“YOU STAY, NO MATTER HOW BAD”: WOMEN VOICE THE
TRAJECTORY OF MARITAL DISAFFECTION

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This thesis is for the two people who first taught me about feminism. Mom, you have taught me to be an independent-thinker like you. I cannot imagine a better gift than your own example. I wish for more daughters to have mothers like you so that they, too, can learn of all the possibilities that await them. Thank you for understanding me in the most meaningful ways. Your quest to love, encourage, and empower me never ends, and I discover that everyday.

Dad, you instilled a lifelong curiosity in me to never want to stop learning and growing. Your inquisitive mind, compassion for others, and passion for adventure have given shape to my life in more ways than you know. I cannot imagine my life without such a devoted, altruistic, and egalitarian father to teach me what love is.

To my siblings, Juan and Camil, you two are my lifelong best friends. Thank you for your companionship, humor, support, and love.
The most notable fact that culture imprints on women is the sense of our limits. The most important thing one woman can do for another is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities.

Adrienne Rich

*Of Woman Born*
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“You Stay, No Matter How Bad”: Women Voice the Trajectory of Marital Disaffection
by
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As the marriage rate in the United States steadily declines, the divorce rate still remains highest amongst most American and European countries. Although these statistics set up a dichotomized notion of individuals’ marital status, there are several other states that couples experience in which labels such as married or divorced do not account for. Part of what is left out of these statistics, is those who are married but experience prolonged marital disaffection. As the meaning of marriage has transformed from an institution to a companionship, and more recently into a model with the individual as the focal point, so have notions of what is expected and cherished from marital partners. Research that investigates marital communication and conflict misses the mark by glossing over what it genuinely means to experience marital disaffection. Little communication research explores the nature of marital disaffection, and even less has studied this relational state qualitatively.

Instead of studying the highs and lows of relationships, this research explores women’s accounts of the sustained sense of disaffection with their partner. These accounts illuminate the communicative moments that work to both enable and disable feelings of disaffection. In attempt to generate a rich and meaningful account of how women describe the feelings associated with disaffection, this study interviews married women who share these stories of moments, events, and emotions that have contributed to their perceptions of disaffection in their marriages. Emergent themes and patterns are interpreted and organized into a model describing the process of disaffection and identity negotiation. Also implications for dating, parenting, and feminist theory are discussed.
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You are brilliant in—what I see as—the best way.
You know human emotion;
you know support;
you know motivation;
individuality, kindness;
you know reflection
—without enough ways to describe,
it is your capacity for human connection.

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CHAPTER 1

NAVIGATING MARRIAGE AND DISAFFECTION:
A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

I’m at the age where my peers are all in serious relationships. My siblings are both married. I’m now the only child on holidays and family vacations. When my siblings and their spouses are around I love being together again, but the feeling becomes even more pronounced that I’m the only single person. Not only am I single, but I’ve been riding solo for almost three and a half years now. I’m not committed to singledom necessarily, and I never proclaimed that I don’t want to get serious with anyone. It just kind of happened. I have met people and dated along the way, but have yet to find someone who “fits.” I know it is the goal of a lot of single women to learn to be happy alone, and for a while I probably lied to myself about being happy. But after three and a half years—that makes four Christmases, four New Years, four Valentine’s Days, and soon four birthdays of celebrating either alone or with friends and family—I’m used to it. Quite honestly, I’ve gotten comfortable being single and I can’t even imagine being in a relationship anymore. The idea has become foreign to me. I wonder at times if I’ll even be in another relationship, and question more whether I’ll ever marry.

The annoying and relentless question that men evidently think is charming, “What’s someone like you doing single?” has generated a list of responses from me over the years: “Haven’t met the right person,” “Why are you?” “I’m too picky,” “I’m focused on school right now,” etc. Although I do get lonely sometimes, I never sit down wishing one of the men who has pursued me before was there with me now. Instead, I miss an imagined soul mate, while also doubting the existence of one. I would much rather be single than be with the wrong person for me. While the list of qualities that make me unattracted to a guy doesn’t necessarily seem to grow, it does continue to get reinforced over and over. The “getting to know each other” process is usually full of excitement and wonder, but then shortly followed by disapproval and disinterest. I never had a problem in my past relationships with my feelings fading. But if my interest is so temporary and fading, how
does marriage go? What if this process happens to me on a macro level instead? What if I fall deeply in love with a wonderful person, get married, and one day I wake up feeling disinterested, unenthused, or even confused by how I got there? Could I end up regretful or feeling trapped? Are there people out there that this has happened to? Maybe they can offer me some advice for how to make sure I don’t let it happen to me. I want to know what I can do before I decide to marry someone, along with what I can do once I’m already married.

My warm embrace of singledom and fear of becoming maritally disaffected from my partner one day led me to reflect more critically about the concept and tradition of marriage as a whole. Looking back, I can see that throughout my adolescence and early adulthood I gradually learned pieces of the truth about my family members’ marriages. Aunts and uncles of mine married because of unplanned pregnancies, or, later on, stayed married because of children. One aunt is widowed, three are divorced, one never married, and another has slept on the living room couch each night for years while her husband gets to have the master bedroom. Alcoholism and intimate violence have also run their course through my family, leaving me with few references of what a desirable marriage actually looks like, wondering if it is even possible to sustain a happy marriage. I do, however, have plenty of examples of what disaffection looks like between couples. Even though the disaffection has become more visible to me over time, the events and feelings associated with the disaffection remain heavily silenced and blanketed, and yet painfully there.

This research study asks the long-anticipated question, “What happened?” and hopefully brings light to the personally agonizing experience of marital disaffection. How women account for the sustained and long-term sense of disaffection with their partner will be the research focus. These accounts will help illuminate the communicative moments that work to both enable and constrain feelings of marital disaffection. In an attempt to generate a rich and meaningful account of how women describe the feelings associated with marital disaffection, I will interview married women who are willing to share stories of moments, events, and emotions that have contributed to their perceptions of stagnating happiness in their marriages.

First, a review of relevant literature pertaining to marital disaffection in this chapter will provide a rationale for this study. Chapter Two offers a description of the methodology and research design of the study. The third chapter offers the results of this research.
Finally, chapter four will provide interpretations and draw conclusions from the results and offer implications, limitations, and directions from the results. To begin, however, chapter one will examine briefly the socio-historical context of marriage over the last century. Second, the discussion turns to the potential benefits and consequences of marriage on people’s psychological and physical well-being. Next, marital disaffection is conceptualized and delineated from other marital states. Fourth, the concept and role of an individual’s marital schema is introduced and considered. To begin, the evolving meaning of marriage is discussed.

**CHANGING TRENDS IN MARRIAGE**

As the purpose and character of marriage in the United States has been revolutionized and reconceptualized over the past century, individuals have become less likely to enter into a marital union. Between the years of 1990 and 2008, the marriage rate per 1,000 persons in the United States from 15-64 years of age, declined from 15.9 to 10.6 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). An exploration of the cultural trends and history leading up to now will aid in understanding the reasons behind this decline.

To begin, the purpose and social function of marriage as an institution has transformed a great deal over the past century moving further away from primarily serving economic, childbearing, religious, and financial purposes (Cherlin, 2004; Dew & Wilcox, 2011; Erickson, 1993; Minnottte, Pedersen, & Mannon, 2010; Wilcox & Nock, 2006; Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998). In 2003, one out of three children were born outside of marriage, a stark increase compared to one out of six in 1982 (Cherlin, 2004; U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2003). In addition to the growing prevalence of childbirth outside of marriage, cohabitation and civil unions have also become increasingly common and socially acceptable (Cherlin, 2004). All of these developments are evidence of a much larger cultural trend that is changing the overall meaning and rewards of marriage.

**Emotional Rewards**

In the early part of the 20th century one dimension of this cultural trend consisted of a greater emphasis on emotional satisfaction, happiness, and romantic love. Towards the end of the century, another dimension that became important was the ethic of expressive individualism, which encouraged the belief that each person should express their core
feelings and intuitions in order to attain true individuality (Cherlin, 2004). These notions of happiness and individuality worked to transform common ideals and expectations of marriage.

With these cultural trends alongside the movement of more married women going into paid labor, there were two main transitions that occurred concerning marriage. First, marriage changed from an institution to companionship in the mid-century (Burgess & Locke, 1945). This companionship still entailed a division of labor with men being the single-earner breadwinners. However, couples were now thought of as friends and lovers. The bonds of love, friendship, and common interest between husbands and wives had become critical to the quality and duration of their marriage (Amato & Irving, 2006). The couples’ primary source of emotional satisfaction, however, was successfully fulfilling their roles as bread-winner and homemaker for the nuclear family (Cherlin, 2004). The second transition, however, would change this drastically.

Beginning in the 1960’s and picking up speed in the 1970’s, the companionate model of marriage gave way to what is known as the individualized marriage. A more individualistic perspective on the rewards associated with marriage changed people’s expectations of marriage once again. As Cherlin (2004) explains:

> When people evaluated how satisfied they were with their marriages, they began to think more in terms of the development of their own sense of self and the expression of their feelings, as opposed to the satisfaction they gained through building a family and playing the roles of spouse and parent. (p. 852)

This shift in individuals’ sources of happiness is crucial to understanding not only how marriage has changed, but also from where we derive our life satisfaction.

Cancian’s (1987) study of popular American magazine articles offering marital advice between 1900 and 1979 found surprising evidence of the individualization of marriage. In the 1970’s, two-thirds of articles displayed individualistic beliefs about marriage. Three themes, in particular, characterized these articles:

> The first was self-development: Each person should develop a fulfilling, independent self instead of merely sacrificing oneself to one’s partner. The second was that roles within marriage should be flexible and negotiable. The third was that communication and openness in confronting problems are essential. (Cherlin, 2004, p. 852)
These themes were most prevalent in the 1970’s, almost double than in the preceding decades. The implications of the themes are a greater emphasis on the sense of self, rather than on people’s role in the relationship (Cancian, 1987).

In a 1980 survey by Booth, Johnson, White, and Edwards (1986), 74 percent of people reported agreement that personal happiness is more important than putting up with a bad marriage. These results reflect how the general attitude towards and significance given to personal happiness had transformed. Amato and Irving (2006) reflect on the implications of these changes on the divorce rate: “Because marriages held together by mutual satisfaction are intrinsically less stable than are marriages held together by community expectations, legal requirements, and religious restrictions, the gradual decline of institutional constraints made the long-term rise in divorce inevitable” (p. 55). This reasoning points out why basing a long-term commitment, such as marriage, on wavering levels of satisfaction can be potentially problematic for the life expectancy of relationships.

The institution of marriage has transformed dramatically from more of a practical requisite, in order to cultivate an intimate relationship, develop companionship, or have children, into simply an option for individuals. The rewards people seek from marriage have also been redefined to now consist of personal growth, deeper intimacy, and open communication (Cherlin, 2004). In addition to the rewards that make marriage emotionally enriching, scholars identify the physical rewards also.

**Physical Rewards and Costs**

Research has supported the premise that a stable, long-term intimate relationship increases the health and well-being of individuals (Burman & Margolin, 1992; Knoke, Burau, & Roehrle, 2010; Manzoli, Villari, Pironec, & Boccia, 2007). The quality of these relationships, however, has not always been considered as a factor in this research. A national study by Hawkins and Booth (2005) investigated the effects of long-term, low-quality marriages on individuals’ well-being. Their findings revealed that compared to other people who are continuously married, remaining unhappily married is associated with significantly lower levels of overall happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall health, while also being associated with greater levels of psychological distress. These
consequences on individuals’ wellbeing can be crucial, especially when it comes to the issue of psychological distress.

Increases in stress hormones, catecholamines and corticosteroids, are associated with marital disaffection (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1997). Research on stress indicates that chronic or recurring strains may be more detrimental to individuals’ health and well being than major life events, citing long-term marital dysfunction as a critical concern (Aneshensel, 1992; Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell, 2005). Extensive research has linked persistent and recurring stressors to, not only psychological distress, but to physical morbidity and mortality as well (Aneshensel, 1992; House, Strecher, Metzner, & Robbins, 1986; Liem & Liem, 1978; Pearlin, Menaghan, Lieberman, & Mullan, 1981; Ross & Huber, 1985; Wheaton, 1983). In addition, people who choose to divorce and later remarry have greater overall happiness, while individuals who divorce and remain unmarried report greater levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall health, in comparison to unhappily married individuals (Hawkins & Booth, 2005). These findings are also supported by Glenn and Weaver (1981) who found that people’s marital satisfaction, greater than life or work satisfaction, is more closely related to their psychological well-being.

Scholars have found that chronic marital distress puts individuals at higher risk for major depressive episodes (Whisman, 1999) and comorbidity (Whisman & Bruce, 1999) within the subsequent year. Burman and Margolin’s (1992) study also found a relationship between marital conflict and poorer health, and specifically with cancer, cardiac disease, and chronic pain. Although all of these psychological and physical effects of marital disaffection are critical in both partners, research has seen much greater health consequences in wives compared to their husbands (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1997; Kiecolt-Glaser, Malarkey, Chee, & Newton, 1993; Malarkey, Kiecolt-Glaser, Pearl, & Glaser, 1994). This can be at least partially explained by the fact that men are more likely than women to engage in violence, infidelity, alcohol abuse, and other forms of substance abuse (Amato & Irving, 2006). Therefore unsurprisingly, “Marriage provides substantially greater benefits to husbands than to wives” (Amato & Irving, 2006, p. 53). This helps explain part of the discrepancy between husbands’ and wives’ marital satisfaction.

After looking at how the perceived rewards of marriage have changed over the years and how the physical rewards are highly contingent upon marital accord, these considerations
are important for understanding current marital trends. Reflecting on their influence on
individuals’ expectations and ideals about marriage may have implications for marital
outcomes. The divorce rate in the United States was at 5.2 in 2008, while most European
countries share lower divorce rates, such as Germany, Spain, and Sweden who are at 3.5
(U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). These statistics, however, only reflect people who were
unhappily married and decidedly terminated their marriages, meanwhile overlooking all of
the other potentially negative outcomes that can materialize inside marriage to compromise
marital quality.

CONCEPTUALIZING MARITAL QUALITY

Marital quality is an overarching concept that encompasses other components, such as
marital happiness, that contribute to people’s overall marital satisfaction (D. R. Johnson,
other components of marital quality:

- Marital interaction (engaging in activities together), marital disagreements
  (ranging from mild arguments to physical violence), marital problems
  (characteristics or behaviors that create a problem in marriage, such as becoming
  angry, hurt, or jealous; infidelity; drug use; and criminal behavior), and divorce
  proneness (also referred to as marital instability, which includes thinking about,
  discussing, or filing for divorce or separation). (p. 1382)

These components include both the positive and negative aspects that make up people’s
marital quality. Marital happiness and interaction are a part of the positive dimension, while
disagreements, problems, and divorce proneness represent the negative dimension (D. R.
Johnson et al., 1986). These distinctions between separate components are important in both
conceptualizing and measuring the dimensions of marital quality. Another term commonly
used to describe a negatively-valenced, marital state is marital distress.

Marital Distress

Marital distress refers to a temporary and short-lived period of tension and conflict
(Beach, Kamen, & Fincham, 2006). Marital distress occurs when partners encounter
difficulties communicating solving problems, working together, and accepting each other’s
differences (Mead, 2002). To be more specific, marital distress is a result of aversive and
ineffectual responses to marital conflict (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). Distressed
couples exchange fewer positive affect behaviors and more aversive behaviors. They are
also more likely to be sensitive to, and then reciprocate, their partner’s use of aversive stimuli (Mead, 2002). It is common for couples that identify as maritally distressed to bounce back or have a turn around, as a study by Waite and Lou (2002) indicated that 8 out of 10 couples reported being happy five years later. Similar to distressed couples, maritally discordant couples also share these communicative patterns.

**Marital Discord**

Maritally-discordant couples have more long-term, interlocking problems (Beach et al., 2006). According to Sultan (2010), marital discord results from disagreement, disharmony, and differences in opinion that lead to a disruption in the sense of unity within a couple. Beach et al. (2006) report that cycles of discordance among couples consists of a process of mutual vilification, polarization, and sense of entrapment. In addition to expressing such increased negativity, couples that are in marital discord usually also will experience an inability to repair the relationship. They often engage in meta-communication with negative affect, which increases the likelihood of the partner at the receiving end to respond negatively as well. This can often lead to further escalation, usually resulting in highly predictable patterns of exchange for the couple (Beach et al., 2006). As a result, neither partner is able to easily exit the exchange without engaging in withdrawal (Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Roberts (2000) identified three different types of withdrawal in marital communication.

**FORMS OF WITHDRAWAL**

The first kind is angry withdrawal, which is usually expressed through stomping out of the room, pouting, or giving “the silent treatment,” works to indirectly communicate either anger, hostility, rejection, or a combination of the three (Roberts, 2000). The second type is known as intimacy avoidance, which involves withdrawing from acts of caregiving or being unresponsive to a partner’s personal disclosure (Roberts, 2000). The last kind is conflict avoidance and “is expressed through behaviors such as changing the subject, making a joke, placating, failing to bring up a disagreement, or demonstrating a lack of interest or involvement in the discussion of a disagreement” (Roberts, 2000, p. 696). This tactic for avoiding conflict could be executed unknowingly by being oblivious to the partner or issue at hand, or, on the other hand, intentionally, as a way to deflect potential attacks.
Interestingly, deflecting potential attacks as a way to avoid conflict has been linked to the degree of relational power a partner holds. Research has found that perceptions of a partner possessing greater relational power increases what is known as the chilling effect in relational communication scholarship (Roloff & Cloven, 1990), which suggests that “a partner’s control of rewards and costs in a relationship prompts an individual to remain silent about irritating situations” (Solomon, Knobloch, & Fitzpatrick, 2004, p. 147). Although withholding complaints is an effort to maintain relational harmony, avoiding conflict can also have negative emotional consequences on the individual remaining bottled up. As relational grievances mount up, individuals not only experience chronic stress as discussed earlier, but the relational issues are never directly addressed and resolved.

Gottman (1994) theorized about flooding, or diffuse physiological arousal, which occurs when an individual feels distressed by their partner’s negative affect. This concept of flooding triggers physiological responses in more than one channel in the body, such as increased heart rate, contractility, or blood velocity (Gottman, 1998). These responses are associated with a decreased ability to process information and a reliance on patterns of behavior and cognition that are used during fight or flight mode (Gottman, 1990). Therefore, he concluded that communication becomes futile when a person is flooded because since the body is in fight or flight mode, the potential for constructiveness is greatly limited. Gottman (1994) also identified flooding as the driving force behind the Distance and Isolation Cascade. He discusses this process in detail as:

> perceiving one’s marital problems as severe, as better worked out alone rather than with the spouse, arranging one’s lives so that they are more parallel than they used to be, and loneliness within the marriage. Eventually, even one’s perception of the entire relationship is affected, and the couple’s narratives change.
> (Gottman, 1998, p. 191)

During this stage, partners are not trying to work out their problems because all interactions escalate so communicating or attempting to work out issues together seems futile. When this conflict avoidance persists it is likely for relationships to become stagnant (Guerrero, Andersen, & Afifi, 2007). Discordant couples may experience a state of stagnation, as their communication and conflict engagement decreases.
Stagnating

Stagnation is highlighted in Knapp’s (1978) Reversal Hypothesis as one of the Coming-Apart stages. When couples get stuck in this stage, “the relationship seems to be at a standstill” (Guerrero et al., 2007, p. 342). Guerrero et al. (2007) describe the dynamics of the relationship:

Communication becomes tense and awkward, and the relationship is itself virtually a taboo subject. At this point people often feel that they already know what their partner will say or that the outcome of interaction will always be negative. Therefore communication is seen as unproductive and unpleasant. (p. 342)

This description of the stagnating stage helps to illustrate the temperament of the communication between couples in marital discord.

The terms marital satisfaction, success, happiness, adjustment, and quality are all used interchangeably in the research, and it is critical to distinguish between these concepts, not only in this study, but in future research as well. Clarifying the distinctions between these terms and measures is an effort to correct for the lack of conceptual soundness in marital research. Marital success refers to an achievement, without necessarily identifying by which criteria a marriage is assessed. Marital adjustment is the couple’s accommodation for each other at a given time, which refers to a dyadic process and not an individual assessment or attitude (Roach, Frazier, & Bowden, 1981). Locke-Wallace (1959) developed the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Inventory, along with Spanier (1976) who developed the Dyadic Adjustment Scale. One concern is that these instruments are designed to measure very specific concepts, therefore using terms interchangeably often leads to the use of measurement scales interchangeably and a compromised level of validity and reliability for specific items (Roach et al., 1981).

This theoretical ambiguity is highly problematic because, for example, in Burleson and Denton’s (1997) study, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale was used to measure marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction is defined as “the perception of one’s marriage along a continuum of greater or lesser favorability at a given point in time” (Roach et al., 1981, p. 539). Satisfaction, by nature, refers to an attitude, not a level of quality, adjustment, or behavioral state. Therefore, items measuring frequency of behaviors or past recall do not
measure marital satisfaction accurately. Items aiming to, and professing to, measure attitudes should evoke an affective response or opinion, rather than cognition (Roach et al., 1981).

Assessments for measuring the quality of a marriage are also problematic because they often misrepresent what they are actually measuring. For example, Mickelson, Claffey, and Williams (2006) claim to be measuring the link between spousal support and marital quality, however not only do they use marital satisfaction and marital conflict scales, but they also fail to adequately measure either of the two concepts. The scale used to measure marital satisfaction contains one single item using a 4-point Likert scale, with the only question asking “Overall, would you rate your marriage as excellent, good, fair, or poor?” (p. 77). Another example is a study by Knoke et al. (2010) that purports to be measuring marital quality, but uses the Partnership Questionnaire by Hahlweg (1988) to measure behavior during arguments, displays of affection, and communication, rather than actual attitudes or levels of satisfaction. Just because couples might report “seldom cuddling before going to sleep at night,” this does not necessarily indicate a lesser quality of marriage.

Lastly, Spanier’s (1976) Dyadic Adjustment Scale has been critiqued by Norton (1983), in which he points out that the items on the Dyadic Adjustment Scale were both inappropriately weighted and disproportionately used. His critique highlights how items are inappropriately weighted because a five-point scale is added together with a dichotomous scale, in which a 1 on the dichotomous scale and a 1 on the five-point scale are treated equivalently. Another problem with the scale’s development is with Spanier’s purportedly tested definition of dyadic adjustment for adequacy. His use of factor analysis, however, leaves him unable to test for a conceptual definition. These shortcomings are highly problematic since Spanier’s (1976) scale has been, and continues to be, widely used by researchers measuring marital quality, adjustment, and satisfaction. Therefore, questions pertaining to both the theoretical soundness and empirical criteria used in research, risk compromising numerous findings.

Contrasting these different marital states beforehand is important for framing our understanding of the unique place in which marital disaffection has in marital research. Among the plethora of other terms used in this body of research, there is marital satisfaction, success, happiness, adjustment, breakdown, dissolution, conflict, and the list goes on. It is
imperative for scholars to distinguish between the different marital states in their own research also in order to clarify for readers exactly what their study is examining.

**OPERATIONALIZING MARITAL DISAFFECTION**

Marital disaffection refers to an accumulation of dissatisfactions with the marriage that often leads to an absence of warmth and feelings of love (Kayser & Rao, 2006). This describes a consistent pattern of dissatisfaction, versus a distressful situation or temporary state. Kayser and Rao’s (2006) definition states that it:

> consists of the gradual breaking down of an emotional attachment, a decline in caring about the partner, an emotional estrangement, and a sense of apathy and indifference toward one’s spouse. During the process of disaffection, positive affect is replaced with neutral affect. (p. 202)

Disaffection is distinct from other marital states and stages because it is not usually temporary, but it also does not necessarily lead to dissolution. Instead, it describes a process that can be experienced internally by just one partner and involves the loss of affection towards the other partner. While feelings of estrangement and apathy begin to take root, the level of conflict and confrontation in the relationship usually decrease.

One study that does, however, use a qualitative approach to look at the process of disaffection is a study by Kayser (1993) and then reinterpreted later by Kayser and Rao (2006). This study conducted in-depth interviews with husbands and wives to discuss perceived turning point events in their marriages. In their interviews, participants were asked to share their personal feelings and thoughts about the relationship, along with behaviors they had observed in their partner. This study identified the most commonly cited turning point events and abstracted three phases of disaffection. The first phase identified is described as beginning disappointments in which disillusionment and self-blame were common patterns. The next phase is escalating anger and hurt, which they describe as expressing assertion and becoming aware of alternative forms of interaction in their marriages. The last phase they identify is reaching apathy and indifference in which the emotional and physical distance increases, while feelings of love are replaced with apathy (Kayser & Rao, 2006). Many low quality marriages last long-term, and this study is interested in unearthing these experiences. These findings are extremely insightful and provide important stepping-stones for this study.

After reviewing the changing social trends and rewards of marriage along with conceptualizing different marital outcomes, the potential roots of such negative outcomes
like disaffection have yet to be discussed. Although finding the root of disaffection seems like a daunting task, it would be helpful to begin by considering people’s fundamental beliefs about marriage. Looking at people’s assumptions and expectations of marriage will provide a starting point for asking, “What happened?”

**Marital Schemas**

Individuals’ ideas and beliefs regarding marriage is what Fitzpatrick (1990) coined as one’s marital schema. A marital schema is an ideology, or what Solomon et al. (2004) describe as a “cognitive structure that contains organized knowledge about marriage relationships” (p. 149), which provides a model of marriage that influences an individual’s interactions, attention, and inferences within the relationship. This model raises important points to consider, and allows insight into potential points of misalignment for couples. Individuals’ ideology about marriage will pervade all aspects of the couple’s interactions and expectations.

Fitzpatrick (1990) identifies three main dimensions of marital schemas, which include interdependence, relational ideology, and conflict. The interdependence dimension refers to expectations for levels of autonomy and detachment versus connectedness and togetherness. The relational ideology dimension includes the couple’s philosophy about marriage, ranging from more traditional to more unconventional gender roles. The dimension dealing with conflict is concerned with the couple’s approaches to conflict management and whether or not they prefer to avoid or engage in conflict (Solomon et al., 2004).

Combinations of these three dimensions yielded three distinct marital schemas (Fitzpatrick, 1990; Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994), which include traditional, independent, and separate. Individuals who share a traditional marital schema tend to prefer stability, share conventional marital ideology with clearly defined traditional sex roles and norms, report high levels of companionship, sharing, and togetherness, and finally actively engage in conflict over issues identified as important. Independent schemas, on the other hand, tend to describe people who value spontaneity, share an unconventional relational ideology, report high degrees of interdependence and psychological closeness but limit it by maintaining separate circles of friends and spaces, and prefer engaging in conflict directly and assertively. Individuals with a separate marital schema, in contrast, usually prefer stability, adhere to a
conventional marital ideology, value individual freedom more than relational maintenance, report lower levels of interdependence due to limiting both psychological and physical closeness, and prefer to avoid conflict (Fitzpatrick, 1990; Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Solomon et al., 2004). These marital schemas are helpful for understanding the different dynamics of a relationship and offer insight into the power relations, conflict styles, expressions of affection, and propensity to self-disclose between partners.

Each dimension of individuals’ marital schema provides an important window into how partners may differ in their ideas and expectations for gender roles, communication styles, closeness, or conflict management in a marriage. Although these are still a limited selection of potential points of difference between marital partners, they provide a foundation to begin asking questions about how and why persons feel discordant. What points of misalignment in ideas, attitudes, or expectations lead to patterns of communication that are responsible for such marital outcomes?

The experience of disaffection is communicative by nature in the way it is cultivated, negotiated, and lived day-to-day. The events or interactions that occur between marital partners are communicative and occur in communicative environments made up of social networks, friendships, children, and community members. Sharing, debriefing, venting, or rehashing the tensions, or the distress caused by them, with others, or even with one’s partner, are all ways in which the trajectory of marital disaffection becomes a communicative experience. In addition, asking women to describe specific moments in which the way they felt about their marriage has changed, are storied moments that are interpreted and reinterpreted through storytelling. Lastly, sharing their stories through the process of interviewing is a communicative act that allows them to come to voice and be empowered by talking about their personal experience (Tracy, 2013).

Marital disaffection is critical for scholars especially in the field of communication to consider when the national divorce rate of first marriages between couples under the age of 46 is 50 percent for men and 45 to 50 percent for women (Fields & Kreider, 2000). When humans are continuously failing to develop healthy, sustainable, long-term, and fulfilling close relationships, one must question what is going wrong? Research that investigates marital communication and conflict misses the mark by glossing over what it genuinely means to experience prolonged, marital discord and disaffection. Individuals experiencing
psychological isolation inside their marriages should not be met with further isolation inside relational communication research.

This study focuses specifically on married couples, rather than dating relationships, partnerships, or cohabitors, because of the structural nature of the commitment and the socio-historical background of marriage as an institution. Vangelisti (2006) describes structural commitment as:

occuring when people feel that they have to continue their relationship—even if they would prefer not to. Individuals feel structurally committed to their partner when the costs of leaving (whether social or financial) constrain their ability to end the relationship. (p. 148)

Although same-sex marriage is recognized in six states, there are differing obstacles and stigmas for absolving these unions. The structural and constraining nature of heterosexual marriage, along with its long history as an institution, shapes the experiences associated with these relational issues uniquely.

Furthermore, extant literature on marital relationships indicates that marriage benefits husbands far more than wives in regard to marital satisfaction, psychological well-being, physical health, career mobility, financial earnings, and success (Amato & Irving, 2006; Christie-Mizell, 2006). These discrepancies in rewards among husbands and wives provide a clear rationale for narrowing in on how women experience and manage marital disaffection. This study is a call for research that addresses women’s feelings of loneliness and entrapment in their marriages, while identifying the communicative patterns that led to such feelings, along with the communication surrounding these patterns. There is a need for scholars to unearth the deeply dark and diverse experiences of marital disaffection. This study will delve into understanding the experiences of women in such predicaments and give voice to the self-silenced woman.

The proposed research questions guiding this study include the following:

RQ1: What do women describe as defining moments that contribute to enhancing or lessening their marital disaffection?

RQ2: What do women describe as their communicative process of navigating disaffection?

Experiencing marital disaffection can be an overwhelmingly large source of stress among individuals. The increased levels and chronic nature of marital distress for individuals has been linked to serious mental and physical health risks, as highlighted earlier.
The practice of marriage functions as a source of family and the reproduction of cultural values and identities. Its iconic role in our culture makes it critical for inquiry and cultural reflection in terms of its implications on the health and wellbeing of its participants. It is important to consider what we can learn from others’ individual experiences before the practice of marriage stops being a health benefit and becomes a health risk. The gravity of marital distress on an individual’s health makes this study a priority for researchers in the health communication field. The design, research methods, and analytic procedures used for conducting this study are illustrated in Chapter Two.
CHAPTER 2

VOICING THE TRAJECTORY OF DISAFFECTION: METHODOLOGY

One of the ways messages about health and relationships are communicated to others is through the use of stories. Stories are an important medium for evaluative messages and lessons to be passed down through both family and culture. In my family I longed for accounts of “What happened?” because no one had interpreted the events for me. In my culture I longed for the raw truth from women who had been through it. My uncertainty and fear motivated me to break the silence and create a space for dialogue about marital disaffection. Statistics about divorce rates or reasons for divorce leave much to be desired when it comes to understanding how marriages work, how they fail, and what lessons can be learned from them. Media outlets advise people to make sure they know their partner, not get married too young, and to be sure to make time for each other. What is lacking from these accounts are real, true-to-the-core, beginning-to-end stories. This chapter describes the interviewing methods, recruitment strategies, and forms of analysis that enabled access to these stories.

