STRENGTHS THAT CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS RESILIENCE IN THE EARLY YEARS OF MARRIAGE

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DECLARATION:

In accordance with Rule G4.6.3, I hereby declare that the above-mentioned treatise/dissertation/thesis is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment to another University or for another qualification.

SIGNATURE: ____________________________________________________________

DATE: ________________________________________________________________
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ABSTRACT

Divorce is a common phenomenon in South Africa, affecting many families across the country. On the other hand, there are many couples who choose to remain married, despite having endured significant stress. In a review of literature there have been studies conducted exploring enduring marriages (marriages that have lasted twenty years or more), but little on resilience in the early years of marriage. With many couples choosing to divorce within the first ten years of marriage, there is value in exploring the strengths of young marriages that contribute towards resilience. The following question then arises: what are the stressors that couples experience during the early years of marriage (under ten years) and how does the way they cope with these challenges enhance resilience in their marriages? This question has resulted in this qualitative study, employing an exploratory descriptive and contextual research design with the aim of exploring the strengths that contribute towards resilience in the early years of marriage. The study is based within the framework of positive psychology, as this facilitates the exploration of the factors that have contributed towards the resilience of the couples that were interviewed. A non-probability, purposive sampling technique was employed to obtain research participants. Data was collected through the use of individual semi-structured interviews conducted with five couples (ten individuals) who have been married for ten years or less, have endured significant stress, have chosen to remain married, and experience their relationship as satisfying. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using thematic content analysis. The results of the study may be used to develop a strengths based-intervention programme for couples in the early years of marriage.

Key words: marriage, stress, strengths, resilience
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CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Divorce is a problem in South Africa, with roughly 50% of marriages ending in divorce, and levels of satisfaction in marriages indicating a decline (Botha, Van den Berg & Venter 2009:1). Divorce has consequences, not only for the couple, but for any children involved. Further, it may be argued that the dissolution of such a high percentage of families may have broader consequences. The White Paper for Social Welfare (1997) specifically refers to the family as “the basic unit of society” thus it follows that if divorce affects families it also affects the fabric of our society.

Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2002:10 cited in Botha et al. 2009:2), claim that marriages are also ending in divorce earlier than before, with 38% of marriages ending within four years, and up to 50% ending within seven years. According to Statistics South Africa (Statistical release P0307 2008) the majority of divorces in 2008 were from first time marriages. The largest portion of marriages ending in divorce in 2008 (27.2%) had lasted between five and nine years. The second largest portion (21.2%), were of marriages that had lasted less than five years. Therefore, 48.4% of marriages ending in divorce in 2008 did not last for longer than ten years.

Yodanis (2005:645) makes reference to a “divorce culture”, where marriage is seen as conditional, and divorce is a way out if things go wrong. It has become more accepted in society, which is evident from the large numbers of divorces per year in our country. This confirms that more people are exposed to divorce, which serves to normalise it (Statssa marriages and divorces 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004). However, there are still approximately 50% of marriages that do not end in divorce, even in a context where this divorce culture exists, and despite the many difficulties that couples experience.
This, together with the researcher’s observation of the dissolution of marriages within the first years, has prompted the interest in the 50% of marriages that survive. In a search of literature, the researcher came across studies that have explored the factors contributing to enduring marriages, and the characteristics of enduring marriages (Robinson & Blanton 1993; Kaslow & Robison 1996; Parker 2002; Rautenbach 2008; Venter & Snyders 2009). However these studies have focussed either on longstanding marriage or they have not specified the duration of the couple’s union. It seems that there is little research on the strengths and resilience of marriages in the early years. Given the divorce trends mentioned above, there is value in exploring what has helped couples to remain, and thrive, in the marriage relationship after having endured significant stress.

This study will be situated within the positive psychology framework, with a focus on resilience. The literature review will contain an overview of studies that have been conducted on couple resilience, and the theoretical framework will contain an overview of resilience as a construct. Given the close affiliation between the concepts and the chosen framework, there might be some overlap, and therefore the key concepts are defined early in the contextualisation of the study.

1.2 Definition of key terms

Marriage: “Traditionally marriage has been defined as a legal relationship that binds a man and a woman together for reproduction and the subsequent physical and emotional care and socialisation of children” (Knox & Schacht 2010:13). However, the Civil Unions Act (17 of 2006) makes provision for the voluntary union of two persons regardless of gender to either enter a civil partnership or a marriage. For the purposes of this study, the traditional definition of marriage, as above, will apply.

Resilience: refers to “an active, dynamic process encompassing the capacity to endure, positively adapt to, and rebound from significant adversities, crisis, and challenges and, through this process, to grow stronger and more resourceful” (Venter & Snyders 2009:64). This definition is reminiscent of definitions by seminal authors such as McCubbin and McCubbin (1988:247), who define resilience as
“characteristics, dimensions and properties of families which help families to be resistant to disruption in the face of change and adaptive in the face of crisis situations”. It is important to note that there is a distinction between individual, couple, family and community resilience. Since the present study focuses on couple relationships, the research will reflect factors and processes that suggest resilience in the couple relationship. The seminal definition of family resilience as proposed by McCubbin and McCubbin (1988) will be adopted for the purpose of this study as the researcher could not find a unique definition for couple resilience in the literature search.

**Strengths (in a relationship):** refers to a quality or characteristic that enhances, strengthens or adds value to a relationship (Knox & Schacht 2010).

**Stress:** Stress in marriage has been defined as those factors, problems and challenges that place tension on a couple’s emotional, physical and psychological resources (Walsh 2002:131). For the purposes of this study, stress will refer to a problem, threat, event or condition that the couple has experienced as being significantly challenging, for example infidelity, disability, death of a child, sexual dysfunction, separation, unemployment/loss of employment, or serious illness. The nature of the data collection questions resulted in the research participants distinguishing between primary and secondary stressors which are explained in the context of the discussion of the findings in chapter 3.

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework

Divorce is a reality and the consequences of divorce are experienced by families throughout South Africa on a daily basis. However, the aim of this study was to explore the strengths of marriages, in particular young marriages where couples have gone through significant stress, endured it, chosen to stay together (i.e. not divorce), and subsequently experience their marriages as satisfying. The emphasis is on what has contributed to the resilience of the marriage, resulting in a healthy, satisfying marriage, versus reasons for divorce and separation.

