview Questions .....79

## Chapter One

### Introduction

The family is a central part of life in the United States, and marriage remains a top priority. Ninety-six percent of people in the United States will marry at some point in their lifetime (Fields, 2004). People have a great desire to be intimate and loved by another and marriage is designed to meet that need for intimacy and love (Chapman, 2010). In 2008, 2.16 million marriages took place in the United States, which is just slightly less than 6,000 marriages a day (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Fifty-six percent of women and 59% of men, who were 18 or older, were married in 2008 and 70% of people, ages 30 to 34 in 2008, had been married at some point in their life (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Even though the cost of weddings are down due to recent economic difficulties, Americans still pay an average of \$21,814 to get married (Overfelt, 2009). “Poignantly, the one thing that unites the poor and the middle class in their hopes for family life is the imperishable dream of being married forever, grabbing hold of the golden ring of lasting partnership” (Flanagan, 2009, p.3).

Maslow (1954) proposed that individuals are motivated to fill their individual desires through a hierarchy of needs. These needs range from the most basic needs for survival to the need for self-actualization. The third level in Maslow’s (1954) hierarchy is the need to belong and feel loved. These needs include affection and close relationships. If these needs are not met a person will feel lonely and will not be able to move on to fulfill the other levels of the hierarchy of needs. The need for love and finding love is evidenced in the number of dating services in the United States. As of 2002, there were 904 dating service establishments, including Internet dating services

that employed almost 4,300 people and brought in revenue of \$489 million (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Discussing the importance of love, Chapman (2010) stated:

Love is the most important word in the English language—and the most confusing. Both secular and religious thinkers agree that love plays a central role in life. Thousands of books, songs, magazines, and movies are peppered with the word. Numerous philosophical and theological systems have made a prominent place for love.

Psychologists have concluded that the need to feel loved is a primary human emotional need. For love, we will climb mountains, cross seas, traverse desert sands, and endure untold hardships. Without love, mountains become unclimbable, seas uncrossable, deserts unbearable, and hardships our lot in life. (p. 19)

VanDenBerghe (2000) argued that marriage is good for people because of the ordinary day-to-day living and sharing of one's life, and that marriage is rarely the high drama that is shown in the media. "Yet to persons deprived of the small pleasures of ordinary family life, the true benefits and long-term advantages inherent in them appear painfully obvious" (VanDenBerghe, 2000, p. 21). VanDenBerghe (2000) described the numerous benefits of marriage. The first is that marriage offers couples a spiritual connection to their deepest values. According to VanDenBerghe (2000), marriage is not just a legal tie, in most cultures marriage represents a sacred vow before a religious community. Because marriage is a vow, it gives couples a spiritual connection to one another. Marriage also satisfies the need of all humans for physical and emotional closeness with another. Marriage gives constant companionship and encourages healthy behaviors (VanDenBerghe, 2000). Marriage offers couples extended social networks and legal rights and privileges (VanDenBerghe, 2000). These extended social networks double the support system in a marriage. VanDenBerge (2000) explained that married

people live longer, suffer less from illness, and recover more quickly. Married people exhibit fewer risk taking behaviors and suffer less from depression and other psychiatric disorders (VanDenBerghe, 2000). People who are married also are happier, enjoy higher well-being, and are better off economically (VanDenBerghe, 2000).

With all of the benefits that married people enjoy, why are so many marriages failing? The July 2, 2009 cover story in *Time Magazine* attempted to investigate this issue. Flanagan (2009) said, “We recognize that it [marriage] is of great worth, but we are increasingly less willing to put in the hard work and personal sacrifice to get there” (Flanagan, 2009, p.3). In recent years there has been an unprecedented increase in nonmarital cohabitations (Fields, 2004), sexual relations outside of marriage (Dolbik-Vorobei, 2005), spouse abuse, and divorce (Popenoe & Whitehead, 1999). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2002), about half of first marriages may end in divorce. Speaking on the fragile state of marriage in the United States Flanagan (2009) stated the following:

An increasingly fragile construct depending less and less on notions of sacrifice and obligation than on the ephemera of romance and happiness as defined by and for its adult principals, the intact, two-parent family remains our cultural ideal, but it exists under constant assault. It is buffeted by affairs and ennui, subject to the eternal American hope for greater happiness, for changing the hand you dealt yourself. Getting married for life, having children and raising them with your partner—this is still the way most Americans are conducting adult life, but the number who are moving in a different direction continue to rise. (p. 2)

According to Flanagan (2009), the collapse of marriage causes great hardship and human misery in the United States and different economic classes have forsaken marriage in different ways.

“The poor are doing it by uncoupling parenthood from marriage, and the financially secure are doing it by blasting apart their unions if the principals aren’t having fun anymore” (Flanagan, 2009, p. 2). Flanagan (2009) argued that having children before marriage is a “catastrophic approach to life” (p. 2) and “on every single significant outcome related to short-term well-being and long-term success, children from intact, two-parent families outperform those from single-parent households” (p. 2). VanDenBerghe (2000) believed that failing marriages can be attributed to narcissism, worldly value systems, and contempt for traditional norms.

VanDenBerghe (2000) explained:

Perhaps most insidious, too many couples no longer sacrifice for each other, instead displaying individualistic, narcissistic attitudes that some social scientists say are a leading cause of divorce. After all, it’s hard to share sorrows and joys, scrimp and save together, and find lasting emotional closeness when one or both partners is primarily interested in him- or herself. (VanDenBerghe, 2000, p. 22)

In Gottman’s (1994) studies, he found that couples headed toward a break-up showed slightly more negative than positive acts. These positive acts include service, a kind word, or a compliment given to the spouse. Negative acts include criticism or contempt. A couple in an unstable relationship may work very hard to find and change what is wrong with their relationship, but they often get distracted by the negative messages from each other. Attempts are often made to repair the relationship, but negativity blocks their way and can overwhelm a marriage (Gottman, 1994). Gottman (1994) believed that the first thing to go in marriage is politeness to each other. He believed that for some the lack of politeness reflected increase comfort in a marriage, “but it leads to taking one another for granted, and it can lead to rudeness” (Gottman, 1994, p. 65). Gottman (1994) suggested that the one thing that was different between

a conversation in a married couple and a conversation between strangers was that married couples were much more impolite to each other than to strangers. The lack of politeness is the beginning of letting more negative acts into a marriage than positive. Gottman and Gottman (2006) believed that there are four disastrous ways of interacting that can damage communication with a spouse. They are criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling and each of these will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter. Gottman (1994) wrote, “As these behaviors become more and more entrenched, husband and wife focus increasingly on the escalating sense of negativity and tension in their marriage. Eventually they may become deaf to each other’s efforts at peacemaking” (p. 72). As each of these behaviors come into a marriage it is easy for the next one to follow. Gottman (1994) argued that it is not the unpleasantness of these behaviors that is so deadly to a marriage, but it is the way that they can severly interfere with how a couple communicates. “They create a continuing cycle of discord and negativity that’s hard to break through if you don’t understand what is happening” (Gottman, 1994, p. 97).

### *Marriage in the Media*

Although American’s hold marriage in such high esteem, it is very difficult to find an accurate portrayal of marriage in the media. Many television shows show an unrealistic view of marriage and may give people unrealistic expectations in their relationships. “People often begin marriage expecting magazine-cover looks, power careers, and sexual prowess to rival cable TV scenes” (VanDenBerghe, 2000, p. 22). Often marriage is also shown in a negative manner. Henson (2008) said, “Today’s prime-time television programming is not merely indifferent to the institution of marriage and the stabilizing role it plays in our society, it seems to be actively seeking to undermine marriage by consistently painting it in a negative light” (p. 1). These

unrealistic and negative views on marriage can be seen across all genres of television, from comedy, to drama, to reality television. Life-long commitment is rarely shown on television and commitment in marriage is shown as a burden that has to be endured.

Unfortunately, finding a good example of commitment in marriage among celebrities is difficult. In *USA Today*, Howard Markman, the co-director of the Center for Marital and Family Studies at the University of Denver (as quoted in Thompson, 2009) said, "We need to have celebrities providing the positive message that marriage matters and that they're taking marriage seriously to the extent that they are role models" (para. 9). Stressing the importance of being a role model for young people, Markman also stated, "With young people, who might be particularly influenced by messages about marriage, we have a culture where more than ever people dream about a happy marriage, but they are less confident that it will happen to them" (para. 9). Many stars "live their life as if marriage is as important as buying a car," Markman said. "There are obviously some exceptions, but if you just chart the marriage and divorce rate of celebrities, you'll see that their marriage rate is higher than average and their divorce rate is much higher than average" (para. 11).

This is particularly evident in the recent Tiger Woods sex scandal. Although Tiger Woods seemed to have it all: a beautiful wife, children, a successful career, it all came crashing down with his admitting to extra-marital affairs. During Tiger Woods' public apology following months of speculation concerning the alleged affairs and status of his marriage, he said the following:

I stopped living by the core values that I was taught to believe in. I knew my actions were wrong, but I convinced myself that normal rules didn't apply. I never thought about who I was hurting. Instead, I thought only about myself. I ran straight through the boundaries

that a married couple should live by. I thought I could get away with whatever I wanted to. I felt that I had worked hard my entire life and deserved to enjoy all the temptations around me. I felt I was entitled. Thanks to money and fame, I didn't have to go far to find them. (Woods, 2010)

So, how do marriages become strong, lasting, happy, and make it to the later years of life? Much literature has been devoted to studying commitment and the reasons that people terminate or continue in a relationship. VanDenBerghe (2000) said, “Although family scientists haven’t prioritized the common denominators of successful marriages, one particular quality—marriage commitment-- seems to underlie and sustain many others” (p. 23). One of the main predictors for marital happiness is religious commitment (VanDenBerghe, 2000). “The effects of one’s religiosity in a marriage depend on its nature as well as its presence or absence. Quiet, unspoken faith may be more resilient and lasting than highly vocal commitment” (VanDenBerghe, 2000, p. 24). Couples that are living happily have a realistic view of marriage and are willing to sacrifice their own desires and maintain their commitment when difficulties are present. Marriages can succeed when a deep friendship is formed and create nurturing feelings toward one another (VanDenBerghe, 2000). Couples in happy unions forgive, compromise, and generate an atmosphere of mutual tolerance and acceptance through communication. Couples who are happy in their marriages tend to solve problems with techniques that are nondestructive and do not distance the couple from each other (VanDenBerghe, 2000). Happily married couples also have a similar view of their marriage and agree on the marriage’s strengths and weaknesses (VanDenBerghe, 2000). Also, successful couples marry later in life, in their twenties or later, than in their teens. VanDenBerghe (2000) concluded:

Perhaps the most interesting in this list of characteristics of successful marriages are the elements that do not appear. No studies show that a man needs to be athletic, handsome, drive an expensive car, or make a six-figure salary in order to be a suitable husband. Nor is there evidence that a woman must be beautiful, wear a size six dress, or cook well in order to be a good wife. (p. 25)

Gottman (1994) also had many ideas on how to make a marriage succeed. He said that social scientists have many theories as to why marriages fail, such as society's shift from a family farm economy to factories, which made society focus less on the family. Other reasons include the easiness of divorce, women's financial independence, and increasing levels of violence, but all these reasons, Gottman (1994) argued, do not explain why some marriages succeed despite the same pressures that make other marriages fail. Gottman's (1994) research showed that how a couple work out their differences is much more important in marriage than having compatible views. He argued that "occasional discontent, especially during a marriage's early years, seems to be good for the union in the long run" (Gottman, 1994, p. 24). A small amount of conflict helps couples to deal with aspects of their relationship that can harm their marriage in the future. Gottman and Gottman (2006) believed that "when couples consistently avoid problems they develop a habit of squelching their negative feelings. This creates emotional distance, which is a high price to pay for avoiding conflict" (p. 43). Gottman (1994) said:

If there is one lesson I have learned from my years of research it is that a lasting marriage results from a couple's ability to resolve the conflicts that are inevitable in any relationship. Many couples tend to equate a low level of conflict with happiness and believe the claim "we never fight" is a sign of marital health. But I believe we grow in

our relationships by reconciling our differences. That's how we become more loving people and truly experience the fruits of marriage. (p. 28)

Gottman and Gottman (2006) said that a stable marriage require at least five times as many positive as negative moments. When this balance of positive and negative moments is uneven, spouses may find themselves frustrated and fighting more often. Gottman (1994) believed that "as long as there is five times as much positive feeling and interaction between husband and wife as there is negative, we found the marriage was likely to be stable" (p. 57).

Because of the importance of infusing positive interactions into a marriage, Gottman (1994) and Gottman and Gottman (2006) suggested a number of things that would help couples reach their five to one ratio of a stable couple. These positive interactions include: showing interest in what your partner is saying, showing affection through subtle acts of tenderness, giving small acts of thoughtfulness, appreciating your marriage and partner, showing concern for the things your spouse is worried about, showing your partner empathy, accepting what your partner says even if you disagree, joking around with each other, and letting your partner know when you are joyful. All of these things can boost the positivity in a marriage and make it more likely to last.