STORYING DISAFFECTION

Stories constitute our realities while illuminating the social, cultural, and familial discourses surrounding events. The practice of storytelling serves as a sense-making tool used to assign meaning to our lived experiences (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010). Asking women for their voices and interpretations is an attempt to end the cultural and academic silence surrounding marital disaffection.

The method of inquiry these research questions beg for and require is a qualitative methodology that investigates and analyzes women’s discourses surrounding marriage—their perspectives of the communication with their partners, their efforts to negotiate their disaffection, and their communication within their social support networks. An interpretive
study was best suited for evoking provocative accounts and rich understandings of how women experience marital disaffection.

**INTERVIEWING**

Interviewing was chosen as the main tool for gathering data in this research for two main reasons. First, because of the sensitive nature of this topic, interviewing is a more personal and flexible method for allowing participants greater control over what they choose to disclose based on their comfort level. The second reason interviewing was chosen as the research method is because the data-rich nature of the method enables an otherwise underdeveloped body of knowledge to expand, refine, and differentiate itself conceptually. Interviewing is ideal for gaining access to others’ perspectives and lived experiences, which serve as a strong foundation for theory-building. It provides an organic and adaptive path towards “mutual discovery, understanding, reflection, and explanation” (Tracy, 2013, p. 3). Interviews give space for the participants’ viewpoints, interpretations, evaluations, and experiences to be shared outside of the confined lines of a survey. One of the benefits of interviewing is that participants are given the flexibility to express themselves in their own way, rather than being forced to identify with pre-written statements on a scale. Although quantitative survey methods are inextricably valuable measures of a diverse range of communication phenomena, they do not allow participants the individual agency, open-ended space, and raw voice that interviews do.

A total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with five participants. Each woman was interviewed three separate times, with each interview lasting an average of about 60 minutes. All three interviews had a unique focus that illuminated a different aspect of their experiences. I conducted semi-structured interviews using guiding questions that helped give direction to the conversation while still allowing participants room to shape it. This type of interview is meant to be flexible and adaptive so that the participants have control over the conversation also (Tracy, 2013). The interviews can be described as a cross between respondent and narrative interviews. Respondent interviews consist of participants who share similar roles and are asked to share their own individual experiences and behaviors (Tracy, 2013). This type of interview is useful for understanding what unites and differentiates members within a cultural group. Narrative interviews are characterized by the stories
participants are asked to share about themselves, their experiences, and past events (Tracy, 2013). The type of interview stance I adopted throughout was responsive interviewing. I made efforts to build rapport with participants, reflect on my role and biases as the researcher, and accept the emotional toll of the interview process (Tracy, 2010). Through the conversation participants accounted for “what happened.” Accounts provide reasoning and justifications for actions and opinions, offering explanations for what happened and how they feel (Tracy, 2010).

A series of three one-hour long interviews with each participant was critical for gaining a well-rounded perspective into participants’ views, their process of disaffection, and their strategies for negotiating disaffection. Part of the first interview focused on getting to know the participant as an individual before they were married because the beginning of their relationship story is often related to their family background, beliefs, and identity. The second part of this first interview shifted the focus towards getting to know the participant’s relational self. Most women can describe the ways in which they felt affection for their husbands when they met, during their dating period, and for the first years of marriage. In order to understand the accumulation of disaffection, we first need to understand the affection. Interview questions, included in Appendix A, were meant to elicit descriptions about how the couple met, what initially attracted them to each other, and what her ideas were about marriage. This interview also aided in building rapport with participants so that they are more comfortable opening up about their disaffection in the following interview.

The second interview was designed to understand the moments that have constructed or created marital disaffection. Research has shown that it usually is not just a single event—it is an accumulation of moments that actually contribute to that disaffection (Kayser & Rao, 2006). In this interview, questions asked women to describe specific moments or events in their marriages in which their feelings changed. Their storied moments provided insight into the turning points that characterize their trajectory of disaffection. The first question, “Could you describe the first time, since being married to your spouse, that you felt a sense of disconnect with him?” encouraged women to locate a starting point in their trajectory of disaffection. Additional questions asked included: “Have similar events occurred since then that made you feel this way?” Other questions ask about how their sense of identity might have changed, such as “How has the way you feel as a person changed over the years?” and
“Has your sense of identity changed over the years?” These questions got at the relational nature of their identities and how they are shaped through our interactions with others.

In the third and final interview, women were asked about how they managed their feelings of disaffection while negotiating roles in their daily lives. One of the main questions in this section was “Have you thought about leaving or divorcing? What has prevented you from divorcing?” Other questions asked women to share how they may have hidden their disaffection from others, such as “Have you kept your disaffection a secret from family, friends, or associates?” and “Do you find yourself in awkward situations where you feel like your discontent is obvious to other people?” These questions elicited themes of secrecy, isolation, and pretending. Participants were also asked in this section if they perceive that their health has been negatively affected by their situation. And finally, “What are some things you wish you could have done differently in your marriage?” and “Is there anything you know now that you wish you would have known earlier on?” are questions that allowed participants to reflect upon their journey and voice to others what they have learned along the way. This also provided an opportunity for them to reinterpret their decisions and actions in a way that could offer advice to others.

**RECRUITMENT METHODS**

This study utilized a snowball sampling method to recruit women who would be willing to share their stories. Snowball sampling is often used when interviewing about a sensitive subject, and utilizes referrals made by people who share or know of others who possess the desired characteristics pertinent to the research focus (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). These participants were informed about the study from mutual acquaintances and were offered my contact information to receive more information. Individuals who expressed interest in participating were provided with a copy of the recruitment letter, found in Appendix B, and a copy of my abstract. Additionally, participants were also reached through flyers, found in Appendix C, containing information about the study and how to contact the researcher. These flyers were displayed at local marriage and family counseling offices where married women would have access to this information. This provided access to a network of women who volunteered to be interviewed.
After forwarding the recruitment letter and abstract for the study, I screened participants to make sure all participants self-identified as currently married and having lasting feelings of disaffection in their marital relationships. If participants were presently separated, I inquired about the status of their separation to verify that they were either considering or already working on reconciling with their partner. This was an important criterion for participants because the research focus is on individuals who have either decided to remain unhappily married or have not made a decision about their intentions to stay or leave.

Participants were then asked for potential dates, times, and locations they were available to meet for the first interview. The location of the interview was left up to the discretion of the participant based on where they felt comfortable meeting. Four interviews were conducted in local coffee shops, two were conducted in a participant’s office at work, one was held at a food court in the mall, one took place on a bench inside the mall, and one was conducted inside of a participant’s vehicle.

**DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS**

The women who participated were all residents of a southwestern city in the United States. Table 1 offers more description of the participants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Yrs Married</th>
<th># of Kids</th>
<th>Title of Story</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Languid Lavender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katrina</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Deep Jungle Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>Admin. Assistant</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Patriarch Purple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Student, Military</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Mint Leaf Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michele</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Account Exec.</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Spring Bud</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Elizabeth was sweet, maternal, and strong. Initially we met in a coffee shop and then also in her office. Her character was incredibly strong while her worries and insecurities poured out, which connected to me and my own bad habits of self-doubt. Her thoughts and worries for herself, the family unit, her children, her job, and the community all circulated like whirlwinds in her mind. Her mind and her body had endured high levels of stress for a long period of time, working to kick most of the fight out of her. I admire her for her drive to think, analyze, understand, and teach.

Katrina was so dynamic during our interviews at local coffee shops. Her posture, humor, athletic build, and kindness all contributed to her aura. When she spoke, her bright blue eyes opened wide, dominating any other expression on her face and demanding your engagement. Her straightforward, easy-going personality and positive energy shined through in every conversation. Listening to the wisdom and honesty in her stories and experiences as told in her vibrant tone, was refreshing and worrisome at the same time. Our conversations were refreshing because of her sharp wisdom and honesty, but they were also extremely heavy because of the dark experiences and feelings she shared. Our conversations would wander my mind for weeks.

I talked with Nancy at a shopping mall twice and once in her car. Nancy was very collected, determined, and strong-willed; a woman who stands firm in her beliefs, goals, and commitments. Speaking with her challenged my ideas about what it meant to be happy, meanwhile her sense of independence and autonomy also comforted and inspired me.

Ashley was a smart, driven, and sweet woman with so much heart. She was still in love with her husband despite their turbulent year of marriage. Her care and hope for the marriage was matched with frustration and disappointment.

Michele was confident, unafraid, and passionate with a remarkably strong sense of self. She knew what she wanted and what she deserved. As we sat in a coffee shop for all three interviews, her animation and optimism stood out to me almost immediately.

**REFLEXIVENESS**

Tracy (2010) highlights self-reflexivity as a continual process of introspection and self-awareness to assess one’s own biases, motivations, strengths, shortcomings, and impact on participants. I was extremely aware of my unique positionality in relation to my
participants because of the differences in age, relationship status, and ethnicity. I believe that identifying with my participants’ gender, however, was more important in establishing rapport. They had all been young inexperienced women who possibly could have benefited from having frank conversations with someone about relationships. Additionally, I believe that my status as single allowed them to have more authority over their experiences and feelings. My lack of experience with marriage helped them feel confident and secure as experts who were knowledgeable about the subject and could not be challenged. If I were married they might have felt judged if they thought that I was comparing their marriage to mine.

The private and sensitive nature of the interview questions also caused me to be mindful of my position as an outsider to their experiences. These initial feelings of alienation, however, are part of the reason why there are intergenerational barriers preventing women from communicating and learning from one another. I was hopeful that the women I interviewed didn’t feel like they were sharing secrets with an outsider, but rather passing on wisdom and accounts that would reach younger generations who would value their experiences and benefit from their lessons. Divisions between generations must be repaired so that women can communicate about the realities of different life stages.

One of the ways I was made aware of these positionalities is when Elizabeth asked me if I was in a relationship and was apologetic about potentially tarnishing my beliefs about marriage. She affirmed, however, that it was important for me to have realistic expectations and ideas about marriage. I assured her that I was grateful to her and that the best chance for me to ever have a strong marriage one day begins with me getting rid of idealistic assumptions and replacing them with reasonable expectations. She then shared with me her aspirations to be able to speak to young women about the disillusionment of marriage so that they know what to expect and can make wise decisions. This conversation demonstrated to me that she truly recognized the importance and benefits of communicating with younger generations woman-to-woman. Katrina had also inquired about my relationship status and offered me sage advice. These women feel a sense of reward by sharing their wisdom with me because they can appreciate the value of the opportunity to pass along life lessons that they wish someone had passed along to them.
ETHICAL CONCERNS

A main consideration for this study was in treating participants and their accounts with high regard. Talking about marital dissatisfaction can be an extremely private and sensitive matter, potentially making participants feel vulnerable or emotional. Because of this risk, I made contact with a Marriage and Family Therapist who agreed to be available for counseling to any participants wishing to talk to a professional. On my consent form and flyer it was made very clear that our interviews were not to be confused for therapy sessions and that I was in no way qualified to offer advice.

There was also a possibility that a participant might share events of physical or sexual violence, in which I would strongly encourage them to contact the aforementioned therapist for counseling. If the physical or sexual violence had occurred in the presence of a minor, I would have immediately reported the incident to the marriage and family therapist, whom is a mandated reporter and would notify the appropriate authorities. Participants were advised of this procedure on the consent form so that they could choose what information they wish to include or omit during the interview.

DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher so that grounded theory (Ellingson, 2009) could be employed as the method of coding and analysis to identify both unique experiences and common patterns. Grounded theory, also known as constant comparison, is an inductive process in which theory is used to contextualize findings (Ellingson, 2009). Transcripts were read closely over and over for emergent themes, first in individual clusters and second as a whole. I began with the three transcripts that belonged to each individual participant in order to discover the emergent themes unique to their experience. As themes began to become clear to me, I developed a specific code for each participant to help identify patterns and organize my sense-making. For example, while reading Michele’s transcripts her use of metaphors to tell her story stood out as her way of making sense of her experiences. In Katrina’s transcripts, on the other hand, it was clear that power, leverage, and tactics were common themes. After developing a unique code of themes for each participant and coding each of their interviews, the themes were
subsequently compared, contrasted, and grouped to construct categories. Each category was produced inductively and represented a pattern of themes found throughout their story.

After analyzing each participant’s set of transcripts individually, I then took a step back to compare and contrast all of the themes and categories that were produced across participants. Analyzing all of the interviews was a continual, cumulative process throughout the data collection. Each new interview warranted new comparison to and reconsideration of what I found to be the overarching categories (Ellingson, 2009). An additional set of themes was produced when looking at all 15 transcripts. After careful analysis, I found that present among all five participants were, what I understood to be, three global categories. I found that even though each story is distinctive, there are still three primary commonalities that unite all of the participants’ experiences.

One overall category that emerged, for example, among participants was defining moments in the marriage, such as grievances or new realizations, by which their trajectory of disaffection could be mapped out. Specific overall themes that emerged include intimacy withdrawal, conflict avoidance, lack of hope or interest in improving the relationship, and the desire for increased physical space. These common themes seen across all of the interviews are an example of how themes were grouped together to construct categories, such as *Emotional Disengagement* in this case. Also, the way in which these disappointments and realizations are communicated to the partner and others contributed to another set of categories. The first overarching category I identified as running through each story is *Marital Negotiations*, or how couples collaborate to define their relationship. The second global category is *Identity Negotiations*, which is how women experience a transformation. Lastly, the third category is *Management* and refers to how women navigate their lives.

**DATA REPRESENTATION**

After constructing the categories that would organize my interpretations of the data, it was time to decide how to actually represent the data. When considering whether I should interweave all of the participants’ voices to create one narrative or to represent their experiences individually, I was torn. On one hand, they all share a set of unifying similarities, but, on the other hand, they each represent such contrasting experiences of disaffection. Ultimately, I decided to represent each participant individually because I began
this project with the goal of providing a rich and contextualized understanding of disaffection. However, in order to understand in-depth how a marriage began to unravel, it is first necessary to understand how the couple came together. This means taking into account their relationship story, marital beliefs, needs, and expectations.

As I narrated each participant’s journey, I interwove excerpts from the interviews so that the narratives remained true to the participants’ own voices. Inevitably, I was faced with the task of making decisions about what excerpts to include or exclude. Ultimately, I chose the excerpts that I perceived as best embodying the experiences and emotions of the participant. After each excerpt there will be a numeric code indicating three pieces of information: the order in which I interviewed this participant, which interview the quote from drawn from, and the page number it was found. As I insert my own personal reflections where I connect what I’ve learned back to my own life experiences, these passages will be italicized to separate them from the analysis.

The data presented in Chapter Three is organized in a deliberate sequence that is based on two criteria. First, it is organized based on when the initial disaffection occurred. Second, participants’ narratives are shared in sequence of how long they have been married. These two criteria highlight key intersections for examining underlying patterns of disaffection. Therefore, as I transition between participants I will discuss the implications of the two criteria for making sense of their experiences.
CHAPTER 3

ACCOUNTS OF LOSS AND RENEWAL

As each woman shared her story, the diverse forms and trajectories of disaffection began to emerge. Each story depicted a unique journey in which the women, it seemed, felt a sense of loss as they remembered parts of their identities and hopes that they had given up along the way, a sense of pride that they had persevered, and a sense of renewal that reflected their own personal growth. The interviews captured accounts of how women made sense of their relationships and identities throughout their journey, all the way up to the present. They were able to point to defining moments during their marriages that stood out as either enhancing or lessening their disaffection. As they described these moments, it was never just one thing, but rather, it was a series of moments that began to construct the disaffection.

For some, the disaffection seemed to enlarge with each passing moment, while other trajectories included highs and lows. Telling each story individually will illuminate all of the different shades of trajectories that together help paint a detailed portrait of disaffection. Despite such varied shades, or experiences, there are both clear lines of similarity and areas of sharp contrast that interconnect to form a rich, multi-colored sketch of how women experience disaffection.

Each voice, like a paintbrush, is the critical medium for transferring raw materials, or experiences, onto the canvas. As their voices overlap, contradict, and extend one another’s experiences, they connect a myriad of feelings, demographics, and behaviors that represent how women experience disaffection. The first story presented belongs to Elizabeth, followed by While transitioning between participants’ stories, the unique dimensions that both unify and distinguish each trajectory will be identified.

LANGUID LAVENDER

As Elizabeth stopped in front of me, I immediately stood up to say hello, shake her hand, and thank her for meeting with me. I wasn’t sure what to expect; if she would be upbeat, pretty, wise—but quickly I found out she was all of these. We scrambled to find an
open table inside the bustling coffee shop full of students and laptops, both of us surprised by how busy it was for a federal holiday. Her eyes were kind. I wanted her to open up to me, and I knew that meant learning her pain. I figured it wouldn’t be long before my worldview would begin to shift in ways unimaginable to me at the time.

This was my first time meeting her in-person and the uncertainty of what she might share with me was nerve-racking. Would my questions make her uncomfortable? Would my questions make ME uncomfortable? I had brought myself to ask these bold questions that usually only spun around in my head causing me such discomfort and anxiety. But this time it wasn’t their persistent circulation that dizzied me, instead it was the thought of finally getting the answers, some of which I may or may not like. I hoped that my glimpse into her marriage wouldn’t be an image I would later wish to unsee.

I also worried if our conversations would really lead to answers, or if they would only lead to more puzzling questions and confusion about my conceptions of love, marriage, or identity. I was well aware that certain knowledge is double-edged—with the potential to be enlightening and/or burdening. Double-edged knowledge pulls back curtains, sparks up light-bulbs, and sharpens the lens through which you see. I wondered if I’d be doing myself a favor or a disservice by learning about the dark side of marriage. Ultimately, it depended upon my own ability to frame and think reflexively about our conversations in a way that would facilitate both a rich understanding and critical discourse about marital disaffection. It would be a challenge to ascertain that my framing and interpretations of the data were more than merely disenchancing, but rather constructive and generative of new strategies, theories, models, or therapies.

I had explored all of the risks for participants in this study through the Institutional Review Board approval, but I wasn’t sure if I had really thought about all the ways this study might impact me. There I was though, in this coffee shop, nervous, but decidedly ready to talk with Elizabeth.

**Negotiating A New Shared Identity**

I asked her the question—the question that made her think even further back than I ever imagined she would need to:

> Can you describe the first time you felt a sense of disconnect with your husband? (1.1.1)
She let out a nervous chuckle and I could tell that even she was surprised by her answer. With every word she looked straight into my eyes without glancing away:

> It’s funny, I would have to say it was on our honeymoon. (1.1.1; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

As I listened to her my mind began pacing back and forth with thoughts. “What she said created a sense of panic in me. I didn’t want to learn that even after dating someone for years, it was still possible to end up feeling incompatible on the honeymoon. Here is this bright, strong, successful, feminist woman who feels like she married the wrong person. If she couldn’t do it, I wondered how anyone who wanted to maintain a strong self-identity could find the right person? This was so disheartening. Where do I begin when trying to make sure my compatibility with someone would last longer than the honeymoon?”

As I wondered what could have happened on her honeymoon, I realized how the timing offered a hint. Even though the honeymoon was not the beginning of their relationship, it did mark the beginning of their marriage, which entailed new expectations and new roles. As couples witness more aspects of the other person’s marital schema, or their ideas of interdependence and how to approach conflict (Fitzpatrick, 1990), they may begin to discover more differences. As she recalled this moment it began to make more and more sense.

> Togetherness—I have a certain picture of what that looks like, or intimacy, on a honeymoon. I have a picture of what that’s supposed to be like, and it doesn’t involve saying, “Hey, we’re going to sit here and read a book,” and then be separated from each other. So I think I had a different idea of who we were going to be. (1.1.2; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

As I listened to her story, I thought to myself, “Maybe this was just one small instance in the bigger scheme of things. That sort of thing happens from time to time.” I wanted to explain away her situation so badly, but she put a stop to it right away:

> And I didn’t even connect it until now, that incident, but I would say that was a pretty good predictor of what the main issue is in our marriage even today. (1.1.3; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

Then I realized that in reality her honeymoon had foreshadowed the rest of her marriage, and I wanted to learn how. I began listening to her story, her identity, and her journey piece by piece.

Elizabeth is a woman, professor, mother of three, and wife. She is 50 years-old and has been married to James for 26 of them. It seemed that her independent and caring nature
had always been a part of her; traveling with her from when she moved away from home, through her college years, and into our present conversation. I was automatically drawn-in by her confusion, contradiction, and analytical mind. It mirrored my own internal battles. I identified with all of her questions about self, religion, happiness, and marriage. Her ideas were being challenged and she was in the process of figuring out what she believed or no longer believed, what brought her happiness, and who she wanted to be.

Her home, work, marital, community, and social roles are all tangled up together, tying her down in contradiction between liberated feminist and doubly subordinated wife. At work she is a scholar, professor, and family woman with Christian values. At home she is a volleyball mom with her hands tied across each of her three kids’ different activities and schedules. In her marriage, she is playing the role of a supportive wife even though she dreaded every minute. In her community she is an active church member, PTA mom, and avid volunteer competing for status and recognition as a family for having successful, talented, and well-mannered children. Elizabeth’s social life, however, is where she thrived. Her friendships are an escape, an outlet, and a haven—somewhere she could find peace and support, express raw emotion, recharge with energy, and enact her desire for a liberated feminist identity.

In each of her roles Elizabeth’s hard-work and determination to do her best and exceed others’ expectations shined through. Her devotion was one of the reasons she was able to achieve such great success both academically and professionally. These same qualities, however, are also the jagged nails that now pin her down.

Elizabeth and James met in college, although they weren’t immediately drawn to each other, their friendship eventually grew. She was attracted to his mind, their conversations, his Christian values, and his promising future. Even looking back, Elizabeth notes:

It was a very good decision on my part. It was a good head one, not a heart one. (1.2.3; Elizabeth, personal communication, October 21, 2011)

She had the best intentions—mindful of her decisions and what she didn’t want her marriage to be like.

My parents’ marriage was full of conflict and strife. So I thought, “I’m not going to have that. I’m going to marry somebody who it won’t happen with, and so I’ll correct for that.” (1.1.1; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)
Elizabeth and James got married the summer after college graduation. After their honeymoon, Elizabeth and James immediately entered into a Master’s program together that Fall. Their full attention, energy, time, and focus were being funneled into their academic careers, which she says disrupted their ability to nurture the relationship and cultivate any romance. Instead of integrating romance into their lives or postponing it, that part of their relationship was skipped over and just never happened. Their ability to negotiate a shared identity as a couple was also hindered by their differing needs, desires, and goals. They were both trying to build, only in different spheres.

He’s very independent, he’s very hard-working, his attention goes there 100%. There’s a little bit of family time, and then go to bed early and then get up early and do that over and over everyday. (1.1.3; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

He was doing the same thing as me but looking outside. “How do I meet the expectations of work and the friends that we have?” He was far more interested in investing outside than inside. (1.2.3; Elizabeth, personal communication, October 21, 2011)

Part of building a life together involves constructing a shared relational identity together that combines the marital schemas of each partner. Couples work to negotiate a marital schema that pleases and meets the needs of both partners. When the outcome of this negotiation process is unfavorable for one partner, the cycle of efforts and disappointments ensues.

**Continuous Efforts**

James desired a high-powered career and more autonomy from the relationship. Elizabeth, on the other hand, had a different idea of who they were going to be as a couple. She shared with me the process she went through trying to make it work. She knew that marriage was going to take effort, sacrifice, adjustment, and determination—and not from just one person. Her efforts to fulfill her role as a partner, accommodate his needs, meet his expectations, and negotiate a shared identity for them continued for years.

It’s not like things are going to be exactly the way you need it. It’s not like there’s puzzle pieces that fit together perfectly. It’s all like reality is negotiated all the time. . . . If you have one person that’s working really hard to do that work, and another person that is not, and is like, “I don’t have to do that.” I can look at that from a feminist perspective and say, “Well I worked my butt off to try to craft a self that was acceptable to my husband: noting what he was interested in, what his values were, what he really liked, how he liked the house, what kind of meals he liked. Do do do do do do all that and be that person, and he got to kind of stay the
same.” And I’m tired. (1.2.1-2; Elizabeth, personal communication, October 21, 2011)

There have been lots of times where I anticipated that what I needed to do was to be something that I wasn’t to make it work. Do more, move over more to his ways of seeing the world, his way of being in the world, and adapt more to his expectations and let go of my own expectations. And this is coming from a feminist. (1.1.4; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

Letting go of one’s identity is the ultimate self-sacrifice that a partner should never desire and a relationship should never require. The deep yearning and unrelenting quest for the attention and approval of your own partner, is clearly a painful and unfortunate battle to have to face. From Elizabeth’s perspective, she put in all of this effort and sacrificed herself to make the marriage work.

Her efforts to work on the relationship were also demonstrated through her willingness to engage in conflict.

Being connected means you’re willing to go where you need to go based on how your relationship is playing out in front of you in that moment. (1.1.8; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

After remaining silent and sacrificing herself in order to maintain harmony, Elizabeth realized that avoiding conflict was only adding to the sense of disconnect she was feeling. Therefore, engaging in conflict, for her, was an effort to be connected. These efforts usually produced little or no change, leaving her feeling disappointed and eventually exhausted. I wanted to understand where she is now and what kind of disappointments she went through to get there.

**Multiple Disappointments**

Her explanation began with telling me about the birth of her first child:

At childbirth, kind of the same thing, ya know, there but not *there*. There, but he was reading a friend’s dissertation while I was in labor. I’m not kidding. Because he had promised it by a certain date and he’s a guy who follows through, because he’s very task-oriented. (1.1.5; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

Before I had a chance to respond, she continued further. Afterwards she had always held onto the notion that at the very least, he would certainly be there for her when it came down to the crucial moments.

If I ever die or I ever get sick he would be there, but that got proven wrong. I went through some medical stuff, and it was never anything serious but I thought
it was. I went in for a biopsy and so there was the procedure itself and he came with me, but while he was waiting in the room with me, there were other women who were going through other things and I don’t know what they were going through but their husbands were sitting next to them holding their hands waiting. And he was on his Blackberry and couldn’t get a connection so he was frustrated so I said, “You might just want to go back out to the lobby where you had a connection.” (1.1.5; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

I was unsure of how I would have responded in her shoes. Sometimes the misunderstanding seems too large for words. Some explanations seem futile when trying to open another person’s eyes to what you see. On the other hand, even when an explanation would suffice, just the need to have that conversation can be aggravating. Ultimately, in her view, he wasn’t connected or tuned-in to Elizabeth’s relational or emotional needs as a wife or a person. He was a great provider, father, and person, but not the companion she had hoped.

As Elizabeth waited months for the results from her biopsy, she felt sick thinking about all of the possible outcomes and imagining the worst. During those two months Elizabeth felt a complete lack of emotional support from James.

It was excruciating, it was over the holidays and he never once said a word to me about it. He never said, “Are you okay?” Because I found myself thinking, “I don’t think I have it in me.” I looked at my kids and it’s like “What would they do?” So I had to live through that for about two months and there was never any support. He just kind of decided to ignore it. (1.1.6; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

The worst part wasn’t being tormented with worries about what might happen. The worst part was having to go through it alone, she expressed:

You can be with someone and you can feel so alone. And in some ways, it’s almost easier to be by yourself and feel alone, than to be with someone else and feel alone. Because the expectation is that when you’re with someone you’re not supposed to feel that way. (1.1.9; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

She felt hurt and, even, betrayed, that her husband wasn’t there for her in these critical moments. Her back felt heavy as the accumulation of straws, or disappointments, built up.

Her medical scare was not over yet, though. James still had time to be the support that she needed.

So then it came time to go in to get the results from the test and he didn’t offer to come with me. He said he would call me to find out the results. My girlfriend came with me, we went in, I didn’t find out the results that day, but by the time I walked from the doctor’s office to my car I had like five texts and three phone calls from friends asking, “What did you find out?” “The results aren’t in.” So, he
didn’t call me. I thought, “He was busy, had meetings back to back.” Like I’m filling in for you, filling in. “Oh, he’s just got other things to do.” So then he finally started to call me when he leaves work, at around five o’clock. . . . So he goes “Hey, how was your day?!” and I’m like, “Uhh . . . okay.” I was waiting for him to go “What happened?” and he didn’t. He totally forgot about it. So I said, “Well, my day was fine. But it would have been really nice to have had a husband who cared enough to want to know the outcome of the tests.” And he was—like I felt all of the air leave the phone line. He was mortified. (1.1.6-7; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

Elizabeth felt that James had plenty of chances to show his support throughout this challenging time. There had been many moments throughout their marriage in which she had felt this way, but for her this was the most serious.

These moments are what Elizabeth pointed to as defining moments in her marriage that contributed to her disaffection. The lack of emotional intimacy, sexual intimacy, and supportiveness were all ways that she felt had disconnected her from her partner and the relationship. After trying for years and being disappointed repeatedly, she had to end the cycle. She had finally reached a point of burnout. She didn’t want intimacy, affection, attention, connection, or support from her partner any longer. In this moment she also experienced a “kind of awakening” that would ultimately set her on a new path.

**Burn-Out**

Elizabeth’s sense of finality with the relationship brought her a certain sense of peace and relief because it meant not trying tirelessly to fix the relationship or please him anymore. On the other hand, she only reached this point as a result of how emotionally drained and exhausted she was. Among the many points in her marriage when she felt disappointed, she specifically highlighted the series of moments when James didn’t comfort her, didn’t go with her to get the test results, didn’t call to check on her, and then forgot about the appointment, as the major turning point in which she felt burned-out and emotionally disengaged from the relationship.

I mean that’s just one example of all the things through the years. . . . Like the work I had been doing to try to tell myself that we are okay, even though they weren’t, it was like . . . I wasn’t able to do that one. I wasn’t able to keep telling myself that he cared. (1.1.7; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

She was unable to make excuses or fill-in for him any longer. So she decided to distance herself from him, enough so that she wouldn’t have to go through feeling let-down again.
I told him at dinner, I said, “I’m taking a step away from you, I have to take a step away, because I can no longer expect that you are going to give me what I need.” (1.1.8; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

Her “stepping away” was her decision to create what Vangelisti (2006) describes as relational distance, or a noticeable shift away from emotional intimacy. Finally Elizabeth had disconnected herself from the relationship, which ironically stood in contrast to what she had previously wanted so badly—to feel connected. Letting go of that wish was freeing because she no longer had an unattainable goal.

She didn’t have the energy, passion, or determination for her marriage anymore, which completely contradicted who she was as a person. The marriage had broken her down to the point where she didn’t have any more motivation or effort left in her to even consider the possibility of repairing the relationship. For Elizabeth, this was a big deal; colleagues and friends alike admired her for her drive, the most monumental quality she possessed. On the occasions when she did consider the idea of making it work, she explained:

I can’t work on this anymore. I feel like we did work on it, we had time. (1.1.5; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

Roberts (2000) would say that Elizabeth was expressing avoidance, or ceasing her attempts to work out any problems or improve the relationship because their communication seems futile.