In this section a brief overview will be given of theoretical frameworks that may be suitable to the study, followed by a motivation for the chosen theoretical framework.
(i.e. positive psychology). Resilience theory, which fits within the positive psychology framework, will be discussed by reviewing individual, family and couple resilience.

Traditionally, in the study of people and their relationships, psychology has had a bias towards pathology and how to ease suffering (Carr 2004:xxvii; Weiten 2007:399). Alternatively, positive psychology is a framework that focuses on wellness and the positive aspects of human experience. It is not a replacement for traditional psychology and its view of human nature and experience; instead it complements traditional psychology (Antonovsky 1987; Carr 2004:2). It provides a framework for exploring wellness and understanding strengths, happiness and health. Given the focus of the present study, this framework seemed to be best suited as the theoretical lens.

Positive psychology has been used as a framework for studying the resilience of remarried families in a recent study completed in the Eastern Cape (Robinson 2007), and in the Western Cape for studying the role of affirming communication in positive family interaction (Jordaan & Greeff 2010).

As described above, positive psychology places greater emphasis on understanding wellness and strengths, as opposed to the traditional focus on pathology. The conceptualisation of resilience has been evolving over the last four decades and has been the source of debates amongst researchers (Walsh 1998; Luthar, Cicchetti & Becker 2000). Ganong and Coleman (2002:346-347) ask whether resilience is a characteristic, a process, or an outcome, and whether it is manifested in the face of significant risk, or if it can be manifested in normative threats or “daily hassles” (ibid.)?

Initially much research was done exploring the resilience of children (individual resilience) who had experienced significant stressors in their environment, but were able to function and develop successfully (Werner & Smith 1992; Luthar et al. 2000; Walsh 2002). Whilst the concept of resilience initially focused on children, there is room for the concept to be researched at other stages in human development, including marriage (Luthar et al 2000:555-556). Initially resilience has been seen to be an internal characteristic, but according to Patterson (2002:352) many researchers view resilience as a process, an interplay between “vulnerability” (harmful) and “protective” (helpful) factors, where the protective factors “moderated
the relationship” between risk and exposure. Luthar et al. (2000:130) echo this in asserting that resilience is not a “static state.”

Previously the study of resilience has focussed on the individual (Walsh 1998:6), but more recently has been seen to be more of an interactional process that occurs within the context of relationships (Walsh 1998:12, Venter & Snyders 2009:64). Following on from this, Walsh (1998:3) asserts that it is important that we understand the processes that facilitate resilience in relationships (families and couples) given the “widespread concern over family breakdown”.

In defining family resilience, Walsh (1998) highlights three key processes, namely belief systems, organizational patterns and communication processes. These three processes inform how we understand resilience in the context of relationships, and for the purpose of this research, a couple. Having a belief system that allows for meaning to be derived from adversity, and maintaining a positive outlook, can facilitate the process of resilience. Similarly, if there is clear communication, the open expression of emotions and a willingness to solve problems together, resilience is promoted. Being open to change, being flexible, and staying connected to forms of support also facilitates resilience in the context of relationships.

Venter and Snyders (2009:73) assert that it is important to remember that resilience is context specific, and its definition is very often interpreted between people. Given the contextual differences there is value in taking into consideration what couple’s have experienced as stressors.

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, resilience can be defined as “an active, dynamic process encompassing the capacity to endure, positively adapt to, and rebound from significant adversities, crisis, and challenges and, through this process, to grow stronger and more resourceful” (Venter & Snyders 2009:64). This definition incorporates the “exposure to a significant threat or adversity [and] the achievement of positive adaption” in spite of that threat or adversity (Luthar et al 2000:543). It allows for the potential of positive growth out of adversity (Walsh 2002:130), where couples can take advantage of the possible opportunities present in adversities, to discover resources and potential they may not have realised they possessed (Story & Bradbury 2004:1145).
Implicit in this definition of resilience is the notion that it is not just ‘bouncing back’ from hardship, but rather “bouncing forward” (Walsh 2002:133). It implies a movement “beyond recovery to actually thriving” (Venter & Snyders 2009:64). In other words, certain couples who have been through hardship and been exposed to significant stressors (real and perceived), have emerged stronger and wiser, and describe their relationships as fulfilling and satisfying, despite (or perhaps because of) what they have been through. A satisfying relationship is more than just the absence of dissatisfaction, or the opposite of a stressful or unhappy relationship (Venter & Snyders 2009:65).

The social exchange framework is one that is often used in studies of marriage and the family (Knox & Schacht 2010). It is presumed that members of the couple or family weigh up the rewards and benefits of different behaviours and individuals seek out the most benefit and the least cost in their interactions. This, principle (utilitarianism) is seen to guide and inform interactions between partners or family members. In the relationship each individual in the couple chooses behaviours and interactions that will bring them the highest benefit at the least cost. This framework provides a lens through which to understand couples behaviour, interactions and the choices they make. However, in the context of the study, couples have chosen to risk and carry the cost, without knowing whether they will experience reward. The couples in the study would have chosen to remain together in a very difficult time in their marriage, without a guarantee that it would ‘pay off’. Resilience implies ‘moving through’ a difficult time and ‘emerging’ stronger. In the process of ‘moving through’ the difficult time, the couple could not be certain that there will be a reward which will outweigh the cost, but chose to remain in the relationship despite the high cost of the ‘moving through’ period. The social exchange framework does not leave much room for fully understanding the concept of resilience, and would therefore not be the best suited theoretical framework for this study. The theoretical framework of choice is hence the resilience theory, embedded in positive psychology and this will be used to contextualise the findings in chapter 3 of this study.
1.4 Background and review of literature

As discussed above, approximately 50% of marriages end in divorce, and most within the first seven years of marriage. It then follows that approximately 50% of couples choose to remain married. This raises the question: do the approximately 50% of married couples who stay married, perhaps have fewer problems in their relationships, and what in fact contributes to the continuation of the marriage? Epstein and Bishop (1991:448 cited in Botha et al 2009:2) suggest that these couples do not have fewer problems. They claim that healthy families, which include couples, “do not necessarily have fewer problems,” but they may be “more adept at solving their problems.” In other words, they are able to endure hardship and adapt to it positively. They have not avoided difficult and challenging circumstances, because in long-term, intimate relationships, challenging and difficult circumstances are inevitable (Parker 2002; Bouchard & Theriault 2003:80; Rautenbach 2008). Instead, they have learnt how to come through difficult and challenging circumstances.