Gottman (1994) argued that there are three types of stable marriages: validating, volatile, and conflict-avoiding marriages. In validating marriages, the couple display ease and calm. They have the ability to listen and understand the other's view and emotions. Couples with validating marriages can let their partner know that they believe their spouse's opinions to be valid in a disagreement, even if they do not believe the same way as their partner. Validating couples value their relationship over their own individual goals and values. They value their communication, openness, love for each other, affection, and sharing activities, interests and

time with each other. The second type of stable marriage is volatile. “Such couples fight on a grand scale and have an even grander time making up. An uninvolved or withdrawn partner does not exist in a volatile marriage. These relationships are marked by a high level of engagement during discussions” (Gottman, 1994, p. 40). A volatile couple’s passion fuels their arguments and also fuels their positive interactions. Volatile couples do express more anger, but they are also more affectionate and also laugh more than other types of couples. Volatile marriages are very honest whatever the cost, which can be “exhilarating and brave, but it can also be terrifying since it leaves no hurt unstated” (Gottman, 1994, p. 43). The main reason that volatile couples are a stable type of marriage is that they express more negative and more positive emotions. The last type of stable marriage described by Gottman (1994) is conflict-avoiding. According to Gottman and Gottman (2006) relationship experts once believed that this type of couple was destined for trouble, but conflict-avoiding couples “make light of their differences rather than resolving them” (Gottman, 1994, p. 44). Couples who avoid conflict agree to disagree and avoid topics of discussion that cannot be resolved. Often, they feel that because of the common ground and values that they share in their marriage and relationship make conflict unimportant.

Rather than resolve conflicts, avoidant couples appeal to their basic shared philosophy of marriage. They reaffirm what they love and value in the marriage, accentuate the positive, and accept the rest. In this way, they often end an unresolved discussion still feeling good about one another. (Gottman, 1994, p. 45-46)

Conflict avoiding couples do have some dangers involved (Gottman & Gottman, 2006). One is that these couples do not get to know each other as well as other types of couples and keep quiet about their dissatisfactions and unmet needs (Gottman & Gottman, 2006).

*Commitment*

With television showing marriage and commitment negatively, a lack of examples of commitment in marriage, and many sobering statistics about marriage, it is no wonder why many young adults are cautious about marriage and doubtful that it will be a lasting and happy experience (Popenoe & Whitehead, 1999). Therefore, researching marriage and commitment is important, and understanding the reasons that some relationships are successful and others are not can be useful to those who are considering marriage. If people considering marriage know the importance of commitment in marriage and how they can effectively build commitment in their relationship, then those couples will be able to enjoy a more happy, stable marriage. Differences and difficulties can be worked through more effectively when a couple is committed to each other and to making their marriage work.

Commitment has been found to be one of the most critical aspects in the success of marriages through a study asking couples, who had been married for at least 30 years, what they believed were the qualities that sustained their relationship through both good and difficult times (Robinson & Blanton, 1993). Other characteristics that were found to have a positive impact on the duration of a relationship were intimacy balanced with autonomy, communication, religious orientation, and similar perceptions of the relationship (Robinson & Blanton, 1993).

Carroll et al. (2009) conducted a study about the criteria that young adults use when making the decision to marry and factors that lead to marriage readiness. They suggested that young people develop their own marriage philosophies that include their desire to marry, the ideal age they would like to marry, the type of person they would like to marry, and their sense of personal readiness or the types of preparation they felt were necessary before being married.

Carroll et al. (2009) found that emerging adults viewed being able to make life-long commitments to others as one of the primary marriage readiness indicators.

Clements & Swensen (2000) studied the marriages of older couples and what predicted marriage quality. The participants of this study had a mean age of 67.9 years and had been married for a mean length of 42.7 years. Participants completed several questionnaires which included questions regarding length of marriage, church attendance, and aspects of marital relationship. Of all the variables tested in this particular study, commitment to the spouse was found to be the most consistent and also the strongest predictor of the quality of marital relationships in older couples. Commitment negatively correlated with many of the marriage problem variables that were being tested, which means that those that reported higher commitment to their spouse reported fewer problems with their marital relationship. Commitment also positively correlated to love expression variables, so the researchers concluded that people with “higher commitment to their spouses expressed more love to their spouses and reported greater levels of adjustment to their marital relationships” (Clements & Swensen, 2000, p. 114). Clements and Swensen (2000) also noted that most of the people who participated in their study reported very few marriage problems and had high satisfaction with their marriage relationship. Participants also reported that the later years of marriage were the most satisfying (Clements & Swensen, 2000).

Rusbult (1983) created investment theory in which commitment is based on satisfaction with the relationship, the alternative quality, and the amount of investments in the relationship. Johnson (1991) suggested that commitment is best explained by three different measures: personal commitment, moral commitment, and structural commitment.

Personal commitment originates from the desire to continue in a relationship. There are three parts of personal commitment. They include: attraction to one's partner, marital satisfaction or attraction to the relationship, and couple identity. Couple identity means that being part of a couple is crucial to self-concept.

Moral commitment is the sense of responsibility to remain married. There are also three parts to moral commitment. They are: specific values about the dissolution of marriage, the feeling of personal obligation originating from the commitment to stay in a relationship, and the feeling of value in consistent behavior in life.

The last component of commitment is structural commitment. Structural commitment involves the cost an individual incurs in order to leave a relationship. Four components encompass structural commitment. They include: alternatives, social pressure, irretrievable investments, and termination procedures. People evaluate issues such as housing, child care, social network disapproval, dividing possessions, and the past expense of time and effort in the relationship when forming their commitment in a relationship. These different measures can also predict what relational-repair strategies should be used in helping different couples (Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008). Brandau-Brown and Ragsdale explained,

Hence the multidimensional approach to commitment provides a more complete explanation of the aspects of commitment that prompt the selection of specific relational-repair strategies. Simply put, whether an individual wants to, feels obligated to, or has to stay married predicts the use of different relational-repair strategies. (p. 80)

To gain a greater understanding of how commitment is constructed in a relationship the symbolic interaction theory can be useful. When individuals interpret experiences they have with one another, they make sense of it by actively interacting with the social world (Blumer,

1969). This aids individuals in building their personal meaning of commitment. As Blumer (1969) explained,

Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them...The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters. (p. 2)

Relationships are moved by a need to create meaning (Duck, 1994) and couples are continually constructing and reconstructing their relationships (Yerby, 1995).

Some researchers have argued that commitment is an experience. Marston, Hecht, Manke, McDaniel, and Reeder (1998), for example, said that commitment is experienced by different people in different and multiple ways. They go on to say that the best way to explore people's commitment is to find out what their personal perceptions of commitment are.

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a greater understanding regarding the construction of commitment to marry and to find out what couple's personal perceptions of commitment are, specifically investigating the experiences of recently married couples. Weigel (2003) explained:

As a case in point, consider the instance of a recently engaged young couple. With the decision to wed, he may feel both joy and relief with the fulfillment of a lifelong expectation, but he also may fear the uncertainty and limitations his marriage may bring. She might feel a sense of security and closeness from her commitment to her partner, but she may also have concerns over a new sense of obligation and the loss of her previous

life-style. Likewise, as a way of behaviorally displaying their commitment experience they give each other a special gift. (p.3)

As this example shows, the experience of commitment varies between couples, as does how their commitment was constructed throughout courtship. Observing and analyzing many varied experiences of commitment, through the interviews in this thesis, will give a greater picture of how commitment is formed and sustained.

As previously discussed, commitment is a key element to the success of a marriage relationship. Couples need to take the time to evaluate why they are currently committed to their spouse and why they were originally committed to them in the first place. This thesis will explore, with newly married couples, how their commitment developed while they were dating and courting, and what ultimately led them to commit to marriage. Married couples and those contemplating marriage need to understand the relationship qualities that make a marriage successful. By studying commitment and the experiences that others have had in their relationships, a greater understanding of what needs to be done to have a happy, stable marriage can be achieved.

The next chapter of this thesis will provide a more thorough literature review regarding commitment and its vitality in a marital relationship. Chapter 3 will discuss the methods used to interview, transcribe, and analyze the data of fifteen recently married couples. The results and findings pertaining to the research questions will then be explored in Chapter 4. The thesis will then conclude in Chapter 5 by explaining the importance of the results, limitations of this study, and offer possible opportunities for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Researchers have found many factors that play a role in the evolution of commitment (Niehuis, Huston, & Rosenband, 2006; Ripley, Worthington, Bromley, & Kemper, 2005; Weigel, Bennett, & Ballard-Reisch, 2003; Duffey, Lumadue, & Woods, 2001). Commitment can be positively or negatively impacted by particular events, conditions, and interactions between those involved in a relationship. Individual qualities, couple qualities, communication, and environmental factors will all be discussed in further detail.

#### *Individual Qualities*

Niehuis et al. (2006) found that personal qualities of each individual in a relationship can affect the course of courtship. These qualities include premarital attitudes about intimacy and marital roles, or realistic compared to romantic expectations of marriage (Niehuis et al., 2006). When a person in a marriage relationship has high communal attitudes, that person is more likely to put marriage above any personal desires. Adams, Spain, and Hunt (1998) recorded that marital satisfaction, commitment, and partner trust correlated with communal marital values. Communal marital values negatively correlated with feelings of entrapment because those individuals with communal marital values were more likely to have a high regard for their relationship.

Mahay and Lewin (2007) found that full-time employment marks readiness for marriage and makes people more desirable companions. People employed full-time have a greater desire to be married, and a college education increases readiness to marry (Mahay & Lewin, 2007). Being employed full-time may make a person a more desirable person to marry (Mahay & Lewin, 2007). Ginther and Zavodny (2001) found that the probability of marriage, for most

men, rises with their earnings. In a study by Carroll et al. (2009), emerging adults stated primary qualities they believed predicted marriage readiness include interpersonal competencies and developing capacities to care for others. As with financial competency, these personal qualities may make a person a more desirable mate in marriage.

Individuals who have positive attitudes toward marriage are more likely to view their relationships as happy and successful and those with negative marriage attitudes do not have positive expectations (Riggio & Weiser, 2008). Riggio and Weiser (2008) suggested that “individuals who feel positively about long-term commitments involving true interdependence, of which marriage is the epitome, are more likely to invest time and effort in relationships and behave in a committed manner” (p. 136). Greater conflict, less satisfaction, less commitment in relationships, higher desirability of alternative relationships, and low expectations of relationship success can be predicted from more embedded negative attitudes about marriage (Riggio & Weiser, 2008). Those with negative attitudes may initiate and continue conflict within a relationship because their negative attitude toward commitment influences their view of relationship events (Riggio & Weiser, 2008). Also, since those with more negative attitudes are less concerned with commitment and the ending of a relationship, they may be more likely to react negatively to conflict cues. This leads to a lower quality relationship with higher conflict than those with more positive attitudes (Riggio & Weiser, 2008). Gottman (1993) believed that there are two things that are critical in marriages that work. These are the overall level of positive affect, or positive feelings or emotion, and the ability to reduce negative affect when a conflict is being resolved.

*Couple Qualities*

A combination of each individual's qualities can also predict marital outcomes by affecting a couple's courtship. A partner's recognition of similar attitudes, social characteristics, or behavior can determine the level of commitment one is willing to give to another (Niehuis et al., 2006). Couples often evaluate each other's responses to different situations. Similarities and differences to one's own response to a situation can affect the future of a relationship (Niehuis et al., 2006). Stets and Hammons (2002) found that marital commitment is influenced by the interpretation of the spouse's behavior and not the interpretation of one's own behavior. On the other hand, Givertz, Segrin, and Hanzal (2009) believed that commitment is based more on one's own thoughts and feelings than those of their partner's thoughts and feelings. This suggests that different couples construct commitment in different and multiple ways.

The difference in how couples construct commitment is shown in a study by Hicks, McWey, Benson, and West (2004) in which 962 participants reported their most important contribution to their relationship. The most frequently reported contribution was turning toward versus turning away, also known as the "Emotional Bank Account." "This level focuses on the couple's positive and negative exchanges in their relationship" (p. 105). When couples spend quality time with one another they invest in their emotional bank account to help them through difficult times. Chapman (2010) defines quality time as giving someone undivided attention, which does not include sitting and watching TV with each other. Other contributions noted in the study (Hicks et al., 2004) were fondness and admiration, shared meaning, and love maps, in other words friendship, love, and mutual respect.

Another couple quality that has been studied is influence and control in a relationship. In a study that investigated the connections between perceived equity-of-influence, use and

influence strategies, and the satisfaction and commitment in marriage relationships, it was found that perceptions of marital satisfaction and commitment are affected by the use of influence strategies by each spouse (Weigel, Bennett, & Ballard-Reisch, 2006). “The more inequitable they saw the level of influence in the relationship, the more often wives used indirect strategies, and the lower their perceptions of commitment” (Weigel et al., 2006). Also, husbands’ views of commitment were lower when wives used indirect influence strategies and wives reported an increase in commitment when their husbands used direct influence strategies (Weigel et al., 2006). Stets and Hammons (2002) also studied control in a relationship and how it affects commitment. They found that husbands’ and wives’ commitment in marriage can be predicted by their spouses’ control and not by their own control in a relationship. When wives control their husbands they reduce the personal commitment of their husbands because it does not verify how husbands view themselves (Stets & Hammons, 2002). In contrast, when a husband controls his wife it increases personal commitment because it verifies how the wife views herself (Stets & Hammons, 2002). Stets and Hammons (2002) concluded, “The greater the verification, the greater the commitment to the marriage” (p. 20).