Elizabeth accounts for what happened to their marriage through the use of metaphor. She talks about her and James as a team and their marriage as a business, explaining that the business ultimately failed because of their lack of investment:

We were two people who were married, who did our best to invest in a very big way to make this whole operation work, and we did fairly well on a number of counts. But when it came to investing in the relationship—so we are now paying the consequences for not making our relationship first. (1.1.7; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

Even though the “business” didn’t survive, Elizabeth was able to acknowledge the good that came from it. She and James were able to build a family together and raise wonderful kids, and for her that meant it wasn’t a complete failure. She was fully prepared to accept their losses, but her husband, James, saw the business as something that could be rebuilt.

I don’t see a way back, like he talks about restoring the marriage, and I go, “To what?” Restoring implies that there was something there that we are trying to go back to and I don’t perceive that there really is. So I think that we disagree on the severity of it. (1.1.14; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)
From Elizabeth’s point of view, a desirable place or time in their marriage didn’t exist, and she was exhausted from trying to create one. But after all these years, despite her marriage being in its worst shape, she could finally say she felt good about herself again.

**Awakening**

While disengaging from the relationship, Elizabeth also reached a point of realization. She had realized something novel about herself, her position, her marriage, and her life. This was a critical turning point in which Elizabeth was able to remove herself from the cycle of self-sacrifice and disappointment she had been wrapped-up in for more than two decades. Although withdrawing from the marriage and feeling hopeless about its future was sad, letting go of her hope was actually far more liberating than anything else.

And what I think was really interesting about that time is when I stepped away from him, I can’t recall very many times in my life where I felt as good as I did, letting go of that expectation. (1.1.8; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

Her feelings of relief and renewal had a profound effect on her mental and physical well-being:

Stepping away helped me realize how hard I had been working to keep this thing going. I’m exhausted from it. (1.1.10; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

It was really interesting because I lost about 10 pounds and I wasn’t dieting, but 10 pounds gone like that (snaps finger), because I was not believing something that wasn’t going to happen. (1.1.8; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

It seems that her body felt the same sense of relief that her mind and heart did.

Elizabeth described a sense of rejuvenation that she felt as a result of “letting go” of all her hopes and expectations for the kind of marriage that she had been trying to build for so long. She also realized how much she had sacrificed of herself by compromising her own needs to meet the needs of her husband and family. She was able to stop putting herself aside and finally allow herself center stage, where she wasn’t just playing a supporting role. This is similar to what Kayser and Rao (2006) identified as the second phase of disaffection in which individuals begin voicing their own needs and feelings, rather than acquiescing to their partners’.
By distancing herself from a relationship that used to be so close to her core identity, a space for new meanings and a renewed sense of control opened up (M. P. Johnson, 1982). Her acceptance that things wouldn’t change was mentally, emotionally, and physically freeing. All of the effort she had previously devoted to trying to please her husband and make their relationship work was now free to be redirected towards improving other aspects of her life. This process of “awakening” provided Elizabeth with a chance at growing into a more desirable self. Her renewed surge of energy, confidence, and awareness about herself marks a critical point in her journey because it served as a springboard for all of the learning and growth to follow.

**Social Support and Self-Construction**

As soon as her perspective in the marriage changed, she was able to see everything else through a different lens also. The awakening stimulated new spiritual and intellectual quests for answers and meaning. Her old way of knowing and understanding the world no longer sufficed because she was ready to learn, expand, and grow beyond the boundaries set for her. Her sense of self was getting back on track and ready to flourish as a result of her therapy, close friendships, work, and exercise:

I see a counselor, that’s a good thing to alleviate the stress. I have a lot of good friends that are very supportive and know the story. I work and have definitely gotten more involved in my work. It’s been therapeutic. I can bring my full self here, my heart and head here. I try to exercise regularly to stay healthy because its super stressful—the idea of unearthing what you’ve laid down all these years. Those are kind of my places of support. (1.2.6; Elizabeth, personal communication, October 21, 2011)

Each of these serves as both outlets for stress and sources of support. These play a primary role in numerous aspects of how she manages both her identity and disaffection.

Elizabeth confided in her closest friends about her marriage, relying on them for encouragement, escape, compassion, distraction, motivation, concern, and guidance. Her girl friends played a primary role in how she managed her disaffection on a regular basis. Cooper, Arber, Fee, and Ginn (1999) highlights companionship, esteem, and emotional support as the ways in which interactions with friends are supportive. Her friend’s companionship asserted her that she wasn’t alone (Hirsch, 1980), while their appraisal and encouragement gave her the esteem support to enable her self-evaluation and self-affirmation that she would prevail (House, 1981). The emotional support she received from them, such
as sympathy, affection, and comfort, helped make this period of uncertainty manageable (Hirsch, 1980). Their feedback during this time was crucial in mobilizing her psychological resources to help master her own emotional dilemmas (Caplan, 1974).

The mobilization of her psychological resources, as facilitated by her social support network, is also known as self-construction. O’Grady (2005) says that recruiting supportiveness from friends enables new meanings to be reinforced and new self-understandings to be legitimated. Her communication with friends and her therapist played a vital role during the process of reassessing her own values, beliefs, and identity.

And so that . . . launched me into a time of questioning a lot of basic assumptions I had about the world. “If that’s not true, then what else that I’m believing, and holding onto as ‘really the way things are’ might not be true?” So I started questioning some basic assumptions that impact every single area of my life. (1.1.8; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

This process of reassessment demonstrates the sort of work that is accomplished through self-construction/reflection. She was able to reflect on and reinterpret her marriage and her identity, which offered space for identity adjustment. Her social support and self-construction/reflection offered her the resources, such as feedback and new interpretations, and the discursive space to rebuild and enact her sense of identity.

**Managing Disaffection**

Joining an exercise group and volunteering in the community are examples of strategies she has developed to help manage her disaffection. Talking to friends over a glass of wine, staying busy, getting out of the house, and keeping her attention on work-related goals were important ways for her to escape from the stress that her home-life induced. She dreaded going home and has even caught herself hoping to catch every red light on her drive home just to delay entering into such a stressful and tension-ridden environment. Even though she has experienced relief and exponential growth over the last couple of years, her life is still highly stressful, only the causes of that stress have shifted.

Previously, she felt tired from trying to fill all of the roles that were demanded of her and please everyone. She was exhausted from working on the marriage, maintaining hope, and being disappointed repeatedly. Now, on the other hand, she feels stress from pretending everything is okay, performing in front of others, worrying about her children, and contemplating whether or not it would be best to stay or leave.
It’s stressful. And so the only time I feel like I don’t have stress, because it’s always I’m doing a performance for my kids trying to be like, “No, everything is fine,” and I’m not very good at it, they have to know. But I’m always performing for the kids like, “We’re okay, it’s going to be fine,” when in fact it’s not. So when I’m alone, like 100% alone, that’s the only time I’m not experiencing stress. (1.1.14; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

This performance is stressful for her because she feels the tension in the house is almost overwhelming. Her thoughts about escaping the tension and leaving constantly loom over her head, but the decision isn’t that simple.

Leaving is excruciating. Staying is excruciating. As I move between the two mindsets, I don’t feel a sense of relief. When you don’t know what to do, you stay. I’m hurting them by leaving, but I’m also hurting them by staying. (1.2.6; Elizabeth, personal communication, October 21, 2011)

As she thinks about the consequences for her children she can’t bear the thought of making the wrong decision or the more painful one, so figuring out which would be best is also stressful. This uncertainty in her life causes her stress and anxiety because she doesn’t feel any sense of security about the present or the future. She even questions how to perform inside of her marriage:

I think the performance of marriage when you’re experiencing discord gets very difficult. Because then who are you if you’re not together but you’re not apart? (1.1.13; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

The chronic stress she is under has taken a sizeable toll on her health:

I walk around with pain in my chest a lot of the time. I have headaches all the time, that I didn’t have before. My hair is falling out. I am experiencing all of these stress related symptoms, and some people would just leave because of that. (1.2.6; Elizabeth, personal communication, October 21, 2011)

As she negotiates between staying and leaving, her development of strategies for managing her disaffection and stress are critical to how she is able to not just survive, but grow and thrive.

**Identity Adjustment**

Elizabeth was ultimately able to set new goals in her life that supported a positive self-concept because they were both self-directed and attainable. She was able to run her first 5K race, she has began networking more, and exploring the possibilities available if she were to make career change. Her dream one day is to share what she has learned about herself as an individual woman and as a married woman to younger women. She was able to
learn a great deal about marriage, life, and self in the process of making sense of her past, making changes in the present, and envisioning her future. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) theorize about how individuals who have experienced some trauma in their life have the capacity to grow in response to it, or engage in a process of posttraumatic growth. They refer to this growth as the wide range of cognitive benefits an individual experiences, such as seeking new meanings, changing priorities, acknowledging new possibilities, adopting new outlooks, and making spiritual changes. This helps explain why the amount and depth of wisdom Elizabeth has acquired is no match to what most women her age have achieved. Her growth was facilitated by her support network and self-construction/reflection and she has gained a great deal of clarity about her life.

**LINES AND LOOPS**

Compared to the other participants, Elizabeth’s trajectory of disaffection is the most linear in the sense that it seems to intensify with every moment and remains on a relatively stable path without highs and lows or looping back. Her trajectory adds straight lines and steady brush strokes of Languid Lavender onto the canvas. Although her trajectory follows a linear pattern, her position on that trajectory moves in a languid climb. Elizabeth’s story was placed first because she has been both married and disaffected the longest. Her disaffection had already begun to take root on her honeymoon, and yet it has now been 26 years. Out of all of my participants, Elizabeth clearly has been living with her disaffection the longest, however, out of the five, she seems to be the least likely to leave any time soon. As I seek to understand the barriers that keep her marriage stabilized, I wonder, is it having three children that prevents her from leaving? Is it her religious beliefs? Or is it her fear of feeling like a failure? Presenting her trajectory first also serves a critical purpose for establishing a frame of reference that will help guide the discussion and analysis of the subsequent participants’ experiences. Her story shares elements in common with each of the other participants’, while still maintaining its own distinct features.

The next woman, Katrina, has been married for 12 years of constant ups and downs. Out of all the participants she has been married the second longest and along her trajectory began feeling disaffected second. Her relationship going up and down because it improves and then is set back again, giving her little bits of hope and then disappointment. She, as
opposed to Elizabeth, experiences temporary relief from her disaffection. Although, along with highs, Katrina has experienced very deep, dark lows that are difficult to recover from. Her trajectory of disaffection has so many layered, levels, loops, and branches, hence why her story adds Deep Jungle Green to the canvas.

**Deep Jungle Green**

I carefully arranged two chairs on opposite sides of a wooden cube-like coffee table. Katrina hadn’t arrived yet and I wasn’t sure exactly who I was expecting to meet. She had called just a few minutes before I arrived to find out directions to the coffee shop. Her tone was friendly, and I could already sense her easygoing but confident personality. We had corresponded over email the past couple of weeks trying to coordinate an interview, and I was eager to finally meet her.

I sat reading over the questions I wanted to ask her, looking up now and then to make sure she would be able to spot me. I remembered Elizabeth’s and Nancy’s responses and wondered how Katrina’s experiences would compare. I wasn’t sure what to expect but as I looked up I saw a slim, brown-haired woman with a colorful scarf wrapped loosely around her neck, walking over and I could tell it was Katrina as soon as we locked eyes. Katrina had a warm personality, the kind that instantly draws you in and makes you feel like you are already friends. Katrina is a 42 year-old professor, mother, wife, athlete, and friend. She plays on co-ed and women’s soccer teams and also enjoys mountain biking. She grew up and worked in the Netherlands until she decided to begin a new venture by taking a nannying job and living in the United States for a year. During that year she was very active and social, making numerous friends and even meeting a guy, whom is now her husband of 12 years, Eric.

It all started at a party of mutual friends. Eric asked one of Katrina’s friends to bring her along, and she did. After arriving to the party and hanging out, she was surprised by the way Eric ignored her and didn’t even acknowledge that she was there because of him. She thought it was ridiculous:

I was so mad! I knew that he’d asked her to bring me! And I’m thinking, you could say, “Hi I’m so happy you could come.” Why did he have to pretend that I’m not here for you? That was crazy! Sometimes I’m still mad about that! Seriously. He tells me, “Women don’t like it when you’re nice to them.” That’s
Katrina explains how she saw this side of him ever since she first met him and she admits that she is partly to blame for being attracted to it:

He’s very muscular, he’s very fit. So we would work out a lot in the beginning, we would do sports together. That was also a big factor. And he had this very masculine—and it kind of comes with the asshole package, so he’s not entirely wrong when he says, “Women don’t like it when you’re nice to them.” I guess something about it, I have to take responsibility for being attracted to the asshole because it did work. I could’ve turned around and said, “Thank you, you’re an asshole, I don’t need that kind of shit from the beginning.” (2.1.4; Katrina, personal communication, November 27, 2011)

She couples higher levels of masculinity as part of the “asshole” package. But there were also other qualities that attracted her to Eric:

I really enjoyed him, he’s really smart and we had a lot of discussions about values and intellectual stuff and religious beliefs, so when it comes to values and things that drive us to do things we were very compatible. And he loved to cook and I do too so we would eat amazing dinners together. We gained like 10 pounds in the first six months, it was just crazy! It was a lot of fun. It was always somewhat easy with him. . . . We could talk about morality and the brain, it’s just fascinating. So I found that very attractive. (2.1.4; Katrina, personal communication, November 27, 2011)

Katrina loved their intellectual conversations and had fun sharing activities with him. She was attracted to his mind, body, and how well they got along. She remembers him being eager to “seal the deal” after just two months of dating. They had talked about getting married, but Katrina had never been very fond of the idea of getting married. In the Netherlands, marriage wasn’t as customary as in the United States and she had never pictured it in her future. None of her best friends or siblings were married, even though they were in long-term committed relationships or even had children. Instead, she was looking forward to going back to her home country and seeing if their relationship could withstand the distance and time apart, or if this is where they go their separate ways.

Turns out, Eric was not interested in giving up on her. He found ways to be romantic even over the distance. She recalls one of the sweetest things he did:

So as soon as I was gone, he kicked his game up a few notches and started really pursuing me. . . . He made this scrabble board with all these words in Dutch that meant stuff, he didn’t know any Dutch he would just look them up. And he made this whole thing on a scrabble board and he took a picture and he emailed it to me, and he did these outrageous things. And my mom is right there and she’s melting
for this guy and she hasn’t even met him yet. (2.1.5; Katrina, personal communication, November 27, 2011)

After several weeks of romance, Katrina and Eric met in Como, Italy where Eric had a conference. She knew he was going to ask her to marry him again. She wasn’t sure what her response would be, though, because she decided that it depended on how he asked.

I thought, “If he’s going to come with a ring, I’m going to say no. But if he asks me and there’s no ring involved, I think I could go for it probably.” I wanted him to be very unconventional. And so I’m sitting on the bed and he came with a box, and I’m thinking, “Oh shit here’s the ring.” And I open it and it’s a necklace, it’s not a ring it’s a necklace! And I just started laughing. And he said, “Oh I thought if I got a ring it would be too much for you and you’d run out of here as fast as you could,” and I laughed my head off and he said, “Did you think anymore about marrying me?” and I said, “Sure, why not, let’s do it.” And we got married. (2.1.6; Katrina, personal communication, November 27, 2011)

Katrina laughed as she told this story. She couldn’t believe how hard she made it for Eric to pursue her. Shortly after the proposal, they held the wedding ceremony in Eric’s parents’ living room in Canada. On December 21, their wedding date, they had known each other for exactly six months and a day. As they celebrated such a joyous moment among family, she was already starting to question if she was kidding herself or not, but from this moment forward her life as a married woman began to take shape.

**Schema Negotiations**

Katrina and Eric drove in a little red sports car down from Canada to San Diego, California. Eric was working as a physicist and the fast-paced nature of his job was very stressful. Katrina couldn’t work yet because she didn’t have a work permit so she was staying home and adjusting to her new life as an unemployed, married woman in the United States. She really missed the gratification of working but decided to make the best out of her situation by wiggling into new roles and activities as a wife.

So I was cooking every day and I did crazy stuff like cycle to his work and bring him a homemade lunch, and this is still the newlywed period and I was really catering. (2.2.3; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina was really catering to Eric by cooking and cleaning, even making sweet gestures. She figured that one day when she started working, he would cater to her also. About four months into the marriage, though, Katrina began to notice that the dynamics in the house weren’t what she had envisioned. As she reflected back on everything she did in the
beginning, she realized that maybe her kind treatment during that time period had actually carved his expectations for what the entire marriage should be like:

In retrospect that was really dumb. I should never have done that. I thought, “Well, I’ll do it because I can now. And then once I start working it will be my turn to get catered to.” But what really happened I think is that he expected me to really be like that and when I started working he got even more angry because I wasn’t doing those things anymore. There would be days he’d come home and be like, “What’s for dinner?” and there would be nothing ready, and I’m like, “I don’t know.” And I would start saying stuff like, “I was just about to ask you the same thing. Why is it my responsibility to figure that out?” And he’d be like, “Oh, I guess you’re in a bad mood.” (2.2.3-4; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina looks back at the beginning and even though at the time she enjoyed catering to him, she thinks it set an unrealistic standard for how the rest of the marriage would go.

When Eric would come home from his stressful job, he would do his own thing and not really try to connect with Katrina. He wouldn’t ask about her day and, instead, would even be critical of her performance taking care of the house. He complained when there wasn’t a certain food in the refrigerator and made remarks about her not having anything better to do all day. Little by little Katrina was realizing that he had certain ideas about what a wife should do and what a husband should do:

I’ve come to the conclusion, at some point, that he really wanted a wife who would be doing all the wife stuff and who he could also talk to because that’s what he likes, to have his intellectual discussions with me and just basically that he doesn’t have to invest in. He just wants to come home to a home-cooked meal, have clean clothes in the closet, and the house is all neat. And I have to be happy of course. He doesn’t really want to hear about my day of course because communication is not something that he is really interested in and I talk about my students too much as it is. He wants to talk a little bit about his work, and then he wants to go back to work! He goes sits at the computer for the rest of the night. That’s a happy marriage for him, right there. Maybe watch a movie together on TV. (2.2.17-8; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Eric’s role expectations for their marriage were very different from Katrina’s. Communicating and connecting with each other was becoming a greater challenge, especially since they weren’t able to really talk about his work. Eric was a physicist, and to this day, his career still creates a knowledge and communication barrier between them.

This stuff he studies, mathematical physics, always working on equations on the computer, curves and instabilities, I have no idea what he’s talking about. As far as it comes to marital satisfaction, that’s one of those things right there that takes a lot of time and space and I really can’t share it with him. And it’s frustrating!
It’s frustrating for me and... I know it’s frustrating for him, probably just as frustrating. Because I want to talk about it and I look and after 30 seconds already he sees a glaze come over my eyes. (2.1.7; Katrina, personal communication, November 27, 2011)

It was difficult for Eric to really share his work with Katrina, which made it even more difficult for them to connect and communicate with one another on a daily basis. After working for a few years, Katrina then decided to go back to school for her Master’s degree, which subsequently led to even more points of conflict in the marriage.

“Below the Belt” Grievances

As Katrina was studying and writing her thesis, she remembers distinctly, not only the lack of positive support and encouragement she received, but also all of the mean and negative remarks Eric made to belittle her work.

He was a pain in the butt when I was studying. He was a pain in the butt. I still remember writing that first page of my thesis the “Acknowledgments” and thinking, “I want to write here how fucking difficult he made my life writing this thesis,” because he had no respect for it! It was such a struggle! He would always say, “I can’t believe how much time you are spending on that. That’s just a joke. You call that studying, but it’s more like a hobby.” He would say that and it’s very hurtful. And at the same time, again, I just chose to ignore it. Thinking, “Whatever,” that, “I have other people in my life that think that what I do is fine and I really want this and I know I have a right to it.” (2.2.7-8; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Eric was unsupportive of her goals and mocked her work. Early on, Katrina was forced to look outside of her marriage for social support, which led to her developing a close network of friends. She had been working and going to school at the same time, but she quit her job as soon as she found out that she was pregnant. Her pregnancy, as joyous as it was, also turned out to be one of the most defining moments in her marriage. She was 34 years old at the time and they had been married for four years, but Eric didn’t want her to keep the baby.

When I got pregnant and he found out he said, “I think you need to get an abortion,” and I said, “No, I’m 34, we weren’t careful, I think we should at least consider making this work.” He said, “No, this is really inconvenient let’s wait until you’re done with school. You have a baby and your whole study is going down the drain. It’s just, professionally you’re going to be finished if you have a kid right now.” And I begged him to let me keep it, and then I promised him that I would do everything and he wouldn’t have to do anything for the child and he consented. He said, “Okay.” And that is how I kept the baby. (2.2.8; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)
Katrina had to beg, plead, and negotiate with her husband in order to keep the baby. To this day, she looks back at that time with anger, hurt, and disgust. Katrina resents how cold her husband was about it and how difficult he made her pregnancy.

I was doing my Master’s thesis and it was really tough. It was really hard. The hardest part wasn’t so much that I had a baby and was studying, but that he was such an asshole about everything and he was not really there. Our daughter did not sleep through the night for the first three years of her life, he never once got up, never once got up at night, never! I did it all. (2.2.8; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

He was financially supportive but not emotionally or physically. She is unable to bring it up to him now and express her anger about it because he refuses to listen. It is frustrating for her that Eric won’t admit and own up to his mistakes. She has often heard him tell other people that having a child was the best thing in the world, meanwhile never receiving a true apology for those years. These few years that consisted of her schooling, pregnancy, and raising their baby stands out to Katrina as a deeply, defining moment in the beginning. The subsequent moments that stand out as enhancing her disaffection, however, are not single events but actually a recurring cycle of behaviors.

There has been a pattern of aggressive behavior from Eric that has caused numerous problems and even extended into secondary issues in their marriage. First, Eric’s aggression, violence, and verbal abuse have been destructive patterns to both the relationship and Katrina. She points to several moments in their marriage in which his behavior or verbal insults have hit “below the belt.” His aggression was often facilitated by alcohol and seemed to worsen with time. She describes the cyclical nature of their marriage:

We would go through phases, if it was really bad and it was a really bad transgression on his part, he would apologize the next day. Sometimes it would have to do with drinking too much because he loved to drink when we first got together. And getting drunk to him was just what you do when you get together and I discovered he was a really bad drunk. . . . I kind of knew but it was just another thing I chose to ignore. I kind of knew he was a little edgy when he’s drunk and I thought, “Oh you know, I just need to distract him a little and we’ll just go to sleep and tomorrow things will be better.” The closer we got the more he’d start to take things out on me. I guess its normal, show his dark side. And he started to get drunk and say stuff like, “Well life’s so easy for you because I make all the money and you can just spend it,” and, “You can do whatever you want. You’re not really interested in my work,” you know little things, but big things too. (2.2.5; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)
His consumption of alcohol and his hostility became more frequent and more severe the longer they were married. Katrina explains that at first she thought his aggression was something she could easily manage and contain, but as it happened over and over each time became increasingly difficult. She recalls the details of the last time one of these episodes occurred:

And the last time that happened, just a month ago . . . not Halloween night but the weekend before . . . I think he had a lot to drink. He somehow disappeared and I found him upstairs laying down saying he wasn’t feeling well and I said, “What do you want me to do? Is there anything I can do?” and he said, “No just leave me alone.” So I left him there and then maybe a half hour later he came down in his regular clothes and he said, “Ok, I want to go home now,” so I said, “Fine let’s go.” So I grabbed my stuff—this is like 12:30 or 1:00 in the morning—and he just starts to rant in the car—and that has happened so many times, probably the 25th time if not more, that he does that—saying, “I don’t even care about him, I show no interest, I’m just a leech, I just play around, can do whatever I feel like, I have no respect for him, I don’t see how hard he works,” stuff like that. (2.2.5; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

This specific evening is one example out of a series of times in which Eric has verbally attacked Katrina by criticizing her competence as a wife, a mother, or a person. She says that similar events have occurred at least 25 other times previous to this night, each one more draining. As she listens to his outrage, it is difficult for her to listen to the insults over and over again. However, she has learned over the years that not responding to him works best to prevent their confrontation from escalating further.

And I try not to take it seriously, because I know by now that he’s going to be regretful the next day and the more I ignore it the less of a chance there is for it to escalate. It’s worse when I say, “No I’m not, what are you talking about! Why are you doing this to me?” When I kind of respond to it and go against it, it just quickly gets worse and we’ve had physical struggles. It’s ridiculous! It’s shameful too, because I never thought I’d be in a situation like that. And the next day he’s extremely regretful. (2.2.6; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina describes here how silencing herself during these confrontations is important for mitigating the situation. Even though Katrina chooses to be silent in these situations, I can't help but worry about how it must effect her. My thoughts were unraveling in my mind, “As I imagine being verbally attacked by the person closest to me and the person I am supposed to feel secure with, it strikes me that this must be even more dreadful—not to defend myself. I wonder if his insults, after listening to them without retort, would sink inside me. I think
about them creeping inside my brain, sneaking into my ideas, and invading their away through my body until I begin to feel them everyday. Eventually, I somehow would no longer be able to distinguish my own ideas from the foreign ones. I only hope that Katrina’s sense of self has been stronger and is still grounded.”

The alternative to being silent, however, would only heighten the conflict and possibly lead to a physical struggle between them. She feels shameful and embarrassed that she is dealing with these problems in her relationship because she never thought it would be her. She doesn’t realize, though, that there is no “type” of woman who finds herself in this kind of relationship. Her fear of the confrontation escalation pushes her to assume a moderating role instead of a defensive or offensive position. Even outside of the marriage, though, Eric has a record of violence with others, as exemplified by that same night:

And I find out that he actually—I mean we are talking here about someone with a Ph.D in plasma physics who is a total nerd—and he fought with someone at that party! I didn’t know because I didn’t see it because I wasn’t there but I found out from other people. And it’s also not the first time, he’s done it three times before! And I thought, “I need to draw the line, I need to draw the line.” And I don’t know why I don’t. I mean I do, and I don’t. I do and he’s on his best behavior for a week, two weeks, and then things kind of slowly go back to our normal routine. We go to another party or he ends up drinking too much at another point or something happens and it happens again. (2.2.6; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina is both appalled by his behavior and disappointed in herself for not being able to draw the line. Each of the incidents she describes are usually followed by great remorse the next day and a promise to improve. Things do get better during these periods following a transgression, and it gives her hope for the marriage. For example, the second time Katrina and I met, she stated that she almost left:

Since the last time we spoke I almost left, I almost left. But we talked it out. He’s like, “Okay.” And I’m like, “Yeah, okay what?” I’ve heard this so many times before. But he says, “No, no, I think I understand it better now,” and he was more open to some of the grievances I was bringing up so we’ll see. (2.2.1; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina remains hopeful even though she is aware that this is a frequent pattern for them and continues to be unhappy afterwards. She admitted that their relationship follows a cycle:

But this week we’ve been talking a lot, there is change. It sounds like there are cycles. He does improve but then he has these major setbacks. It’s like he falls off the wagon. (2.2.9; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)
These patterns of behavior have become cyclical, with part of the cycle reaching extreme lows and the other parts reaching highs.

Ultimately, though, Katrina still feels sincerely hurt and mistreated. She reflected on his history of verbal abuse and how it has affected her:

All these things that happened that were, as far as I’m concerned, below the belt, such as, being really mean to your partner and saying, like he told me, “Oh you’re just a leech, you’re just with me for my money,” and then the next day say, “Oh I didn’t mean that I was drunk, I say crazy stuff when I’m drunk,” but if it happens often enough. . . . The first time it happened I thought, “Okay, I guess he was just being ridiculous.” But I don’t believe it anymore. I mean I carry it with me.

(2.2.16; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Making disparaging remarks and insulting your partner are what Katrina refers to as hitting “below the belt.” After hearing the same accusations and criticisms repeatedly, she could no longer let them go or brush them off as empty words. His words were penetrating and made her heart heavier each time. She felt angry with Eric that she then had to live with that pain every day for years. When new transgressions or aggressive episodes occurred, Katrina describes the dark feelings they provoked in her:

Well, I wish he would drop dead. Very often I’d thought that I wish that he would just die. I wish he would just not come home today from work and he would just disappear so I do not have to go through the struggle ending the relationship. And those are really terrible thoughts to have to just want someone out of your life. And I should just end it then if that’s what I really want. And that he is horrible, that I can’t believe it. It’s just extreme disbelief because it’s such a contrast of who he is in his day-to-day life, not talking about with me, a lot of our shit happens behind closed doors. . . . It’s ups and downs, ups and downs. But yeah, those days I go, “It’s horrible.” But then I think, “What am I going to do? How am I going to end this? And where am I going to go? I’m going to have to support myself. I’m going to have to find a place for me and my kid, have to go to court over who gets custody,” and it scares me. (2.2.6-7; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina reflects on the extremely dark thoughts she has about her husband during the times when the verbal insults, aggression, or violence resurface. These thoughts are a reflection of the indignation, rage, and disbelief she feels during these moments. She admits that these feelings are horrible, but she fears what might happen if she left.

The pain and anger she felt were enough to make her want to leave Eric, but she agonized over the consequences and risks involved with leaving. She also felt shame and
disappointment for being in this kind of relationship. It bewildered her why she has not yet been able to draw the line, but she recalls times when she has made clear efforts:

I’ve threatened a few times, “I’m going to leave.” I’ve kicked him out one time where he spent the night at a hotel because he attacked me and I was calling the cops so he said, “Don’t call the cops,” and I said, “Okay I won’t call them if you leave now. Otherwise I’m going to call them and tell them to come pick you up.” (2.2.23; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina points to this moment as one of her attempts to really put her foot down about what she considers unacceptable. Together, these repeated moments of aggression, violence, and verbal abuse have been destructive to the relationship and Katrina, while simultaneously creating and building Katrina’s disaffection. She has tried to address these issues directly by talking to Eric about them, but her attempts to talk about them have not been successful.

**Continuous Efforts**

Both Katrina and Eric came from families who were critical and always looked for areas of improvement, which also carried over into how they communicated with one another. However, there was a turning point in their approach to communicating about the relationship. After reading a book on interpersonal communication, Katrina became aware of some of their communication problems and worked on applying what she had learned to change their communication style.

I read the book, and it was a major shock! It was like wow! Everything about relationships, intimacy, and I saw all these things we were doing wrong. I realized that the critical part was not good. So I started to talk about it and he agreed with me! But knowing it, and doing it and working on it and especially alerting the other when it happens, which in itself is a form of criticism too of course, that’s often where we started to argue and it was usually just, “Well it’s your responsibility because I’m already doing this,” and, “You’re just being nasty,” and, “You’re just being a flake,” from him. . . . He says that I’m flaky, my friends are more important to me than my family, that’s what he says. I’m messy, it’s just back-and-forth accusations of shortcomings we see in each other. I know of course from the book and years of therapy I’ve been in before I even met him that that’s not okay. (2.2.11-12; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina’s attempts to communicate about the relationship usually still led to arguments in which they were both pointing out flaws in the other. Even though they realized that their conflict style was not constructive, it was still difficult to correct. Other times when Katrina
expressed to Eric that she was unhappy with the marriage, rather than talking about specific problems, he often responded by deflecting the blame onto Katrina’s own incompetence.