Parker (2002:17) cites a study by Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1996) in which interviews were conducted with couples who described their marriages as being “very happy” though not as a result of the absence of difficulty. All of the couples interviewed had been through “at least one personal or family tragedy”, and had learned to cope in ways that enhanced and protected their marriage. In another study also cited by Parker (2002:9), Klagsbrun (1985) interviewed couples who had been married for fifteen years or more. These couples reported to have “experienced their share of problems, and sometimes more.” Of the happier couples that were interviewed, Klagsbrun (1985) found that they stayed married “both ‘because of’ the emotional benefits they gained through marriage and ‘in spite of’ the stresses and strains they may have experienced” (ibid.). This survival of a marriage as a result of and in spite of the stressors it has experienced, has been termed resilience, and was explained in more detail in the theoretical framework.

In order to better understand the process of resilience, one would need to have a clear understanding of the stressor/s (risk or threat) that the couples in question are exposed to. Stress can be understood in terms of chronic and acute stress. Chronic stressors are generally present for longer periods of time. These are also referred to
as “background stressors”, which place constant, if not always immediate pressure on the relationship. For example, having diabetes or living in a dangerous suburb (Neff & Karney 2004; Karney, Story & Bradbury 2005). In contrast, acute stressors usually “occur at one point in time and have a clear onset and offset” (Neff & Karney 2004:137), such as a temporarily heavy workload, or a legal dispute.

Similarly, Patterson (2002:354-355) cites Masten and Coatsworth (1998) who describe significant risk as long term exposure to “adverse social conditions, such as poverty” (chronic stress), or “exposure to a traumatic event or severe adversity, such as war” (acute stress), or a combination of both. Karney et al (2005) highlight the interplay of these two forms of stressors. The levels of chronic stress experienced in the relationship may affect how well couples are able to cope with acute stress. For example, if there are low levels of chronic stress, couples may have the resources to deal with the sudden onset of an acute stressor. However if the couple experiences high levels of chronic stress, they may have fewer resources at their disposal to cope with an acute stressor, posing more of a challenge to the relationship. In other words, if one or both partners have been dealing with ongoing, stressful work situations (chronic stress); it may be more difficult for them to cope with the sudden death of a close family member (acute stress). The same might apply for other stressors couples may experience, such as infidelity, serious accidents, starting a family/having children, unemployment, the death of a child, chronic illness or being the victim of a crime (Broman, Riba & Trahan 1996; Bradbury & Karney 2004).

In circumstances where couples experience lower levels of chronic stress, it is possible that the successful resolution of the challenge presented by an acute stressor may create the “opportunity to reinforce feelings of closeness and relational efficacy” (Karney et al. 2005:17).

In addition to this, different developmental transitions or predictable life cycle changes might prove to be stressful, as they inevitably disturb the homeostasis in the couple system (Brodoff, Hendrick, Lasswell, Lester & Spitz 1983:1-2; Patterson 2002:355-356). Most families are able to navigate these challenges, but there may be circumstances that make them especially difficult to master.

The first years of marriage are marked by numerous changes for the couple related to their transition into this newly formed union. The magnitude of the adjustment
difficulties is determined by the nature of the required changes. These may involve moving house, starting a new job (Neff & Karney 2004:136), deciding on the division of labour in the home, determining roles in the relationship, redefining their relationships with their families of origin, and learning how to handle conflict (Van Laningham, Johnson & Amato 2001:1317).

Bader and Pearson (1988) liken couple development to early childhood development. They propose that couples pass through various developmental stages over the course of their relationship. The first stage of “symbiosis” signifies a time of strong bonding, where similarities are emphasised and differences minimized. However, this ‘honeymoon’ period does not last forever. In fact, couples need to grow and move from symbiosis onto the next stage in order for healthy development to take place. This change and progression can prove to be a significant adjustment for newly married couples, who may be disillusioned with their partner suddenly not supporting a decision that they would previously not have opposed.

Venter and Snyders (2009) carried out a study researching resilience in intimate relationships. They gathered data from interviews with family therapists and couples, and used excerpts from films to provide information and stimulate discussion among couples. The three couples who constituted the sample were married, middle class and from the same ethnic group, but were from different life stages and had diverse backgrounds (Venter & Snyders 2009:69). They found resilience to be a “response-ability”, i.e., the couple’s ability to “respond to adverse circumstances that affect their relationship” (Venter & Snyders 2009:73). Also, they found resilience to be a “dynamic and multivariate process”.

The focus of the study was on finding a definition of resilience in intimate relationships, i.e., finding out from the couples and therapists what they understood regarding the concept, with the aim of refining the definition of relational resilience. One limitation of this study was the small sample size and exclusion of the length of the marriage.

In recent research conducted in the Eastern Cape, the strengths of enduring marriages were explored with twenty eight couples who had been married for thirty years or more. They reported in the research interviews that the main stressors they
faced in their marriages were: infidelity, disability, death of a child, sexual dysfunction, separation, unemployment/loss of employment, and serious illness (Rautenbach 2008:156). These may not be strictly in line with significant risks (chronic and acute stress) as described above, but they were perceived by the couples as being significant stressors which they had to overcome.

Marriage and marital satisfaction have long been associated with well-being and “overall life happiness” (Bowman 1990:463; Botha et al. 2009:2) and the benefits of marriage extend to the rest of the family too. Children who grow up with “two continuously married parents” are less likely than others to experience problems (cognitive, emotional and social problems) in childhood, and in adulthood (Amato 2005:89 cited in Rautenbach 2008:13). The difference is even more evident when children grow up with “two happily married biological parents” (ibid.). Therefore, there is benefit in exploring what contributes to keeping these marriages together.

In a study on marriage and marital well-being it would be amiss to not mention love. Love has been a source of interest and fascination for perhaps as long as people have lived. Love, and in particular romantic love, has been a source of inspiration in poetry, fairy tales, mythology and philosophy for centuries (Bader & Pearson 1988:xvii). Entering the word “love” into an online search engine such as Google yields eight billion, eight hundred and forty million (8 840 000 000) results (www.google.co.za accessed 23/12/2011) suggesting the importance of love in people’s lives.