The way a couple views it’s relationship and the type of couple they are can have an impact on commitment. When a couple views marriage as a covenantal agreement then the levels of commitment can be predicted (Ripley et al., 2005). Ripley et al. (2005) suggested that covenantal values include:

- (a) the primary unit of the community is the marital dyad, (b) individual sacrifice for the collective (i.e., marital or family) good is expected, (c) commitment and vow taking are valued, and (d) traditional interventions, such as the use of spiritual resources, are seen as a primary means of restoring order when the marriage is threatened. (p. 317)

Men have shown to have more covenantal values than women (Ripley et al., 2005).

On the other hand, contractual values in a relationship can lead to low levels of commitment. In contractual type relationships the individual is more important than the union and the aspirations of the individual are more important than the collective good (Ripley et al., 2005). Focusing on the individual more than the relationship as a whole can impede the development of commitment and successful relationships.

Givertz, Segrin, and Hanzal (2009) argued that there are three different types of couples. Traditional couples have conventional ideologies, are highly interdependent, and engage in conflict for only serious issues. Independent couples have unconventional ideologies and do not believe that relationships should limit individual freedom. Also, they are highly assertive and often engage in conflict. Separate couples have traditional qualities in public and unconventional qualities in private. They do engage in conflict aggressively, but momentarily. In this particular study by Givertz, Segrin, and Hanzal (2009), it was found that separate couples had significantly lower marital satisfaction than any of the other couple types. Also, traditional couples had significantly higher dedication commitment and separates had significantly lower dedication commitment than any of the other couple types. Separate couples also invested the least in their marriage, both emotionally and behaviorally (Givertz, Segrin, & Hanzal, 2009). Traditional couples believe that their marriage is permanent, and the significance of caring for one's spouse and the value of companionship are more important than satisfaction expectations. They also show high levels of commitment to their spouse without the thought or expectation of rewards from the marriage relationship (Givertz, Segrin, & Hanzal, 2009).

Finally, the religious activity of a couple is another quality that has an influence on commitment. In a study by Larson and Goltz (1989) data was collected from 179 married

couples in regards to their religious participation and marital commitment. They found that the personal commitment of both husbands and wives are positively related to church attendance. Structural commitment is also significantly associated with husbands and wives involvement in church (Larson & Goltz, 1989). When a couple is actively involved in church and religious activities there is an increase in the level of marital commitment (Larson & Goltz, 1989). Larson and Goltz (1989) also found that the lowest levels of personal commitment arise when the wife attends church and the husband does not.

### *Communication*

The impact of communication on commitment is immense, and couples use communication to decide on their compatibility. Both verbal and non-verbal communication is the way in which couples create their joint realities of commitment. This communication or lack of communication is the deciding factor in the changing or continuation of commitment in one's partner (Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1999). Ballard-Reisch and Weigel (1999) argued that couples communicate to change aspects of their relationship in which they are dissatisfied or to maintain desired roles. Knapp and Taylor (1994) believed that commitment is formed through interactions with others and with spouses.

Couples also communicate commitment to each other in different ways. According to Gary Chapman (2010) in his book *The 5 Love Languages*, couples use five methods to communicate commitment and finding and practicing the love language of a spouse is imperative to the happiness of a marriage relationship. The first love language described is words of affirmation. People who prefer this love language appreciate compliments and encouraging words. The next love language is quality time, where focused attention and quality conversation are important. The third love language is receiving gifts and giving the gift of oneself. Acts of

service is another love language where actions are expressions of love. The last love language is physical touch. Chapman (2010) said, “Physical touch is also a powerful vehicle for communicating marital love...For some individuals, physical touch is their primary love language. Without it they feel unloved” (p. 109).

Some communication patterns can be greatly detrimental to the commitment in a relationship, relational satisfaction, and stability. These include: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling (Gottman, 1999). Criticism starts with a complaint that includes a global attack on the spouse’s personality or character. Contempt is criticism that is reinforced with disgust or hostility. Defensiveness can happen in a relationship when counterattacking to maintain innocence or avoid responsibility. Stonewalling is a defense people use to withdraw from a conversation and give not clues to how a conversation is affecting them (Gottman & Gottman, 2006). Niehuis et al. (2006) suggested that it is possible that only compatible couples are willing to work on improving communication skills and problem solving in the short term, but also for long term benefits. Also, couples that are less committed or incompatible may work on communication skills for only short term relief.

### *Environmental Factors*

Environmental factors can also have an influence on whether an individual is willing to commit to another or not. Current perceptions of commitment are associated with commitment messages that were learned from a person’s family of origin (Weigel et al., 2003). Also, a person’s “perceptions of dedication and constraints, or of personal, moral, and structural elements, may have as much to do with the messages and learning that occurred while growing up as with the present situational aspects of the current relationship itself” (Weigel et al., 2003, p.

470). Commitment themes that were recalled from childhood were seen in the assessment of commitment in current relationships (Weigel et al., 2003).

Riggio and Weiser (2008) found that those individuals with divorced parents have lower expectations for their own relationships and had a more negative view of marriage. Riggio and Weiser (2008) also found that individuals who came from a home with high parental conflict were also more likely to exhibit conflict in present relationships.

Maintaining rituals are important in creating an environment where commitment can flourish. "Rituals serve as guides in close relationships especially during significant life events and stressful periods. The magical quality of rituals is embedded in their capacity to make transitions manageable" (Campbell & Ponzetti, 2007, p. 416). When rituals are increased, commitment increased; lower commitment levels were seen when there is a decrease in rituals (Campbell & Ponzetti, 2007).

Some factors have been shown to negatively affect commitment. In a study by Risch, Riley, and Lawler (2003) 793 respondents reported the most problematic issues arising in the first years of marriage. The most problematic issue encountered was balancing job and family, followed by frequency of sexual relations, financial problems, expectations about household tasks, communication and conflict resolution, and parents/in-laws and time spent with spouse. Other factors that impede the growth of commitment will be discussed in further detail due to their prevalence in society: ambivalence toward marriage, sexual permissiveness, and cohabitation.

### *Ambivalence Toward Marriage*

One of these factors that can impede the growth of commitment in a relationship is ambivalence toward marriage. In recent years there has been a dramatic change in the way

young adults view marriage and what they believe makes a person ready to get married. In 1970 the median age at first marriage for females was 20.8 and 23.2 for males. More recently, the age for females has risen to 25.3 and 27.1 for males (Fields, 2004).

The postponement of marriage since 1970 has led to a substantial increase in the percentage of young, never-married adults. The proportion of women 20 to 24 years old who had never married more than doubled between 1970 and 2003—from 36 percent to 75 percent. The increase was relatively greater for women 30 to 34 years old, more than tripling, from 6 percent to 23 percent. Changes were also dramatic for men—the proportion of men 20 to 24 years old who had never married increased from 55 percent in 1970 to 86 percent in 2003. Men 30 to 34 years old experienced an increase from 9 percent to 33 percent. (Fields, 2004, p. 12)

The dating experience for young people today is much different from what was experienced by older generations. Traditional dating, where a man asks a woman out on a date and the man pays, is very rare in today's dating experience (Holman, Viverios, & Carroll, 2005). Instead, young people informally “hang out” together in a group or as a couple (Holman et al., 2005).

In past generations, becoming an adult meant caring for one's family. Today, many young adults do not believe that marriage and parenthood are required in making a person an adult. Becoming an adult means being able to take care of oneself and being financially independent (Carroll et al., 2009). These views of independence often drive young adults away from marriage by not knowing how to merge two independent lifestyles into one marriage.

### *Sexual Permissiveness*

Sexual permissiveness can also be a hindrance to commitment in relationship. There is greater acceptance of sexual permissiveness in today's society. Premarital sexual behavior is a great risk to future success in marriage, but young adults still show casual attitudes towards this type of behavior (Heaton, 2002). There have also been increases in acceptance of out-of-wedlock childbearing, single parenting, and cohabitation before marriage (VanDenBerghe, 2000; Martin, Martin, & Martin, 2001).

### *Cohabitation*

Another factor that can thwart the development of commitment is cohabitation. Xie, Raymo, Goyette, and Thornton (2003) defined cohabitation as living in an intimate relationship with another person of the opposite sex without being married. Cohabitation has come to be a phase of courtship, an introduction to marriage, or an alternative to marriage to provide the advantages of marriage, but without any or limited commitment involved in the relationship (Woods & Emery, 2002). Some couples believe that a period of cohabitation would strengthen interpersonal relationships without the worry and responsibility that come with marriage and children and would transform into a more stable marriage (Axinn & Thornton, 1992). The reality is that some cohabiting couples commit to marriage and many others do not (Sahib & Gu, 2002). "Cohabitation is not the kind of system that successfully prepares future partners for marriage, because the absence of obligations in the non married household can lead to the absence of obligations in marriage" (Dolbik-Vorobei, 2005, p. 49). Fields (2004) found that cohabitation has increased sharply in recent years to 4.6 million couples in 2003. Cohabitation is also becoming more widespread among college students and most people do not object to sexual relationships outside of marriage (Dolbik-Vorobei, 2005).

Studies have consistently shown that cohabitation before marriage leads to lower marital quality and higher levels of instability and divorce (Brown, Sanchez, Nock, and Wright, 2006). People who live together before marriage report less satisfaction with their marriage and lower levels of interpersonal commitment than those who did not cohabit before marriage (Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004). Married couples report greater dedication, greater sexual satisfaction, and more religiosity (Stanley et al., 2004). Also, cohabitation is related to marital disagreement and conflict and has a negative impact on marital interaction, satisfaction, communication, and commitment (Brown, et al., 2006). Studies have also shown that those who practice cohabitation have a weaker commitment to marriage, a greater acceptance of divorce, and poor interpersonal relationship skills (Brown, et al., 2006). The risks of cohabitation are “directly influenced by lower levels of willingness to forego self-interest in favor of couple or partner interests” (Stanley et al., 2004, p. 515). Couples who cohabited before marriage are more likely to consider divorce as a solution to marital problems (Woods & Emery, 2002). Also, couples are more selective when forming marital unions than cohabiting unions (Sahib & Gu, 2002). In describing cohabitation, Dolbik-Vorobei (2005) stated, “Something that is commonly available cannot be an object of passion; what we are seeing is a cheapening of intimacy; in informal marriages the partners are linked only by mutual feelings and an oral agreement” (p. 50).

Some studies, though, do not paint cohabitation in a negative light. When asked for a definition of commitment, both married couples and cohabiting couples used the same words to describe the commitment in their relationship. Keeping promises and honoring obligations, relational future, unconditional involvement, putting work into the relationship, and personal

characteristics, such as love, loyalty, sensitivity, and trust, were all descriptions of commitment used by both married couples and those couples who were cohabiting (Pryor & Roberts, 2005).

### *Research Questions*

Although many researchers have conducted studies regarding commitment, generally this has been done from an outsider's view. In other words, research has focused on individual factors that develop or impede commitment in a relationship. Weigel (2003) stated, "Particular events, conditions, and interactions that people themselves say are relevant to the construction and maintenance of commitment, and the meaning they make of those conditions, are often overlooked" (p. 2). Future research should examine the development of commitment throughout the courtship period prior to marriage from an insider's point of view (Weigel, 2003). Most previous studies have not studied the origin and development of commitment during courtship. This point of view will provide a greater understanding of how couples begin, view, develop, and continue the commitment in their relationships and marriages. Numerous avenues have been taken to understand relationship commitment (Weigel, 2003); however the research in this thesis will explore a route rarely taken. There is little research on the construction of commitment leading to marriage, especially concerning everyday interaction. Generally previous studies have employed the Likert Scale (Likert, 1932) or a similar method to gather data concerning commitment in marriage. In this thesis, a more in-depth approach will be applied through intensive interviewing. By using interviews it is hoped that a deeper understanding of the construction of commitment can be established.

Based on the literature, it would be relevant to study the following research questions. As Weigel (2003) stated, "little attention has been given to how couples construct and re-

construct the meaning of commitment in their relationships” (p. 2). This leads to the first research question:

RQ1: How do couples construct and re-construct the meaning of commitment through events in courtship?

To gain a greater understanding of the commitment which has been developed between couples in a marital relationship, it is fundamental to investigate the origins of their belief in commitment. The family of origin has a great impact on what an individual believes about commitment (Weigel et al., 2003). These beliefs may have been developed through experiences they have had in life and also interaction they have had with their family and friends. The second research question states:

RQ2: Where do people’s understanding of commitment in marriage originate?

By investigating certain events that took place during the courtship of a couple’s relationship, we are able to analyze how commitment is constructed. Rather than a singular event, can commitment be understood as a process that is ongoing even after years of marriage? Also, what role does communication play in establishing commitment in a relationship? Communication is key in the development of commitment and is the deciding factor in decisions to change or continue commitment (Ballard-Reisch & Weigel, 1999; Knapp & Taylor, 1994).

These ideas lead to our final research question:

RQ3: How is commitment communicated during the courtship process and in marriage?