When I say that, “I’m not happy in this relationship,” or, “This isn’t going well for me,” he usually responds with something, “You’re never happy. You’re never going to be happy. It’s not me. It doesn’t matter who you’re with, because you’re just that kind of a person. You are never going to be happy. You were not happy with the guys before, you’re not happy with me now. It’s you.” Or, “You’re just crazy,” and because he knew that I had been in therapy before and stuff and I had taken medication and all that, for him I am just half crazy. And he easily takes advantage of those weaknesses in my past to point out to me that I am not seeing it right. And I am very sensitive to that, it always throws me off and I go, “Oh. Maybe he is right. I have to reassess and see how I’m approaching it and maybe I am asking him too much, maybe he is right.” (2.2.17; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

From Katrina’s perspective, Eric would frequently take advantage of her insecurities with demeaning comments aimed at breaking down her confidence. In her view, he knew how to hit her where it hurt by questioning her psychological or emotional grounding. When Eric didn’t respond to her concerns with criticism, it was atypical for him to refuse to engage in the discussion altogether. She describes how this usually happened:

The typical argument would be me telling him how I think he’s wrong and he would just stop talking and I keep talking non-stop about how I think we should improve our relationship and he just tunes me out and at some point he just leaves and walks away. (2.2.11-12; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina’s efforts to talk about their issues or raise concerns usually didn’t lead to a meaningful conversation because Eric would either insult her or disengage completely from the discussion. For example, Katrina has tried to talk about how he treated her during her pregnancy but Eric refuses to talk about it. Katrina states that with most past transgressions, he won’t discuss it:

And I just can’t talk about it because he will stonewall everything that I bring up. (2.2.9; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

These patterns of either “below the belt” insults or silence made it nearly impossible to create any constructive changes in the relationship. It is clear that their styles of communication were not helping resolve their issues. Once Katrina began seeing her attempts at communicating as futile, she found alternative methods for negotiating power and change in the marriage.
Negotiating Methods

As Katrina agonized over their continued problems and her increasing disaffection, she negotiated between staying and leaving. Negotiating between staying and leaving is a long and complex process, and pushed Katrina to find other ways to work on their marriage. Katrina exercised alternative methods for gaining leverage, maintaining the relationship, and moderating the disaffection. These methods included: therapy, seeking moments of opportunity, and good behavior. These three methods were Katrina’s approaches to mediate her disaffection and manage the relationship over the years.

First, therapy was a way in which Katrina could vent, gain clarity, seek guidance, find support, and learn skills for working on their relationship. Katrina attended therapy individually the first time even though Eric didn’t want her to. Since Eric was never supportive of her therapy, she decided not to tell him the second time she started therapy again.

I initially didn’t tell Eric, because I had been in therapy before and he just thought it was a waste of money. Every time I had gone to therapy I would say, “Oh yeah I went to therapy today,” and he would say, “How much does it cost again when you go?” That would be his first response. So I stopped talking about that altogether, and I didn’t tell him I was seeing a therapist. (2.2.15; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

She had started seeing a therapist again because she had already finished school and had been at her first job for about a year. Completing graduate school and jumpstarting her career had been a main focus for awhile, but with those areas of her life in order, she felt it was time to divert her focus onto improving her marriage.

A year after my first job, I really reached a moment where I thought I really need to make up my mind about this because everything else in my life was going well except for my marriage. My marriage was the only thing that really seemed to still be an issue, because, before that I was studying, I was setting up, there were many things in my life that were still kind of—I hadn’t quite established myself yet. But at this point I realized that I was doing well in all areas of my life but that I wasn’t doing well with my marriage. I decided to go into therapy, seek out a therapist, and basically come up with a strategy in therapy on how I could work better on the marriage, because I also realized that I wanted to improve the marriage but whatever I was doing wasn’t working. (2.2.14; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina had finally reached a comfortable place in her career and social life and longed for that same security and stability in her marital life also. Her therapy allowed her space to
reflect on and explore the pain, anger, and shame she was carrying around with her. But in order to really improve her sense of security with Eric, she needed to get him into therapy also. Eric was resistant to the idea of Katrina going to therapy so it was no surprise that he initially refused to go. This is where Katrina utilized another approach that gained her leverage for making requests in the marriage.

The second approach she took involved identifying and maximizing on moments of opportunity. On a regular basis, Katrina’s voice was not taken seriously; she did not have the power or the voice to raise concerns or make requests from Eric.

On a random day even though I was still angry about stuff, it often came out like, “Why are you bothering me with this stuff now? I worked hard all day, we’ve had a nice dinner, and now you start talking about this shit. Why?” And I’d be thinking, “Okay, I see how that is probably not a good idea.” So I would wait for something bad to happen so he would owe me. (2.2.16; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina didn’t feel justified to bring up old transgressions or talk about the marriage because it was seen more as trouble making to Eric and even when they did enter into a discussion it was usually unproductive. She had to wait for there to be another aggressive or drunken episode in which Eric was remorseful and use that moment as a stage for presenting the changes or efforts she wanted made. For example, this is how Katrina was able to get Eric into therapy:

He resisted for while and then he finally did. Probably had some other alcoholic episode in-between and then when he said sorry I forced him. I said, “If you want to make up for it, come with me to the therapist,” and he did. (2.2.15; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

So then he went to it by himself. Something else happened, probably another drunken episode where I forced him to do something, and after which I found—I mean sometimes I was even looking forward to it . . . to him doing something so ridiculous that even he had to see that it was not okay with me, so I could ask him to make an effort to improve. (2.2.16; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina found that new transgressions worked to revert the balance of power in the relationship so that she could rightfully ask for him to make efforts to improve since he “owed” her. These moments were like small windows of time where she could bring up all of the other things that had been bothering her. She looked forward to these periods in which she had authority, voice, and agency to express her frustrations, be heard, and request new efforts or changes from him that usually produced results. She had to contain her new ideas
on how to improve the marriage and alleviate her feelings of disaffection until a new transgression opened up an opportunity for her to mobilize them. Some examples of the types of requests she has raised before include: attend therapy with her, go to couples’ counseling together, seek individual therapy, find help for anger management, and help more with their daughter.

The third method in which Katrina used to maintain the relationship and gain leverage was to be on “good behavior.” This meant cooking, cleaning the house, and doing things she knew would please him. She described making a conscious effort to maintain the relational harmony, such as keeping a positive attitude, dismissing irritating situations, or house-cleaning:

Or maybe if I make sure the house is nice, because he responds well to treatment. (2.2.19; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Usually in periods when I work less I have more time to take care of the house, I don’t have work stress, I’m more available to the family, and then the relationship tends to go a little better. (2.2.22; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina noticed that when she was doing all of the things he liked, that he seemed to be on better behavior also and that it was easier to get along. In addition to being more attentive to household chores and the family, her efforts to keep him happy also extended into their intimate relationship. At one point Eric had expressed his dissatisfaction with their sexual intimacy:

We had this horrible phase where he was accusing me that we weren’t having sex enough. I said, “Well, you know I’m on anti-depressants, which you know decreases my libido, and we both have jobs. You’re a night owl, I’m a morning person, so I go to bed at 10 o’clock and you don’t go to bed ‘til 1 o’clock in the morning. And then I get up in the morning and I’m out of the house with our daughter in the morning before you even get up. So it’s not like we have good opportunities to spend one-on-one time.” We really don’t. We rarely have time just the two of us, but he said, “Well, you know you need to take care of my needs because you’re turning me down and that’s really frustrating for a guy and that’s how women push men to sleep with other women.” . . . So he had all these research things on what is normal for couples to have intercourse or sexual encounters with each other. And he was convinced that the minimal average, dependable minimum average, was three times a week. And I didn’t believe that! I don’t believe that, I really don’t. (2.2.19; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)
From Eric’s perspective, he felt like they should be having sex more often, at least three times a week. He blamed wives for being neglectful to their husband’s needs and causing them to have extra-marital affairs. Katrina, on the other hand, explains that if you factor in if the couple has kids under the age of 10, work full-time, have different sleeping schedules, and one is on anti-depressants, then three times a week is highly unlikely. Even though she didn’t believe that the statistics he found were an accurate representation of people in similar circumstances, she still felt compelled to appease him. She describes how sex became an additional way for her to be on “good behavior”:

But I was like, “Fine! We’ll see if that’s better!” and, honestly, I still use that, to some extent, as a way to be good so that he’ll be good to me! And thinking about it now it’s just stupid. It’s just stupid. It’s a really good example how two people one-on-one can create something that’s totally messed up. (2.2.19; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina has used sex as a way to gain leverage in the marriage so that Eric would be nicer to her. She realized in the same moment that she was telling me about it how twisted it seemed. I thought to myself, this is different than having sex with your partner even though you might not really be in the mood. Instead, Katrina was complying in hopes that he would be nicer to her as a result. Overall, her good behavior was a way to decrease conflict, maintain harmony, and, in the process, temporarily alleviate her disaffection.

Since there was a communication breakdown in the marriage and Katrina was unable to raise concerns, express her feelings, or suggest improvements directly, she exercised alternative ways to achieve these relational goals. She developed relational management strategies that allowed her to still make continuous efforts to save, maintain, and strengthen the relationship. However, these methods were also tactics for negotiating power, authority, and agency in the marriage. As she moved back and forth between wanting to stay or leave, and their tumultuous relationship moved between highs and lows, Katrina was able to manage her disaffection and maintain the relationship. In addition to coping and negotiating, she found outlets, leaned on support networks, and developed strategies outside of the marriage also.

**Building Strength**

For Katrina, building strength has been a long-term venture that she has pursued through various avenues. She highlights four main avenues, which include: embracing her
job with passion, becoming socially independent from Eric, maintaining close friendships, and even exploring the possibility of finding someone new. Each of these avenues has helped Katrina grow and find strength in a unique way. First, her installment into a fulfilling career played a pivotal role in establishing a stronger sense of self. She described how this set the stage for realizing she had other sources of support and gratification:

So working and becoming independent, especially when I started teaching, finally having work that I felt I was intellectually pushing myself and really getting connections at work. I felt very much at home and coming into my own at my job because I realized, “Why am I trying so hard to keep him involved? I have other people.” So I really started to do stuff without him. I started to play soccer without him. (2.2.9; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Gaining her professional grounding afforded her a new perspective in which she realized that, outside of her marriage, she had other sources of fulfillment, support, and companionship. Once she had arrived at this juncture, she was ready to expand beyond her marriage and cultivate other relationships.

This leads to her second avenue of building strength: individual growth. After her countless attempts to grow together as a couple hadn’t worked, she realized that she needed to focus on her individual growth, apart from him. She hadn’t made any real progress while trying to grow as a couple and, therefore, decided not to let her marriage continue to stunt her growth. Since they could not grow together, she decided that she needed to grow on her own instead.

She explained that previously she was the social engine in the marriage that always proposed activities for them to do to stay socially and physically active together. At this point, she decided to retire that role in her marriage and stopped trying to recruit his involvement or participation in her social life. Instead, she began involving herself in activities and social circles independently.

As she gained more social independence, she also gained more emotional independence from the marriage. The third way she found strength was by turning less to her husband and more towards her friends for emotional support and companionship. Her friendships were supportive and nurturing relationships that provided a safe space for her to openly and honestly share what she was going through. Her friends have listened to her and offered their support throughout her turbulent twelve years of marriage, and she feels both extremely grateful and onerous. She explained her worries about venting to her friends:
I’m also ashamed with my friends because I go through periods where I’m very upset about the state of my marriage and I talk to them about it and usually comes a phase of rekindling . . . I feel like I burden my friends a lot with it and I feel bad about that. (2.2.21-2; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Even though Katrina feels bad about dragging her friends along through the ups and downs of her relationship, they always reassure her that they are judgment-free and encourage her to bring her full self to their friendship. She explained how her friends hold her accountable to being open:

> I value my friendships a lot and I like to be truthful in my friendships. So sometimes when I say, “Oh yeah I was feeling shitty but I didn’t want to say anything about it,” they tell me, “Don’t do that, because you need to be able to let us know how you feel.” (2.2.22; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina and her friends shared a mutual expectation for sincerity between them. They have listened, provided companionship, and offered guidance to her throughout the years. She described the different ways they’ve offered her support:

> They’ve been really good. I can’t say anybody’s been bad about listening to me complain about my marriage. Nobody has said, “Oh you should just get rid of him.” People have told me stuff like, “Oh maybe you should talk to a lawyer so you can be prepared in case things really start falling apart, that you’re prepared,” and Andrea [our mutual friend] has always told me that it’s not shameful to get divorced, that it’s okay, she got divorced too. So they’ve been very supportive. They’ve really been good and helped me with ideas on things I could do with myself or try to explain his behavior. (2.2.22; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Her friendships have not only offered her a place of solace, they have also been resources for new ideas, strategies, and plans for action. This system of support has been a steady and constant shoulder for her over the years and has played a critical role in her pursuit to build strength. In contrast to her stable and continuous friendships, her interest in someone new provided a more sporadic, but yet deeply meaningful, form of support.

The fourth catalyst that helped her find strength was becoming involved with someone else. She explained that becoming involved with someone else taught her more about herself, afforded her insight into other possibilities, and renewed her self-confidence.

She described how this new relationship changed her outlook:

> The biggest turning point I think happened this summer, where I got involved with someone else. He doesn’t know it of course. Even though I’m still not ready to give up on this relationship with him and I still have hope, it’s really helped me
to understand that I deserve better and that I can choose. I have a choice. I am choosing to stay with him and I can go and it’s okay. (2.2.10; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina’s tryst served as an eye-opening experience that ultimately led her to new conclusions about her situation. Receiving affirmation of her self-worth was extremely gratifying and refreshing after living with someone who consistently broke her down. Alternative possibilities for her future were becoming more conceivable to her. Each of these new developments empowered Katrina to feel a greater sense of control, agency, and strength in her life.

Establishing her professional career, gaining independence, relying on friends, and raising her awareness of other possibilities were all ways in which Katrina was able to build strength. As opposed to sources of strength, these were, in fact, avenues to strength. Katrina was not given strength, but rather, engaged in activities that provided her with the tools to find her own. As she worked to become more independent, sought new endeavors, and cultivated relationships with others, she was afforded different tools, such as social support, new interpretations, or reassurance, that facilitated her journey towards both discovering her own strengths and building on them. Each of these avenues led her to new understandings and discoveries about herself by providing the resources that enabled her to learn and grow.

This goal to find and build strength was actually born out of her reflection on the past twelve years. When she looked back at those years of marriage, she saw herself as weak. For Katrina, weak meant tolerating, accepting, and forgiving “below the belt” transgressions. She explains:

Weak means that I put up with it. I’ve forgiven him for things that are really, really not okay. I don’t know, I’ve let them go. I’ve not been able to tell him that that’s really a deal breaker. (2.2.23; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina reflects on her inability to draw the line and have a violation of that line be an actual deal breaker. Therefore, being weak means allowing herself to: endure the verbal abuse, continue in an ongoing cycle of aggression and remorse, become voiceless in her marriage, and stay in the marriage out of fear. The fears that keep her in her marriage are of becoming regretful of the decision later on, worrying about how it will affect her child, and wondering how she will support herself financially.
I’m really worried that if I leave I’m going to regret it. And that I’ve messed up something I would have preferred to keep. That’s probably my greatest fear, that I’d regret leaving. (2.2.24; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Since Katrina has changed her mind about staying or leaving so many times before, it is easy for her to imagine the possibility of changing her mind again after it is too late. With this definition of weakness, it is no surprise that finding strength has been a substantial part of her growth process. Building that strength means ensuring that she will not go backwards and continue in the cycle of hurt again. It means not allowing someone to break her down again, maintaining her sense of self despite everything, drawing the line, and leaving the marriage.

Here, Katrina discusses her journey of gaining strength:

It’s a little complicated, on the one hand I feel that I’ve gotten stronger. Especially in the last few years I’ve tried to accept of myself that I will go when I’m strong enough to go, and that it may take some time. And that’s one thing that the therapist I started seeing three years ago told me, “Give yourself time to make up your mind.” (2.2.21; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Building strength is a process that takes time. Her ultimate goal is to have enough strength to make up her mind and be able to leave, if that’s what she chooses. She has given Eric a time frame for him to show her that he has changed:

So now I’ve told him he has a year to clean up his act and get his shit together, to either choose for me and own up to the hurtful things or otherwise I’ll go. And I think I will, I hope I will. I hope I’ll have enough reason to stay. I don’t know why I’m just a born optimist to a point where I still see opportunity in that relationship. (2.2.10; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Katrina hopes that she will leave if things have not changed, but she also hopes that certain changes will cure her disaffection and she will want to stay. As Katrina continues building strength, she will ultimately have enough vigor to thrive regardless of her decision stay or leave.

**ABUSE OF POWER**

Katrina’s story includes themes of verbal abuse and possibly physical violence, while the next story relates to the abuse of power. Katrina struggled over power in her marriage to make changes and get her husband to attend therapy with her, sometimes using sex as a strategy for gaining more power. Nancy, on the other hand, worked to gain power in her
marriage in order to gain the intimacy she desired. She has been married for six years, the third longest, and was the next to experience disaffection.

Nancy is a 36 year-old woman who experienced moments in her marriage similar to the ones Elizabeth described, in which she longed for “togetherness.” The story of her disaffection will reinforce notions of expectations, disappointment, disengagement, and awakening seen in Elizabeth’s story. The two women also share similar characteristics, such as religious beliefs and husbands who have an over-commitment to work. Although these commonalities link them together, the defining moments and the communication surrounding these moments in their marriages are unique. Nancy’s trajectory also differs from Elizabeth’s through her different sources of social support and strategies for managing her disaffection. Also, Nancy has been married for a much shorter amount time and without children, which offers an alternative narrative of disaffection.

**Patriarch Purple**

Nancy and I spoke over the phone trying to find each other inside the large shopping mall, each of us naming stores or signs we were standing in front of trying to navigate the other. Luckily it was a weekday so there weren’t very many shoppers to weave through. She walked towards me saying, “I’m the Latina woman walking and talking on the phone!” We made eye contact and laughingly hung up to greet each other. I noticed her lengthy straight black hair tied behind her head and reaching all the way to her lower back. “Oh! She’s my size,” I thought. She was short with a small frame. She had just gotten off of work so we decided to walk over to the food court so that she could eat dinner. As we made our way past stores I noticed she was limping and bearing more weight on her left foot. I slowed my pace not sure what was wrong. She began to explain that she had been working out at the gym and injured her ankle running. We settled at a large circular table in the sparse food court with her platter of beef and broccoli. She offered to share her food with me but I politely declined. I felt bad not eating with her but I had just eaten dinner. I didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable by watching her eat, and I also didn’t want to interrupt her meal by asking her questions. I knew she was hungry and that interviewing her wouldn’t exactly allow her to eat since she would be doing most of the talking. However, she insisted we begin.
Nancy was still in college and working at the time she met her husband. Her strength and independence were qualities she prided herself in at the age of 22, and still does. Growing up, her father wasn’t very involved so she and her sisters were raised primarily by her mother. Throughout her adolescence she had a strong sense of who she was and how she envisioned her life going.

My idea was always “Marry once, and forever.” I was always in this typical dream saying, “You know what, I’m not going to get married at a young age. I’m going to live, I’m going to travel, I’m going to do a lot of things, and then maybe when I get a little older I will probably get married because that will be my only and my last marriage.” (3.1.5; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

I was intrigued when I heard this because that plan didn’t sound too different from my own. It became clear to me that Nancy was not only hard working and self-reliant, but she was also ambitious and wise when it came to making goals for her life. I wondered if she ever got to accomplish any of those goals before getting married and if she still hoped to accomplish them one day.

Rick was already graduating college and beginning his career when they met. Among the things she admired about him were his good character and his family. His family was very close and parents were still married. Since she came from a separated family and didn’t always get along with her mother, his traditional model of family that was so welcoming to her seemed attractive.

He was a good person with good values. He doesn’t drink, he doesn’t smoke, he doesn’t do any drugs, he’s a workaholic, which can be good, but again, can be bad. He was healthy on many levels. Professionally, he had his degree when I met him because he’s older than I, he owned his own business. So I kind of looked up to him in many different ways, he’s smart, he’s a nice person. He was always very positive. Under any crisis he will always have a positive thing to say, that was something I really valued about him. He always wanted me to have a good relationship with my mom. (3.1.4; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

His character, stability, and similar values made it easy for her and both of their families to see marriage as the next logical step in their relationship. Their dating relationship had always been long distance, straddling the border between California and Mexico. They had already dated for eight years, so even though she wasn’t 100 percent sure about getting married yet, her family became a part of the decision by telling her he was a good man and it was time for her to get married.
It was just like okay, we love each other, we care about each other, and we will get married. (3.1.5; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

For Nancy it made sense to marry Rick after dating for so long. She described four key factors that go into building a healthy relationship: spending time together, sharing the same perspective of life, having the same goals, and communicating. After being married for six years, she explained to me that these are also the ways in which she was disappointed in their relationship. These four components are ultimately how her marriage began to fail.

**Providing Companionship**

First, time was one of the biggest issues in their marriage. One of the agreements they had made when getting married was that they would live in San Diego even though Rick’s job was in Mexi-Cali. Soon, however, his long work hours and commute to cross the border every day began impacting their relationship. In California work hours are typically from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., but in Mexico the work hours are from 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. After an hour to an hour and a half commute, he would get home late and it would almost be time for bed already. There were also times when he had his own business so would get home at 10 or 11 o’clock at night on weekdays, Saturdays he worked half days, and Sundays he wanted to be home to relax.

He worked hard and was a great provider for them, but it was difficult for them to spend any time together since he got home late every night. She described it as living two separate lives under one roof because she was alone 90 percent of the time. Friends and family would ask Nancy, “Where’s Rick? Is he coming?” She was tired of showing up to social gatherings alone and her excuses for him began to sound like a broken record, until eventually people stopped asking. He was always working or tired or hanging out in Mexi-Cali with family and friends.

Pretty much he was just supporting me but not being with me. And that was his excuse, “Well I’m giving you everything that you want, I’m giving you—you don’t have to work if you don’t want to and I don’t know what you’re complaining about. You don’t need anything.” And I said “Yes, maybe I don’t need material things but I need time. I need someone to be with me.” (3.1.2; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

Rick’s notion that fulfilling the role as provider was a key source of emotional satisfaction in their relationship is similar to what Cherlin (2004) referred to as the companionate model of marriage. Since he was providing an income to build and sustain their lifestyle, he believed
that he was doing what he needed to do to be a good husband. Nancy, on the other hand, was disappointed by the lack of time they spent together because she felt that it was preventing them from connecting and negotiating a new shared identity as a couple.

I realized that we never really spent time together. After the first year, we were pretty much apart. I think it is good while you are dating, but once you are in the relationship, you realize that it’s not as good to be very independent. It’s always good to be together and have things together as a couple. (3.1.5; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

For Nancy, part of negotiating a new shared identity as a couple involved integrating each other’s lives together. Fitzpatrick (1990) describes a marital schema as an individual’s ideology about interdependence and conflict in the relationship, which will influence their inferences and expectations within the marriage. Nancy’s marital schema included the desire for high levels of companionship and togetherness. Rick, on the other hand, shared qualities of an independent marital schema in which couples maintain separate circles of friends and spaces.

The second key to building a relationship was also a key difference between Nancy and Rick. Nancy’s perspective of life, particularly marriage, was in sharp contrast to his. She accounted for the cultural norms that may have played a significant role in his perspective of marriage.

My perspective of a perfect marriage was for him to be at home, do things together, go to the grocery store together, cooking together, that was kind of my perspective of a marriage, doing things together. . . . Culturally he comes from Mexico where men have to protect the family. So his perspective is like, “I’m giving you food, I’m giving you a house to live, you should be happy with that.” (3.1.7; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

Nancy’s expectations for roles and intimacy in their relationship were not met. She felt disappointed by the lack of time and activities they shared together. Sharing a similar perspective of marriage is also similar to sharing a similar marital schema. Nancy’s idea of closeness and togetherness as a married couple demonstrated what Fitzpatrick (1990) described as interdependence, one of three dimensions that make up an individual’s marital schema. Her expectations for levels of autonomy and connectedness in their marriage differed from Rick’s.

Their different ideas of togetherness was not the only point of contention within the marriage; their goals for the future also conflicted, which was the third factor Nancy
identified as key to building a relationship. The two of them hadn’t really sat down and talked about their plans and goals for how they wanted their lives to unfold. Nancy was ready to be married but not quite ready to have children yet, meanwhile her husband was eager to begin fatherhood.

We never really had that goal of doing things together, of planning things together . . . and I think that was pretty much one of the mistakes because he wanted kids as soon as we got married and I didn’t want to have kids. I wanted to wait a couple of years. So, I never really had expectations. I thought, “He’s a good person, he has a good job, everything will be fine.” (3.1.5; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

Nancy pointed out that they since they didn’t talk about their plans, they never set mutual goals for both their marriage and their futures.

We just got so excited with the whole idea of marriage that we never really talked about kids, financially how things are going to be, where are we going to be living, things like that should be agreed before you sign that contract. (3.1.9; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

Entering into their marriage without explicitly talking about their expectations was problematic for them because they each had separate plans.

The fourth aspect that Nancy highlighted as instrumental to building a relationship was communicating. For her, their ability to talk about their disagreements was important, but it got more and more frustrating each time she brought up a concern.

The first year we communicated we argued a lot because I was talking to him about my differences and then it was like, “Yes, okay I understand, you want more time. But I have to work because I have to give you a house, I have to pay the bills.” And I’m like, “Okay, makes sense. But I also want you to make a balance like half and half.” So it got to the point where our communication got so worse I just hide everything. It got so worse I said, “You know what, I’m not going to say anything because its not making a difference.” I didn’t argue anymore, I didn’t have any differences, I just kept my mouth shut and said, “Okay. He’s giving me whatever he wants and that’s it.” (3.1.7; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

Nancy described their communication during their first year of being married as intense arguments, but after the first year she grew tired of arguing because it wasn’t changing or improving anything.

Roberts (2000) described conflict avoidance as one of three different forms of withdrawal in which a partner may fail to bring up a disagreement as a tactic for deflecting potential attacks and maintaining relational harmony. Solomon et al. (2004) found that when
an individual perceives their partner as having greater power, or control, in the relationship they are prompted to remain silent about irritating situations or grievances. This chilling effect (Roloff & Cloven, 1990) can be harmful to the individual bottling up their feelings, by causing chronic stress, and it also prevents the issue from being resolved.

You get so frustrated that you don’t want to talk about it anymore and I think that’s what happened with us. I got to a point where I thought, “You know what? I’m not going to talk to him because he’s not going to listen to me.” So I was keeping all of my feelings inside for many years and it didn’t help. (3.1.7; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

When communication and engagement in conflict decreases, there is no progress being made and the couple is no longer trying to work out their problems.

**Communication Breakdown and Breakup**

Nancy felt like they had too many differences and without being able to talk about their disagreements in a productive way, they had no reason to continue being married. She was exhausted from the relationship after dealing with the same issues over and over and nothing changing. She was tired of trying and felt a sense of burnout. Just as she was feeling doubtful about the future of their relationship, Rick got extremely sick for about two years. She didn’t want to leave him by himself in his time of need because she felt like she should honor her commitment and cultural beliefs. She explained:

I didn’t want to leave him because he was sick. Culturally it’s like, “‘Til death do us part,” that’s what they say. He got better after the second year and his health improved a lot and so that’s when I decided that I wanted to get divorced. (3.1.3; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

Nancy waited around for two years to ask him for a divorce. This points to what Vangelisti (2006) describes as a structural commitment, in which an individual feels like they have to continue the relationship.

By the time Rick recovered, they had been married for three and a half years. Nancy said that he refused to give her a divorce so they decided to go to therapy together instead.

It was funny because with the therapy I got even more frustrated. Instead of helping me say, “No I don’t want to get a divorce,” it kind of helped me realize how much I sacrificed my life for him. That I’ve been holding in all these feelings because I didn’t want him to suffer, when in reality I’m helping him but not helping me. (3.1.3; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)
The therapy sessions were eye-opening and led to a sense of awakening for Nancy in which she realized all that she had given up. The process of unearthing all of her suppressed feelings in therapy just reaffirmed her desire to get a divorce.

We continued with therapy for about a year, to counseling, the church, marital counseling, we did everything probably for about a year. Then, after that, my feeling was the same. I didn’t want to continue. I wanted to get divorced, but he refused to. So then I decided to move out of the house. (3.1.4; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

After seeking help and counseling Nancy still wanted to pursue a divorce. Her decision to move out represents a critical moment in her disaffection in which she was able to make a change that would help establish her independence and autonomy from him. She was able to live independently and financially support herself without him. Even though she appreciated Rick’s hard work, she felt that her transition to independence helped demonstrate to him that she can provide for herself and therefore needed something more than that from her marriage. Unlike the economical purposes of marriage as an institution that were common before the 20th century, Nancy was looking for companionship, open communication, and deeper intimacy (Cherlin, 2004).

Our interview reached a close. I was left puzzled by her story, not because it didn’t make sense, but rather because of how unique it was to the other women’s experiences, and yet still relatable. I contemplated our conversation for a few days until it was time to meet again.

It was a cold and rainy evening when we met in her car outside of the shopping mall. Her ankle was still injured and she was waiting for her crutches to come in the mail, so we just sat in her car to talk so that she didn’t have to apply weight on it. As we sat across from each other in the front seats of her white SUV, we were isolated from everything else going on around us: the bustling mall, eager shoppers preparing for the holidays, and the traffic jam on the 805 Highway heading South. The conversation felt like it was an escape from the rest of the world. We sat together in her car, as if we were ready to go somewhere together, but instead we sat stagnant. Her car was turned off and the cold air slowly filled the car, chilling our bodies. We sat talking, neither of us sure of direction. Sitting in that car reminded me of her marriage. The car had almost a full tank of gas and we were fully capable of leaving. It was like we were half way out of the door; not fully committed to staying or leaving. Nancy had been separated from her husband for two years and even though they were working on
reconciling, she wasn’t quite ready to move back in together. As she equally maintains her distance from the marriage and from moving on, she sits patiently in the middle negotiating and reasoning.

**Sick of It**

Last time we met I had asked her about how their affection grew and what brought them together, but this time I would ask how their relationship began to fall apart. She identified two defining moments in her marriage that mark a change in how she felt about the relationship and her sense of identity. The first moment was her husband’s illness in which he was very sick for about two years. The second moment was when she moved out of the house to live on her own. Each of these moments represent a communicative event in the relationship where there was social interaction leading up to the event, discourses surrounding the event, and the process of sense-making that Nancy engaged in to reflect on each of them.

When Nancy’s husband got sick, the emotional and financial burden put stress on their relationship. The medication he was on changed his mood and his behavior became more aggressive. Even though she knew this was a side effect of the medicine, it was still extremely difficult for them to get along. Then she began to question whether or not she could go through this again, since his illness was something he would struggle with off and on for the rest of his life.

It kind of made me realize that I wasn’t sure if I was the person for him because I felt I wasn’t able to help him as much as I wanted to. I felt isolated. . . . When he gets sick he tends to avoid people, like hide himself, and not only that, I thought, “If we are having kids, how is that going to work out if he’s sick and I’m having the kids?” (3.2.1; Nancy, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Nancy began to weigh the pros and cons of the relationship, not sure if she could go through this over and over again in the future. His health affected their communication, intimacy, finances, and her emotional satisfaction.

Afterwards, she found it difficult to recover from the toll his illness took on her and their relationship.