The topic of love is very broad, and can be used to describe a number of different relationships, for example the relationship between friends, or between a parent and child, and between lovers. Kelly (2002:80) speaks of three different forms of love, eros (sexual desire), philia (friendship), and agape (unconditional love) and suggests that the marriage relationship combines these three forms of love. Likewise Knox and Schacht (2010:50) refer to the three components of love which are intimacy, passion and commitment which can make up at least eight different types of love, dependent on the presence and combination of these components of love in a relationship.

Most couples enter the marriage relationship through the experience of being “in love” (Chapman 2004:28). This “in love” experience is one of great passion where
similarities are emphasised and differences minimised, and where partners are likely to be very generous and nurturing (Bader & Pearson 1988:9). Chapman (2004:29) describes this time as being one of intense emotion, euphoria and hope for the future. This time of being in love seems like it would last forever, and naturally lends itself to making promises (Lewis 1952:107). People in love often make vows and promises to each other, and for some, this may eventually lead on to marriage, which symbolises a commitment to another.

However, this “in love” experience does not last forever, and can leave some disillusioned, wondering what happened, and if they still are in love, which leaves couples with one of three choices. Do they stay with the person they married even though the “in-love” feelings are gone? Do they abandon the relationship looking for the passion of another “in-love” experience? Or do they choose to work on the kind of love that “unites reason and emotion, (involves) an act of the will and requires discipline?” (Chapman 2004:31-35). This author recommends the third option. Long and Young (2000:19) seem to agree with this in stating that one of the important psychological tasks healthy couples go through in their life cycle is that they need to work on keeping the marriage “alive” and “fun” once the “in love” euphoria has passed.

This kind of love requires action. Fromm (1956 cited in Rulka-Hathaway 2001:56-57) is quoted as saying that “love is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love” which is linked to Knox and Schacht’s (2010:50) distinction between the different types of love. This is very different to infatuation and instead involves a deep commitment towards the other person, including affection and action. It is not just a feeling, but involves actually doing something for the other.

When reviewing the research landscape on marriage, including studies on resilience, the impact of stress, enduring strengths and love, it is apparent that the proposed study is necessary, as earlier studies have focused on what causes marriages to fall apart, but not as much on what keeps them together, especially in the early years (Kaslow & Robison 1996:153). The studies that have focussed on healthy marriages in the early years date back to the 1970’s and 1980’s (ibid.). Twenty years on, society has changed, and a new generation of people are marrying. Rautenbach’s study in 2008 focused on couples whose marriages were described as “enduring”
and had lasted for thirty years or more. Rautenbach’s research provides a framework within which to understand some of the factors related to how marriages last, and endure significant stress. Similarly, there is value in building on Venter and Snyders’s (2009) findings regarding relational resilience, but focussing on couple’s within the first years of marriage who have endured hardship, who have chosen to stay together, and experience their relationships as satisfying.

1.5 Problem Statement and Motivation for Study

Healthy marriage is an important part of a healthy society. This is under threat due to the number of divorces, particularly early divorces of marriages which lasted for less than seven years (Statistical release P0307 2008) and the lowering levels of satisfaction experienced in marriage. All marriage relationships will experience stress and hardship as a natural part of long-term intimate relationships. Research has been done looking at the strengths of marriages over twenty years, but due to the number of early divorces; there is a need to explore the experiences of couples in ‘young’ marriages (ten years and less) in overcoming stress and difficult challenges. The study is conducted with that in mind, exploring what couples in the early years of marriage experience to be the strengths that contribute to resilience and that assist them in overcoming significant challenges in their marriages.

Personally and professionally, the researcher is curious to learn from couples who have endured hardship in such a way that they have emerged stronger. The researcher holds the belief that these stories could offer hope to other couples she may encounter in the course of her work, as a social worker. “Hope” in the form of having an example of it being possible to ‘walk through’ a significantly stressful time, and come out in a better condition. There has been a steady shift in the nature of the theoretical and therapeutic approaches used in couple and family counselling. The more traditional modernist approaches view the therapist as the expert, whilst the postmodernist perspectives recognise that there are multiple versions of reality and that clients are experts in the history and resolution of their problems (Carr 2004). The search therefore for the core strengths in marriages in the early years would be in synergy with the postmodern approaches to therapeutic interventions.

Also, as there are not many studies (that can be accessed) that explore the stories of couples in early marriage in such a way, this study could add rich descriptions to the
growing understanding of resilience in the context of marriage, specifically in the Eastern Cape.

### 1.6 Research Objectives

The ensuing goals and objectives of the study are as follows:

#### 1.6.1 Research goal

To explore the strengths that have contributed to the resilience of marriages in the early years (under ten years) that have overcome significant stress.

#### 1.6.2 Research objectives

- To explore and describe the challenges and stressors couples experience during the first ten years of marriage, and the factors that mediate the impact of these challenges and stressors;
- To explore and describe how the couples dealt with these challenges and stressors in their relationship and how this contributed to the resilience of the marriage.

### 1.7 Research Design and Methodology

Research design is the plan that the researcher follows in conducting the research project (Leedy & Ormrod 2005:85). It provides the structure for how data is collected and analysed, and which procedures the researcher will follow in the research process. In the discussion below, the reader will be introduced to the research design and methodology used. A more detailed discussion can be found in Chapter 2.
1.7.1 Research approach and design
The study was located within a qualitative approach, which allowed for the exploration of meaning and the development of concepts (Nicholls 2009b:591). In addition, an exploratory, descriptive and contextual design was used, to describe the phenomenon of young healthy marriages that have endured significant stress. The study was retrospective, in the sense that couples had already endured and worked through the stressor, and had the chance to come through it, and emerge stronger. Retrospective studies are used to investigate a phenomenon that has happened in the past, and are conducted based on participants' recollection of the situation (Kumar 1996:86).

1.7.2 Research methods
Participants that met the sampling criteria were recruited using non-probability purposive sampling methods. A total of ten participants (five couples) were selected. A pilot study was conducted with one participant and data was used to make any necessary adjustments to the research design and questions. Following that, data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Interviews are a very common data collection method in research studies and is a useful way of gathering in-depth and rich information about the area being studied (Nicholls 2009c:640).