This thesis is an extension of previous research produced by Daniel J. Weigel (2003) of the University of Nevada, Reno. In his research study entitled, *A Communication Approach to the Construction of Commitment in the Early Years of Marriage: A Qualitative Study*, he

interviewed a recently married couple and asked several questions relating to commitment.

According to Weigel (2003):

The findings revealed particular events, conditions, and interactions that the couple themselves said are relevant to their “commitment.” Further, their definition of “commitment” seemed to drive their daily interactions, the way they spent their time together, the choices they made, and their goals for the future. (p. 1)

This thesis amplifies the findings of Weigel’s study by interviewing many couples and searching for consistent themes throughout the interviews. In these interviews an investigation on how couples’ definition and understanding of commitment influenced their courtship. By interviewing multiple couples, a more in depth understanding is provided about why people choose to commit to each other and get married. As Weigel (2003) explains, “More extensive sampling could systematically map the spectrum of newlywed couples” (p. 16).

By increasing the sample size of recently married couples, a more in depth understanding can be created concerning the interaction that takes place during the commitment process. The primary goal of this thesis is to “provide a greater depth of understanding into how couples perceive, develop, and maintain commitment in marriages” (Weigel, 2003, p.5). Just as Weigel’s (2003) study laid some groundwork for comprehending the construction of commitment leading to marriage, this thesis seeks to further that understanding.

## Chapter Three

### Methods

#### *Grounded Theory*

A grounded theory method was chosen in order to develop the research study and analyze the data. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss developed grounded theory and their ideas were first published in *Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). As Janice M. Morse (Morse et al., 2009) explained:

Grounded theory may now be the most commonly used qualitative research method, surpassing ethnography. Despite its relative newness, developed only in 1967, the method is used extensively in North America and internationally. Significantly this vast expansion has extended from only two researchers, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, who were at the University of California at San Francisco (UCSF), their students, and their students' students. In four decades, their methods and research publications have created a traceable lineage. (p. 13)

Grounded theory allows for the explication of “what is going on or what is happening (or has happened) within a setting or around a particular event” (Morse et al., 2009, p. 14). It is important to note that this method is primarily a particular way of thinking about data. Every time grounded theory is used it must be adapted in ways to meet the demands of the research questions. In this way, grounded theory is not to be used rigidly, in a “cookbook” or formulaic way (Morse et al., 2009). Grounded theory, therefore, is more of a set of guidelines to follow in order to develop research and interpret data. It is imperative to also remember that this method is grounded in the data thus the name of the method (Morse et al., 2009). Grounded theory was selected for use in this thesis because it “enables not only the documentation of change within

social groups, but understanding of the core processes central to that change” (Morse, et al., 2009, p. 13). Grounded theory allows a researcher to identify and describe phenomena, its attributes, core social or social psychological process, and their interactions on the way to change (Morse, et al., 2009). “In other words, it allows us to explicate what is *going on* or *what is happening (or has happened)* within a setting or around a particular event” (Morse, et al., 2009, p. 14). Grounded theory is a very powerful tool that allows researchers to synthesize data, develop concepts, and midrange theory and it remains linked to the data and is also generalizable (Morse, et al., 2009).

Grounded theory has changed and evolved since it was first developed in 1967. As Juliet Corbin (Morse et al., 2009) who worked with Anselm Strauss for 16 years observed, “Methodology is a living thing in the sense that it has to be given credit for the possessing the possibility of change” (p. 37). In other words, Strauss’s version of grounded theory has not been abandoned, but there have been changes as the theory has evolved. Juliet Corbin (Morse et al., 2009) clarifies by saying, “The method remains rooted in pragmatism and symbolic interactionism, with its emphasis on structure and process” (p.37). What has changed is how scholars think about qualitative research and mold the method so that it is relevant to their specific research study (Morse et al., 2009).

Some of the students of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss have branched off with their own ideas. Based on the “ideas of both mentors, Kathy Charmaz (2006) developed constructivist grounded theory” (Morse et al., 2009, p. 16). Discussing this method, Kathy Charmaz (Morse et al., 2009) said:

Constructivist grounded theory assumes that we produce knowledge by grappling with empirical problems. Knowledge rests on social constructions. We construct research

processes and products, but these constructions occur under preexisting structural conditions, arise in emergent situations, and are influenced by the researcher's perspectives, privileges, positions, interactions, and geographical locations. (p. 130)

Specifically, constructivists seek to understand the “world of meaning and action” of their participants “in ways classic grounded theorists do not” (Morse et al., 2009, p. 131).

Constructivists also view data as constructed instead of discovered and see their analyses as “interpretive renderings not as objective reports or the only viewpoint on the topic” (Morse et al., 2009, p. 131). It is also important to note that, “A constructivist would emphasize eliciting the participant's definitions of terms, situations, and events and try to tap his or her assumptions, implicit meanings, and tacit rules” unlike an objectivist who is concerned with chronology, events, settings, and behaviors (Morse et al., 2009, p. 32).

### *Design*

Although in many ways this study is a replication of research by Weigel (2003), it differs in the method. Weigel (2003) used a case study design to analyze his data, whereas the research study conducted for this thesis encompasses the ideas and guidelines proposed by Kathy Charmaz (2006) in her book *Constructing Grounded Theory*. In describing the design of his research study Weigel (2003) explained,

Through the interviews, I relied on participant's subjective viewpoints and interpretations. I did not include direct observation that might have corroborated people's interview answers. However, interviews better serve the purposes of this study—to identify spouses' personal perceptions of meaning and the language that they use to describe their views of commitment in their marriage. (p. 6)

Also incorporated into the interview process was a knowledge of the use of intensive interviewing as outlined by Charmaz (2006). As discussed by Charmaz (2006), “intensive interviewing permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience and thus, is a useful method for interpretive inquiry...The in-depth nature of an intensive interview fosters eliciting each participant’s interpretation of his or her experience” (p. 25). Other guidelines about interviewing were also followed by creating open ended questions that were non-judgmental in order to encourage unanticipated statements and stories (Charmaz, 2006). The list of questions used to gather data during the interview process are included in the appendix.

### *Participants and Setting*

The couples that participated in this study were recruited in several different ways. Posters were made and hung in prominent locations around campus at a western university. An appeal for participants was made prior to the beginning of class and flyers were handed out with details regarding the study in several undergraduate communication classes and one community class for newly married couples. Also, one professor offered bonus points to students that were willing to participate from his communication class.

A requirement for participation in this study was that the married couples needed to be married less than two years. Weigel (2003) explained, “The study of the early years of marriages offers a valuable opportunity to examine the construction of commitment” (p. 5). According to Vangelisti and Huston (as cited in Weigel, 2003), the “first years of marriage are used to develop joint couple meanings, rituals, and realities as newlyweds actively negotiate roles and communication patterns.” (p. 5)

As an incentive for participation in the research study, a \$15 gift card to a local restaurant was offered to each couple that completed the study. The incentive was provided to serve two

purposes. First, it was used to provide motivation for couples to participate. The incentive was substantial enough to draw attention to the study during recruiting purposes. Second, the incentive was provided so that couples could practice some of the things they may have learned during the interview process. In this way, a continuation of the study would occur, but on a practical level for the participants.

Fifteen couples (30 participants; 15 male, 15 female) participated in this research study. On average the couples had been married for approximately 13 months, with 21 months being the longest length of time married, while 5 months was the least. The male participants were 23.6 years old on average with 27 years old being the oldest participant's age and 21 years old being the youngest. The female participants were on average 21.9 years old with 27 years old being the oldest and 20 years old being the youngest. At least one person in each couple was either an undergraduate or graduate student of a western university.

The setting for this study was on a western university campus in a conference room. The room was nicely decorated and well-lighted. The room was furnished with several padded chairs around a large oval table. The interviewer and interviewee sat across from each other at the middle of the table. Care was taken to make sure that the interviewee would be as comfortable as possible during the research study. While interviewing one person, the other person went into a computer lab down the hall from the conference room to create more privacy. All of the interviews took place during the evening, between 4:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.

### *Data Collection*

After being introduced to the research study by a poster on campus or through a flyer handed out during a university class, the couple contacted the researcher via email. The researcher then contacted the couple via email and explained the purpose of the study and

scheduled a time to meet. Before the interview began, the couple met with the researcher in a computer lab close to the conference room in order to explain the study and to distribute the informed consent forms. Any questions the couple had regarding the study would be answered at this time. Prior to each interview, the participant was notified regarding the confidentiality of the interview. Although excerpts from the interview would be used in the thesis or future publication, the participants were assured that their names would be changed. In all of the interviews, except one, the husband was interviewed by the researcher first. The interview with the husband would last approximately one hour. At the conclusion of the interview, the husband would trade places with his wife and she was interviewed separately for approximately one hour. At the conclusion of both interviews, the couple was brought back together for a short debriefing session and the \$15 gift card was awarded to the couple for their participation. A small card was also given to each couple thanking them for their participation and giving them the web address to find the results of the study following the analysis, revision, and completion. Any questions the couple had regarding the study could also be asked at this time. The couple was then thanked for their participation and the session ended.

During the interviews, questions were initially asked to create a relationship of trust between the interviewer and the interviewee. Although these questions did not specifically address the research questions, they helped to establish an atmosphere to help the interviewees feel open and comfortable in sharing stories about their personal life. Some of these questions included where the interviewee was raised, how many siblings the interviewee had, what initially interested the couple in each other, and how married life had been so far. For many of the participants this proved to be an important time as many of them were able to relax, and it created a conversational tone between the interviewer and interviewees.

The next questions in the interview process were designed to address the research questions. Follow-up questions were often asked according to the relevancy during the interview and to encourage the participants to be more in-depth with their responses. As Charmaz (2006) explained about interviewing, “If you attend to respondents’ language, you can bridge their experience with your research questions. Then you can learn about their meanings rather than make assumptions about what they mean” (p. 35). These questions tackled issues such as (1) their individual definition of commitment, (2) where they believed their understanding of commitment in marriage originated from, (3) the effects of family and friends on their personal understanding of commitment, (4) how and why the commitment to marry his or her spouse developed, (5) discussions about commitment during the courtship period, (6) whether certain events changed the commitment level during courtship, (7) how their beliefs and perceptions about commitment changed since being married, (8) how the individual finalized his or her decision about marrying his or her spouse, (9) how individuals communicate commitment to his or her spouse (verbally, emotionally, physically, etc.), (10) how the spouse communicates his or her commitment, (11) whether they continue to discuss commitment in their relationship, and (12) what the individual could do to show more commitment to his or her spouse.

The researcher followed the advice given by Charmaz (2006) when discussing interviewing stated, “The combination of how you construct the questions and conduct the interview shapes how well you achieve a balance between making the interview open-ended and focusing on significant statements” (p. 26). The design and chronology of these questions were also patterned after the interview method that Weigel (2003) used in his research study. The questions were used to guide the interview so comparisons could be made between each

individual couple. Although the sequence of questions was occasionally different from one participant to the next, generally the questions followed the order specified in the appendix.

### *Data Analysis*

The interviews were digitally recorded and were later transcribed for the purpose of analysis. The researcher had an assistant who transcribed all 321 pages which consisted of approximately 30 hours of interview data. The process of analysis consisted of several steps. Following the transcription of the interviews, the researcher listened to each interview one time to initially become re-acquainted with the responses of the participants. The researcher then listened to the interviews for a second time while reading through them line-by-line on the transcribed pages. Significant portions of the interview that answered the research questions were highlighted. This second analysis of the data began the initial coding phase as described in Charmaz (2006). Describing initial coding, Charmaz (2006) said, “From the start, careful word-by-word, line-by-line, incident-by-incident coding moves you toward fulfilling two criteria for completing a grounded theory analysis: fit and relevance” (p.54).

Elements of focused coding were then applied to a third listening of the interviews and read through. Charmaz (2006) described focused coding as “using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (p. 57). Focused coding allowed the researcher to identify overlaps in the couple’s language and perceptions of commitment. Both the husband and the wife use specific language that was unique to their relationship regarding what made them committed to their spouse.

Additional understanding that was learned about the participants and their understanding of commitment was written in memos on the side of the page and on separate pieces of paper in

both the initial and focused coding process. Charmaz (2006) clarifies the importance of memo-writing when she said:

Writing successive memos throughout the research process keeps you involved in the analysis and helps you to increase the level of abstraction of your ideas. Certain codes stand out and take form as theoretical categories as you write successive memos. Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions for you to pursue. Through conversing with yourself while memo-writing, new ideas and insights arise during the act of writing. (p. 72)

By using grounded theory, researchers are able to focus on the meaning of the interviews. Especially by applying constructive grounded theory, the perspective of participants regarding a specific issue can be extracted. Charmaz (2006) described why using grounded theory coding is an exceptional way for researchers to develop theory regarding social interactions.

Grounded theory coding is more than a way of sifting, sorting, and synthesizing data, as is the usual purpose of qualitative coding. Instead grounded theory coding begins to unify ideas analytically because you kept in mind what the possible theoretical meanings of your data and codes might be. (p. 71)

Due to the careful analysis that took place, the researcher was able to discover interesting findings discussed in Chapter 4.