He became better and healthy, but I started feeling like I was isolating myself. He wanted to communicate more, he wanted to do things together. It was because in the beginning we struggled a little bit and, after he got sick, it was hard for me to go back and pretend like nothing happened. . . . Inside of me I was like, “I don’t
want to go through this again, I don’t know if I can do it.” So I started to isolate myself from his family and from him. I started to spend more time with my family just by myself. . . . When he got better, we never really recovered. (3.2.1-2; Nancy, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

After two years of him being sick and acting different because of his medication, Nancy had trouble getting past what had happened. She had withdrawn emotionally from him and the relationship in order to cope with his illness. She was not ready to suddenly reinvest her emotions, time, and effort back into the relationship as soon as he was feeling better. Even after counseling and working on spending more time together, things soon returned back to how they were before he got sick. She was always at weddings, birthday parties, and quinceñeras by herself. The distance between their families also prevented them from spending a lot of holidays together, including her birthday that he had promised he would come to.

That’s when I started thinking, “You know what? Whatever.” I realized it was the same thing as the first year. So, it was a continuous issue, it was never over. I hold those emotions inside. Why should I say something? It doesn’t matter, nothing is going to change. So, I was holding in all those emotions until I said, “Enough is enough.” (3.2.3; Nancy, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

When Nancy reached this point of burnout she had given up trying. The accumulation of disappointments within the relationship eventually led up to her decision to move out.

**An Autonomous Power**

Nancy had been married for four years when she decided to move out and gain her independence. She began working full-time and proving to herself that she didn’t need him to support her. She also engaged in a process of self-construction:

I wanted to be independent and reevaluate me as a person and reevaluate the marriage and the only way for me to do that was to take some time off. And that’s when I decided to break up and move I wanted to reevaluate myself first and then maybe go back to the marriage in the future, I was hoping. That was my goal at the time. (3.2.7; Nancy, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

After taking a step back from the marriage she was able to rethink who she wanted to be in the relationship. Her autonomy afforded her a new perspective and a sense of clarity about the division of power in their marriage.

I felt like I was not allowed to make decisions or complain because, to him, I had a perfect life. What should I be complaining about if I have all these things? So now, in a way, I have the right to tell him about my feelings, I have the right to
ask for things, versus in the past I felt that I never had the right to ask for things. So now I’m telling him, “If you want this to work out you need to make these changes, if not, I don’t need you anymore. I don’t need your money, I don’t need your things. I can be independent. I can live on my own.” I think that helped him understand that he needs to treat me different because whenever I want I can walk out. If I decide to be independent I can do it, I can do it on my own. (3.2.7; Nancy, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Nancy viewed control over resources as a source of power within their relationship. After she moved out and began earning her own income, she also gained more power and leverage. Making her own money helped level them as a couple so that they both could make decisions together about the household, money, and children.

In addition to gaining power, moving out also offered her a renewed perspective of marriage. The time and space away from the marriage allowed her to reflect on her own beliefs about marriage. Even though she was separated from her husband, she still commended marriage as one of the best things a person can do for themselves, their family, and community. She explained why marriage is a better choice than cohabitating:

Even when people say, “Oh there’s no difference living together than being married,” to me, personally, I think it is because it’s a more conscious commitment that you’re giving yourself and to your partner that . . . regardless of the situation, you are constantly fighting for a better day and a better marriage. And if you don’t have the paper it’s just so easy to walk out. But when you’re married you rethink about things, especially if you have kids, you think about the value and morals of the people who are looking at you as an example. And I think that is one of the reasons why I’m still thinking about going back because I really value marriage. (3.1.9; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

In Nancy’s perspective, marriage is a commitment to do your best and to fight for your marriage every day. The structural and binding nature of marriage helps motivate and hold people accountable to do that.

She explained that it doesn’t matter who you are in a relationship with, you will still have problems and disagreements but it’s the commitment to work through those problems that makes a marriage successful.

You’re always going to have differences, even if you met somebody else you are going to struggle. The same way you struggle with the first marriage you are going to struggle with the second, third, whatever many marriages you have. It’s just a matter of deciding that you really want to make that work and if you don’t make that commitment to yourself or make that commitment to the person that you’re living with nothing is going to work. (3.1.9; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)
I respected her view of marriage and I was glad to hear why she believes in marriage. I admired how much she valued commitment, but I wondered where the idea of happiness fit into the picture.

So I asked her, “Take commitment and take happiness, where would you put them? Are they equal or is one more important?” She wasn’t surprised by my question because her friends have questioned whether or not being married makes her happy. She tells them:

Sometimes I say “Yeah maybe I don’t love him anymore and I’m just going back because of the marriage,” but at the same time when we are together, we’ve been seeing each other again, I see the way he treats me—things that sometimes you forget because you’re so stressed out you’re only looking at the bad things, you tend to forget the good things and then you become unhappy, you’re always complaining. So, you make yourself happy or unhappy, you don’t have to have a marriage to be happy or unhappy. And I think that’s something that I realized. Like right now I realize that yes I’m alone, I’m very independent, I support myself, but I’m not saying I’m unhappy, I feel happy, I just feel that I’m missing something. Like I want to be able to share my life with somebody else. (3.1.11; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

Nancy’s concept of happiness was refreshing and humbling because it seemed to relieve some of the pressure for marrying the “right” person who will make you happy. What she said made a lot of sense to me. I was even further intrigued, though, and asked, “So what does marriage provide for you? Since it doesn’t provide happiness because you provide that for yourself, what does marriage provide?”

I think what I realized, that it provided me in the past, is stability emotionally. . . . I want that stability to be able to share my life with someone else. I want to go to the movies with somebody; I want to share maybe my birthday with that person; I want to be able to go to the mall, sharing my life or sharing moments with somebody else. It’s more about sharing than about, “Oh! Yes! I want to be with him because I’m ecstatic happy!” (3.1.12; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

For Nancy, being married is about sharing moments and time together. She cherishes the companionship between husband and wife. She can be happy by herself but wants to share her life with someone. Even though individuals can be happy alone, she values the emotional intimacy between two people who share everything with one another. For her, the ability to share everything with someone else provides comfort, security, companionship, and emotional intimacy. Her renewed perspective and sense of self has positioned her to return to the marriage with an empowered ability to communicate with her partner and work on
their relationship. She has not moved back in, but they are communicating and hopeful of reaching that step one day.

**MOVING OUT VERSUS MOVING ON**

Nancy and Elizabeth’s trajectories of disaffection share several similarities, such as their husband’s lack of time spent at home and their strong religious faiths. However, they differ in a few important ways. Nancy’s ability to attain “togetherness” was hindered by the imbalance of power in her relationship, whereas Elizabeth’s ability was hindered by her husband’s disconnectedness from romance and intimacy. Therefore, the strategies they develop for managing their disaffection, the sources of support they resort to, and the progression of their disaffection over time are all ways in which Nancy and Elizabeth’s experiences continued to diverge from one another.

Instead of relying mainly on close female friendships, like Elizabeth did, Nancy relied on reaching personal goals that she felt would offer her the financial support, independence, and power that she needed. Nancy was forced to rise to the ranks of power in order to change the dynamics of her marriage, hence her artistry in Patriarch Purple, the color of royalty. Her focus on work, self-reflection, and self-improvement kept her busy and allowed her to reevaluate her identity, relationship, desires, and goals. Although Nancy also sought marital therapy and counseling, a more significant strategy in managing her disaffection was gaining power and voice in the relationship. She accomplished this by becoming self-sustainable, which not only leveled the balance of power in their relationship, but it also demonstrated to her husband that she didn’t need him to be the “provider” because she was perfectly capable of providing for herself. Instead, she longed for companionship and intimacy from the relationship.

Even though Nancy moved out and separated from her husband, their relationship seemed more reparable than Elizabeth’s. Nancy talks about fixing the relationship and making it work, whereas Elizabeth resists the idea that her relationship can be restored since she doesn’t identify any point in her marriage as a better relational state. Although Elizabeth has lost all hope or desire for the marriage, there are several barriers preventing her from leaving. She talks about her children finishing school first and a lack of financial resources to sustain her.
Interestingly, Elizabeth and Nancy both mention that their agency was limited due to a lack of financial resources. In Elizabeth’s case, she talks about not being financially stable enough to leave her marriage, while Nancy talks about needing greater financial resources in order to gain power and independence. For Elizabeth, the financial resources would help her leave and rebuild agency outside of her marriage; whereas for Nancy, even though gaining financial independence helped her leave, it also led her back with a greater sense of power and confidence to rebuild her marriage.

The grievances in each marriage are also drastically different both in scale and length of time in which they have been accumulating. Each woman expresses different goals for the future, and they both talk about wanting to create a positive environment and example for their children. Although Nancy doesn’t have children, she still talks about the idea of being a good model for her future children.

Their experiences differ in several aspects, such as the role of social support, the strategies they each developed, and their degrees of disaffection. Although these discrepancies highlight the rich diversity of experiences, exploring their similarities, on the other hand, will offer opportunities for identifying important parallels, common themes, and emergent patterns between participants.

Some common themes include the effort to create a new shared identity as a couple, the accumulation of disappointments, a sense of burnout or exhaustion, a sense of awakening or renewed perspective, the development of strategies, and the emergence of a new sense of self. In addition, both women experienced conflict avoidance and withdrawal in their communication surrounding relational grievances. Their build-up of emotion, stress, and frustration drove them further into disaffection for their partner and harmed their relationships. Also, they each experienced chronic stress that affected their mental and physical well-being.

**STALE AND FRESH**

Ashley has been married a little over a year, making her the fourth longest, except for Michele. Their first anniversary just passed a couple weeks before we met, while the other women I interviewed had been married for ranging from six to 26 years. Although marital disaffection is the accumulation of dissatisfactions, and Ashley’s are still fresh like Mint Leaf
Green, there is no measure to say when they will begin or how long that accumulation will take. Many of the dissatisfactions Ashley spoke about were very similar to some of the dissatisfactions that Katrina, especially, recalled experiencing in the beginning of her marriage also, such as being expected to do all of the housekeeping.

Each woman identified as being at a different point in the trajectory, or progression, of her disaffection, with each of the trajectories taking on a unique shape altogether. Some trajectories advance in a more linear fashion with barely any variance from the track, like Elizabeth’s, while others are dizzied by the amount of loops, like Katrina’s. Ashley’s trajectory is just beginning, though, and although it may be too early to tell, it seems to loop back around. This analysis will highlight the diversity of experiences meanwhile abstracting common moments, feelings, or patterns that characterize marital disaffection, even in the first year.

**MINT LEAF GREEN**

Ashley and I met through a mutual friend who was one of her co-workers. After emailing and texting back-and-forth, we agreed upon a coffee shop that was right around the corner from her house. As I parked and walked up to the entrance of the coffee shop, I noticed a short, petite, brown-haired young woman in her 20’s that was sitting outside at one of the circular, two-person, metal tables. I introduced myself to her and immediately I was struck by how bright and beautiful her eyes were. They were green-colored with a hint of brown swirl around them. I remember them very well because as I listened to her speak, I saw more pain in her eyes than any of the other women I had spoken to.

We went inside to order ourselves gourmet cupcakes and then returned back to the table outside where we could hear cars whizzing by and pedestrians passing on the sidewalk next to our table. It was a warm sunny day but, sitting under the shade, we could feel the chill. I sensed her nervousness and I tried to imagine how she must have felt preparing to meet me here. I hoped that she would be more at ease when she sees that this time I’m only asking about how her and her husband met and fell in love.

Ashley and Josh were childhood friends ever since the age of 12. They were best friends all throughout high school while they each dated other people, even though they always shared an attraction for one another. She explained that their friendship has always
been based on their common interests and how much they truly enjoyed each other’s company:

He was just my best friend and I always felt really comfortable around him. We’re both very outdoorsy, like I’m the kind of person who will go fishing or hunting or go throw a ball with him. (4.1.3; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

After graduation Ashley was dating someone else and Josh went off to the military. Ashley’s relationship soon ended and she stayed in touch with Josh through his boot camp training. Later, her decision to join the military gave them even more reason to keep in contact. They were both deployed to Iraq at the same time and during that time grew even closer through their conversations. Although they had been friends for years, their time in Iraq was where their relationship really began to grow into something more. When they got back from Iraq and saw each other back home they decided they wanted to try a relationship, even though it would be long-distance. Ashley was living in Hawaii and Josh in California so they relied heavily on phone conversations since they only got to see each other four or five times throughout the year. Ashley recalled how much she enjoyed his visits:

When I lived in Hawaii I had a lot of friends but there were definitely times where I would go snorkeling or hiking by myself. . . . So I really missed that about Ryan because he would come visit me and we would do all those things. (4.1.14; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

She really cherished their time together and the connection they shared. She felt completely comfortable around him and never had to worry about being judged. They were both down-to-earth and felt free to truly be themselves around the other.

I like that connection we have and we can always make each other laugh. I think that’s why I really love him. (4.1.3; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

Ashley had fallen in love with her best friend and couldn’t be happier.

After she got out of the military and moved back home to go to school, their relationship eventually reached a fork. Josh was supposed to be getting out of the military also and moving back home, but then he decided not to at the last minute. Soon afterwards Ashley and Josh broke up, but still remained best friends. As they dealt with the distance once again, they reached the point in their relationship where the road diverged in opposite directions. They didn’t want to do long-distance anymore and had to make a decision.
Ashley was in love with him, but told him that she needed a serious commitment if she was going to move:

> At first we had issues about getting married, we didn’t want to get married right away. But to me it was like, “Well I’m not going to move half way across the country to be with you, if you’re not that serious about me. It costs a lot of money and there’s things that have to take place.” So I wanted to make sure he was really serious. (4.1.2; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

Ultimately they decided to get married, so Ashley transferred schools and moved from Texas to California.

**Marital Negotiations**

Ashley recalled the first two months of marriage as blissful. She was in school but hadn’t started working yet so she had the extra time to take care of the house and Josh, which she enjoyed doing. She described her values and beliefs about marital roles:

> I’m more traditional, so I think the wife should cook the food and do the laundry and all those things is she’s not working. (4.1.4; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

Ashley was more than happy to cook, clean, and run errands for the both of them since she didn’t have a job. She credits her belief system to the upbringing she had with her dad after moving in with him at the age of 12. He expected her to step-up and learn how to take care of everything inside the house, while he and her brother were responsible for taking care of everything outside of the house. Being responsible for learning how to cook and clean from a young age played a significant role in developing her sense of independence and accomplishment. Her experiences growing up transferred into her adoption of a caretaking role in her marriage, which she felt was an expression of love and support. She remembered how much she enjoyed doing things for Josh:

> At the beginning it was really nice, we were kind of like in the honeymoon phase. (4.1.1; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

> I love doing that for Josh especially when we first got married I loved playing that housewife role making him dinner, making him breakfast, making his lunch for him and go to work. (4.1.15; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

> Like I would wake up with him before he went to work at like 5:30 and make him breakfast and I’d make sure the house was always clean. (4.1.4; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)
Ashley truly felt a sense of reward and great pleasure to do nice things for the person she loved since he made her so happy.

As she was going out of her way making efforts to spoil him, though, Ashley started to notice that Josh wasn’t reciprocating and began feeling unappreciated. She explained:

When that wasn’t being reciprocated I just felt like “Why am I doing this?” He makes me so happy at first and I want to do all of these things for him and he’s not realizing how much I’m doing for him and he didn’t give me anything back. And it didn’t have to be materialistic it just had to be affection or thank you. And he would say thank you but I think he felt more like he was entitled to me doing those things for him. (4.2.2; Ashley, personal communication, April 17, 2012)

And I really spoiled him. But it’s not realistic to keep up, and I think maybe it would have been if he would have helped out more. He made me so happy at first like I wanted to do all these things for him but then none of it was returned and it kind of became expected and its like, “Wait a minute, this isn’t fun anymore.” (4.1.15; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

Ashley liked spoiling her husband because she loved him and wanted to do nice things for him—not because it was expected of her. As soon as cooking and cleaning began to feel like a job, it took away the meaning for her. Ultimately, she saw all of the effort she was putting in to keep Josh happy, but she didn’t see him making any special efforts to do the same for her. As they were working to, “achieve a mutually acceptable form of involvement” (Duck, 1982, pp. 10-11), she realized that their negotiation of schemas and roles was not how she had envisioned her life with Josh. This was the moment of awareness that marked the beginning of a long cycle of effort and disappointment that would soon start to give shape to a “roller-coaster” marriage.

Their relationship had mostly been built over a distance and now that they were all of a sudden married and living together it was going to require some getting used to. Integrating two lives together requires a dyadic process of adjustment, adaptation, and collaboration, especially when it comes to negotiating how social groups, financial resources, routines, and assets will be merged or kept separate. This is often mediated by the couple’s level of interdependence, or their expectations for autonomy or connectedness in the marriage (Fitzpatrick, 1990). Although marriage itself is a major change for a couple, even just being around each other for more than four or five short periods of time throughout the year posed a new challenge:
I think it was just hard for us to live with one another when we had never been around each other that long. So it was just a lot of stress all at once. (4.1.1; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

Along with learning how to constantly be around each other, they were also getting to know one another’s preferences, habits, expectations, and marital styles. This was stressful for Ashley because she was consumed by trying to balance her job, school, and housework. Her entire world had been turned upside down in such a short amount of time. As it became more apparent that their individual schemas and role expectations were not in alignment, she found herself discovering that married life was not what she had expected it to be.

About two months in, Ashley grew very sick and was unable to really care for the house or Josh like she had been doing. She recalls this period of time being extremely disheartening because she saw that she couldn’t depend on Josh to step-up when she really needed him to. As she thought back to the particular moment in which she came to this, she explained:

I guess it’s really stupid now when I look back at it. I got really sick, like my lymph nodes were really swollen, I don’t know if I had the mumps or what. But I had some type of virus and it lasted a little over two months. It was really bad, I was running a fever, and I was still having to work at this time and go to school. I remember I woke up one morning and I made us breakfast and I didn’t even want to eat I just felt so bad and I just went back to sleep and I woke up a couple hours later and the dishes were still in the sink and the kitchen was still a mess. He was on the couch playing video games and I was like, “Ryan, you know, you can help me out, you can do the dishes.” And he just snapped at me and said, “Well I was going to do them.” And I said, “Well it’s been two hours now and you’re not doing anything important, like why can’t you just . . .” As so superficial as that sounds, it meant so much more to me. (4.2.3; Ashley, personal communication, April 17, 2012)

I got really sick when I moved out . . . and I would still try to cook and clean for him and do all of those things and it got to the point where I wasn’t able to take care of me and I’m getting really sick. We had a fight about like who was going to do the dishes, it was something so silly. So I talked to his mom about it and she was like “I’m really sorry, he grew up in a house where he didn’t have to do anything. I did everything for him.” So I think that’s just kind of what he expected. He didn’t really look at it as I go to work and go to school too AND I have to take care of everything. I shouldn’t have to. So I just expected him to want to do more for me because I was doing so much for him. Like it should have been more of a give and take, it shouldn’t have been all give or all take. (4.1.4-5; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)
Ashley points to this time in her marriage as one of the defining moments in which she felt disappointment and doubt about her marriage. She had already been feeling overextended and unappreciated, but she felt it at an even deeper level when she got sick. Seeing Josh be inattentive to her needs and her health, and still not make an effort to pull his weight around the house, was especially hurtful and frustrating.

She realized that Josh was raised differently and tried to be understanding, but ultimately felt that it was still something that needed to change in their relationship. Their dissimilar upbringings greatly shaped each of their role expectations in the marriage. His mom did everything for him so he didn’t develop the same sense of accomplishment from keeping his things well-maintained. She felt a great sense of ownership and pride over the house because of the hard work she knew it took to be able to afford what they had. This motivated her to take good care of the house and their belongings, and she expected Josh to feel the same.

This pattern continued with Ashley asking Josh to help out more around the house, and Josh would respond in one of two ways. First, he would claim that he does, in fact, help out around the house, in which Ashley would argue against and ask for examples.

He got very defensive about it. I asked him if he would help out around the house more and he said, “I do help out” and I’m like “No, you don’t. What do you help out with?” and he’s like, “I always help out with stuff.” And he would never give me a specific thing. (4.1.5; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

She eventually came to the conclusion that his idea of helping out around the house meant picking up his things and hanging up his towel. Second, he would claim that if she wanted something done she should just ask him to.

We would argue about it and he would say, “If you want something done, just tell me.” And I’m like, “I shouldn’t have to tell you, you should want to help out. You should see that this needs to get done, so just do it.” (4.1.10; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

This was a major point of contention between them because Ashley didn’t feel that she should have to ask him to clean his own house and wash his own dishes. She wished that Josh felt a sense of personal responsibility and self-motivation to contribute around the house.
At this point, Ashley began to look back at everything she was doing in the beginning and wonder if it was a bad idea to start the marriage out spoiling him. She reflected on how doing that may have hindered their relationship:

Whenever we first got married I liked doing all the household things for him, cooking and cleaning and making sure everything was set for him, and doing his laundry. I liked doing all of that but I’m sure it wasn’t healthy for us. So maybe if we would have set mutual chores for each other. Like if I cook, you clean up the kitchen. Just things like that. In my mind that’s common sense because that’s the way I grew up and he totally didn’t grow up like that. In his mind it’s like, “Well my mom made the mess in the kitchen so my mom’s going to clean it up.” That’s his mindset about it, and that’s not how it works. Like listening to myself talk about these problems, they seem minor and like they’re not a big deal, but they really are. It takes such a toll on our relationship. (4.3.7-8; Ashley, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

Disaffection often occurs as the grievances in the relationship accumulate, so the seemingly small things build up to create larger dissatisfaction. It is never just one thing, but many. Furthermore, the seemingly small issues such as this one, have the capacity to diffuse into other aspects of the individual’s life and cause secondary, or even tertiary, conflicts.

**Effects on Time, Well-Being, and Affection**

In Ashley’s case, the lack of support she had in household tasks began to have secondary affects in three main areas: her time, well-being, and affection. First, all of her time was consumed with chores and errands when she wasn’t busy with school or work, the stress of balancing all of her roles was building up, and she wasn’t able to be who she desired to be.

I guess a big part of it too became time for me. I don’t feel like I have time to do things that I want to do just to take care of myself. I’m not one of those people who go out and get manicures and pedicures and facials but if I wanted that time to go do that and treat myself, I don’t have that anymore. If I wanted to go to the gym, like when I was working and going to school before we got married, I had time. I set aside time everyday to go to the gym. But now it’s like that time has been consumed by grocery shopping or laundry, and its not just his laundry its mutual household laundry, like he’s not the one who washes the towels and the sheets. It’s like housecleaning, cooking food, cleaning, things like that. It just bothers me that he has all the time in the world to do all the stuff that he wants to do, but my time I have to do those things. (4.3.8; Ashley, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

Ashley no longer had time to do anything for herself, whether it meant going to the gym or the mall. She began to feel burdened by all of the chores and errands that she was taking care
of single-handedly, and resented Josh for not sharing them. Her lack of time was restricting her from going places and doing things, but most of all it was impinging upon her freedom.

Also, all of the stress she was feeling from balancing her roles at school, work, and home didn’t have an outlet since she never had time for herself. She felt increased stress and began to feel more irritable with Josh. Her increased stress levels had two main tertiary effects: her mood and social life. First, her irritability around Josh made her less tolerant and increased the frequency of their conflict.

The times where I’m really stressed out or really moody I’m more on edge so things kind of get, I get more annoyed. (4.2.1; Ashley, personal communication, April 17, 2012)

Second, when she was feeling stressed out and fighting with Josh she avoided social events and outings.

A lot of the time when we’re not getting along I try not to go out with him. Like if his friends are having a barbeque or something I’ll just tell him I don’t want to go. (4.3.6; Ashley, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

As the stress increased their conflict, she responded by isolating herself from others. This was also a way to save face, avoid awkward situations, and hide their problems from people.

Because if we’re having a bad day or a bad week and we have to be out in public with people, it’s hard to be distant in front of them because you want everyone to think that we’re okay. We’re still kind of newlyweds so I don’t want people to think that we’re having all these issues now. (4.3.5; Ashley, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

Ashley found it more and more difficult to attend social gatherings as a couple because she didn’t want to have to pretend she was happy and fake being affectionate with Josh. She also felt pressure to hide her marital problems from others in order to maintain the façade of being the happy newlyweds. In addition to hiding their problems from friends, she also had to keep a smile on her face in front of his family and her father. Clearly, having to hide the conflict from others added even more stress to her already stressful situation.

Finally, the third secondary effect resulting from the lack of support at home was her decrease in affection for Josh. Initially, Ashley would raise concerns and express her frustrations with Josh about not helping out around the house, but she found that this only increased their conflict and didn’t produce any real changes. Eventually, she saw no point in bringing it up anymore:
We would just argue so it’s just kind of like, I’m not getting anywhere and we’re just fighting I might as well just not say anything. (4.2.6; Ashley, personal communication, April 17, 2012)

Ashley began trying to avoid bringing up the fact that he doesn’t help her because if nothing was going to change anyways then it wasn’t even worth having the argument. This is one example of how she coped with their issues—remaining silent. Self-silencing was her coping method for avoiding conflict and maintaining harmony in their relationship. As this may have mediated or diffused the conflict temporarily, there would be long-term effects of keeping her dissatisfaction bottled up that would eventually surface. Her feelings of frustration were just piling up inside and began to affect her own happiness and her affection for Josh:

It makes me more stressed out and like I hold on to that stuff. I’m already stressed out with work and school and not having enough time to really take care of myself and then plus I’m holding in all of those things so it just makes me that much more aggravated with him. It makes me not even want to be around him sometimes. Even though nothing specific has happened that day, I’m just so angry with everything else. I’m like, “I don’t even want to be around you.” And I know it’s not healthy at all because I’m not affectionate towards him. I just don’t want to have anything to do with him at that moment. (4.2.8; Ashley, personal communication, April 17, 2012)

The combination of stress, lack of time for herself, and the inability to voice her frustrations all contribute to her feelings of disaffection towards Josh. There are also times when her disaffection has grown so big that it began to affect their intimacy:

I feel like I’m holding in everything for so long it makes me, it almost just makes me not attracted to him. I’ve always been very physically attracted to him but I think that the way you treat somebody can make you not want to be around him. So yeah definitely there’s times where I’m like, “I don’t want to be around you, I don’t want to hug you, I don’t to kiss you, I don’t want you to touch me, like just leave me alone.” (4.2.10; Ashley, personal communication, April 17, 2012)

When her she is experiencing a loss of attraction and affection for Josh, she describes an increase in emotional distance and the atmosphere in the house as:

Yeah everything is just very cold and distant when I feel really frustrated with him or when I feel like he’s not pulling his weight around the house . . . and we don’t really talk. (4.3.4; Ashley, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

When I asked her if she had any other outlets for releasing her frustration, besides talking to Josh about it, she explained that sometimes she talks to others but mostly tries to spend time alone:
Yeah it’s really hard keeping everything in and I do that a lot. Like I’ll talk to my mom or my step-mom about our problems sometimes and sometimes that will make me feel better, just to get that all out, but I’m not talking to the right person. So therefore, its still there, which kind of just makes me more angry that I got to vent but not to him. Like it’s not going to solve anything. I guess my outlets would be staying away from him honestly. It gets to that point where I’m like, “I don’t want to be around you, I just want space.” And if I have time to go to the gym or go on a run or do something by myself, like I’ll take my dog hiking or something. So just time apart, and eventually I get to miss him. And I think that’s what draws me back to him is just having that time apart and realizing that I really do love him and I don’t want to be without him and I start to miss him and it makes everything okay. It kind of puts things in perspective. (4.3.2; Ashley, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

Her disaffection caused her to withdraw physically and not want to be around Josh, but eventually time apart made her miss him. This explains part of how her trajectory is given the shape of highs and lows, much like a roller coaster. This cycle may continue, the division of labor in their relationship may get better, or she may eventually become exhausted by the relationship and emotionally disengage. These are a few possible outcomes, but do not reflect all of the possibilities.

**Sacrificial Inequity**

Currently, Ashley’s hope for the relationship and affection for Josh are wavering on a periodic basis. Her inability to openly communicate her frustrations to Josh made it challenging for her to create change in the relationship. This challenge is cited by research (Christensen & Heavey, 1990) indicating that women are typically the ones who desire change in relationships, which inadvertently forms a social structure since women are unable to attain their goal without the cooperation of their partner. The partner, on the other hand, whose goal is for things to remain the same, can achieve his goal unilaterally—simply by not complying. This places women at a power disadvantage in the relationship because the fulfillment of her needs or desires is dependent upon the other person, who is already content. In a marriage this is commonly represented with wives making continuous efforts to change the dynamics of the relationship through making requests or raising concerns, while their husbands expressed withdrawal, defensiveness, or passive inaction (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). When one person is already content, or gaining more benefits from the relationship than the other, they this person has less of a vested interest or motivation to
engage in any sort of conflict or discussion about the relationship since reaching a resolution most likely would not benefit them.

As Ashley thought about the changes that she desired in her marriage, she contemplated whether or not she should be the one changing instead. She wondered if she should try to be more laid back, just let things go, and specifically ask for his help each time. Asking herself these questions brought about another concern that she hadn’t given much thought. She began to look back at how much she had already sacrificed as a person.

Ashley described herself as a very independent, self-motivated, athletic, financially responsible, and an accomplished young woman before getting married. Going into the marriage she had expected to give up her independence and join a lifelong partnership with Josh. She knew marriage would require change, compromise, and sacrifice, however, she also expected it to be a mutual process:

I mean I think that’s something that’s supposed to happen when you get married because you’re a team then and you’re not really supposed to be an individual. But at the same time, I don’t think he gave up a lot of what made him him, so I was doing a lot more and not taking care of me because I was taking care of him. (4.1.4; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

Ashley reflected on what she had sacrificed and then looked at Josh’s life and noticed that his hadn’t really changed very much. In fact, his life seemed even better and easier because he now had someone to cook and clean up for him. Ashley, on the other hand, had supplanted her whole life to move to California, she gave up her time, freedom, peace of mind, and going to the gym.

So I think whenever we got married I have to give up a lot of what made me happy, to sacrifice to kind of make our household. (4.1.3; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

Ashley was already feeling exhausted, stressed out, and frustrated from the marriage, but after reflecting on the sacrifices she had made compared to Josh, added to that list was feeling like their marriage was unfair. Even though she knew the division of labor was not equal, she hadn’t realized how many other things were unequal in their relationship, such as the amount of sacrifices made. Having to sacrifice the things that made her happy was unfounded, and she began questioning her decision to marry Josh:

At that point I thought that was just how our marriage was going to be, like everything was going to be put on me, he wasn’t going to help. I sacrificed so much to move out here to be with him and it just kind of boiled down to, “Why
did I do this? I should just go back home.” So that was my mind set, like “It’s not worth it, I don’t want to do this anymore if this is what its going to be like.” (4.2.3; Ashley, personal communication, April 17, 2012)

Ashley describes how her feelings of injustice often raised doubts that would circulate in her mind.