The data was analysed using the process of content analysis. Themes were drawn from the data, and grouped according to the themes suggested by the interview questions, and the participants' responses. The criteria that were used to ensure trustworthiness are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Schwandt 2007:299). These are discussed in more depth in Chapter 2.

1.8 Ethical Considerations
Before embarking on any research project, the researcher has the ethical responsibility to ensure that participants' dignity will be respected, that participants will not be harmed, and that any potential benefits for participants is maximised (Wassenaar 2006:67)
In order to respect participants’ autonomy the researcher made use of a newspaper advertisement and gatekeepers in the recruitment process. Gatekeepers were selected from organisations that work with couples and families, and thus had prior knowledge of potential research participants that may be suitable for inclusion in the study. After being invited to take part in the study, individuals indicated their willingness to participate by providing written consent. Additional permission was obtained to record the interviews.

As part of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on a significant stressor they have experienced in their marriages. Although in order to take part in the study they would have already endured the stressor and ‘come out the other side’ stronger, there is a risk that in reflecting on those events might result in emotional distress. The research interview was not intended as a therapeutic process, and although no emotional distress was foreseen, the researcher was mindful of the fact that it was a possibility. For this reason the researcher was prepared to provide participants with the contact details of local psychological services should this have been necessary.

**1.9 Chapter Division**

The study is divided into the following chapters:

- Chapter one: Overview of the research study
- Chapter two: Research methodology
- Chapter three: Discussion of findings and literature control
- Chapter four: Summary, conclusions, limitations, and recommendations

**1.10 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided an overview of the research study. A review of relevant literature and a background to the study were presented, as well as the theoretical framework that informs the study (resilience theory and positive psychology). Ethical considerations and research methodology were discussed briefly, and will be expanded upon in Chapter 2.
CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction
The researcher provided a brief description in chapter 1 of the selected research approach and methodology that was followed to execute this study. Research is defined as a systematic process that is undertaken with the view of expanding knowledge and insight on a particular topic (Delport & De Vos 2005:45). Qualitative research in particular aims to obtain a first hand, holistic view of the specific research problem by adopting a flexible approach to the problem formulation and data collection process (Strauss & Corbin 1998:10). In contrast, the quantitative research approach emphasises measurement, testing of theories and quantities, as opposed to detailed, rich descriptions of peoples’ experiences of a certain phenomen (Nicholls 2009b:591).

The ensuing chapter will provide a detailed overview of the specific research approach that was implemented, with specifics around the methodology that was followed to carry out this study.

2.2 The Qualitative Research Process
Qualitative research seeks to explore meaning and develop concepts (Nicholls 2009b:591). To this effect, the qualitative research approach has also been described as an interactive and reflective one that allows the researcher to return to the research participants for clarification on ideas mentioned in the earlier phases of the data collection process (Corbetta 2003:37). Arsenault and Anderson (2002:119) furthermore describe qualitative research as an inductive form of reasoning that exposes phenomena in their natural settings and uses multi-methods to interpret, explain and bring meaning to them. Qualitative research is therefore multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting, attempting to
make sense of and interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

The concept of resilience in the early years of marriage could have been investigated using a quantitative approach, to test theories relating to resilience, however considering the focus of the study, and the dearth of knowledge in this particular focus area, the qualitative approach was deemed more applicable for the purposes of this study. Fouche and Delport (2005:79) unpack the qualitative research process according to particular phases, detailing the steps inherent to each of these phases. The researcher will subsequently provide a comprehensive description of the qualitative research process that was employed in this study, following the outline proposed by Fouche and Delport (2005:79).

2.3 Phase 1: Choice of Research Topic

The problem was identified through scanning literature and by observing practice (Fouche & Delport 2005:80). In order to conduct a research study it is proposed that the research problem be clearly defined and delineated to ensure that the researcher remains focused on the actual problem under investigation (Rossouw 2000:96). In addition, the actual problem that the researcher is investigating should be apparent to the reader, as well as what the researcher hopes to achieve by undertaking this research project (Fouche & De Vos 2005:89). However, not all problems are necessarily researchable; instead one can distinguish between research problems, personal problems and practice problems (Leedy 1993:53; Creswell 1994:4).

Creswell (1994:3) emphasized that the researcher should be guided by responses to the following questions in order to first confirm that they have a researchable problem, and secondly to delineate the particular focus of the study:

- Is the problem researchable given the available time, resources and availability of data?
- Is the researcher sufficiently interested in the research topic to ensure sustained attention for the duration of the study?
- Will the research findings be of interest to others?
• Will the topic be well received and publishable?
• Will the study address a dearth in literature? Will it enhance existing knowledge and broaden the thinking around the topic?

The choice of research topic for the purposes of this study revolved around resilience in early marriages. The researcher’s search of both national and international literature revealed that very few studies have been conducted on resilience in marriages, especially in the first ten years of the relationship.

In responding to each of the questions proposed by Creswell (1994:3), the researcher confirmed that the research problem was researchable. A similar study was conducted in the Eastern Cape of South Africa by Rautenbach (2008) on strengths in enduring marriages, hence highlighting the researchability of the problem, as well as the need for an urgent focus on marriages of much shorter duration. This is of special consideration given the increase in the divorce rate in marriages under ten years old (Statistical release P0307 2008). The researcher submitted the research proposal in good time to ensure that she would at least have ten months available to undertake the field study, complete a comprehensive review and write up the research findings. The researcher’s professional interest in the topic was paramount to the identification of the problem.

The researcher pursued a career in Social Work with the desire to serve her community and play a part in facilitating positive change in people’s lives. Her interest for this study came about as a result of being exposed to a professional colleague’s research on enduring marriages, as well as observing the dissolution of marriages around her and in practice, many of which were still in their early years. As a social worker, the researcher is interested in exploring the stories of couples who have chosen to stay together, so that the learning from these experiences can be applied in the context of strength based interventions to couples in counselling or relationship enrichment.

As marriage is a topic that touches on the lives of many, personally and in practise, the results of the study would be of interest to others. Also, there are many scholarly journals that focus specifically on the area of marriage (many of which have been
consulted in the course of the study), so it is likely that the results of the study could be published in one such journal.