## Chapter Four

### Results

#### *Construction and Re-Construction of Commitment*

The first research question sought to explore how couples construct and re-construct the meaning of commitment through events in courtship. Specifically, questions were designed during the interview process to provide information regarding the construction of commitment. These questions included how the couple became interested in each other, qualities they found attractive in their spouse, and certain events that changed their commitment level during courtship. Follow-up questions were asked as necessary to extract any additional insight. Although many themes were expressed by the participants during the interview process, these have been broken down to two prominent themes. Friendship and gradual process were the two themes that emerged about how couples construct and reconstruct commitment throughout courtship. These themes will be discussed and examples will be shared. Although fictitious names will be used regarding the participants, all of the examples or quotes are directly from the interview transcripts.

#### *Friendship.*

The most prominent theme regarding the construction of commitment expressed during the interviews was the importance of friendship. For almost all the couples, this at first was the basis of their relationship prior to any romantic involvement. Gottman and Gottman (2006) believed that happily married couples behave like good friends. “In other words, their relationships are characterized by respect, affection, and empathy. They pay close attention to what’s happening in each other’s life and they feel emotionally connected” (Gottman & Gottman, 2006, p. 3-4).

Trent and Gretchen Walker are a couple that exemplified the importance of friendship as the basis of their relationship. Trent and Gretchen met when they were only 14 years old. They became good friends during the high school years. Looking back on their relationship, Trent said, “We were friends first and we always have been friends first and foremost. That’s where it all started I guess.” Gretchen provided further clarity on the importance of friendship when she said:

I’ve always felt like relationships need to start as friendships. It’s funny actually, when Trent and I were first starting to like each other, and I think I had just turned 16, but he hadn’t kissed me yet. Trent asked me, will you go out with me, and I told him no, and the very reason I told him no had to do with that I was scared of losing that friendship. And cause I think I just see so many relationships where they get in and start dating and already have that romantic aspect involved in that relationship before they have any sort of admirations for the other person. I don’t really know how to explain it, but I have always been scared going into a relationship without that friendship base. It really does just have to do with the fact that you just get to learn about someone in so many more ways if you’re just friends first and there’s no commitment attached to it before. You’re just learning about the person and want to know about them and when that leads to a commitment relationship it changes. It is so night and day from relationships that start right off.

For Gretchen, developing a friendship with Trent was a priority if their relationship was going to progress. It was important to both Trent and Gretchen to really get to know each other by being friends first and then letting the romance come later.

Ben and Kaylee Wright are another example of how friendship can aid a couple in the construction of commitment. Ben and Kaylee met in September 2007 while attending a small, western university. Ben and his roommates lived in an apartment above Kaylee and her roommates. Due to the close proximity, Ben and Kaylee became friends, which later led to dating and eventually their marriage. Ben said that they both started their friendship not wanting a romantic relationship, “but as our friendship grew we both started liking each other a lot, so we were going to be boyfriend, girlfriend.” Kaylee was asked why their friendship made a difference during her individual interview and she said that friendship “made a huge difference because I wouldn’t have married him if we weren’t friends.” Kaylee also said, “We would just talk a lot, because we were friends, anytime really...We were on the same wavelength. We were both on the same page.” Because Kaylee and Ben were such good friends, they were able to talk about anything, anytime. This type of communication helped them to be on the same page and move forward with their relationship. Prior to their marriage, Ben and Kaylee broke up, but they remained good friends. This friendship helped them get back together and continue their relationship.

Brandon and Carly Adams were also participants that explained about how important their friendship was. Brandon and Carly met when they were 6 years old in first grade. They grew up together, their families knew each other, and Brandon and Carly were often involved in activities together with a group of friends. Although they never dated in high school, they would talk to each other about boy and girl problems they were having. Carly was asked during her interview why it made a difference in their relationship to be friends first and she said, “I think a really big difference because the ice was broken and we were really able to get to know each other on a deeper level.” Brandon really appreciated their friendship and he explained:

It was a good foundation that we were just friends and had that connection before any real romance was integrated in. I guess you know that person. You know the different aspects of who they are rather than, I have an attraction to you, I want to date you. We can be fine when we don't have to kiss or hold hands. We can be fine just being together and talking and not having anything uncomfortable to worry about. So, I think that really helped in our marriage because we're just more completely comfortable with each other right from the get go and it's not ever awkward.

Brandon was able to get to know Carly in ways he believed would not have been possible if they had not been friends first. Although these three couples demonstrate the importance of friendship during the courtship period, all of the couples interviewed also felt that friendship was important in their relationship. Friendship seemed to create a strong foundation for their relationship. Friendship was important in the comfort level of a relationship. Friendship made couples more comfortable with each other. Friendship also gave couples a connection to each other before romance was integrated into the relationship. The strong foundation, comfort, and connection that friendship gave to the couples interviewed assisted in their ability to communicate and commit to each other.

#### *Gradual Process.*

For the majority of the participants in the research study, their construction of commitment to their spouse was a gradual process. This commitment increased over a period of time and was amplified due to certain events the couples experienced together. Generally there was not a certain event that significantly increased their commitment level toward their future spouse. It was the small things that couples would do for each other during the courtship process that seemed to make all the difference. Many of the couples made it clear that they needed

adequate amounts of time to get to know their spouse and really trust them before they were willing to commit.

Cody and Savannah Morgan developed their relationship gradually, which allowed them to build their commitment to each other. Cody and Savannah dated each other for a period of 3 years prior to their marriage. Religious differences between Cody and Savannah prevented the relationship from progressing at a faster speed, but they were able to work these differences out and eventually get married. Speaking of these religion differences and how their courtship was a gradual process, Savannah said the following:

I always knew that he was the type of person that I could marry, but I was always kind of afraid to because of religion differences. Over the course of the 3 years that we dated it was kind of the same, it just grew and grew. It was never like a pounding, glorifying moment that “I’m going to marry him.” Just more and more every day. This is the person that I could marry, this is a person that I could spend forever with. So, it wasn’t anything big or exciting. It was just that gradual and when I first met him I knew he was the type and as we kept dating, I knew he was the type of person. Eventually, I knew that he was the person that I wanted to marry.”

So instead of some grand experience that shifted her commitment level, Savannah was able to truly commit to Cody the more she got to know him and spend time with him.

Luke and Taryn Freeman were also a couple that discussed how their relationship developed gradually. Luke and Taryn met each other in the spring of 2008 during a history class they had together at a small, western university. Luke was asked whether his feelings of commitment were instant or gradual over time and he responded, “I would have to say it was gradual. When I first noticed her in our class, I think I developed a fondness of her. I liked her.

I thought she was not only pretty, but a neat person.” Taryn provided greater clarity to the gradual process that occurred in their relationship when she said the following:

Just looking back through all those qualities that I had wanted and understanding where he came from and understanding that neither one of us was perfect and that we would grow together. His strengths helped my weaknesses and vice versa. And really just knowing that I was comfortable with him and knowing that I could trust him. Knowing that we could work through conflict and working through things that we disagreed with because it happened when we were dating.

Taryn noted that it was the little things that gradually allowed her to be committed to Luke. As Taryn got to know Luke over time, she learned to appreciate his good qualities more and more. Taryn said, “I’ve always been a keep to myself person,” but over time was able to open up to Luke. Taryn said, “I never felt like I need to keep secrets. I have been able to share everything with him.”

Bill and Emily Stevens are yet another example of a gradual building commitment. Bill and Emily shared common interests and enjoy the outdoors and recreational activities that involve nature. Explaining this gradual process, Emily said, “It was really gradual. It wasn’t big things that moved it up. Just spending time together. We went on a lot of walks, ate a lot of ice cream, or just sit in his apartment or on my front porch.” Bill believed that their relationship developed through a gradual process. When he was asked during the interview if certain events increased his commitment level to Emily, he said:

Well, pretty early on in our relationship we liked to go on pretty regular dates and we liked to go on hikes and really liked to do things outside. And I think those were the times when we really felt like we connected and really that’s when I felt like I was the

closest to Emily and I really felt like I understood her when we were out and we were alone. We weren't just out in public, we were hiking in the woods or something and we felt like we could really open up to each other, but I can't think of a specific time, but there were several instances like that.

Bill described that it was several instances that made his commitment to Emily grow, not just one, big event. Bill and Emily both loved to be together doing activities to build their relationship.

It was clear through the interviews that friendship and gradual process were the prominent themes discovered in regards to construction and re-construction of commitment. For the majority of participants in the research study, friendship was attributed as a major factor to the development of commitment with their spouse. Participants in this study also explained that their commitment for their spouse did not happen overnight. In other words, it was a gradual process that happened over time. As couples were able to get to know each other through simple, everyday occurrences, their commitment level was increased.

### *Origins of Commitment*

The second research question investigated where people's understanding of commitment in marriage originated. During the interviews, participants were asked where their understanding of commitment in marriage came from, and also what the effects of family and friends had on their personal understanding of commitment in marriage. Primarily, participants expressed that parental example was the dominant way in which their understanding of commitment began. Interestingly, all of the participants, besides mentioning positive examples of commitment, mentioned the negative examples of commitment that they witnessed. These negative examples of commitment also seemed to have a profound influence on their understanding of what

commitment means. Particularly, participants used these negative examples of commitment to understand what not to do in their future relationships. Although some participants mentioned religion as an origin of their understanding of commitment, parental example and negative examples were the two prominent themes found regarding this research question.

*Parental example.*

Oliver and Nancy Jones provide a strong example of how parental example has shaped their understanding of commitment in marriage. Oliver and Nancy were both 27 years old at the time of these interviews were conducted. It was apparent that they had observed a wide range of examples of commitment throughout their lives. Nancy believed that her understanding of commitment, first of all, was established through the observation of her mom and dad's marriage. Nancy mentioned the example her parents set:

They stuck it out. Marriage is hard and it has ups and downs. So, as a kid or a teenager you could tell when those times were harder on your parents, but they always stuck it out. They were always kind and respectful to each other and that's the biggest thing that I saw, how they treated each other.

Nancy understood that having a successful marriage relationship requires effort and patience. Her parents provided that example for her. Discussing this primary origin of understanding commitment, Oliver said:

Probably primarily from my parents. Just watching them and seeing how their relationship was, is the most fundamental influence on my life. And then I've read all kinds of different things from which I've taken, discarded different information. But ya, I would say fundamentally from my parents and watching their relationship and how they did things...I don't think anything mattered as much as their relationship.

Oliver's family moved across the country while he was growing up. His dad went to medical school while his mom stayed home with him and his six siblings. Often his dad had to work 100 hour weeks while he was finishing his training to become a doctor. Although his mom and dad were apart from each other often and money was tight, they didn't let these circumstances drive them apart.

Landon and Jenny Brown also were influenced by the parental example that was provided concerning commitment. Landon and Jenny had been married for 7 months when they participated in the research study. Landon explained that his parent's example has made a significant impact on his life. When asked what difference it made that his parent's exemplified commitment Landon said:

Huge difference, especially in today's world. If my parents never showed me or expressed it, honestly, I don't know if I would work for it or fight for it if things get rough. It seems like in today's world if things get rough, then bail. If that's all that I saw, and I never saw what it was like to keep a commitment or to work for it, to build that commitment or relationship...I mean, if I never knew what it was or saw what it looked like, I wouldn't know how to emulate or imitate it.

Landon's mom and dad continually showed each other how much they cared about their relationship. Landon's parents found ways to serve each other every day and Landon wanted to be the same way in his relationship with Jenny. Jenny also explained that her parents were the primary influence of the meaning of commitment in her life prior to marriage. She said:

They help each other out. My dad helps my mom if she needs to vent. He lets her vent her frustrations on him. My dad is one of those people that keeps everything inside so he takes whatever comes at him. We did family home evening, went to church, just all the

stuff that they did. It's just that they never quit on each other. That's the way I want to be and not have something come up and say I'm not dealing with that, I'll go do something else. Just like looking for a person to marry, I looked for those kind of qualities. If something came up, he didn't run away and freak out and stuff.

Something both Landon and Jenny mentioned during their interviews was the clinical depression that Landon was dealing with. Jenny learned from an early age not to quit on a relationship when things are difficult. Landon said about Jenny:

She's been fantastic though. I have depression. I am just imbalanced, so my chemicals go imbalanced. It doesn't help much. I guess I just get, like you get really depressed or irritable, angry, but she is really patient and understanding and she still sticks with me.

Jenny has been able to emulate her parent's example of not quitting on a relationship during difficult circumstances. Although Landon has depression, they are dealing with it together and she is patient and supportive of him.

Trevor and Julia Johnson also believed that their parents' examples were the most important factor in their development of understanding commitment. Trevor and Julia had been friends since high school and grew up in the same town. When asked where her commitment originated, Julia said:

Watching my parents. Watching my grandparents. I knew sometimes when they were upset with each other, but I never saw them fight. They might have discussed by themselves. Divorce was, I didn't really understand what it was until my friends would tell me. My parents they were just so loving to each other all the time.

Although Julia's parents sometimes had disagreements and were upset with each other, they were still willing to forgive and apologize and strengthen their relationship. This example

played an important role in Julia's understanding of commitment. Trevor's father worked in a gold mine and hated the atmosphere there. Many of the workers would use the work computers to look at pornography and were not respectful of women. In order to provide for his family, Trevor's dad sacrificed so that his family could have the things that they needed. Speaking of his dad, Trevor said:

I see in him his commitment to keep going to that work...I can just see tons that he's sacrificed to keep the family so we can do our sports, so my mom can do the things she wants to do.