In addition to the unequal division of labor, another major source of conflict in their relationship was the unequal division of finances. Ashley and Josh had agreed to share a joint checking account to which they would both deposit their monthly housing allowances. The extra money after paying the mortgage would pay for mutual bills, such as utilities and groceries, and the money they made from their jobs would be for their own personal bills. This was the plan they had mutually agreed upon, but it did not materialize into a functional arrangement. Josh was only depositing enough money to pay half of the mortgage, instead of his full housing allowance. As such, Ashley, who earned less money than he did, ended up paying for everything else. She used to be great at budgeting her money, but now it felt like she never had enough and couldn’t save anything. When she would bring this up to Josh, his response was similar to when she asked him to help out around the house—that if she wanted money then she should just ask. She explains how food and gas have become extra expenses she doesn’t think are fair:

My car gets really good gas mileage and he drives a truck that doesn’t, so a lot of times he’ll be like, “Babe can I use your car?” And at first when we were married it was like “Yeah! Sure! Whatever.” But he would never put gas in it. So of course it’s cheaper for you to use my car because you don’t put gas in it. So like that was an added expense with all the food and at first we were splitting the bills but I spend $700 a month in groceries plus all of our shared bills plus all of my personal bills, it’s like, “I can’t do this.” I don’t even make as much money as he does. So yeah we definitely argue about those things because he just feels like it’s my fault for not asking him for money. (4.1.18; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

Ashley expresses that there was added strain on her to make ends meet because she often ended up paying for all of the groceries and had to refill her gas tank more frequently. This is another way in which she felt that the marriage was inequitable. She couldn’t understand why Josh insisted that she ask him for money when he already knows they will have mutual expenses every month. She felt it was unjust and wishes they had made more financial plans before getting married:
I wish we would have had mutual financial goals and had that figured out, because I still don’t feel like it’s fair. It’s really hard to talk to him about because he just pins it on me. . . . But as his wife I don’t feel like I should have to ask him for money to pay for the food that he eats, or put gas in my car because he drove it. (4.3.7; Ashley, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

Ashley feels that she is shouldering most of the expenses in addition to playing full-time home-maker, neither of which are roles that she had anticipated filling in these capacities. Not only did the added financial burden increase her stress and limit her freedom to do what she wanted, but it also added to her feelings of inequity in the marriage. As all of these dissatisfactions accumulate, she feels hurt and a sense of ambiguous loss about her marriage and Josh:

Josh has been one of my best friends since we were 12 so it’s really hard to just say I’m done. I’m not only losing my husband, I’m losing my best friend. Like he’s been the person I’ve always talked to, he’s always been there for me and vice versa. So I think that’s what hurts now too, because we have these differences and I’m like, “What happened to my best friend?” (4.3.1; Ashley, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

Ashley mourns the loss of their close bond, their open communication, and always being on the same page. She still loves him, but she feels their close friendship and her idea of what their marriage would be like withering away. Her role in the relationship is primarily caretaking and it makes her worried about having kids one day because she fears that she would be doing all of the work she’s doing now multiplied by two or three. She looks at all of the ways she provides, supports, and cares for Josh and thinks:

It’s not fair, I feel like he should be my partner. I shouldn’t have to take care of my husband. There’s a difference between wanting to care for them and do things for him, and taking care of them. (4.3.11; Ashley, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

Ashley differentiates between the way a wife should care for her husband, and the way a parent takes care of a child. The relationship, in its current state, is emotionally and physically taxing on Ashley, but she maintains the hope that they will work out their problems. Her methods for maintaining the relationship include self-silencing, or conflict avoidance, self-sacrificing, or overextending herself to maintain the relationship, and minimizing them. Similar to coping methods, which is defined as the cognitive and behavioral efforts used to manage when situations exceed the resources of the individual (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Launier, 1978), women developed strategies to help
them manage and maintain their relationships. These methods are sources of comfort and motivation to persevere:

I think one thing that keeps me holding on so much is like I’m sure other people have the same issues if not worse. So things that they have to deal with too and they found a way to deal with it. (4.1.12; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

I tell myself our problems aren’t that big like we can work through them, if we really want to. (4.3.2; Ashley, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

As long as Ashley maintains hope, motivation, and energy to make her relationship better, her marriage will be an open book.

**FRESH TO FERTILE**

Ashley’s story stands out from the others because she has only been married for one year. Although this is early in her marriage, and she is not very far along in her trajectory, including her story offered some interesting insights. Both Elizabeth and Katrina recall feeling what they described as the beginning of their disaffection. In their accounts, however, they expressed more surprise and confusion as red flags began popping up here and there. Ashley, however, is already well along in the *Marital Negotiations* stage in which she is trying to negotiate roles and changes in the relationship. Her disaffection is mint fresh, as felt through her emotions in our interviews.

The next and final participant, Michele, is 44 years old and has been married for 14 years. Although being married for 14 years, it took her the longest out of all the women to begin feeling disaffected. She describes the first 12 years as wonderful, but then suddenly she began to feel their age difference, constrained, and neglected. Michele’s story differs from all the rest because she actually *leaves*. Her disaffection occurred the latest, in terms of how many years she had been married, and yet she is the only one who has left. She is like a Spring Bud because her drive, passion, strong sense of self, and fresh start are all ingredients that have watered and nurtured her to sprout and eventually outgrow her partner.

**SPRING BUD**

I was standing in line waiting to order a frapuccino and yogurt parfait. The Southern Californian sun was shining through the glass windows trying to radiate its heat into the coffee shop. When I answered my cell phone Michele told me she was walking across the
parking lot and dressed in work-out clothes. As I squinted my eyes against the glare of the sun, I could see her walking towards the building in her purple spandex shorts and white tank top. Immediately I noticed her form and shape, as I’m sure most people do when they see her. Michele is a figure competitor. Unlike most women her age, or people in general for that matter, her muscles had tone and definition.

Evident in Michele’s body language and personality, she is confident, unafraid, and passionate. She describes, however, how each of these qualities has grown and evolved over time, with each twist and turn giving shape to the woman she is proud to say she has become. These qualities represent touchstones for how she is able to look back and track how she has grown throughout her journey. For example, one of her current passions is competing as a figure bodybuilder. She readily admits that she is a rare gem among most women her age because of her optimism, desire for change, and need for a challenge.

As Michele shares her story, she uses metaphors to make sense of her experiences. These metaphors represent her interpretations of the feelings, behaviors, conversations, efforts, expectations, and disappointments that make up her journey of disaffection. These metaphors will be highlighted throughout her story as a way to both use her voice and also illustrate how she organizes and construes her marriage.

**Building Castles and Bungalows**

Michele doesn’t look back on her impoverished childhood with resentment or self-pity, but rather focuses on the view ahead with motivation and vigor to succeed. She recalls periods of time in which her family didn’t have electricity, in which she had to carry buckets of water that she heated over the gas-stove up two flights of stairs to the tub so that she could have a warm bath. However, these early struggles only pushed Michele to work harder for everything that she has accomplished. After high school she worked for several years before saving up enough money to pay her way through college. Naturally, this made for a significant age difference between her and the other students, and therefore a narrower age gap between her and the professors. Little did she know, this small detail would make a big difference in her life.

During her third year in school, she took a class with Dr. Andy Schwitz, a professor who would make an incredible impression on Michele. Andy stood tall at about 6’4 with
long, salt and pepper curly hair. He was a 43 year-old man with charisma, a great smile, and a brilliant mind. She had heard from other students that he was arrogant, but after listening to him in class, she found him to be confident and extremely intelligent. Although they always had great conversations about the class, it wasn’t until Michele noticed that he stopped wearing his wedding ring that she decided to ask him out. After briefly dating for a few months, she quickly realized that if she continued their relationship that her role would become the “transitional” woman, so she decided to end it first. Even though the break-up left her extremely heartbroken and sad, she knew it was the best thing for them. Five months passed by without dating anyone, but when the spring semester of her senior year rolled around, fortunately, they began dating again. Immediately their relationship took off and she began falling in love:

It was a great start to a great relationship. Initially we were friends, we had wonderful conversations, and I think that’s what attracted me to him was it was one of the first times I really had someone talk to me, not down to me, not up to me, but talk to me as full equal, and attractiveness aside. It wasn’t necessarily about how I looked but who I was, and we had great conversations. (5.1.1; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele describes all of the qualities that attracted her to Andy, from their conversations and his down-to-earth personality, to his physical attractiveness and style. He smelled good, had a great smile, and gorgeous hair, plus he was sophisticated and well-read. They shared interests in competing in marathons, reading, current affairs, and the acquisition of knowledge. Michele explained that they connected on multiple levels: emotionally, intellectually, physically, and sexually. She knew he was the one and their relationship only continued to progress steadily towards marriage:

So that was the beginning, and it was a very standard evolution. What everybody wants. We dated, moved in, got engaged, did the party, got married in the backyard, the whole 9 yards. It was three total years. (5.1.2; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele speaks confidently about the choices she made and about how her relationship evolved. It is clear that she is comfortable with the steps they took towards marriage and doesn’t think it was rushed. She looks at the early stages of their relationship with no regrets.

Furthermore, Michele and Andy shared almost 14 years of marriage together, and Michele is able to reflect back on the first 12 of them as great ones. She recalls all of the ways that she and Andy worked to build their relationship together that made their marriage
successful for 12 years. Michele describes what raw materials she feels are needed to build and maintain a healthy marriage. First and foremost, she highlights open and ongoing communication as one of the most important building blocks. Part of communicating openly means also being tactful and part of keeping the conversation going means reminding your partner how much you care about them all the time. She explained:

You need to talk all the time, and you need to say, “I love you,” all the time. Because you cannot let that person forget and do not take that for granted, ever. Building a relationship is all about the details, and paying attention to the small details. All those details turn into one big picture. And you have to stay focused on taking care of the details. (5.1.16; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele emphasizes that the small things matter in marriage, especially when it comes to communicating love. Three ways that she highlights as key to communicating love in the relationship include: affection, attentiveness, and appreciation. First, she explains that expressing affection means utilizing both nonverbal and verbal mediums. Intimacy plays a major role, but explicitly telling your partner, “I love you,” on a consistent basis is equally important for the relationship.

When you talk about building a relationship you have to meet each other, and that means reaffirming all the time how you feel about that person, how you love that person, your attractiveness for that person, and ensuring you’re doing things to maintain that level of attractiveness, of course, but also the attraction. (5.1.22; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele talks about explicitly expressing feelings for the other person and also implicitly expressing that affection by actively working to maintain the same level of attraction between each other.

Second, being attentive to your partner’s needs and desires demonstrates care, involvement, effort, and consideration—each of which contribute to a greater sense of connectedness in the marriage. Something that worked for her and Andy was sending text messages to one another throughout the day. Michele explained:

Texting is good! Text, “I love you.” Text, “Can I pick you up something at the store?” Text, “I picked up your dry cleaning.” Buy him something. Surprise him. (5.1.16; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Texting was a strategy that helped them stay connected throughout the day. Even though they were each busy at work or with errands, texting allowed them to maintain an open line of communication and remind one another that they are valued.
Third, communicating appreciation is another small detail of the relationship that should not be forgotten. For Michele, showing appreciation in a small way meant never neglecting to say, “Please,” or, “Thank you.” Each of these small details are important raw materials that are needed to support the foundation of the relationship.

In addition to communication and small details, finding specific ways to ensure that the relationship remains fresh and experiences new growth is another building block. First, she emphasizes the need to maintain a sense of childishness and adventure in the relationship because it will allow you to still have fun together. Trying new things, either together or alone, is a great way to be stimulated. Michele makes the point that in addition to fostering your growth as a couple, each person should also maintain individuality:

Essentially you are two different people, and do not expect that person to want to do everything with you, they are not your twin. Give them the latitude and space to grow to. But work on growing together too. (5.1.17; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Neither person in the relationship should feel constrained or limited by their partner or the relationship. Although spending time together is an essential part of any enduring relationship, so is spending time apart. Part of fostering growth as a couple means giving one another the space to be an individual and grow independently as well. For Michele, maintaining hobbies, interests, and friends outside of the marriage was another key building block to making her marriage work.

The last aspect of building a relationship that Michele discusses plays a significant role in her story because it ultimately drove a wedge between her and Andy. She explains that although having all of the raw materials and building blocks are critical, an essential aspect of building comes down to who is providing those materials. Contributing equally to the relationship and making equal efforts will make a difference in how the relationship is truly able to grow.

So building a relationship is about all these things, but it’s a partnership and you’re endeavoring to do it together and you better be building it together. And that means when I lay down a block, you lay down a block. (5.1.17; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele talks about building together as a joint effort by both partners. This means both individuals are communicating, expressing affection and appreciation, paying attention to the small details, trying new things, and truly supporting the other. For awhile, they did build
together, but Michele explains what she perceived happening after their 12th year of marriage:

I felt like I was furiously adding, and he stopped. . . . He was building a bungalow and I was building a castle. And his bungalow got built and I kept going. And I didn’t have any help building the castle, so when we stopped building together, it starts to fall apart. So I have a castle over here and he’s still in his bungalow. (5.1.18; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele uses this building metaphor to help describe how she makes sense of what happened in their marriage. As she extends the metaphor to describe the actual structures that each of them were building, we are offered insight into how their disproportionate efforts really affected the relationship.

Michele felt that she was making a greater effort to build and strengthen their relationship and their lives together. For example, Michele recalls her tireless efforts to keep Andy happy:

Oh I covered the bases. I tried to make sure he never felt deprived or dissatisfied, or any of that, and it just felt like it was never enough. I just kept doing more and more and more, and it’s not like he lacked appreciation, “You’re a great cook. You’re so wonderful. You’re that,” and I’m like, “Yup. Why aren’t you holding up your end of the bargain?” (5.1.9; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Her vision for who she wanted them to be as a couple was unattainable without his effort also. He became comfortable and complacent with how their relationship was, in his bungalow, meanwhile Michele saw space for improvement, new additions, and, ultimately, a stronger and greater relationship. Each of them were building with different materials and with different end goals. Ultimately, the lack of effort on his part led to their structure falling apart, or her disaffection, and as she continued building independently her structure eventually outgrew the neighborhood. She is able to describe all of the disappointments, struggles, and grievances that were byproducts of the lack of effort.

Hairy Politics

As Michele transitioned from talking about what she believes it takes to build a strong relationship to what went wrong in her marriage, her use of metaphor also shifted. When she reflected on how their relationship became unraveled, she compared it to her husband’s head of hair:
And the metaphor for all of this is my husband has a mane of hair. It’s thick and
curly and it’s beautiful, it’s a real standout. . . . He just decided he wasn’t going
to cut it anymore, or he was going to cut it himself. (5.1.3; Michele, personal
communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele explains her that her husband decided to stop cutting his hair because it was growing
too fast. His decision struck a nerve with Michele for three main reasons.

**Attraction**

First, maintaining attractiveness and attraction is an important building block to a
relationship for Michele, as stated earlier. She considered maintaining a high level of
attraction in the relationship critical because it feeds into both affection and intimacy. For
her, maintaining yourself is something you should be self-motivated to do, especially for the
person you love.

My expectation was that I was with someone who had the same outlook and the
same expectations of themselves. I will be exceptional across the board. And he
was like, “No, love me as I am.” (5.1.8; Michele, personal communication, May
31, 2012)

Michele gives an example of one argument in particular that they had over his hair:

And really what struck me the most was we got into a pretty big battle in Utah on
vacation last year, he goes, “You’re supposed to love me unconditionally.” “No
I’m not. I love puppies and children unconditionally, because they don’t know the
mistakes they’re making and that’s the kind of love they need to grow. Men
should know better. So should women. And I have conditions. The conditions
are the ones that you supposedly set forth for me at the begining of the
relationship. ‘I’m sophisticated, I’m urbane, I get my hair cut. I look good for
you. I make every effort to maintain my attractiveness. And I’m going to treat
you like an equal.’ ” (5.1.4; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele and Andy had a different understanding of what it meant to love one another. To
Michele, loving your partner meant wanting to look good for them and maintain a strong
sense of attraction in the relationship. For Andy, loving your partner meant accepting their
flaws and shortcomings. These contrasting ideas made it increasingly difficult for Michele
and Andy to see eye to eye.

His physical appearance was also important to Michele because of their age
difference. She felt that their apparent gap in age was even further exacerbated by his
untamed hair:

He didn’t cut his hair for so long it started to look kind of ridiculous, it was to
here. And hair like that you start to look like a historical figure, and it’s bad
enough that we already have a 16-year age gap, and I look roughly 35. I don’t feel like I look 44. So you start to have this person who is starting to look younger and younger as a result of this [her bodybuilding]. . . . So here I am doing this [motions down] in terms of my youth and he’s doing this [motions up]. And I’m like, “No, we need to meet in the middle.” (5.1.3-4; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele felt pretty comfortable with their age difference, but she began feeling like they were moving in opposite directions both physically and mentally. Even though he had also gained weight, she explains that it really came down to his hair:

Ultimately, the hair. It really became a metaphor for everything else that was going on. It was like, “I need you to be attractive for me and you’re not even keeping up with that, don’t even go there, don’t even go there.” (5.1.7; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

When Michele felt like Andy was neglecting to maintain their attraction, she was reminded of all of the other times she felt neglected.

**Relational Neglect**

The second reason his hair was a point of contention for Michele is because it was one of many ways in which she felt he was neglecting her relational needs. Therefore, his hair became a metaphor for all of the different ways in which he was neglecting to meet her needs and care for their relationship. Michele specifically highlighted four of these relational needs, which include: support, affection, intimacy, and mutual growth.

First, encouragement and emotional support were each things that Michele desired from her marriage in both her professional and personal ventures. When Michele decided to begin bodybuilding, it demanded an extraordinary amount of self-discipline, dedication, and energy. She explains Andy’s initial reaction:

If I weighed 160, trust me I’d be hearing about it. But instead I went the opposite direction, and the complete and total lack of support I got when I first started doing this was so incredibly disconcerting and disheartening, I cried all the time. He hated it. Hated it. And when I stepped off stage the first time he said, “I hope you’re not doing that again. Man these people are low rent, bodybuilders are low rent.” I was like, “Really? Because I was just in the dressing room with a woman who is a physician, another one who’s a lawyer, and another one who’s a CEO. Because this is such a physically demanding athletic endeavor, and we’re low rent because we put on tanner.” (5.1.8-9; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)
Learning that her husband did not support her goals was heartbreaking. It was extremely
disappointing and hurtful to realize that her partner is not the supportive person she once
thought. Working towards and then finally reaching that goal despite his disapproval was
unbearable at times. Not only didn’t he offer his moral support, but he also denigrated her
and the sport. Michele explains how she tried to accommodate him and maintain harmony
while training for competition:

So that was just like devastating. And it wasn’t until my 3rd competition that he
finally got on board with it. So here I am trying to do this athletic endeavor that
I’m trying to keep out of his way. Do it in the morning, do it when he’s not home,
go do my training get it out of the way, come home, clean the house, do the
laundry, cook every night, because I have to compensate for it and make sure he
has this, this, and this and make sure he has this stocked. (5.1.8-9; Michele,
personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele worked extra hard to maintain and even exceed what she was doing before for Andy
in order to keep him happy. All of the effort she made to stay out of his way and to perform
her role was exhausting both physically and emotionally.

The second way Michele felt her needs were being neglected is affection. In the
beginning of their marriage she describes them as a very affectionate couple; they were good
at always reaffirming their feelings for one another. However, as time passed and she
continued expressing her feelings for him, her affection little by little became unreturned.
She explains her views on affection and what happened in her marriage:

He didn’t make me feel particularly attractive. It was rare that he would tell me I
was beautiful. The rare times we would have sex he’d be like, “Oh you’re so
hot,” and I’m like, “Yeah I’m naked, what about when I’m not?” That was really
hard because I’m very, very self-expressed, and when I’m with somebody they
know how I feel about them. If I’m attracted to you and I love you and I think
you’re hot, then I’m going to tell you that all the time. And initially I think we
did that all the time, but I think he stopped and I kind of kept doing that. (5.1.22;
Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele was usually a very affectionate person in her relationships, but she slowly began to
feel a void where her affection wasn’t being reciprocated. Her need for verbal affection was
being neglected, and it felt like all of her positive qualities had become invisible. He no
longer made her feel admired, which was hurtful for her. As she continued explaining, I
reflected back on my last relationship and was disappointingly reminded that I also knew
what it was like to feel unseen. I remember thinking, “I don’t think he has ever told me I’m
beautiful.” To be in love and in a long-term relationship, it didn’t seem right. I, on the other
hand, always complimented his looks and style, which was many times returned with, “I
know.” Even though I knew he was joking, it made me feel like he didn’t need my affection.
Maybe he didn’t, and maybe that is why he didn’t think I needed his. I felt a similar void as
Michele, in which I anticipated even more the rare occasions on which he would tell me,
“You look nice.” In Michele’s case, however, she started out hearing those reaffirming
words regularly but with time it slowly dwindled. Its absence seemed even more pronounced
because she knew what it felt like to receive that assurance and affection from her partner.

As she reflects back on how this affected the relationship, she drew an analogy
between relational maintenance and keeping a ball in motion. Her comparison is helpful in
understanding how she makes sense out of what happened:

> People just drop the ball man, and you gotta maintain it. Because that’s what
keeps the ball rolling. If one of you drops the ball, why do you want the other one
to keep pushing it? I’m like, I’m not going to sit here and tell you how great you
are all the time if I’m not getting the same sort of feedback from you. One thing
feeds the other. (5.1.22; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

This metaphor helps describe how Michele felt a sense of abandonment to maintain the
relationship all by herself. Without help, the ball was too heavy to move very far.

The third way in which her needs were no longer being fulfilled was in the bedroom.
She was very satisfied with their sexual relationship in the beginning, but slowly that
changed also. She felt that he stopped making an effort in the bedroom also, which made it
difficult for her to enjoy being intimate.

> Disaffection. And it was in the bedroom too. “I need this, this, and this. How
many times do I have to tell you this?” (5.1.5; Michele, personal communication,
May 31, 2012)

Even after telling him repeatedly what she needed, he didn’t make the effort. This was
extremely frustrating for her because she always went out of her way to keep a spark in their
relationship and it seemed like he wasn’t concerned with making sure she was satisfied. In
addition to his lack of attention to her needs, she also felt a less physically attracted to him
because of his hair. Both of these made it difficult for her to enjoy sex:

> If you’re not physically attractive to me, it’s really hard for me to have sex with
you. I’m sorry but emotions aside, yeah I have an emotional attachment to you but
I’m a . . . person. (5.1.7; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele’s basic needs for attraction, support, affection, and intimacy were not being met,
which was heartbreaking in many ways for her. Andy’s decision to stop getting haircuts
stands out as a monumental issue in their marriage not only because he was neglecting his physical appearance and her relational needs, but also because it represented a struggle over power in their marriage.

**POWER BATTLES**

Lastly, the third reason why Andy’s hair became such a controversial issue for Michele is because it also represented a larger political battle and power struggle between them. Over the span of their marriage the balance of power has shifted significantly, which created a great degree of tension for them. As Michele explains, his age, intellect, and experience positioned him as more powerful compared to her. However, as she continued to learn and grow, so did her level of power. She explains how this gradual change occurred:

I don’t think what I’m going through is unusual, I’m 44 years old. I’m clearly in a stronger position. The difference between 26 and 44 is fast, and you do come into yourself, hopefully, as a woman. And able to be with people who nurture who you are and the emotional and intellectual and mental parts to yourself, and I’ve had that. I know a lot of people, I’ve been around a lot of people, and I have a supportive family. So the dynamic just changed so dramatically. (5.1.10; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele reflects on how she has matured and developed in multiple areas of her life. Through the social support of her family and the people around her, she has experienced self-growth and gained a greater sense of self. She understands this process to be a common developmental stage for women her age. As her identity was being shaped through her relationships, life experiences, and career, her relationship with Andy also began taking a new shape. She reflects back on the beginning of their relationship and how the development of her sense of self changed the dynamics of her marriage:

In retrospect, when I look back at it, I can see how the relationship at that juncture and over the years, evolved to this juncture. Because I didn’t have a tremendous amount of self-confidence when I met him, I had some, but certainly didn’t have what I have now. So when people say student-teacher relationship, it wasn’t necessarily a student-teacher relationship, but he was a powerful man and there was more of a mentor and coachee kind of deal, or mentor and mentee thing going on that ultimately I railed against. I look at it this way: he was here [motions with hand], and I was here [below his position], because there was a substantial age gap developmentally of course he’s going to be further along in his development. And then I started doing this [motions upward] and then you start to come into yourself as a woman, or at least you hope that you do, and when you’re with the right partner that happens. But then what happens is this [moves her position higher than his]. I started outpacing him—on a whole bunch of different levels.
He wanted to stay here. And ultimately I couldn’t get him to come up here with me, he wanted to stay. And in some respects, it was like he was dissolving. This incredible, sophisticated man, very urbane man that I had met, decided that he was a child of the 70’s and that he was going to stay that way. (5.1.2-3; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele explains how her marriage reflected her personal evolution in many respects. As a couple, they were growing unilaterally, which at first evened the playing field, but eventually led to her surpassing him. Supposedly, both partners grow together, but instead Andy was resisting change. Michele made continuous efforts to grow together but she was shut down.

Steadily their interactions became battles. Michele points to specific examples of how even small decisions turned into full-on battles that extended over weeks and sometimes months:

Did I get the interior decorator? Yeah four months later after we fought every time we went out to look at stuff. We had a red couch that we bought for a year that sat in this room, hired an interior decorator and a month-and-a-half later it was done. It was worth the trouble. It took months to get a housekeeper. When I became unemployed I took over cleaning the house. I was like, “I’m cool with that, I have time,” but if I’m working 45-50 hours a week, then I don’t have time. (5.1.5-6; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Slowly, everything became a battle and Michele became increasingly frustrated. As Michele gained more power, they were even more at odds with one another because Andy was unyielding. Michele explains how his refusal to cut his hair symbolized how everything in their marriage had become a struggle over power and a claim to authority:

This is really central for me because it represents this battle extended across our relationship. It took him over 6 weeks to cut it. “You’re not the boss of me,” and then that started happening. I’m like, “Look, I'm not trying to be the boss.” (5.1.3; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

From Michele’s perspective, her husband was unwilling to share the power that used to be solely his. As he became insecure with his level of power in the relationship and uncomfortable with sharing it, he tried desperately to grasp it even tighter. Michele didn’t want a role reversal or to be his boss, she merely wanted the field to be even. Andy’s hair represented all of the ways he was, in a very real sense, rebelling against her.

So the hair is a metaphor for everything else that was happening. He needed to meet me in the middle in all sorts of ways and instead he’s railing against me. (5.1.4; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)
Michele expected her partner to be willing to adjust and evolve with her in order to be able to meet her half-way, the same way she had bent to his will in the past. The lack of flexibility she found, instead, was disheartening:

It’s tough. Ultimately I expected someone to keep pace with me. That’s what I wanted in a partner, somebody who would grow, evolve, and change, and whose sensibilities need to be aligned with mine, and if they’re not then we can at least talk it through and reach a middle ground. And it didn’t happen. Even though I tried to address it over and over again, I got denied. And I just got tired of doing everything and having everything be a battle. (5.1.5; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Even though couples may not always be on same page, supposedly they are open enough to one another’s needs and desires that they can eventually arrive on a similar page. As Andy continued to rail against her, though, Michele grew tired of the constant combating back and forth. His unwillingness to negotiate with her was maddening, but it wasn’t until their social gatherings that it really sunk in for Michele.

From Michele’s perspective, Andy was trying to maintain his sense of authority and power in the relationship by trying to keep their balance of power in the same position as when their relationship began. Trying to keep her from gaining power inside their marriage was one thing, however attempting to prevent her from gaining social power was insulting on another level. She explains how their social gatherings convinced her she didn’t want to be married anymore:

This was tough, it was really tough. We’d be having a dinner party and it had gotten to the juncture where all of his friends weren’t all of his friends anymore they were our friends. Because when I moved-in I didn’t know anybody. . . . So initially I inherited his friends, and that’s okay, you have a dinner party they’re mostly going to talk to him. Well, it got to the point where we had friends who clearly wanted to talk to me, I had a social currency. And they would start to talk to me and he would take the conversation over. He’d interrupt me and just run with it, so that he had everyone’s attention. Then, I knew. I was like, “I can’t salvage this. I can’t salvage a relationship when someone is trying to keep me in the same dynamic we had. I’m here [motions a higher level] and you don’t want me here, you want me here [motions a lower level], so I gotta go.” (5.1.9-10; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Realizing her husband was trying to push her down and keep her at the level she was on felt like the last push that caused her to emotionally disengage. At this moment she understood how their desires clashed:
He really wanted the dynamics to stay the same and I wanted it to change and him to embrace who I was becoming, not who I was. (5.1.13; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele wanted Andy to support her growth and who she had become, along with who she wanted to be, but Andy was not along for the ride.

Looking back on this stage of her marriage, she is able to understand how their marriage became unraveled. Ultimately, the shift in power changed the dynamics of the relationship and created a hostile environment that turned their conversations into competitions. Power plays a key role in how Michele is able to make sense of what happened:

It was a great relationship for a long time until the balance of power began to shift. I emerged as my own person and two alphas started to run things. And it really became, “You’re not the boss of me.” Isn’t that interesting? Because while he was the boss of me it was okay. (5.1.12; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Andy was unprepared to take this journey with her and felt threatened by the new transformations she was making. Overall, Andy’s hair was a point of contention in their relationship because, from Michele’s perspective, not only did it diminish his attractiveness and widen their perceived age gap, but it also represented all of the other ways Michele felt that her needs were being unattended and, ultimately, served as yet another power move for Andy to establish his authority. His hair symbolized his refusal to take care of Michele’s needs or the relationship, let alone his own appearance. To Michele, his hair meant two things: neglect and power. These two things drove her to heartbreak, depression, and eventually exhaustion.

The Retreat from Battle

Michele was aching over all of the ways her marriage was not fulfilling her needs. She grieved all of the hopes and desires she went into the marriage with that were not going to be realized. The vision she had for who she would be and what her life would be like, did not include any of the pain, strife, loneliness, and stress that she was now living. She describes how it felt during the past two years and what she told Andy:

Well, it’s stressful and I would let go at times and just start crying and I would tell him, “I’m really not happy; I’m really upset; I’m flailing around here; I’m losing my identity,” but what I really wanted to say is, “This relationship isn’t working;
It’s starting to not work.” (5.2.5; Michele, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

Michele explains that she was going through an identity crisis. Not only had she recently grown in new directions and come into herself as a woman, but she was also contemplating what it would mean to no longer be one-half. She had become one-half of a partnership with the man she thought was her soul mate and it baffled her to consider what it might be like to be a whole again.

After months of crying, heart ache, and loneliness, Michele was tired—tired from vehemently trying to maintain the relationship; tired of feeling the hurt from his neglect; tired of all the battles; tired of being with someone who didn’t want to see her grow. She explained:

You know, you just get tired. And it starts to really affect how you feel about somebody when you’re constantly in an emotional battle with them. (5.1.6; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

The constant feuding made it difficult for her feelings not to steadily wither away. There were some red flags that made it apparent to her that her feelings just weren’t the same anymore. She described how her change in attitude about having sex was a red flag:

I knew something was going wrong when I started to think, “Well, got that over with,” instead of looking forward to it. And that was really tough. I just felt like I was performing a duty all the way around. (5.1.5; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele had begun to feel like sex was just another one of her many duties. It had become grouped together with housework, dinner parties, and pretending like everything was great in front of others. She did her best to avoid being intimate with him, which created quite a climate change in the house:

There were a lot of times when I felt like I was walking on eggshells to try and maintain and to try to mitigate the tension that was resulting as a result of the lack of intimacy. (5.2.6; Michele, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

It was depressing for Michele to know that her marriage had reached this point where even sex felt like a job. Secretly dreading and avoiding being intimate with Andy was like a new low. This is when she knew that her pain and exhaustion was actually disaffection.