There is room within the field of marriage for further study of the early years of marriage, in particular with regards to resilience (this was discussed at length in the literature review in Chapter 1). This study further explores ideas in literature relating to marriage, and in so doing attempts to contribute to that body of knowledge.

Having considered all of the questions posed by Creswell (1994:3), the researcher was able to determine that the research topic was in fact researchable. After ascertaining the topic was suitable, the researcher moved on to formulating a research problem.

2.4 Phase 2: Formulation of the Research Problem

This phase entails the actual formulation of the research problem where the suitability of the research approach needs to be determined. The formulation of the research question, goals and objectives should be developed and a research proposal prepared (Fouche & De Vos 2005:101). It was clearly demonstrated in chapter 1 why the qualitative research approach was more applicable to the current study. Durrheim (2006:47) asserts that qualitative methods “allow the researcher to study selected issues in depth, openness, and detail as they identify and attempt to understand the categories of information that emerge from the data”. This gives the researcher the opportunity to allow the views of the participants to shape and inform the study. From an interpretivist perspective, each individual, and each couple is unique, and so are their stories. The researcher “seeks to understand experience through the eyes of the person experiencing it” (Van Manen 1990, cited in Nicholls 2009a:530). This approach was well suited to this study, which aimed to explore the strengths that contribute to resilience in marriages that have endured significant stress. In the study participants had the opportunity to share their lived experiences in detail, which produced rich descriptions for analysis.

The study was retrospective, in the sense that couples had already endured and worked through the stressor they were asked about, having had the chance to come
through it, and emerge stronger. Retrospective studies are used to investigate a phenomenon that has happened in the past, and are conducted based on participants’ recollection of the situation (Kumar 1996:86).

The following research question therefore formed the centre of this study:

Which strengths have contributed to the resilience of early marriages (under ten years) that have overcome significant stress?

In accordance with this research question, the ensuing goal of the study was to explore the strengths that have contributed to the resilience of marriages in the early years (under ten years), that have overcome significant stress.

The accompanying research objectives were as follows:

- To explore and describe the challenges and stressors couples experience during the first ten years of marriage, and the factors that mediate the impact of these challenges and stressors;
- To explore and describe how the couples dealt with these challenges and stressors in their relationship and how this contributed to the resilience of the marriage.

The marking out of the research question, goals and objectives concluded phase 2 of the qualitative research process.

2.5 Phase 3: Planning

According to Fouche and Delport (2005:79) this phase entails the following steps as part of the planning process:

- Choosing a research paradigm and determining the place of a literature control within this qualitative approach
- Choosing a qualitative research design
- Choosing a method of data collection and data analysis
• Delineating the research sample and identifying the most appropriate sampling method

The value of the qualitative research approach to this study was explained under the preceding heading. It was essential that the researcher familiarised herself with the relevant literature available in the subject field. Kumar (2005:30) explained that at the outset of the study the literature review helps to “establish the theoretical roots of the study clarify your ideas and develop your methodology, but later on the literature review serves to enhance and consolidate your knowledge base and helps to integrate your findings within the existing body of knowledge”. In order to explore the concept of resilience in early marriage, the researcher therefore needed to understand the background to the study of resilience which is rooted in positive psychology, and aptly demonstrated this in chapter 1.

The next step associated with the planning phase is the selection of an appropriate research design.

An **exploratory, descriptive and contextual research design** was employed in an attempt to answer the research question. Durrheim (2006:44) suggests that **exploratory designs** seek to look for “new insights into phenomenon”. An exploratory research design was therefore deemed appropriate as the aim of the study was to explore the strengths that have contributed to the resilience of early marriages (under ten years), that have overcome significant stress.

The strength of this kind of research design is that it allows for the topic to be studied broadly and generally, usually yielding at least some insights into the observed behaviour and arriving at recommendations for areas of further study. The main weakness of the exploratory design is that it often does not yield definitive results and further explanatory research is needed to obtain satisfactory answers to research questions (Babbie 1995:85).

The second part of the research design was **descriptive** in nature. Descriptive studies “aim to obtain a detailed description of a phenomenon” (Durrheim 2006:44); and therefore De Vaus (2001:1) proposes that descriptive research questions ask
“What is going on?” Babbie (1995:85) echoes that descriptive studies describe situations and events. The descriptive nature of the design was intended therefore to enable the researcher to obtain a complete picture of how couples in the early years of marriage have overcome significant stress. Babbie (ibid.) explains that the researcher “observes and then describes what was observed”. This study described rather than introduced or influenced predetermined variables. Using this approach, this study aimed at gaining new insights into, and descriptions of, the phenomenon of young healthy marriages that have endured significant stress.

Quotations from the participants’ views have been included in Chapter 3 (discussion of the findings chapter) so that a rich description may be provided to enable the readers to gain insight into the participants’ experiences of the strengths that they have drawn upon in their early years of marriage in times of stress.

A contextual design involves situating the object of the study within its immediate setting (Creswell 1994:62). The qualitative approach allowed for research to be conducted in the natural setting and context of the research participants. The implementation of the contextual research design was therefore necessitated by the fact that “people’s behaviour becomes meaningful and understandable when placed in the context of their lives and the lives of those around them” (Friedl, De Vos and Fouche in De Vos et al. 2002:435). The participants consisted of married couples who were interviewed in the comfort of their own homes or in a venue of their preference. In addition, their freedom to select the interview venue also allowed the researcher insight into what the participants regarded as their own geographical context.

After the confirmation of the relevant research design, the focus shifted to the identification of the data collection method that could elicit the rich narratives that the researcher hoped to extract from the research participants lived marital experiences.

Semi-structured research interviews appeared to be the most suitable data collection strategy for the purposes of this study. Nicholls (2009c:640) suggest that interviews are a very common data collection method in research studies that are focused on
understanding people’s lived experiences. He furthermore states that interviews are a useful way of gathering in-depth and rich information about the area being studied, and is a method of data collection that is familiar to social workers, who have been trained to conduct professional interviews with clients (Nicholls 2009c:640). Semi-structured interviews allow for the freedom to ask open ended questions that can help in gaining further insight from participants. It also allows them the opportunity to elaborate on their stories. The use of a guideline assisted in providing focus around certain themes, to try and minimise investigator bias (Kumar 1996:109).