It was clear that Trevor was trying to follow his father's example of commitment. Trevor had been taught to be a hard worker. In fact, Julia remarked, "He's a really hard worker. He won't leave a project until he's finished with it."

Each of the participants in the study discussed the importance of parental example. Their parents had taught them the importance of sacrifice and working through disagreements that they had in their relationship. They were also taught the value of service and putting someone else's needs before their own. In this way, parental example was the primary way in which commitment originated for the participants.

*Negative examples.*

Colin and Paige Richardson explained during their interview sessions that observing negative examples assisted them in forming their own ideas of what commitment means. Colin and Paige use these negative examples of commitment to become better people. Paige explained how initially her parents had a successful marriage, but then explained how that changed:

With my parents I saw how good their marriage was and I saw how romantic and loving they were my whole life. Then I saw it go downhill because of one person's choices so I

could diagnose it. So, I wasn't afraid to get married. Some people say, "I don't want to get married because my parents got divorced." I know what they did and I can see why it went wrong, so I know...we will be fine.

Paige wanted her relationship with Colin to be happy and to last. Due to the negative example of her parent's current relationship, she knew how she did not want to be. Colin's parents got divorced when he graduated from high school. Colin had always imagined that his family would always be together and their divorce "rocked his world." For a long time, commitment was a very difficult issue for him. Colin said, "It took me awhile to decide whether I should marry Paige or not." Interestingly, Colin believed he was able to grow personally from the bad experience of his parents divorcing. Colin explained:

Their divorce totally made me a better person. Better son, eventually a better father, a better husband. It [his parent's divorce] changed it [how he thought about marriage] because I figured out it's not all rainbows and butterflies. If you want to be committed to marriage you have to constantly work at it and it won't always be easy once you say I do and come home from the honeymoon. It does take constant work and consideration for the other and wanting to serve the other constantly. When the other can't give 100%, you give 110%. There's always, always effort that has to be involved. Because of my parents' divorce I realize you can't just coast. As important as it is to raise your children and everything, and this is coming from someone who doesn't have children, but was the child in my parent's family, it is so important to take time and spend time with your sweetheart, your significant other. So, I think that there's a lot of ways it affected me, but as far as commitment it affected me a lot. It opened my eyes to work that needs to be put into it.

Colin's parent's divorce made him realize that marriage is not always easy and that it takes work to make a relationship strong. Colin believed that parents need to make time for their spouse, especially when raising young children.

Aaron and Brittany Turner are another couple who have observed negative examples of commitment and used them to make their own relationship even better. Aaron and Brittany had been married for almost a year when they were interviewed. Brittany believed that watching negative examples of commitment could help her own relationship. When asked if she thought the negative examples she had seen made a difference, Brittany said, "I do because you see the effects they have and you see the causes of them too, so it kinda helps you learn without doing." Brittany could see that watching the mistakes of others could help her not make the same mistakes in her own marriage. Aaron also saw how bad habits can affect a marriage and how negative examples can help you know the good in a marriage. Aaron said:

I kind of learned that bad habits can affect your commitment with one another and so that was another thing that I would say I learned from my extended family, how smoking and drinking can affect a couple...you don't know what good is if you don't know what bad is. If you don't know how bad it can be, you don't know if what you have is any good. I don't think I would feel as strongly about how I feel about commitment if I didn't see my friends' family environment and how commitment tore them up so you definitely have to have the good and the bad.

Aaron saw how his friends' families were torn apart when commitment was not present in a marriage. Aaron believed that when you see the negative examples, it helps you see the good examples as well. In this way, an individual is able to decide how they will act in a marriage relationship.

Adam and Katie Williams realized the importance of learning from the mistakes of others. Adam and Katie had been married for a little over a year and a half when this interview took place. Adam understood that some relationships fail, so he wanted to do whatever he could to prevent the same mistakes in his own relationship. Adam explained:

Sometimes in my own mind to prevent a failure you have to understand what caused the failure in the first place and I'm an engineer. It's easy to dig through a machine.

Machines don't feel pain, they don't feel upset, they don't get hurt. People are a lot more complex than a machine, and so it was really important to me to understand how different types of relationships fail because if I can understand why they can fail, I can recognize the signs and maybe I can take steps to prevent or correct it.

Katie came from a family where her parents were divorced. This divorce made her apprehensive of commitment in her relationship with Adam. Katie said:

Coming from divorced parents, it freaked me out that I had deep feelings for him in the first place. Being a divorced child I didn't want to go through a divorce and I feel once you make that commitment, you made that promise...It's made a big impact on a lot of my decisions, being scared of commitment.

Katie could see how the divorce of her parents affected her and her perceptions about relationships and did not want the same thing to happen to her and Adam. Her father later remarried and had a good relationship with her step-mom. Her understanding of commitment originated from her dad and her step-mom. In this way, she was provided a positive example of a marriage relationship.

Parental example and negative examples were the most prevalent themes as the origins of commitment. Parents were a major influence on how the couples in this study perceived and

developed their own ideas of commitment. When participants had observed positive examples of commitment from their mother and father, they often expressed a desire to emulate those characteristics in their own relationships. Interestingly, negative examples of commitment were actually considered a benefit by many of the participants. By having the opportunity to observe examples of bad commitment from family members or friends, the participants realized how they did not want their relationship to be someday. For some of the participants in this study, being able to observe negative examples bolstered their desire to be a good husband or wife in their marriage someday.

### *Communication of Commitment*

The final research question that was examined in this study was how commitment is communicated during the courtship process and in marriage. Questions were designed to extract information about how the participants communicated commitment to their spouse. These questions included: did you talk about commitment during the courtship period, do you currently talk about commitment in your relationship, how do you communicate commitment in your relationship with your spouse, how does your spouse communicate their commitment, and what could you do to show more commitment to your spouse. As with the other research questions, many themes were discovered, however two prominent themes were found to be part of all participant interviews. Planning for the future and words of affirmation were the most prominent themes from the interviews in the research study. The researcher noted that the theme planning for the future was discussed both in courtship stage and in marriage. However, words of affirmation were specifically linked to their interaction during their marriage relationship. Although words like “I love you” and other words of affirmation were used during the courtship period, for many couples communicating commitment was especially necessary during marriage.

*Planning for the future.*

Bill and Emily Stevens are a couple that exemplified the idea of planning for the future. One of the primary ways that Bill and Emily communicate their commitment for each other is by “staying on the same page.” In other words, they plan their days and weeks together. Bill explained how they plan for the future together as a couple. When asked whether they set goals or talk about future plans, he said:

Yeah, all the time. I'd say we do every week, ever week I mean, if just setting goals for the week. We'll talk about things that we have planned for the week and how that relates to our future, whether it be talking about our classes in school or job interviews or talk about things we'd like to do with our family someday, setting goals for things that we can do this week or things that we would like to do next year, or 5 years. We try to communicate those things pretty well.

The researcher then asked why these conversations about planning for the future together made a difference in their relationship. Bill responded:

It definitely makes a difference. It's just something to talk about, first of all, and that it builds our relationship, being able to talk and taking the time to be together. I think that's important to do, to set aside some time each day to talk and that's a big part of it, but also it does help us to mix our goals together so that they mesh well and cooperate well, so we have the same goals ultimately.

When Bill and Emily talked about their goals and aspirations they were able to mesh their goals together for one united goal. Setting goals together, for Bill and Emily was relationship strengthening and gave them a time to talk to each other each day.

Michael and Sarah Webb also noted the importance the discussing future plans in courtship. At the time of the interview, Michael and Sarah had been married for 1 year and 6 months. Michael expressed that he needed to discuss future plans with Sarah because their future affected their whole family. He said:

It would make a lot of surprises that aren't good surprises. It's a lot of guess work or you're walking on egg shells. I don't want to live like that. It creates a lot of stress. We talk about plans about where we want to go to grad school and for me a huge input to that is how she feels because I don't want her to hate where we live for awhile because if she's unhappy how in the world can I be happy. Just the fact that she's unhappy just pulls at my heartstrings. If I knew if we are going someplace that she was going to hate would just always be something I'd want to fix. It would be something that would just be a challenge. So, it's just great to be able to feel united so you have support or something for the plans. Life can be kind of scary when you're making plans for the rest of your life. I feel awfully inadequate to make decisions for myself, my whole family. The decisions that will affect us for years to come, but the fact that you have somebody there that is in your corner supporting you in your plans then that makes a difference.

Michael believed that not talking about plans during courtship would bring a lot of unwanted surprises into a marriage. He felt like it was important that they were both in the decision-making process together so they can both be happy with the life they led. Sarah also believed that it made a big difference to plan for the future together. She said:

I think it makes a big difference to plan. When the time comes along because we know what to expect and we've talked about his and we know what to do. I think it makes a big difference in the way we perceive each other. The way we feel about each other. It

just makes us more prepared for the future and know that the other is on the same page.

So, it makes it easier to go through the future things and challenges, if we know we are going to stick together and have loftier goals ahead.

Sarah felt that when a couple plans for the future together they know what to expect and will know what to do when a certain situation comes up. Sarah believed that planning for the future can affect how the couple feels about each other and also know that they are on the same page in regards to plans for the future.

Ethan and Addison Thompson had been married a little over a year at the time of the interview and knew the importance of talking about the future throughout the courtship period. Ethan felt like talking about the future helped them to know exactly what they were getting into when they married. Ethan said:

I think it helped a lot because we both, we've watched friends that have had bad experiences and that kind of stuff. We walked into it with both eyes open. We both knew exactly what we were signing up for.

Ethan felt like he knew what he could expect for the future because he and Addison had discussed it previously. Talking about the future has helped Ethan and Addison prevent the mistakes that they had seen from the relationships of friends. Addison also believed that talking about the future during courtship and in marriage is important. Addison explained:

I know that he's fully committed and prepared to go through everything with me and he looks forward to all of our life experiences together...We're just making future plans, looking for jobs, trying to have a baby. He's just like, "I can't see the future," but I know he'll be there with me, which is cheesy but true.

Addison believed that Ethan would be there for her and was fully committed because they planned for the future together. Talking about the future as a couple can assist the couple in looking forward to the experiences to come.

*Words of Affirmation.*

Owen and Emma Anderson met in a class at a small, western university and had been married for a year and a half at the time of the interview. Owen and Emma both agreed on the importance of words of affirmation in keeping their relationship and commitment strong. Owen explained the importance of words of affirmation when he said:

I don't think I could possibly hear "I love you" enough in a day, and she is much better about adjusting than I have been. She'll tell me she loves me all the time. She'll send text messages, and to me, that makes my day and makes life and things much brighter. Whenever she says that, it's easier to reflect on when we were first dating and recollect those memories, and the first time she said, "I love you," how it made me feel and stuff like that. That's the best avenue to convey it and I think that's how she does do it.

Owen felt loved by Emma when she expressed her love verbally. Emma diligently strived to show her love verbally, even though it was sometimes difficult for her. Emma explained:

He's a more verbal being than I am, so he constantly says daily, "I'm glad I married you." He's always saying that. He always tells me he loves me. He's a verbal lover. That's how he loves me, verbally. He expresses it by saying those things...It's a lot harder for me because my parents don't say, "I love you," but spend all their time together. So, converting to a person that says, "I love you" every day is hard.

Even though words of affirmation were not Emma's primary way of showing her commitment and love, she worked on it continually so Owen would know how she felt about him.

Luke and Taryn Freeman felt like words of affirmation were important in their marriage relationship. When Luke and Taryn tell each other how they feel about each other, their commitment to each other is made stronger. Luke discussed how he and Taryn use words of affirmation in their relationship:

We try to tell each other that we love each other at least once a day, whether when she drops me off at work or when just before we go to sleep. There will be times when she asks me, “Are you happy being married to me,” and I’ll ask her too. I think verbally, communicating it verbally, that we are committed to each other has been something very important. Just telling each other that, I wouldn’t have life any other way. Even if we had millions of dollars, I don’t think I would wish for something like that to change.

Luke believed that telling Taryn that he loved her was more important than millions of dollars and never wanted the words of affirmation in their relationship to change. Taryn also shared how she felt about words of affirmation by saying:

I think telling him every day that I love him, holding his hand every chance I get when we’re in public or whatever. Showing him that I will do anything for him if he asks or I’ll be there for him if he needs me to. I think encouraging him and him encouraging me. I know that he is committed to me when he does that. I think one of the biggest things is when I listen to him or when he listens to me, being attentive and trying to understand. That’s one way that both of us really show each other that we’re committed to the relationship because we want to improve it.

Taryn felt like it was important to tell Luke everyday how much she loved him. Also, she believed that encouraging each other shows that they are committed to each other. Other words

of affirmation, such as talking and listening to one another, is also an important part of Luke and Taryn's relationship.

Trevor and Julia Johnson felt that words of affirmation was important to both of them in communicating their commitment to one another. Trevor felt like words of affirmation was the most important aspect of communicating commitment. Trevor explained:

She wants to hear it. I could've left the whole house a mess. I could've left a huge mess, but as soon as she comes in the door I embrace her and tell her I love her and just look at her and have 10 seconds of "how are you?" type of thing. That would make the difference for her and she would be in a whole different [sic], that makes her so happy.