Disaffection, as Kayser and Rao (2006) explain, is the loss of affection and love for your partner. Michele had fallen out of love with Andy and her disposition had changed completely. Disaffection is not only the loss of warmth, but also a decline in efforts to
resolve disagreements and repair the relationship. This notion was reflected in the way she describes her response to conflict changing:

So it just became one thing after another and then I started feeling this cold distance. It was like, “Well I guess I’m not going to fight a fight with you about this either.” And then you just stop battling, because you’re just too tired, and then you give up. And you saw it. And I tried over and over and over again to talk to him about it. (5.1.7; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele explained her lack of hope, motivation, and energy to continue fighting. This aligns closely with how Kayser and Rao (2006) describe disaffection as the replacement of confrontation and conflict with feelings of estrangement and apathy. Her exhaustion and change of heart eventually led her to withdraw:

But all these, what seems like minor battles, just start to come together and I just couldn’t fight it anymore. I was like, “This can’t be the rest of my life. I’m only 44.” (5.1.6; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele talks about the moment of realization she had about what her future would resemble: potentially the longest war in history. It wasn’t just one fight, or just one disagreement, but rather a series of disappointments and battles extended over time. She put up her best fight for a long time, but eventually there came a point in which she had to decide if she wanted to die at war or to retreat. Michele knew that she couldn’t fight anymore, so if she stayed she would have to sacrifice her needs, desires, and who she wanted to be. She was not willing to die at war, and retreating from battle meant leaving with her dignity and identity still in tact.

Michele’s decision to retreat completely, both emotionally and physically, was further solidified by her desire to withdraw sexually. She explains how this aspect of the relationship brought her clarity to make the decision to leave:

And then it got to a point where it just seemed like there was no other option, like it was something that I had to do because I just didn’t want to have sex with him anymore. I just wasn’t there emotionally and it’s really important for me to be there emotionally to be physical with somebody, and it was like, “I just can’t do this.” I remember the last time we had sex and I was like, “I can never do this again; I just can’t do this anymore,” and I left right after. (5.2.7; Michele, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

When it became too difficult for her to be intimate in bed, it became even more evident to her how emotionally disengaged and disaffected she was. One evening shortly after this, Andy expressed to her outside on the back deck of a friend’s house:
You’re not sexual with me, you’re not affectionate with me, you’re not there for me emotionally or physically anymore. (5.1.12; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

After spending all of dinner feeling his hostile glares burn through her, Michele finally told him when they got home:

I don’t want to be married anymore. (5.1.12; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Andy woke up the next morning wishing it were all just a nightmare. While he processed the devastating news and began grieving, Michele was actually experiencing a much different emotion: relief.

I mean, his heart’s broken and, see the thing is, I’ve done my grieving already. I’ve been grieving for the last two years. (5.1.11; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele had already experienced the heartbreak and grief during the two years of efforts, neglect, and battles. After finally breaking it off with Andy and asking him for a divorce, however, it was like the suffering was over. She explained:

I felt—at after I told him—relieved. It was incredible. Sure, things hurt, but the relief of just finally being able to be myself again, maybe it’s all worth it. (5.2.7; Michele, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

The heaviest weight felt like it had been lifted from her shoulders. Her health even improved and after not being able to sleep for two years, she was finally able to sleep through the night again. Now the last bit of sweet relief for her was to be able to resign from performing the role of Andy’s happy wife. She knew there would be some backlash about the news, but she did not anticipate all of the different reactions and ripples that it would cause.

The “Coming Out”

Something that makes Michele’s story so unique is that she is able to talk about the social aspect of divorce. When I first met with Michele, she was still living with Andy, but by our second interview she had moved out. It came as a complete shock to their friends and family because she kept her disaffection from them. She explains how well she performed her role as Andy’s happy wife:

Nobody would have thought. Things were perfectly normal because I hid things so well and I maintained the status quo really well and was very accommodating and was the perfect wife. I kept the social wheels turning; I kept the house immaculate; I took care of the dry cleaning and the laundry and the shopping. I
Michele describes why no one around her suspected that she was going through an identity crisis, feeling disaffected, or thinking about retreating from battle. She didn’t feel like it was fair to Andy to tell anyone about their marital issues, so partly out of her own uncertainty but also out of respect for him, she kept how she was feeling private. Once she decided on leaving and broke up with him, it was time to “come out” to her friends and family. She explains what it meant to “come out” and how the people in their circle reacted:

I just totally tore the most ginormous hole in the social fabric. I’ve had people emailing me, “Please! What are you doing? You have to reconsider! You guys had the best relationship, I modeled my relationship after yours,” and I’m like, “That just shows you what people see and how much you can hide.” (5.1.14; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele compares the effects of her “coming out” to ripping a massive hole in an otherwise seamless fabric and also to dropping a bomb. These metaphors are interesting because, not only do they allude to conceptions of rupture, destruction, and despair, but they also position her as the villain and everyone else as the victims. Even though Michele secretly suffered for two years and her life was being turned completely upside down, her decision to leave somehow resulted in her vilification.

From Michele’s perspective, instead of carefully unstitching, she just completely destroyed the fabric. It violated the expectations of everyone around her and created both panic and disbelief. As people scrambled to patch up the hole, they desperately urged Michele not to go through with the divorce. They were terrified of the uncertainty that this news created in their lives. The marriage they greatly admired and thought, with confidence, was strong, happy, and on the right track, was all of a sudden dissolving before their eyes. Their assumptions about reality were being disproved and this brought into question the accuracy of their other assumptions—including ones about their own marriages. Michele’s social circle might have felt uneasy about their social circle changing, but of greater concern became: What else could I be wrong about? What else is at risk of dissolving? Essentially, she was disrupting people’s notions of stability and, therefore, interrupting their perceived sense of security that they derived from the continuity around them.

Michele was confounded by how perplexed people felt about why the news came as such a shock. They did not understand how someone who seemed so happily married could
possibly be ready for divorce. As shocked and confused as they were, Michele was even more befuddled that anyone would expect the situation to be any different. She remarks:

> What am I supposed to do? Walk around like, “I’m really upset and I’m contemplating divorce?” People don’t do that. Of course it’s a shock, you dumbass! I mean, what are you thinking? I know I just threw him a big party, what was I supposed to do? I didn’t know then that I was going to leave! I was contemplating it! I’m not going to screw up his 60th. (5.1.14; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele was following social norms, respecting her husband’s privacy, and keeping the peace because she sincerely had not come to a decision yet about staying or leaving.

After people got over their initial sense of shock and panic and finally accepted what was happening, their next response was expressing social support. Interestingly, however, Michele did not receive the support she expected because, once again, she became vilified. She reflects on what she noticed during this stage:

> And it’s interesting because as the relationship has fallen apart he’s gotten a ton of support because I’m the one who’s leaving and I’ve gotten very little. But I’m the one who drove everything, the whole social piece; I was the social glue that held everybody together. We threw more parties than anyone, more dinner parties, I coordinated more fun stuff, and really thought I was developing all of these meaningful relationships with people—no not so much. And that’s an interesting component in all of this; they’re all rallying around him because he’s been left. But they’re also rallying around him because they think I’m leaving them, and—that sense of change—people are terrified of what I’m doing. And there’s nothing to be done. I knew there would be fall-out because of this and I’m going to accept it and move on and a year from now things will be better. (5.1.5; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele talks about the abandonment she felt after realizing the people she had grown close to were choosing sides. Her friends were constructing the break-up as an oppositional relationship between the “leaver” and the “left.” Michele, on the other hand, was interpreting the break-up as a sad, yet, dignified and respectful ending to the romantic piece of an otherwise great relationship that remains intact.

One interesting and unexpected result that came from her break-up, however, was how many people were compelled to divulge their own marital problems to her. Michele’s news was groundbreaking in her circle and it actually did break the ice for others to come forward and share their own struggles. She describes how others began confiding in her:

> But here’s what did come out of this. People started creeping forward with their, “Yeah we almost got a divorce” story and “Oh my relationship is miserable” and
“Oh I was thinking about leaving my husband” and “Oh my god, I know we’ve been married for 35 years but I think I’m going to get out.” Really? Interesting. See, you scratch the surface of any relationship, and I always say, something comes up under your fingernails. It’s a disgusting little metaphor but it’s so true. There’s something. They’re just not all perfect, not by any stretch. (5.1.15; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele understands that even though some people may have vilified her, there are still many others—maybe even some of those same people—who also greatly admire her courage and exalt her as a kind of heroine. So many people choose to stay, and she can relate to them. As she reflects back on the process of negotiating whether she should stay or leave, she began to understand why so many people decide to stay even though they feel disaffected. She explains:

People are complacent. And as I was going through this I started to understand why people don’t get divorced. It’s expensive and it’s so much easier. You can keep your social network, you can do all this stuff. So what you’re miserable? You’re safe! You’re comfortable! You have stuff! Right? You have things! You built this together! So what if you hate each other’s guts? (5.1.15; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele can relate to how overwhelming the thought of tearing everything apart and completely rebuilding can be for people. The fall-out from divorce is substantial, especially when there are kids involved and you have to worry about how a divorce would force them to adjust and rebuild also. Even though she understands why people stay, she feels confidently that she made the right decision for herself.

Even though Michele felt extremely alone for the past two years, she doesn’t anymore. Also, she has now made it possible for the women and men in her life—who have their own doubts, are disaffected from their partner, or are contemplating whether to stay or leave—to not have to feel alone either.

It’s Been a Great Ride

Although she is still going through her divorce, Michele feels a great sense of relief and rejuvenation knowing that she has already faced and weathered the roughest part of the storm. As she reflects back on her marriage with Andy, she feels lucky, appreciative, and joyful about the first 12 years. They shared 12 strong years of marriage together, and she would not take it back. Even though she got married with the hope and intention of staying
married to one person for the rest of her life, she still feels extremely lucky to have shared a happy, healthy, and fulfilling relationship with Andy for 12 years. She reflects by saying:

But I think the perspective I have on this is: we had a great ride, for a long time. We had an almost 20-year relationship. Why should I be sad, upset, and pissed off? Some people’s relationships don’t even last beyond 6 months. It is what it is, we’re at a different stage in our life, we are going to go in different directions, we’ll be friends, we’ll both find somebody else—that I don’t doubt—the relationship is still there but the romantic piece is no longer in existence, and I’m sorry your heart is broken, I’ll always love you. (5.1.13; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele uses the metaphor of “a great ride” to make sense of her marriage and to capture the sense of nostalgia she feels about all of their great years together. They had a great ride. Even though they each had hoped to stay on the ride together for the rest of their lives, there were some irreparable mechanical issues that made the ride too unpleasant to stay on. Eventually the ride started jerking around instead of riding smoothly like it used to, and even though it only bothered Michele, if the only other person on the ride with you is miserable then eventually it will affect so many aspects of the ride that it becomes impossible for the other person to enjoy it either. Michele was ready to get off of a two-person ride that Andy could not ride alone.

Michele is sentimental about their happy years together and even though their marriage is ending, there is not one thing about their ride together that she regrets. I ask her what she wishes she could have done differently in her marriage and she answers with great poise:

Nothing; it is what it is and you know what? It evolved the way it was supposed to and there’s no way I could have changed its outcome. I went to the place I went, he stayed in the place he’s in and that’s all that happened. (5.2.10; Michele, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

Michele has accepted that it is unfortunate that it could not last longer, but nobody is to blame and she certainly does not look back at the past 14 years with disappointment and bitterness. She explains:

We had a great run. . . . I was with somebody for 17 years . . . that’s a very enduring relationship and we’re still friends. (5.2.10; Michele, personal communication, June 11, 2012)
Michele is pleased with the time they did spend together and cannot deny how much happiness and knowledge she has derived from their relationship. She assures me that if she could go back that she would still choose to marry Andy:

I have grown so much in this relationship, how can I negate this experience and talk negatively? I mean, I’m giving you the reasons we broke up but by and large I got lucky. (5.1.20; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

So, you know, is divorce a bad thing? No, I think it gets a bad rap. It can be terrible if it’s war of the roses, but it can also be, like you said, relationships help you grow, and they can be some of the most meaningful growing experiences of your life. (5.1.25; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele’s perspective of their marriage is positive and she is appreciative of how much she has learned and grown in the process. She explains that marriages ending in divorce do not necessarily signify poor decision making by the individuals for choosing to get married in the first place. Certainly some people do exit their marriages with those sentiments, but not all marriages that end with divorce are mistakes. She feels strongly about the value of having long-term, fulfilling relationships. After listening to her point, I definitely understood her point. It is interesting to consider how many wonderful relationships that had a great ride, even though they did not last, might not have reached their full potential without such a high level of commitment.

Aside from comparing her marriage to “a great ride,” she also explains her hopes for the future with Andy. Michele explains that the fact that they have always respected each other makes it easy for them to remain friends. No matter how many battles they had or how angry they were, they never name-called or said mean things to purposely hurt the other. Even though it has only been a couple of weeks since she moved out, she explains how they are already adapting to the change. When we met up for our second interview she had just finished having Andy over for dinner in her new apartment. She is happy with where they are now and is confident that they will remain lifelong friends. Michele explains her plans for divorce and how Andy is adjusting:

We haven’t filed for divorce yet; I’m giving him that time and he said, he looked at me the other day and he goes, “I’ve accepted this.” It is good. (5.2.11; Michele, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

Michele is happy that Andy is slowly coming to peace with their marriage ending because she wants him to be happy as well. She is confident that they each will move on and find fulfilling relationships. She explains what her expectations are going forward:
To remain friends, to continue to respect each other, so eventually I’ll file for divorce, we’ll reach a settlement, I’ll buy a house, and maybe someday I’ll get married again. I don’t know. (5.2.11; Michele, personal communication, June 11, 2012)

Since Michele has already grieved the relationship, she is now at a point where she feels hopeful about the possibilities in her future. Her booming social life is a testament to how ready she is to move forward, grow, meet new people, and develop new relationships.

She is still in question about whether or not she would marry again, not because she is against marriage, but because she is just unsure if marriage is something that is for her in particular. She knows that she needs and embraces change, she desires romance and passion, and that marriage is often a recipe for the exact opposite of that. She shares with me her beliefs about marriage and potential strategies for pursuing marriage:

I’d be hesitant to recommend it to anybody else but I see wonderful long enduring marriages, I would recommend it but I would temperate with this: make sure your expectations are going to be met, and have those conversations before. And we did, I think we had great conversations prior but know yourself before you ever decide to commit to somebody else. So, you know, getting married at 20, I probably wouldn’t recommend it. (5.1.19; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

She emphasizes the importance of having a strong sense of self before committing to a life alongside another person. Part of knowing yourself means knowing what you want, don’t want, what bothers you, and what makes you happy. If you don’t know yourself well enough to have figured out these key points, then you might consider just how well the person you are with can possibly know you either. Asking the right questions of the other person is critical, but it is also hopeful to assume that they have a strong enough sense of self to be able to offer a somewhat accurate answer. Even if that person does happen to have a strong sense of self, still, identities are in constant flux and there is no guarantee that their answers won’t change over time. Michele explains how this gamble works:

Because the fact of the matter is, we do change and we do grow and we do evolve. Sometimes the preview is better than the movie, and it’s a longgg ass movie to watch. (5.1.20; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele compares getting to know someone to watching the preview of a movie. Even though you may like what you see in the preview, oftentimes the movie does not live up to the expectations for thrill or action that the preview set forth. Similarly, in relationships people spend time getting to know one another and assumptions are made about what a
future relationship with that person would be like. Unfortunately, there is always a risk for disenchantment. Overall, Michele is a proponent of marriage, but she does not think it is for everyone and that it should be pursued with caution.

Michele is uniquely positioned to talk about her perspective on marriage. Having experienced both sides of the coin—a happy and an unhappy marriage—she is able to reflect on all that she has learned and offer practical guidance for how to make a marriage work. She was able to share her perspective and illuminate strategies for maintaining a relationship, beginning with describing her friends’ marriage as a functional model:

They have been married for I think for about ten years; they agreed they wanted three kids, maybe four. She might have another one if she wants to be pregnant. They travel because they love it; they have a date night every week, no kids, and they travel without the kids. They moved here from Minneapolis and stayed here nine months, and they’re going to move back and split the time. I think they’re going to end up splitting the time between San Diego and Minneapolis. She’s committed to seeing pretty much the entire world, and so is he. It’s awesome, but they agreed. And then they go see a counselor every five years, just to tweak it. And they’ve had their ups and downs, but still really romantic, still have really great sex. And they’re still three kids later and ten years in, but they made certain agreements. And one of those agreements was change. (5.1.24-25; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)

Michele explains how her friends have developed strategies for maintaining their own relationship, such as making it a priority to spend quality time together, travel, seeking outside help, and sustain a certain level of change in their lives. These strategies are effective in fostering growth, stimulating romance, and renewing interest in their marriage. Although this model is specific to people who share similar values in a relationship, she emphasizes that the reason it works so well is because their needs are in agreement. Ultimately, being in agreement about what you want out of the relationship is the key overarching strategy for building a strong and fulfilling marriage. Michele elaborates further on how to implement this strategy:

Codify the relationship. It’s an agreement really. . . . And if you’re actually entering into a long-term agreement with somebody, you better be in alignment. I don’t think I codified everything but there were a lot of things I didn’t know. It was my first really serious relationship so you learn along the way. . . . But it’s an agreement, and you better agree. Honestly, if and when I ever do get married next time, I’m writing it all down. . . . “This is what I want, this is what you want, do we agree?” (5.1.25-26; Michele, personal communication, May 31, 2012)
She explains one way of assuring you and your partner are in agreement is by coding your needs, desires, and expectations and actually comparing them side-by-side. Her strategy moving forward is to have better questions, better answers, and, most importantly, a greater sense of self.

After looking at all five participants’ journeys, our definitions and understandings of marital disaffection are left both informed in some ways, while complicated in others. With some of these women’s experiences seeming unimaginable, we are pushed to want to understand and further the discussion more. Although there are an indefinite amount of different potential trajectories, these five have offered enough data to draw some overarching conclusions about the knowledge that can be gained from it. What kind of patterns can be seen across all of the stories? What have we learned from these women’s experiences? How can this knowledge be summarized and passed along to young women and men?
CHAPTER 4

COMPLEXITIES OF MARITAL DIAFFECTION

As I sit in the same coffee shop where this project made, not its first step, but its first giant stride forward, it is surreal to now be commencing the final chapter. Sitting in my favorite spot in the café, I was sunk into—what even gained a nickname over this writing process as—“le couch.” It was one of the more comfortable places for spending hours analyzing, typing, and reflecting. The reason I say this coffee shop is where my project took its first stride is because it is where I interviewed my first participant, Elizabeth, for the very first time. Listening to her journey was incredibly insightful, inspiring, and thought-provoking, especially as a first interview. Her story confirmed my interest and devotion to completing this thesis.

As I reflect back on beginning this research process here, I am interrupted when my attention is suddenly drawn to a man who just spilled his entire fresh cup of coffee down his arm. None of the employees noticed the mess to come and help wipe up the spill. The man embarrassingly grabbed piles of napkins and knelt down to dry the floor while occasionally holding his bright-red arm in pain. Nobody looked up from their laptops or books, and nobody offered to help. I asked, “Are you okay? Is your arm okay?” He responded, “I think so; it’s burned. This is so embarrassing.” When he returned from washing his arm off in the bathroom, he said, “Thank you for your concern, ya know, asking if I was okay. They wouldn’t even give me a new coffee.” We continued talking about the particular employee who is the only cold one out of an otherwise friendly and outgoing staff. He was about to just go home to study when, sort of as a last question, he casually asked, “So what are you working on?” I told him what disaffection meant and explained that I had interviewed women on the subject for my thesis. He immediately reached behind him, stole a chair from a table, and sat facing me.

Call it a coincidence, or even count it as one of the “interesting people” it seems we always meet at coffee shops, but either way, it couldn’t have been a more fateful encounter. His wife had just left him because she “fell out of love” with him. They were married for
two years and are still waiting for the divorce to be finalized. As he began sharing with me her reasons for falling out of love and then explaining his side, it felt like I was having déjà vu. He explained that he had decided to grow his hair out, dress in clothes that were more retro, and drive an old but classic car. He definitely had a retro style to him, but it suited him well. His wife, however, began feeling like he was degenerating and trying to become a child of the 70’s at age 25. I thought, “Wow, this sounds freakishly similar to Michele’s description of Andy.” He was really opening up to me, and that’s when he moved from the chair he was sitting in over to the couch I was on. He told me, “It began to feel like her love for me was not only conditional, but it was conditional upon me changing my appearance and style. I don’t mind making gradual changes for her but it felt like I had to change in order to earn her love.” Hearing from the male’s perspective, who is the other half of the equation, was such an auspicious occurrence. It made me feel like, as I write this closing chapter, I am not actually finishing this project at all.

I started out reflecting on my own examples of marriage and reading as much as I could about it in the literature. After finally arriving at two research questions, I was able to map out a plan of study for how I could build knowledge and theory about the process of disaffection. Recruiting participants and collecting a series of interviews with each one led to an enormous amount of rich data to be analyzed and presented.

In this final chapter I’d first like to talk about what conclusions I was able to draw from the results of this research; there are certainly some things I know now that I didn’t know before. Then I’d like to connect these conclusions back to theory with a discussion of theoretical implications, along with the implications that would be of practical use. Third, I’ll share some of the limitations of this study and the directions for future research. Finally, I’ll share some personal reflections and what it means to me to complete this research process.

CONCLUSIONS

After reflecting back on my analysis, I was able to draw four main conclusions from the data. First, I will present and explain a model I constructed to represent the complex and complicated nature of my findings. Second, I will highlight parts of the model that reveal fascinating similarities among my participants. Third, I will discuss the findings that reveal
adaptations to the model that better capture the new understandings of disaffection this research revealed. Fourth, I will discuss what we can conclude about the different kinds of trajectories of disaffection.

**Modeling Disaffection and Identity Adjustment**

After analyzing the interview data, I was able to map out the sense that could be made of the process of both disaffection and adjustment for married women. Figure 1 is an organized representation of some of the key concepts that the interviews produced collectively. Some of the clear patterns that seem to characterize women’s overall experiences of marriage and disaffection include: (a) the desire to negotiate a shared marital schema, (b) a period when continuous efforts are met with (c) disappointment, (d) the development of relational management strategies, (e) a sense of emotional disengagement that often occurs simultaneously with (f) an individual sense of awakening, that leads to a process of searching for new meaning and support through (g) self-construction/reflection and (h) social activities, (i) identity adjustment, (j) the development of strategies for managing their stress and navigating their realities, and (k) finally the construction of new relational and individual identities. These are the emergent themes that I identified as being reflected as the process of disaffection in both the participants’ own voices and the analysis.

None of the women’s journeys fit perfectly into the model, however each woman’s perspective is represented here, depending on where she is in her trajectory or how she negotiates living with her disaffection. While there are important parts of each woman’s experience that do fit with the model, the parts that deviate or misalign are incredibly noteworthy also.

This model can be divided into three main stages to describe the process of disaffection: marital negotiation, identity negotiation, and management. Each stage includes defined relationships between key theoretical constructs. These relationships are supported through the data and additionally through the literature.

**Marital Negotiations**

The first stage of the model, *Marital Negotiations*, contains four main constructs: (a) schema negotiations, (b) continuous efforts, (c) multiple disappointments, and (d) relational management strategies. This beginning stage identifies how couples work to merge and
negotiate roles and schemas as an, “attempt to achieve a mutually acceptable form of involvement” (Duck, 1982, pp. 10-11). As couples integrate their lives together, they engage in a process of adjustment, adaptation, and collaboration in order to negotiate how social networks, financial resources, and routines will be managed. In addition to these practical negotiations, couples are also faced with negotiating their individual ideas, such as about marriage, intimacy, divisions of labor, children, and conflict, as they become increasingly pertinent to their relationship.

As their marital schemas misalign, women make efforts, requests, and raise concerns in order to correct for the discrepancy between what they desire and their actual dynamics in their relationship. In Ashley’s case, she made requests and raised concerns by asking her partner to help with housework and to contribute more financially. For Nancy, this meant telling her partner:

**Figure 1. Model of the process of marital disaffection and identity adjustment.**
I don’t need material things but I need time; I need someone to be with me.  
(3.1.2; Nancy, personal communication, December 2, 2011)

When their partners or the behaviors they hoped for in their relationships did not reflect these desired changes, women learned to cope with the disappointment they felt about the relationship.

For Elizabeth and Katrina, these relational management strategies meant making excuses for their partners, engaging in self-blame, sacrificing their own needs and desires, and withholding grievances. For example, Elizabeth’s excuses for her husband were:

“If he were home,” and, “If he got a good night’s sleep” then he wouldn’t just do that. (1.1.13; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

These excuses were her way of coping with her unmet needs in the relationship. In both Elizabeth’s and Ashley’s accounts they expressed their willingness to make sacrifices for the relationship, but did not anticipate being the only one. For example, Ashley recalled that:

Whenever we got married I had to give up a lot of what made me happy, to sacrifice to kind of make our household. (4.1.3; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

These examples demonstrate the two main functions that coping serves for women in this model: to compensate for their unfulfilled expectations or needs and to maintain the relationship. Relational management strategies, in this model, refers to the disempowering, and sometimes self-destructive methods that women utilize to maintain relational harmony and satisfy their partners. This stage of the model is a recurring cycle for women, who make continuous efforts to achieve a mutually satisfying marital schema, experience multiple disappointments, and develop strategies for relational maintenance.

**IDENTITY NEGOTIATIONS**

The second stage of the model, *Identity Negotiations*, includes (e) emotional disengagement, (f) awakening, (g) social support, and (h) self-construction/reflection. These theoretical constructs are interrelated with how the women negotiate their identities while disaffected.

**Emotional Disengagement**

First, as the cycle of effort and disappointment persists and the women’s relational management strategies are no longer appeasing, feelings of frustration, hurt, and injustice
mount up until the women are pushed to emotionally disengage from the relationship. Emotional disengagement is conceptualized in this model by triangulating the three concepts of relational distancing, withdrawal, and burnout. In the model, the construct of emotional disengagement signifies a range of relational distance in which the women may experience a noticeable decrease in closeness and emotional intimacy to a complete loss of interest in repairing the relationship.

Second, the concept of emotional disengagement is further explained by two different levels of withdrawal: intimacy avoidance and conflict avoidance. These forms of withdrawal can be described as a decrease in attentiveness to the partner, interest in engaging in conflict, and investment to repair the relationship (Gottman, 1994; Roberts, 2000). Kersten (1990) developed a Marital Disaffection Scale that includes items for measuring levels of withdrawal. Participants were asked to rate items on a scale ranging from 1 (not true at all) to 4 (very true) on items such as, “I feel little, if any, desire to have sex with my spouse,” and, “I try to avoid spending time with my spouse.” These items accurately reflect the patterns of withdrawal in which Elizabeth, Katrina, Nancy, Ashley, and Michele all identify feeling—some occasionally and others continuously.

Third, emotional disengagement is given further definition in its comparison to burnout, or emotional exhaustion (Erickson, 1993). All of the women in this study experienced a sense of emotional exhaustion from the relationship. Collectively, relational distance, withdrawal, and burnout each contribute to a crystallized conceptualization of emotional disengagement. Each aspect of the construct is evident in the experiences shared by participants. For Elizabeth, when she emotionally disengaged from the marriage she experienced a complete loss of hope and desire for her partner to change and for the marriage to work. In Nancy’s case, she gave up trying to convince her husband to make more time for her and actually moved out of the house. Elizabeth felt drained from constantly being disappointed but making excuses for why her husband was not emotionally connected; Katrina was tired of being hurt repeatedly by her husband’s verbal abuse; Michele was tired of feeling neglected and fatigued from the constant battling.
Awakening

The next construct in the model is *Awakening*, which occurs alongside disengagement, and refers to the sense of relief, realization, and independence that is gained as women unburden themselves from the cycle of pain and disappointment. For Elizabeth, Katrina, Nancy, and Michele, the decision to stop devoting so much effort into trying to please their partner and change the relationship was mentally, physically, and emotionally freeing. That release actually freed up space for exploring new meanings and possibilities for their identities. M. P. Johnson (1982) explains how certain conditions of ambiguity are created that enable opportunities for a renewed sense of self-control. For Elizabeth, her thoughts at this juncture were:

I realized I just let who I was go. I didn’t value what I thought because I didn’t think it was the right thing anyways. (1.1.14; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

Social Support and Self-Construction/Reflection

The next constructs in the model, *Social Support* and *Self-Construction/Reflection*, work as reflexive moderating factors between the disengagement and awakening process and identity adjustment. Social support and self-construction/reflection each facilitated the development and growth of participants’ identities. Social support in the form of companionship, encouragement, sympathy, affection, comfort, advice, and affirmation (Hirsch, 1980) is critical in both mobilizing individuals’ psychological resources to defeat emotional dilemmas (Caplan, 1974) and also legitimating new self-understandings (O’Grady, 2005).

MANAGEMENT

The third stage in the model is known as *Management* and includes (a) identity adjustment, (b) identity management strategies, and (c) identity reconstruction.

Identity Adjustment

First, as a product of the disengagement and awakening, and as facilitated by social support and self-construction, women experienced *Identity Adjustment*. This relationship is supported by Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (2004) claim that, “People who report growth must
disengage, or give up, certain goals and basic assumptions, at the same time persisting in an attempt at building new schemas, goals, and meanings” (p. 9). This kind of growth was seen across the board in all of the participants for this study. One way that Elizabeth grew was by finding new meanings as she questioned her assumptions and beliefs about marriage, love, happiness, divorce, and religious faith. Nancy also questioned her beliefs about marriage and divorce. As they disengaged from the unattainable goals in their marriages they were able to construct and invest in realizable goals. Although these women experienced growth, this construct is labeled *Identity Adjustment* to include all of the ways their identities and roles changed or adapted in light of their disaffection, instead of necessarily growing.

**Management Strategies**

Second, through this new growth women were then able to develop strategies for managing their disaffection in their everyday lives. These *Management Strategies* are ways in which participants were able to navigate their disaffection, rather than simply cope with it. Elizabeth, Katrina, and Michele identified both marital and individual therapy as strategies for maneuvering how to live with disaffection. Other strategies included reading self-help literature, participating in seminars, exercise, journaling, investing more at work, and drawing clear lines in their relationships. The strategies participants developed were ways in which they were able to gain voice, build strength, and reconstruct their identities.

**Identity Reconstruction**

The last construct in the model is *Identity Reconstruction* and this refers to the renewed sense of agency and empowerment that women experience. This was evident in talking with the women who have undoubtedly gained a remarkable amount of knowledge, wisdom, confidence, and clarity in their lives. As abstract and multifaceted as it may seem, Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) are able to offer an idea of the kind of growth that these participants embodied when they describe it as, “The ability to balance reflection and action, weigh the known and the unknowns of life, be better able to accept some of the paradoxes of life, and to more openly and satisfactorily address the fundamental questions of human existence” (p. 21). Participants, regardless of their marital outcome, were all able to remark on the new understandings, perspectives, and wisdom that they have acquired along their journey.
Additional Patterns

The model represents a way of visually representing how women experience disaffection. However, the experience of disaffection is more complex than the model can capture because although there are some patterns among women’s experiences, there are similarities and differences between participants that do not fit within the structure of this model. I will highlight two unique similarities among the women’s stories that were not represented in the current model: signs in the first year of marriage and identity development as a potential factor during the Marital Negotiations stage.