The following questions formed part of the interview schedule:

- Please tell me about your experiences of adjusting to marriage
- Please tell me about the stressors you have experienced in your marriage
- Describe the most stressful event that you have faced in your marriage
- Tell me about what you believe to be the reasons you were able to endure that stressful time in your marriage
- What are the things that you have done to strengthen your marriage?
- What are the strengths that have kept your marriage together?
- What would you want to say to a couple who are currently experiencing difficulty in their marriage?

The researcher was able to arrive at these data collection questions by constantly keeping the main research question in mind as well as the goal and objectives of the study. The researcher confirmed the relevance of the data collection questions by anticipating possible responses to them.

It was important for the data collection questions to be formulated in an open ended manner to encourage elaboration from the research participants and to reduce fixed one word responses. If the researcher is to capture the participant’s perspective, the participant needs to be given the freedom to express his/her thoughts. A good research interview allows the participant to do so, with the researcher prompting and encouraging the participant as he/she shares (Corbetta 2003:266). Robson (2002:274) recommends that interviewers listen more than they speak, that they ask questions in a clear way, avoid using cues that could lead the participant to answer
in a certain way, and be aware of their body language and tone of voice. The fact that the researcher is an experienced social worker that had comprehensive training in good interviewing techniques was an added benefit.

The researcher had to guard against the research interview being transformed into a therapeutic interview. This required a lot of self talk and monitoring on the researcher’s side to clearly delineate between the researcher and the therapist roles. An important consideration was whether the semi structured interviews would be with the individual spouses or with the marital couple. To further guard against confusion that may occur regarding the nature of the interview (research and not therapeutic), the researcher chose to interview participants as individuals not as couples. Interviewing as individuals was consistent with the focus of the study and allowed participants to share their stories more candidly. Most of the stressors participants shared involved their spouses, so being interviewed alone allowed for candid discussions of the stressor, without the concern of possibly re-opening issues the couple has dealt with. This decision was made in consultation with the research supervisor.

The next step in the planning phase focused on the data analysis process. The method of data analysis proposed by Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson (2002) and Nicholls (2009) was utilised to analyse the data. The following proposed steps were followed systematically:

- The researcher transcribed the audio recorded interviews.
- An initial reading was completed. This produced initial ideas which were noted.
- The transcripts were read again, this time more closely. The researcher reflected on the underlying meaning inherent in the transcripts as they were being read
- Themes and sub-themes were identified. These were compiled into a table, one per interview. The themes were informed by the research questions.
- This process was repeated for each transcript
- The researcher then consulted theory to gain further insight into the themes.
• Then the tables from all of the transcripts were compiled into one table.
• The researcher then consulted with the independent coder and research supervisor to discuss the identified themes, subthemes, categories and subcategories
• The information was reviewed and re-organised as necessary following the discussion with the independent coder and research supervisor.

The next step in the planning phase focused on the **delineation of the sample and the sampling method**. After approval was granted for the research proposal in April 2011, and after gaining permission from the relevant committees (Faculty Research Technology and Innovation Committee - FRTI, and Research Human Ethics committee - REC-H), advertisements were placed in the newspaper and on community radio stations inviting couples to participate.

The entire population for this study comprised all heterosexual, monogamous married couples living in South Africa, who were in their first marriage, have been married for ten years or less (regardless of dating history), have endured significant stress, and experienced their relationship as satisfying at the time of the research interviews.

From this population a sample was drawn from couples living in the Eastern Cape area, which was the researcher’s province of residence. The sampling method that was used was non-probability purposive sampling, because it is the method that was most likely to provide cases that were typical of the population being studied (Durrheim & Painter 2006:139). Purposive sampling involves approaching a specific population who have shared a common experience, and then to select from that group a sample that is “willing and able to talk candidly about their experiences” (Nicholls 2009c:640). Participants were selected because they volunteered, and upon the initial screening were found to fit the sampling criteria, had the potential to provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation and not because they were necessarily reflective of the population at large (Nicholls 2009c:639). The following sampling criteria were used for the selection of the participants.

• Legally married
• Heterosexual
• Monogamous
• Married for ten years or less
• They have experienced at least one of the following stressors in the course of their marriage: chronic or serious illness, unemployment or loss of employment, separation, sexual dysfunction, death of a child, disability, infidelity, infertility, mental illness, financial ruin, substance abuse or addiction, imprisonment. These stressors were identified by Rautenbach (2008) in his study of enduring marriages;
• Currently experience their marriage as healthy and satisfying (in accordance with their own definition of what constitutes healthy and satisfying).

The study was advertised in the Daily Dispatch, a local newspaper (Appendix 1) on 3 June 2011 and on two radio stations, Link FM and Algoa FM on 6 June 2011. On both radio stations, the researcher was interviewed by a radio presenter. Both methods of advertising provided information about the study and the sampling criteria. Members of the public who felt that they matched the sampling criteria and were interested in participating were invited to contact the researcher. Both telephone and email contacts were provided. As a result of the newspaper article and radio interviews the researcher was contacted by twenty one interested members of the public. Only two were in relationships that fit the sampling criteria. Thirteen couples were excluded because they had been married for more than ten years. One woman contacted the researcher enquiring about being a research assistant; another one called saying that she had a friend who fit the criteria and asked if the researcher could contact her. It was advised that she speak to her friend, and if her friend was interested, to ask her to contact the researcher. One man called and left a voice message. The researcher returned the call but couldn’t get through, so left a voice message. He did not contact the researcher again. One woman called for more information and said she would speak to her husband and contact the researcher if they were interested in participating. They did not contact the researcher again. One woman contacted the researcher via email. It was not clear if she was interested in participating or just interested in the results of the study. She did not reply to the researcher’s reply email, and lastly, one man phoned...
the researcher saying he saw the article and the researcher’s photo in the paper and that he loved her and desperately wanted to meet her. The researcher declined a meeting. The detail of the responses to the social media research participant recruitment method is cited in detail to sensitize the reader to the essential skills required of the researcher to manage this process without offending candidates that do not meet the sampling criteria.