Trevor believed that Julia would rather hear "I love you" than have a clean house when she came home for the day. Julia felt Trevor's commitment and love through words of affirmation. Julia also liked to communicate her commitment to Trevor verbally. Julia said:

I think I really like to communicate to him verbally. I tell him a lot that I'm really glad that he's only mine and that's a huge part of commitment. I am just so glad that I get him forever, and he's only mine, and I think he likes to hear that.

Julia felt that Trevor liked to hear how much she loved him, and how he is only hers. Julia believes that words of affirmation are a huge part of the commitment that Trevor and Julia have for each other.

Planning for the future and words of affirmation is how many of the participants in this research study communicated their commitment to their spouse. When couples plan for the future they can combine both of their individual goals into one goal for their future. Words of affirmation were important for many couples in conveying their commitment to each other.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

The primary goal of this research study was to investigate how couples construct and reconstruct the meaning of commitment through events in courtship. Consistent with Weigel's (2003) study, the small, everyday interactions played the greatest role in constructing commitment during the courtship period and in marriage. This correlates with the gradual process theme discovered during the interview and coding process. The participants in this research study described how they would do nice things for each other during the courtship period, such as write love notes, make each other gifts, and communicate their love frequently both verbally and physically. Both the male and female participants described how they would go out of their way to show affection to their boyfriend or girlfriend during courtship. Unlike the way commitment is sometimes portrayed in the popular media, generally the participants did not describe dramatic events as the way their commitment level increased while dating and courting. It was through quality time and lengthy conversations that provided a foundation for the couples to begin committing to each other.

It is imperative to note, that most of the couples interviewed described the building of their commitment level for their spouse as a gradual process. The participants' strong feelings of commitment for their spouse were not instant. Instead, they were developed slowly and over time, through daily interactions that created more and more feelings of love and appreciation for their future spouse. When discussing if certain events in courtship changed his commitment level, Adam William, a participant in the research study, said:

I honestly don't think there was a defining point...One of the key points that our friendship was based on was service. I think it was that approach that just day by day, act

by act, being caring, compassionate, learning how to more fully express love, learning how to more fully identify what she's going through, and finding out how I can give her some support that she needs. Just day by day, act by act, solidified my commitment.

Another participant, Oliver Jones, stated:

It just gradually progresses through the spectrum and you get more and more commitment. You see how it is and she's faithful to her commitment, and I'm faithful to mine and it continues on and keeps getting greater and greater.

For those considering marriage, making the experience of courtship a gradual process can be potentially beneficial in the long-term.

Most of the couples also described their friendship prior to dating and how it continued through courtship and into marriage. The majority of participants described their spouse as their best friend. Many of them attribute the friendship they established when they met for the first time and started dating as the most prominent way commitment was constructed. For most of the participants, common interests and background played the greatest role in the initial development of their friendship. Establishing friendship in a relationship that leads to marriage is consistent with Gottman and Gottman's (2006) findings concerning happily married couples; they behave like good friends.

Especially for couples who are considering marriage, there are many implications that can be drawn from this research study. All of the participants discussed in their individual interview that they were enjoying marriage and felt that they had a successful relationship. Many of the participants attributed the success they had in marriage to the friendship they had established prior to marriage. This would indicate that friendship is an important element when considering a potential spouse.

The origin of the meaning of commitment was another research question that was investigated during this thesis. Consistent with Weigel et al. (2003), parental example had a great impact on what the participants believed about commitment. The majority of participants recognized their parents as the origin of their understanding of commitment. There were a few participants that credited their grandparents or aunts and uncles as the ideal couple to look to for a positive example of commitment. These positive examples provide couples with an understanding of how to deal with difficult situations. Some of the participants discussed that although their parents would have arguments or disagreements they still stuck together. This persistence to overcome obstacles provided valuable knowledge that it is possible to make it through difficult times.

An implication of parental example being the primary origin of understanding commitment is the great need for stable examples of commitment in homes. Many of the participants that had parents who had been divorced explained that it had been a struggle initially to commit to someone in a relationship. Due to their parents' divorce it is possible that apprehension had been created concerning commitment and relationships. The theme, parental example, stresses the importance of children being able to observe their mother and father in a strong committed relationship. However, if that is not possible, individuals should seek to find positive examples they can admire using grandparents, relatives, or friends. It is essential that individuals become aware of positive examples of commitment so that they can model their observations in their own relationships.

One theme that participants consistently discussed was negative examples of commitment. This theme was particularly interesting because it was an unexpected finding. When discussing the benefits of seeing positive examples versus negative examples, one

participant noted, “I don’t know which I would consider more valuable to my own marriage in my life, being able to say, ‘I’d like to be like them,’ or being able to say, ‘I’ll never let myself be like them.’” Some of the participants had parents that had been divorced or had witnessed brothers or sisters and friends who had gotten divorced. Interestingly, these participants all felt that it was beneficial to see the negative examples, so that they could understand what to do and what not to do in their own relationship.

When discussing their understanding of the origins of commitment, participants were quick to point out the negative examples of commitment they had observed. It is probably not advisable or necessary that individuals seek after observing negative examples of commitment. Nevertheless, when negative examples of commitment present themselves, this can potentially be an important learning opportunity for individuals and couples contemplating marriage. The participant Carly Adams explained why she believed it was beneficial to observe both positive and negative examples of commitment when she said:

I was thinking about that the other day when I was talking to my friend who is about to go through a divorce. It’s really hard. I was thinking, it’s really good to learn from other’s mistakes and not have to go through them yourself. It’s definitely been good for me to see what I need to do so that doesn’t happen...I talked to them and I know they weren’t doing the things that helped to keep a marriage strong. So, how important those things really are, even though they seem so fundamental and mundane. They really are huge things.

There is much that can be learned from negative examples of commitment, such as, the importance of having good communication, being loyal, and putting your spouse’s needs first. Based on the data that was gathered from the interviews, it is difficult to determine whether

positive or negative examples are a more powerful influence for an individual's understanding of commitment.

The final research question asked couples how they communicated commitment during courtship and marriage. As the researcher interviewed the participants, many of them referred to the book, *The 5 Love Languages*, by Gary Chapman (2010). It was apparent that for many newly married couples, this was a popular text to read and the participants in this study were trying how to best show their love and commitment to their spouse. According to Chapman (2010), "Discovering the primary love language of your spouse is essential if you are to keep their emotional love tank full" (p. 123). These languages include: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. All five of these "love languages" were found in this study as ways that people communicate commitment. Although many of these ways were expressed by the participants as ways they communicate commitment, words of affirmation, or verbal communication, were the most prominent. Participants explained how important it was that their spouse used the words, "I love you," gave them compliments, and encouraged them on a daily basis.

For participants in this research study, when their spouse communicated commitment verbally, it provided reassurance of their spouse's love. Words of affirmation was the most common way couples in this research study communicated commitment and also wanted to receive messages of commitment. Although quality time and physical affection were very important for many of the couples as well, they were not the most prominent ways of communicating commitment. Prior to marriage, couples should consider the importance of words of affirmation. It is an essential trait for many healthy marriage relationships.

Another unexpected finding was that planning for the future was a theme found in all of the interviews with the participants concerning communicating commitment. Participants communicated their commitment to their spouse by talking about the future and setting goals. Some of the concerns these married couples had were: graduating from college, finding a job, when to have children, or where they would like to live someday. Many couples said that these topics were the main subject of conversation. It was clear that these important issues the couples were facing made them united in their goals. They realized that they could face these life changing experiences if they did so together and acted as one. Gottman and Gottman (2006) explained that, “Research on behavior change shows that people who set goals, make a plan, and then track their progress have the most success” (p. 91). When couples set goals, and make a plan for their lives and marriage, they will have greater success in both areas. When asked if they had talked about future plans during the courtship period, one of the participants mentioned, “We had a lot of stuff that we talked about and a lot of goals that we have set. We continue to make goals too, to help us in the short term and long term goals to help us keep going.”

Before couples commit to a marriage relationship, it is advisable that they talk with their future spouse about personal goals and expectations for their relationship. Some of the points to include in these conversations may be about having children, how many children to have, where the couple would like to live someday, and educational and professional goals. These conversations allow couples during courtship to get on “the same page” and be united, so that there are fewer surprises after marriage. Negative conflict can be avoided and husband and wife can support one another in the goals they set for their family. Not only should couples plan for the future during courtship, but there should also be constant conversations about future plans

during marriage as well. This can create an atmosphere in a marriage relationship that can allow personal and family goals to converge instead of diverge.

Personal definitions of commitment can be a driving force for couples in a marriage relationship. When discussing the participants in his own study on commitment, Weigel (2003) stated:

Further, these personal definitions of commitment seemed to drive their daily interactions, the way they spent their time together, the choices they made, and their goals for the future. It appears that their views of commitment had a strong influence within the marriage. (p. 15)

This was found to be consistent in the research conducted for this thesis as well. For the participants, their definition of commitment influenced many of the decisions they had relating to their marriage relationship. Each individual's definition of commitment shaped the themes that were discovered. Friendship, gradual process, parental example, negative examples, words of affirmation, and planning for the future were all fueled by the participant's personal definition of commitment. Taryn Freeman, a participant in the research study explained how her perceptions and beliefs about commitment had changed since being married:

I'd always believed that commitment was going to be the hardest thing in marriage and maybe it is, but it hasn't seemed so to me. It seems like a joyful ride so far that we've been able to just be together and be committed and understand each other and know things may get hard, but we can get through them all. I have also noticed how important commitment really is, of course to each other, but also commitment to yourself.

Knowing I am married and this is who I've chosen and this is who I want to be with forever. When we were dating, I would think, am I going to want to be with him in 20

years or when we have three kids and struggling in various ways and I would think to myself, would I want to be with someone else and I would think, if I was with so and so that I was dating before, would I be any happier, and it never seemed to fit right. So, I think that just being personally committed to the relationship. I never really thought about that. I just thought about commitment to each other. What has really changed is my personal commitment to our relationship.

Taryn's husband, Luke Freeman, identified commitment as:

Devoting oneself to, in this case marriage, completely giving all of yourself to the other person. I've heard of cases where one spouse will be, kind of, hanging on a past relationship. They still had feelings for an old boyfriend, or the male not wanting to give up watching football on Sundays, if that's something that bothers the wife. Commitment really is just [being] willing to sacrifice anything for the other person and just really giving everything you have to them in any sense...Commitment is really devoting yourself to each other and having common goals and working together to reach those goals and encouraging each other and having confidence in each other. Hopefully that was a good definition.

Michael Webb, another participant defined commitment as:

Just being faithful. Just staying true to a decision you made. You make a choice and it's no one else's choice. You can't blame your parents for saying you should marry this person. You can't blame your partner for forcing you into being married. It's your choice and you made a commitment to it and if you didn't like it, why in the world did you do it in the first place?

Michael's wife, Sarah Webb also shared what commitment meant to her, by saying:

My marriage means that he is the only one...Commitment you have to be whole heartedly toward your husband or spouse. Just tell them everything and never put anything before them. They're always the top priority and do everything to make them happy. To make your marriage work, you just have to put them first.

These are the type of definitions that many of the participants shared during their individual interviews in the research study. According to these participants, their understanding of commitment was a driving force in how they conducted themselves in their marriage relationship. As Weigel (2003) explained, "It may be that a couple brings basic core beliefs about commitment to their relationship, but that those core beliefs are pulled and stretched, shaped and molded through interaction to fit the current shape of the relationship" (p. 16).

An unexpected benefit from this research study was the positive experience that the majority of participants had. During the debriefing session the participants often explained to the researcher how refreshing it was to recall their dating experience and how their commitment grew for their spouse. Some of the participants mentioned that they would go home and write down the feelings they had and the experiences they had shared regarding the construction of their commitment during the courtship period. For other participants, they expressed a renewed desire to communicate their commitment to their spouse on a daily basis. Gottman and Gottman (2006) explained that many couples when discussing their personal love story become "energized and animated" and their faces seem to "light up in a rush of vivid, happy memories" (p. 70). The participants in this research study also demonstrated these same reactions when discussing their courtship and marriage.

*Limitations*

Although this research study was able to produce rich data and answer the research questions, it also had its own set of limitations. It may be perceived that the demographic for this research study presents a major limitation. The majority of the participants in this study grew up in the same state and all of the participants live in the same college town now. Although not all of the participants were attending a small, western university, the majority of them were. All of the participants were white, middle class couples, and the majority had similar religious views. Specifically, religious views could be considered a limitation because participants' understanding of commitment in marriage is often influenced by religion. However, the themes found through this study are consistent to research that has been done in other areas of the United States where other religious faiths may be more dominant. Age is another restriction of the results that were found as all of the participants were 20 - 27 years old. Another interesting factor was that all of the participants were in their first time marriage. Unlike first time married couples, perhaps couples who have been previously married would share different ideas about how commitment is constructed.

The way the questions were worded could possibly be another limitation. It may be possible that not all of the participants were able to fully understand the questions that were being asked during the interviews. If interpretation of the questions varied between individuals, questions asked during the interviews may need to be modified.