First, the number of years that the women in this sample were married ranged between one full year and 26 years. This range was extremely broad but it allowed for an interesting discovery about the first year of marriage. As I spoke with Elizabeth, who has been married for 26 years, Katrina, who has been married for 12 years, and Ashley, who has been married for one year, I was surprised to hear very similar accounts about the beginning stages of marriage for them. Elizabeth, Katrina, and Ashley all reflect back on the beginning and recall how they went out of their way to fulfill their partners’ needs and make them happy. For Elizabeth this meant focusing on tasks, reaching goals, and moving over to his way of doing things. For Katrina this meant spoiling her husband with kind gestures like delivering homemade lunches to his job on her bike. For Ashley this meant waking up with her husband every morning at 5:00 to cook him breakfast and pack his lunch. As their stories continue, all three suggest that their acute attentiveness to making their husbands happy backfired on them.

Elizabeth later felt like she had neglected and sacrificed her own needs and desires to fully focus on and accommodate his, which he was content with. This resulted not only in exhaustion from trying to keep up with his way of doing things, but also feeling neglected and disappointed that he was not attending to her needs. Katrina felt like she had been so accommodating and attentive that when she began working full-time and could no longer do those nice things, nothing she did was ever good enough. She had set an ideal that was not only unrealistic, but also never reciprocated. Ashley, who believes in more traditional gender roles and enjoys taking care of her husband, was surprised by the issues that her kindness created in their marriage. It didn’t matter if Ashley had worked an eight-hour shift and then attended her six-hour night class right after, when she got home at 10:00 at night her husband
would still ask her what she was making for dinner. Her husband got to work-out everyday and on the weekends he trained, played video games, and hung out with his friends. Ashley, on the other hand, had piles of laundry to do, grocery shopping, vacuuming, bathrooms to clean, and meals to cook. She resented the fact that she sacrificed all of her time for personal hobbies, like going to the gym, to maintain the house while her husband got to stay the same.

These patterns are critical to note because there is clearly something going on as couples integrate their lives together, in which only the women, in particular, seem to feel naturally inclined to make sacrifices to enrich their marriage and please their partner. Although this pattern falls under the stage in which couples negotiate a mutually acceptable marital schema, it provides more depth and insight into how this negotiation process commonly occurs.

The second pattern that emerged from the data refers to the identity development of women before they have emotionally disengaged from the relationship. I found that in some cases, the women’s identity development was not just a response to the disaffection. For Michele and Katrina, establishing themselves outside of the relationship played a role in how they felt about their relationships. For Katrina, completing her Master’s degree, establishing her career, and excelling in both her professional and social lives, allowed her to feel stable and secure in her identity. In Michele’s case, her professional development led her to become CEO of a company for seven years. Excelling in her professional and personal endeavors enabled her to grow and gain confidence. For both of them, they were able to derive a greater sense of self and confidence from their accomplishments outside of the marriage.

Katrina felt confident and fulfilled in her professional and social roles, but realized the only place that needed work was her marriage. Katrina described it as realizing she was doing well in all the other areas of her life except for her marriage. Previously her attention and energy was being channeled into studying, setting up, and proving herself professionally. Her newfound stability allowed her to shift her attention towards her marriage. This was when she decided to seek therapy individually to try and figure it out.

Michele explained that the establishment of her career built her confidence and identity, but it was actually through her job loss that she began looking at her marriage more closely. Similar to Katrina, previously she had been so busy and consumed with other areas
of her life that she hadn’t had as much time to focus on her relationship. She recalls this time being a major turning point for her because once finally had time to think and reflect, she realized that something was missing.

In both cases, these turning points occurred three years ago and at a juncture in which they had strong identities. Neither of these women had emotionally disengaged at this point but had still developed a strong sense of self. Although their identities each continued to grow throughout their disaffection, this finding suggests that there may be a kind of identity development occurring earlier in the model that plays a role in the disaffection process.

**Trajectories of Disaffection**

One important conclusion to make about these narratives is that there is an identifiable pattern in each relationship giving a particular shape to their trajectory. Throughout the women’s narratives relates there are also different trajectories of disaffection. There are three main patterns of disaffection I saw among their trajectories: erosion, dialectic, and crisis. Erosion refers to the deterioration over time as the costs of the relationship accumulate over time. Elizabeth’s trajectory is most similar to the erosion trajectory in the sense that over time there is more and more damage accumulating, in which Elizabeth sees no relief or repair for. The dialectic shape refers to the constant moving back and forth in which the person experiences a wide range of emotion. Katrina’s trajectory is an example of this dialectic in which she has wonderful and great times but experiences anger and very dark feelings at other times. Lastly, the crisis trajectory is given shape by severe or unforeseen events occurring in the marriage that make it difficult for partners to recover from. Nancy’s relational trajectory was altered greatly by the news of her husband’s chronic illness, along with the stress of taking care of him for months. Each trajectory is characterized by intricate details and factors that are unique to the relationship, making it impossible to fully account for how women actually experience each trajectory. Trajectories are able to change in shape and pattern.

While choosing autonomy over interdependence may work for Ashley as a coping method for a certain period of time, it may also lead to erosive trajectory of disaffection over time. While there are some variations, the real claim is that this process of managing disaffection is so complex, there is no way to even begin to account for all of the
complexities that actually exist here. It is ever-changing longitudinally, while these narratives only capture or account for their interpretations, feelings, and understandings of their marriages at one place and one moment in their trajectory. Their narratives are in constant flux as they construct new meanings about their identities, relationships, the past, and their future.

Narratives for Staying or Leaving

While reading these narratives and identifying emergent patterns, it is evident that there are common ways of constructing what it means to stay married or what it means to leave. Reflecting on these narratives, there are certain cultural discourses that construct and reinforce a dominant narrative about: What is a good enough excuse to leave? We are able to listen to the ways in which women articulate why they stay. The narratives of our generation inform us that if he is a good person, a good man, a good father, or a good provider then these are reasons to stay, no matter what. Elizabeth, Katrina, Nancy, and Michele each expressed these are reasons to feel guilty about leaving, reasons to accept blame for breaking apart the family, and reasons for being framed a “bad person” or “villain” by others for leaving. Michele talks about how she was vilified for leaving her husband. Elizabeth fears being blamed or labeled as a bad person by all of the community members who would see her leaving a good father and a good Christian man. The reinforcements for why you should stay are different based on culture, ethnicity, class, and gender, however these are the reasons articulated by the women in this study.

Based on reasons for staying, what do we learn form these narratives about what is a good enough reason to get divorced? The socially acceptable justifications for divorce include physical abuse, drug abuse, or infidelity. Even still, though, these reasons are shaky. Although Katrina may have experience verbal or physical abuse, she is still constrained by social pressures and stigmas that would encourage her to keep that private from others, her daughter, and the authorities. Unless she wants to drag her family through a “shameful” divorce and custody battle, there is social pressure to keep her private life in the private domain.
THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

There are three main implications about theory that I would like to highlight. First, I’ll discuss how this model contributes to previous literature and models of disaffection. Second, interpreting these results through a feminist lens will illuminate further implications related to power and society. Third, there are critical implications about exit barriers preventing women from leaving.

Model Implications

First, the Model of Disaffection and Identity Negotiation seeks to forward our field’s thinking of the process of marital disaffection to encapsulate aspects of social support, identity adjustment, and management strategies. Previous models focus on the decision making process (Duck, 1982) or the breakdown phases leading up to dissolution (Duck, 1982), without lending attention to the other processes occurring simultaneously that work to facilitate, mediate, or construct new meanings. This model takes into account the chronicity of disaffection, which an individual could experience for a couple years or for the duration of their lives after being married. Women begin with coping in the first phase of the model, however eventually these methods prove inadequate in accounting for their partners’ behavior, the undesired dynamics of their marriage, or their chronic feelings of disappointment. Although living with disaffection is usually ridden with high levels of stress, anxiety, guilt, indecision, mourning, fear of loss, and brooding (Duck, 1982), there are also positive consequences that accompany this trauma to enable women to thrive. Enough of the population remains in low-quality marriages, even if they eventually dissolve, for communication scholars to study and understand how these women learn to live and manage to thrive under these circumstances.

Feminist Lens

The second key implication looks at how the results of this study relate to feminist theory. If we were to look at these findings through a feminist lens, we might take a look at the implications they have about power relations in our society. While interpreting these women’s narratives, it became apparent that their way of framing their experiences worked as a discursive practice for assigning meaning to events. Therefore, their framing drew upon culturally embedded discourses to interpret their experiences that may have worked to reify
existing power structures. Clair’s (1993) study identified framing devices in its examination of the subjugated group’s telling of organizational narratives of sexual harassment. Several of these framing devices were visible in the women’s stories of disaffection.

First, Denotative Hesitancy refers to being muted, limited, and dominated through vocabulary and definition. In Clair’s study women without legal expertise were less likely to use the term sexual harassment in their narratives. This is similar to Katrina, who talks about her husband’s behavior as aggressiveness, being mean, or violent, rather than using the terms verbal abuse, domestic abuse, or alcoholism.

Second, Public/private Expression/Public/Private Domain relates to whom a person shares their complaint with. This can also be compared to a cultural norm for silencing and keeping private all marital affairs. This contributes to why marital disaffection is so taboo for certain cultural groups to disclose or discuss among peers or even other family members in some cases. Keeping these marital issues in the dark works to reify the current individuation, devaluation, and isolation of women’s oppression by disaffection. The silence surrounding it also works to mystify marriage and marital issues on multiple levels, such as for the family, neighborhood, and society.

Third, Accepting Dominant Interest as Universal refers to accepting the organization’s interests as more important than their personal interests. This was also seen in the narratives of this study, for example Elizabeth described the family unit’s interests as more important than her own. Although she is suffering mentally, physically, and emotionally, she devalues herself and her interests by accepting responsibility for the family staying together. She expresses worry and guilt about tearing the family apart and feels guilty for jeopardizing her family’s happiness, cohesion, and harmony. Elizabeth and Michele both talk about overworking themselves trying to maintain the visage of a happy marriage and happy family for her children and community members, which reifies existing social pressures and power structures that work to prevent women from leaving.

Fourth, Trivialization was is the denial or invalidation of the experience and feelings. This occurred across most participants but particularly with Katrina and Ashley. Katrina describes the time she realized it was not okay to joke with her husband by saying “eff you” and how she chose to ignore his drinking habits:
But he turns around and gets so mad and yeah just like fired at me and I thought, “Oh okay, I guess I can’t say that. I guess that’s a transgression on my part.” But I didn’t expect that that wouldn’t be okay. So that was the very, very first time that I thought, “I’m not sure,” but I decided to pretend that it didn’t happen. (2.2.3; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

And getting drunk to him was just what you do when you get together and I discovered he was a really bad drunk. I kind of knew, I kind of knew but it was just another thing I chose to ignore. I kind of knew he was a little edgy when he’s drunk and I thought, “Oh, ya know, I just need to distract him a little and we’ll just go to sleep and tomorrow things will be better.” (2.2.5; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Although both occasions were early signs of an anger problem or verbal abuse, Michele trivialized these events by denying their significance. Ashley similarly trivialized her own marital issues and feelings by comparing herself to other hypothetical marriages:

I think one thing that keeps me holding on so much is like I’m sure other people have the same issues if not worse. So things that they have to deal with too and they found a way to deal with it. (4.1.12; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

By comparing her problems to other people who have worse issues, she is negating the significance and validity of her own experiences.

Ultimately, these framing devices are evidence of ways in which women participate in their own oppression. This notion is known as hegemony, or when one group’s leadership is dominant over another group through that group’s unconscious active participation (Clair, 1993). In this case, the dominant group is patriarchy’s privileged and dominant position that is maintained through hegemony. From a feminist perspective, one interpretation that emerges is that when women talk about their disaffection, they often frame it in a way that disempowers themselves and reifies the power structure. There is added complexity to these findings based on sex, gender, class, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and ethnicity in which we are unable to describe women or our culture as a whole.

Also, there is hegemony where these women are not necessarily choosing gender roles, marital schemas, and whether or not they want to stay or leave. Elizabeth is not necessarily choosing to stay, but she feels constrained and disempowered by the structures of her religion. Even though in many cases these dominant power structures are invisible to women because they have become complicit in their subjugation. Ashley, for example, is complicit by her beliefs in traditional gender roles:
I’m more traditional, so I think the wife should cook the food and do the laundry and all those things if she’s not working. I grew up with my dad mostly and towards the end of high school he remarried and I saw my step-mom do everything for my dad and that’s because she wasn’t working, and so I kind of liked that. (4.1.4; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

And I’m sure you enjoy cooking for him, because I love doing that for Josh, especially when we first got married, I loved playing that housewife role making him dinner, making him breakfast, making his lunch for him and go to work. And I really spoiled him. But it’s not realistic to keep up, and I think maybe it would have been if he would have helped out more. (4.1.15; Ashley, personal communication, April 12, 2012)

Even though Ashley was working and going to school, she was still expected to maintain the house and do all of the cooking. When she began feeling that the workload was not only too much, but also unilateral, she responded by “asking for help” from Josh around the house. The way she talked about asking for help, framed it in a way that denied his own personal responsibility for contributing equally to maintaining the house. Instead, her framing reified the dominant power structure in place that it was her responsibility and his help would be a favor instead of a duty, or that she is supposed to do most of it and that he should just help.

There are powerful social constructions, such as gender roles or social pressures to stay married, based on macro structures, such as religion, that become disempowering for women to actually choose. These women don’t have the power to recognize the embedded structures that are dictated by our culture. When you look at these results, while women are in the position of negotiating their disaffection, there is a hegemonic force that limits their ability to construct what they want to be.

**Exit Barriers**

In looking at the results and these women’s narratives I recognize that many of these women are describing exit barriers, such as limitations, constraints, structures, and pressures, that work to prevent them from leaving. As much as these women are articulating their sense of disaffection, and maybe even their desire to leave the relationship, there are a whole range of barriers that keep them there.

M. P. Johnson (1999) differentiates between three basic types of commitment: personal, moral, and structural. Structural commitment refers to an individual’s feeling that they have to continue a relationship because they are constrained by the social and economic costs of leaving. M. P. Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston (1999) operationalized this
conceptualization by developing the *Measurement of Components of Commitment* and included items that measured alternatives, social pressures, termination procedures, and irretreivable investments on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*). These components are helpful in identifying some of the economic and social structures that work as exit barriers for women in this study. For example, M. P. Johnson et al. (1999) highlight the approval of others, the legal and costly procedures of a divorce, custody battles for children, division of possessions, the search for new housing, and the financial burden of either going from dual to single income, or having to search for employment. These structural barriers were apparent in Katrina’s story when she expressed her fear and uncertainty about how she would ensure her own and her child’s economic stability:

> But then I think, “What am I going to do? How am I going to end this? And where am I going to go? I’m going to have to support myself. I’m going to have to find a place for me and my kid, have to go to court over who gets custody and, ya know, it scares me.” (2.2.7; Katrina, personal communication, December 3, 2011)

Ashley also talks about the economic constraints and termination procedures that prevent her from leaving:

> When I do think about leaving part of the reason I can’t is because of financial reasons and I’m here for school. There are a lot of things that fall in place here that I can’t just pick up and leave. I can’t just go back home to Texas. So I guess school and financial reasons, and we have our dogs now like that’s our kid, we have our house, we built a lot of things together, we have a lot of mutual stuff. It would just be so messy to break all of that apart. (4.3.1 Ashley, personal communication, April 19, 2012)

Social exchange theorists have also theorized about why unhappy marriages remain stable. Heaton and Albrecht (1991) identify several variables that contribute, and interestingly highlight the traditional division of household labor as a barrier or constraint because divorce would require *both* partners to alter their lifestyles drastically, unlike egalitarian marriages in which both partners already share financial and household responsibilities. They also identify promarriage values, assets, and ethnoreligious membership as barriers. A couple’s life course is also a factor; they state that the longer couples remain married, the more shared experiences and common resources accumulate between them. This factor offers insight into why Elizabeth’s marriage seems to be the most stable, despite having felt disaffection the longest. Educational and occupational achievement is also a variable they identify, stating that these advancements may lead to a
reevaluation or liberalization of personal values and beliefs about marital stability. Although there was a correlation between disaffection and personal beliefs, the direction of that relationship seemed to be reverse for some participants, such as Elizabeth’s disaffection triggered her to question her personally held values and beliefs about marriage. Based off of these theoretical implications there are also ways to think about them practically.

**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Of course there are some practical implications that can be drawn from this research. This section will focus on three practical implications. First, this study has practical implications for dating individuals who are considering marriage. Second, the findings in this research suggests that parents might consider how they socialize their children in terms of the roles they play in relationships and what they should consider about their own identity construction. Finally, it is clear from these findings that there are very few resources immediately recognizable and available to women and men when they begin to feel the disaffection that the women in this study describe.

**Identifying and Responding to Disaffection**

If I were to give a talk to young men and women at an organization, in the community, or on a college campus, having completed this study, there are a few things that stand out to me as practical pieces of advice that I would share with them. My first piece of advice is for people who are dating. Don’t wait until later in the relationship to ask the important questions. Be more diplomatic about who you allow yourself to catch feelings for. Think critically in the beginning because the number of people in the world that you could potentially fall in love with is far greater than the number of people you could potentially have a healthy and fulfilling relationship with. Therefore, take this into account so that you do not end up in love with someone who, in the long run, you are not compatible with or that you will clash with.

Find out if the person you are interested in has the same ideas about marriage, gender roles, conflict, children, and anything else you consider important to find in your lifelong partner, either on the first few dates or within the first couple months of dating. Waiting until things are already serious, until you have already developed strong feelings for one another, or until you have already made a big commitment to someone is not a good idea because it
disallows you to think critically about your compatibility. By the time you are that deep in, no matter what the incompatibility you are more likely to overlook it, make an exception, or assume an overly optimistic point of view rather than actually consider how it potentially may or may not become a point of contention in the future.

Think practically about responsibilities and contributions in the relationship. Even though you might be a compassionate, loving, generous, and altruistic person who enjoys doing things for others or does not mind making sacrifices for the person you love; a marriage is a lifetime commitment and inequality, no matter how little or how great, becomes increasingly manifest over time. There are many women, including Elizabeth, Katrina, Ashley, and Michele, who got married and are content with working a full-time job and carrying the brunt of labor in the house, but in time realized that they have set an unfair, unrealistic, and undesirable standard and expectation of themselves for the rest of their marriage. These women express regret about catering to and spoiling their husbands in the beginning because from their perspectives it was ever reciprocated, they are stressed out and exhausted by how physically and emotionally demanding maintaining both a job and housework is, and they now have the lower hand by having to ask their partner to change their comfortable lifestyle by accepting more responsibilities—and then hoping that they actually will.

**Parenting Affection**

An additional implication of this data is how girls and boys are being socialized into gender roles that lead them to fulfilling certain expected roles in their romantic relationships. Running through the participants’ accounts are a sense of obligation, feelings of responsibility, and guilt. These themes shed light onto the cultural forces at work in our society, which may derive from religious beliefs, family values, fairytales, or media. Whatever the source, there are clear signs of a dominant, though often invisible, presence of these pressures in both women and men’s conceptions of what it means to be a good wife or a good husband. It is evident in the participants’ stories that women are continuing to be oppressed by their disaffection. We have certainly explored on an interpersonal level what factors may be involved leading to disaffection; however, we must also consider on a broader
societal level: What is it in our culture that continues to cultivate and reproduce the conditions for disaffection to occur and persist?

Parents should think critically about what lessons they teach and examples they set for their daughters and sons. For example, as a role model are you exhibiting agency over your own life? Elizabeth expresses her deep concern over how her disaffection is impacting her children:

I feel like I want to do what is right for them, and it might come a point where what is right for them is to say, “This isn’t working, we need to end this.” (1.1.10; Elizabeth, personal communication, September 5, 2011)

I feel badly for them right now because they don’t see very much connectedness. I worry they are going to not get married because they will be cynical. They will inherit this too, this perspective that they are seeing. Ultimately end up creating what you are not trying to create. (1.2.5; Elizabeth, personal communication, October 21, 2011)

I worry about my next one, he’s a boy, and how he views women. Like my self-sacrificial approach to it all, like to set myself aside and be the person I thought I had to be to make this work, that was not a good thing. I worry he has an unrealistic perspective. (1.2.5; Elizabeth, personal communication, October 21, 2011)

In my daughter I already see it in her relationship with her brothers. She says, “I do all of this for them, I go out my way to do this for them,” and that’s my language! So I think she might be disappointed. So I started telling her, “You have a choice. You can choose to do these nice things for them. Don’t expect anything in return.” In my heart of hearts I didn’t know I was expecting anything. I thought I was being altruistic. (1.2.5; Elizabeth, personal communication, October 21, 2011)

For Elizabeth, she is equally torn between worrying about how the disaffection may harm her children and how a divorce may harm her children. The quote used as the title of this thesis, “You stay, no matter how bad,” is a message that Elizabeth recalls being ingrained in her mother. This is one example of a cultural discourse that instills a sense of obligation, responsibility, and guilt in women to persevere, remain loyal, and never give up, even in the face of deep, unwavering disaffection. Even though Elizabeth expresses that her beliefs do not fundamentally align with this moral, so far her actions have aligned with it and one has to wonder if her daughter will learn the same lesson that Elizabeth did.

Also, if part of the contention between men and women is their differences in needs for, or ideas about intimacy, affection, and communication, then we might consider trying to express less gender differentiation in how we raise children. If children were not taught as
strictly about what was “for boys” and what was “for girls,” in terms of colors, games, activities, and emotions, then maybe as adults, men’s and women’s relational needs could be more in alignment.

**LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

While I gained a tremendous amount of data and knowledge throughout this study, there are still ways in which the results were limited and in those limitations are opportunities for future research.

**Couple’s Perspectives**

Gaining in depth knowledge of these five women’s perspectives was incredibly insightful, however future studies would allow for a more well-rounded and in-depth understanding if the husband’s perspectives were also included. Why were the men in this study content with how the marriage was going? Why wasn’t it more troubling for them to learn that their wives were unhappy? At any point did it seem like the feelings of disaffection began transferring to them also? What do men perceive as the biggest barriers preventing their wives from being happy or in love?

**Women’s Age/Place in the Trajectory**

In addition to a wide range of years married, there was also a wide range of ages among participants, with the youngest, Ashley, at age 23 and the oldest, Elizabeth, at age 50. Katrina and Michele were in their lower 40’s and Nancy was in her mid-30’s. This range allowed for women to share their experiences from different points in the trajectory of disaffection. While Elizabeth spoke from a position further along in her trajectory, *Identity Reconstruction*, Ashley, on the other hand, was still trying to cope with the disappointment she was experiencing. Nancy had reached *Management Strategies* but was working on returning back to the marriage with a renewed perspective, balance of power, and effort to make the relationship work. Ultimately, age was correlated to women’s positionality along their trajectory, but it was not explored in-depth.

Asking for participants to look back on their journey and map out where they perceive they were in their trajectory at different ages would help identify if there are certain developmental stages that marriages follow or that women’s identities go through.
Identifying these patterns may help in discovering, and possibly predicting, when marriage can be the most challenging, for example after two years, five years, or ten years. This could also help narrow down the types of challenges marriages are likely to face at different benchmarks. For example, it would be interesting to find out if Katrina and Elizabeth both disengaged emotionally after relatively the same number of years of marriage. Was their dominant concern in their marriage their desire for shared responsibility in the first five years? Did their desire for emotional connection become their primary concern after the first seven years? These are all questions that are worthy of exploration in future studies because it can help current literature and therapies be more effective in developing useful strategies for couples.

**Extending/Testing the Model**

The model created from this data is a beginning. An important direction I propose for this research to take is in quantifying and testing the model that I have developed. Developing different scales and surveys for the constructs in the model would enhance our ability to not only measure the intensity of an individual’s disaffection, but also to determine where they are in their trajectory. If this model were tested and modified accordingly, it could be accepted and used as a method of studying and understanding disaffection by both scholars and interested audiences alike.

**Member Checking**

An additional limitation and future direction for this research is through member checking. I did not verify with participants if these narratives accurately represented their experiences. A future direction for this research would be to ask participants to read their narrative and hold a follow-up interview to discuss two points. First, offer their feedback and interpretations after reading their narrative about whether or not they are in agreement with how their experience was represented. Second, ask them how it felt to read the other women’s stories while juxtaposed next to their own. This is a future avenue I hope to take with this research.
REFLECTIONS

This experience of working with one of the most admirable women I will probably ever know in my lifetime, and then also interviewing truly wise women has been the ideal opportunity for growth and learning. The most we ever learn about ourselves and the most we ever grow, is through our close relationships with others. What better way to gain wisdom about the human condition, than to learn about an aspect of life from which so many people derive meaning, purpose, and identity? Marriage is the hallmark of close, long-term, committed relationships and serves as an incredible window for gaining practical wisdom and life lessons. I can’t really put into words how wise and insightful some of the women I interviewed were. Enduring the hopes, fears, challenges, and disappointments that their marriages have brought upon them has fostered a uniquely rich kind of growth that is widely unmatched.

I am confident that by listening to their experiences so many young women and men can be better equipped with the right questions to ask and the tools to navigate their relationships. Part of navigating the relationship means learning the strategies to, not only resolve tensions and dissatisfactions, but also maintain levels of affection, communication, intimacy, support, and new growth that enable it to thrive. For myself, I already feel extremely fortunate to have had frank conversations about an aspect of relationships that most people don’t learn about until they are in that situation themselves. In addition to educating young men and women, individuals who are already married can find snippets of their own voices in these women’s experiences that could offer perspective and encourage them to seek support, implement strategies, and find ways for both them and their marriages to grow.

One of the greatest lessons that I leave this project with relates to women and identity in relationships. I learned how some of the most intelligent, wise, compassionate, and successful women become disempowered and lose their sense of self in their relationships. I understand how easily it can happen, without even realizing it. Leaving this project with a greater awareness about this is one of the most vital lessons I could have learned because it taught me how to protect, nurture, and value myself enough to hold onto who I am and who I want to be, even if I decide I want to hold on to someone else too.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE
Hi my name is Mariel, thank you so much for making time to meet with me today. I’m working on my thesis with Dr. Geist-Martin at SDSU and it is about marital discord and particularly women’s experiences with this. I’d really appreciate if you could share with me some stories from your marriage that would really illuminate how you feel, how you’ve arrived to where you are now, and some things you’ve learned along the way. So really anything you feel comfortable sharing with me is great, and just so you know your participation in this interview will remain completely anonymous in my thesis. Do you have any questions before we get started? …. Okay well I’m just going to ask you a few questions to help guide the interview but feel free to share anything you like because the direction of the interview is opened up to you.

1. Can you tell me you and your partner’s relationship story? How did you meet?
   A. What initially attracted you to him and made you fall in love?
   B. What made the two of you compatible? How did you know that he was the one?

2. Who were you before marriage? How would you describe yourself before marrying your husband?

3. What was your idea of marriage? What was your idea of your future husband? How did you envision your marriage going?
   A. Where do you think you got your ideas about marriage from?
   B. What was your parent’s or other family members’ marriages like?

4. What does it mean to build a relationship? What is key?

5. If you could go back, would you have still married him?

6. Would you recommend marriage for others? Can you share with me what hopes or worries you may have for your own children’s decision to choose marriage?
2ND INTERVIEW

“Last time we met you shared with me how you and your husband met, why you fell in love with each other, and what your ideas were about marriage. This time I want to ask you questions about how your relationship began to fall apart from your point of view.”

7. Could you describe the first time, since being married to your spouse, that you felt a sense of disconnect with him?
   A. How did you feel after this? What were your thoughts at the time about the current or future state of your relationship with him?
8. Have similar events occurred since then that made you feel this way? Could you share those moments with me?
9. What moments in your marriage would you say were the biggest turning points for you? It could be a turning point in your marriage, how you chose to communicate, or how you felt.
10. Have you told him how you feel? What was his reaction/response?
    A. How did/do you and your spouse typically communicate about these events/disagreements?
    B. Have you ever refrained from telling him how you felt or what you thought? Why?
11. How has the way you feel about your marriage changed over the years?
    A. Do you perceive this to be a mutual feeling? Have you shared exactly how you feel about your marriage with him? If not, why?
12. How did the way you felt as a person change over time? Did your sense of identity change?
“Last time we met you shared with me specific moments and events that gave you a sense of disconnect. You also told me about how your attitude about your marriage and sense of identity changed during that time. Today, I want to ask you more about how you manage to cope with your feelings, your marriage, and all of your roles.”

13. Have you thought about leaving or divorcing? What has prevented you from divorcing?

14. How do you negotiate between staying and going?
   A. On a day-to-day basis what is it like moving between pretending and finding other outlets?

15. What are the current dynamics of your relationship like? (Day-to-day communication, interacting, sharing in activities, sharing spaces in the home)

16. Have you kept your disaffection a secret from family, friends, or associates? What is that like?

17. Do you find yourself in awkward situations where you feel like your discontent is obvious to other people?

18. Have you ever been in a position in which you had to explain your disaffection to others?

19. What are some things you wish you could have done differently in your marriage? Is there anything you know now that you wish you would have known earlier on?

20. What are your expectations going forward for how your life and marriage will go?

21. There is research that says when people stay in unhappy relationships their stress levels lead to other mental and physical health problems. Do you believe your health has been affected by the situation you have been in?
WRAP-UP QUESTIONS

1. How does it feel to talk to me about this?
2. Is there anything we didn’t cover that you’d like to add? Well I thank you and admire you for sharing such personal details with me, if you think of anything else you’d like to add feel free to contact me liceagmd@gmail.com.
APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT LETTER
Hello,

My name is Mariel Liceaga, I am a graduate student at San Diego State University and I am conducting research for my thesis, with Dr. Patricia Geist-Martin serving as my chair. My research focus is in understanding women’s experiences of marital disaffection. I've attached a brief abstract describing my proposal and was hoping you could take a look at it and let me know if this is something you’d be interested in talking about. If so, your participation would require three one-hour long interviews. If you are interested in sharing your experiences with me I would greatly appreciate it and please respond to this email so that we can set up a time to meet!

Thank you so much for your time,
Mariel Liceaga
APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT MATERIALS
FLYER

Are you currently unhappy in your marriage?

If you are willing to be interviewed about your experience, please contact me by email or phone. Your participation would contribute to a research study for a Master's thesis and would help to develop a greater understanding about the process of marital dissatisfaction. Your participation would be voluntary and your identity would remain completely confidential.

Please email me at liceagmd@gmail.com or contact me by phone at 757-593-7482**

Thank you!
Mariel Liceaga
Graduate Student
School of Communication
San Diego State University
5500 Campanile Dr.
San Diego, CA 92182

This is not a therapy session and I am not qualified to offer you advice. If at any point this interview brings about emotional distress, you may contact Dr. Jan Ewing, a professional marriage and family therapist, who will be available to speak with you. Her email address is jewing@mail.sdsu.edu and phone number is 619-594-7455.

**This is a long distance phone number and you may be charged by your provider for calling