The lessons people learned from observing positive and negative examples of commitment may also be a limitation of this study. As discussed previously, it is difficult to determine whether positive or negative examples of commitment have a stronger influence on people's understanding of commitment and the future choices they'll make in their relationships.

Discussing with participants in more depth about which example is more impactful would be beneficial to our understanding of how couples construct commitment.

### *Future Research*

Future research may include interviewing couples that have been married for ten years or longer. By doing so, couples that have been married longer could be compared to younger couples and their reasons for commitment. For couples who had been married for longer than two years would they be able to remember the reasons they committed to each other in the first place? In this way, a more thorough examination of the construction and re-construction of commitment in courtship and marriage could occur. Also, interviewing non-white couples may produce alternate views and perceptions concerning commitment. Future research could also include participants from many different demographics and see how they compare to the findings of this research study.

More research regarding negative examples of commitment would also offer an interesting body of research. Do other couples rely on negative examples so that they know what not to do in their relationships? Do people with different economic circumstances or demographics view negative examples the same way as the participants in this research study? Or was this particular finding of negative examples something unique to this study?

By spending approximately one hour with all 30 participants, the researcher was able to collect a substantial amount of data about the construction of commitment and other issues pertaining to marriage. There are other research questions that have not been asked that can be applied to future studies. In the future, it is hoped that the data collected can be used to create comparisons and new themes about the courtship process and the relationship of marriage.

*Final Thoughts*

This thesis endeavored to further the understanding of how commitment is constructed, where it originates, and how it is communicated during courtship and in marriage. The themes that were identified through this thesis can have an enabling ability for individuals to commit to another in a marriage relationship. The elements of friendship, gradual process, parental example, negative examples, planning for the future, and words of affirmation can be important ingredients to consider for those who are married or considering marriage. The unexpected finding of the significance of negative examples to the construction of commitment is in need of further research. It may be atypical to assume that negative examples can actually be beneficial for the understanding of commitment. Little research has been given to how negative examples can actually be beneficial for a person that is constructing their understanding and meaning of commitment.

Interestingly, the definition of commitment in marriage varied between all 30 of the participants in this research study. Each individual, even within couples, had their own unique ideas and understanding of commitment. It is believed that an individual's origin of understanding commitment is a primary factor for this variance of opinion. Even though each individual has a different definition of commitment, the researcher learned that couples can still be compatible with each other through communicating commitment effectively. By planning for the future and by using words of affirmation, married couples can grow closer together and their commitment level can increase.

## References

- Adams, J. M., Spain, J. S., & Hunt, K. (1998). The measurement of exchange and communal attitudes in marriage: Scale development and initial validation. Paper presented at American Psychological Society, Washington, DC.
- Axinn, W. & Thornton, A. (1992). The relationship between cohabitation and divorce: Selectivity or causal influence? *Demography*, 29, 357-374.
- Ballard-Reisch, D. S. & Weigel, D. J. (1999). Communication processes in marital commitment: An integrative approach. In J. M. Adams & W. H. Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal commitment and relationship stability* (pp. 407-424). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: perspectives and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Brandau-Brown, F. E. & Ragsdale, J. D. (2008). Personal, moral, and structural commitment and the repair of marital relationships. *Southern Communication Journal*, 73, 68-83.
- Brown, S. L., Sanchez, L. A., Nock, S. L., & Wright, J. D. (2006). Links between premarital cohabitation and subsequent marital quality, stability, and divorce: A comparison of covenant versus standard marriages. *Social Science Research*, 35, 357-374.
- Campbell, K. & Ponzetti Jr., J. J. (2007). The moderating effects of rituals on commitment in premarital involvements. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, 22, 415-428.
- Carroll, J. S., Badger, S., Willoughby, B. J., Nelson, L. J., Madsen, S. D., & Barry, C. M. (2009). Ready or not? Criteria for marriage readiness among emerging adults. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 24, 349-379.
- Chapman, G. (2010). *The 5 love languages: The secret to love that lasts*. Chicago: Northfield

Publishing.

- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Clements, R. & Swensen, C. H. (2000). Commitment to one's spouse as a predictor of marital quality among older couples. *Current Psychology* 19, 110-120.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Dolbik-Vorobei, T. A. (2005). What college students think about problems of marriage and having children. *Russian Education and Society*, 47, 47-57.
- Duck, S. W. (1994). *Meaningful relationships: Talking, sense, and relating*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Duffey, T. H., Lumadue, C. A., & Woods, S. (2001). A musical chronology and the emerging life song. *The Family Journal*, 9, 398-406.
- Fields, J. (2004). *America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2003*. Current Population Reports, P20-553. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC.
- Flanagan, C. (2009, July 2). Is there hope for the American marriage?. *Time*. Retrieved April 2, 2010 from <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1908243-1,00.html>
- Ginther, D. K. & Zavodny, M. (2001). Is the male marriage premium due to selection? The effect of shotgun weddings on the return to marriage. *Population Economics*, 14, 313-328.
- Givertz, M., Segrin, C., & Hanzal, A. (2009). The association between satisfaction and commitment differs across marital couple types. *Communication Research*, 36, 561-584.
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. New York: Aldine.
- Gottman, J. M. (1993). A theory of marital dissolution and stability. *Journal of Family*

*Psychology*, 7, 57-75.

Gottman, J. M. (1994). *Why marriages succeed or fail and how you can make yours last*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The marriage clinic: A scientifically based marital therapy*. New York: Norton.

Gottman, J. M. & Gottman, J. S. (2006). *10 lessons to transform your marriage*. New York: Three Rivers Press.

Heaton, T. B. (2002). Factors contributing to increased marital stability in the United States. *Journal of Family Issues*, 23, 392-409.

Henson, M. (2008). Happily never after: How Hollywood favors adultery and promiscuity over marital intimacy on prime time broadcast television. *A Parent's Television Special Report*.

Retrieved April 2, 2010 from

<http://www.parentstv.org/PTC/publications/reports/SexonTV/MarriageStudy.pdf>

Hicks, M. W., McWey, L. M., Benson, K. E., & West, S. H. (2004). Using what premarital couples already know to inform marriage education, Integration of a Gottman model perspective. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 26, 97-113.

Holman, T. B., Viverios, A., & Carroll, J. S. (2005). Progression toward an eternal marriage relationship. In C. H. Hart, L. D. Newell, E. Walton, & D. Dollahite (Eds.), *Helping and healing our families* (pp. 44-49). Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company.

Johnson, M. P. (1991). Commitment to personal relationships. In W. H. Jones & D. W. Perlman (Eds.), *Advances in personal relationships* (Vol. 3, pp. 117-143). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Knapp, M. L. & Taylor, E. H. (1994). Commitment and its communication in romantic

- relationships. In A. L. Weber & J. H. Harvey (Eds.), *Perspectives on close relationships* (pp. 153-175). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Larson, L. E. & Goltz, J. W. (1989). Religious participation and marital commitment. *Review of Religious Research*, 30, 387-400.
- Likert, R. (1932). A technique for the measurement of attitudes. *Archives of Psychology*, 140, 1-55.
- Mahay, J. & Lewin, A. C. (2007). Age and the desire to marry. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28, 706-723.
- Marston, P. J., Hecht, M. L., Manke, M. L., McDaniel, S., & Reeder, H. (1998). The subjective experience of intimacy, passion, and commitment in heterosexual loving relationships. *Personal Relationships*, 5, 15-30.
- Martin, P. D., Martin, D., & Martin, M. (2001). Adolescent premarital sexual activity, cohabitation, and attitudes toward marriage. *Adolescence*, 36, 601-609.
- Maslow, A. (1954). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper.
- Morse, J. M., Stern, P. N., Corbin, J., Bowers, B., Charmaz, K., & Clarke, A. E. (2009). *Developing grounded theory: The second generation*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc.
- Niehuis, S., Huston, T. L., & Rosenband, R. (2006). From courtship into marriage: A new developmental model and methodological critique. *The Journal of Family Communication*, 6, 23-47.
- Overfelt, M. (2009, February 13). Love in the time of recession. *CNNMoney.com*. Retrieved April 2, 1010 from [http://money.cnn.com/2009/02/13/smallbusiness/wedding\\_jitters/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2009/02/13/smallbusiness/wedding_jitters/index.htm)

- Pryor, J. & Roberts, J. (2005). What is commitment? How married and cohabiting parents talk about their relationships. *Family Matters*, 71, 24-31.
- Popenoe, D. & Whitehead, B. D. (1999). Should we live together: What young adults need to know about cohabitation before marriage. *The State of Our Unions*. Retrieved from <http://marriage.rutgers.edu/Publications/SWLT2%20TEXT.htm>
- Riggio, H. R. & Weiser, D. A. (2008). Attitudes toward marriage: Embeddedness and outcomes in personal relationships. *Personal Relationships*, 15, 123-140.
- Ripley, J. S., Worthington, E. L. Jr., Bromley, D., & Kemper, S. D. (2005). Covenantal and contractual values in marriage: Marital values orientation toward wedlock or self-actualization scale. *Personal Relationships*, 12, 317-336.
- Robinson, L. C., & Blanton, P. W. (1993). Marital strengths in enduring marriages. *Family Relations*, 42, 38-45.
- Rusbult, C. E. (1983). A longitudinal test of the investment model: The development and deterioration) of satisfaction and commitment in heterosexual involvements. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 45, 101-117.
- Sahib, P. R. & Gu, X. (2002). "Living in sin" and marriage: A matching model. *Population Economics*, 15, 261-282.
- Stanley, S. M., Whitton, S. W., & Markman, H. J. (2004). Maybe I do: Interpersonal commitment and premarital or nonmarital cohabitation. *Journal of Family Issues*, 25, 496-519.
- Stets, J. E. & Hammons, S. A. (2002). Gender, control, and marital commitment. *Journal of Family Issues*, 23, 3-25.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures*

*and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Thompson, A. (2009, August 20). Putting a finger on celebrities and their wedding rings. *USA*

*Today*. Retrieved April 5, 2010 from [http://www.usatoday.com/life/2009-08-16-celebs-rings\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/life/2009-08-16-celebs-rings_N.htm)

U.S. Census Bureau (2002, February 8). Nearly 9-in-10 people may marry, but half of first marriages may end in divorce, Census Bureau says. Retrieved April 2, 2010 from

<http://www.census.gov/Press->

[Release/www/releases/archives/marital\\_status\\_living\\_arrangements/000500.html](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/marital_status_living_arrangements/000500.html)

U.S. Census Bureau (2009, December 15). Facts for features: Valentine's day 1010: Feb. 14.

Retrieved April 2, 2010 from <http://www.census.gov/Press->

[Release/www/releases/pdf/cb10ff-02\\_valentinesday.pdf](http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/pdf/cb10ff-02_valentinesday.pdf)

VanDenBerghe, E. (2000). The enduring, happy marriage: Findings and implications from

research. In D. C. Dollahite (Ed.), *Strengthening our families* (pp. 18-20). Salt Lake City:

Deseret Book Company.

Weigel, D. J. (2003). A communication approach to the construction of commitment in the

early years of marriage: A qualitative study. *The Journal of Family Communication*, 3, 1-19.

Weigel, D. J., Bennett, K. K., & Ballard-Reisch, D. S. (2003). Family influences on

commitment: Examining the family of origin correlates of relationship commitment attitudes. *Personal Relationships*, 10, 453-474.

Weigel, D. J., Bennett, K. K., & Ballard-Reisch, D. S. (2006). Influence strategies in marriage:

Self and partner links between equity, strategy use, and marital satisfaction and commitment. *The Journal of Family Communication*, 6, 77-95.

Woods, L. N. & Emery, R. E. (2002). The cohabitation effect on divorce: Causation or selection.

*Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 37, 101-122.

Woods, T. (2010, February 19). PGA Tour: Tiger Woods statement. Retrieved April 5, 2010

from [http://www.asapsports.com/show\\_conference.php?id=61523](http://www.asapsports.com/show_conference.php?id=61523)

Xie, Y., Raymo, J., Goyette, K., & Thornton, A. (2003). Economic potential and entry into marriage and cohabitation. *Demography*, 40, 351-367.

Yerby, J. (1995). Family systems theory reconsidered: Integrating social construction theory and dialectical process. *Communication Theory*, 5, 339-365.

## Appendix

### Interview Questions

- Please begin by stating your name, your age, and you how long you have been married.
- Where did you grow up? How many siblings do you have?
- How long have you known your spouse?
- How did you first meet your spouse?
- How did the couple become interested in each other? What specifically attracted you to your spouse?
- How did you become a couple?
- How has married life been for you so far?
- What is your definition of commitment?
- Where did your understanding of commitment in marriage come from?
- What were the effects of family and friends on your personal understanding of what commitment means?
- How and why did the commitment to marry your spouse develop?
- Did you talk about commitment during the courtship period? When? How?
- Did certain events in courtship change your commitment level? For example?
- How did you finally decide this was the right person to marry?
- How have your beliefs or perceptions about commitment changed since being married?
- Why is communication important in a marriage relationship?
- Why is patience important in a marriage relationship?

- How do you communicate commitment in the relationship with your spouse?
- How does your spouse communicate his/her commitment?
- Do you currently talk about commitment in your relationship? When? How?
- What could you do to show more commitment to your spouse?