The second medium of recruitment that was used was to approach organisations that provide counselling services to couples. The researcher made contact with social workers at three different NGO’s. The researcher met with each of the social workers and explained the nature of the study and asked if they would act as gatekeepers. The gatekeepers were informed of the study, and were asked to identify clients from their caseload who fit the sampling criteria. All three social workers agreed. The gatekeepers explained the study to the clients to see whether or not they would be interested.

After the initial meetings, phone calls were made to follow up. Only one of the gatekeepers had attempted to recruit participants. The social worker had spoken to two couples who had both expressed interest in the study and given consent for their contact details to be given to the researcher. The researcher only contacted potential participants after receiving confirmation from the gatekeeper that the potential research participant has given permission to be involved in the study. One was married for more than ten years. The other said that they will contact the researcher when they are in East London again, despite the researcher offering to meet them in their home town (outside of East London). The other two social workers apologised saying that they had been busy and had therefore not been able to recruit participants. The research’s supervisor also acted as a gatekeeper and recruited three of the couples interviewed.

From the respondents, a sample was chosen that matches the sampling criteria. The whole sample consisted of five couples, who met the sampling criteria, and gave their consent to participate in the study.
2.6 Phase 4: Implementation

The first step in the implementation phase revolves around the consideration and principles of a pilot study (Fouche & Delport 2005:79). Conducting a pilot study is useful in identifying possible problems with the research design and in doing so can help to convince readers that the research has been well thought through and carefully planned (Van der Riet & Durrheim 2006:94). It also alerts the researcher to the value of the research questions and to determine whether they are easily understood by participants. A pilot study was conducted with one participant. The pilot interview was audio recorded and transcribed. The transcript was sent to the research supervisor who reflected on the relevance of the interview questions as well as the interview process. The research supervisor encouraged more reflection during the interview, to invite further exploration of the participant’s experiences. This aided in the subsequent interviews by eliciting detailed responses to the research questions, adding to the richness of the data. The data gathered in the pilot study suggested that the questions asked were understood, and yielded detailed responses.

The next step inherent in the implementation phase is the actual collection of the data and the undertaking of a comprehensive literature review.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews as detailed above. Each couple was interviewed separately and each interview lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. The interviews were scheduled at a time and place of the participants’ choosing. All of the interviews were done in the participants’ homes (or the home of one of their family members). Eight out of the ten interviews were conducted by the researcher, who is a Social Worker by profession, and has four years experience in conducting interviews with clients. One of the couples (two of the participants) happened to be known by the researcher, so the interviews were conducted by a colleague, who is also a Social Worker, and a Clinical Social Work Masters graduate. The researcher met with the independent interviewer before interviews were conducted. The independent interview was briefed on the study, research ethics and interview schedule, and provided with the relevant documents such as consent forms.
Due to the shortage of participants in the researcher’s city of residence, three couples were recruited in Port Elizabeth (with the research supervisor acting as gatekeeper). This required that the researcher had to travel and spend a few days in Port Elizabeth to conduct the six interviews. As all of the participants were volunteers, they were receptive to the research process and willing to share their stories and experiences. Interviewing participants individually allowed for participants’ perspective to be shared in detail. Of all of the participants interviewed, only one couple mentioned different stressors as the main stressor in the relationship. Comparing participants’ different perspectives was not the main focus of the study, but was interesting to note.

Interviews were recorded (with the informed consent of the participants), and then transcribed.

2.7 Phase 5: Interpretation and Presentation

Fouche and Delport (2005:79) describe the interpretation and presentation phase as the final phase in the qualitative research process. This is where the researcher processes and analyses the collected data according to the proposed method. The data analysis process was described in detail under heading 2.5. In addition to the model of data analysis mentioned above, the researcher also utilised the parallel steps outlined by Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Kelly (2006:322-326) to guide the data analysis. This involved the following: immersion and familiarisation, inducing themes, coding, elaboration, and interpretation and checking of the coded information.

The data analysis process was followed by the verification of the data against the literature control that has been conducted in phase 4 of the qualitative research process. Lastly it required the researcher to select criteria that would be utilised to assess the **trustworthiness of the research process.** Curtin and Fossey (2007:89) suggested that “trustworthiness refers to the extent to which the findings are an authentic reflection of the personal or lived experiences of the phenomenon under investigation”
The model proposed by Shenton (2004), which is based on Guba’s (1981) criteria, was employed to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative research process. He described four criteria that can be used to ensure trustworthiness, namely credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Schwandt 2007:299). Each of these criteria are described in turn and supported by the specific strategies that were employed to meet the criteria.

- **Credibility**
  “Credible research produces findings that are convincing and believable” (Van der Riet & Durrheim 2006:90). One of the methods of enhancing credibility is to view any plausible rival hypotheses as variables that have an integral part to play in the outcome of the study. So instead of trying to explain them away, they are rather investigated, and their impact on the outcome of the study is noted (Van der Riet & Durrheim 2006:91). The method of **triangulation** was also useful in enhancing credibility of this study (Curtin & Fossey 2007:90). The data derived from the different participants were compared with each other, in particular the responses from husbands and wives in each couple. The regular reflective discussions between the researcher and the research supervisor also served as an important **peer reflection** and peer evaluation process which served to enhance the credibility of the study. In addition an **independent coder** was employed. She read through each of the transcripts and conducted an independent data analysis, which was followed by a consensus discussion where the two different sets of data analysis were reviewed and reflected upon.

The credibility of the research study was further enhanced by the use of a variety of **interviewing techniques**, which ranged from probing, exploration, summarising, reflective responding, and congruence between the researcher’s verbal and non verbal responses.

- **Transferability**
  Transferability involves the extent to which the study can be transferred to other contexts (Kelly 2006:381; Curtin et al. 2007:92). Qualitative studies are not usually generalisable, but the findings should be transferable in that the results can be
compared to other studies and experiences, and encourage further investigation into those areas (Curtin et al 2007:92). Kelly (2006:381) suggests strategies to enhance transferability, namely providing a detailed description of the research process, an argument for the different methods used, and a thick description of the context and situation of the research. It is also for this purpose that the responses to the media sample recruitment process was discussed in so much detail. In the final write up of the study, a detailed description of the research process has been provided, with validation for the methods chosen throughout the process.

- **Dependability**
Dependability refers to “the degree to which the reader can be convinced that the findings did indeed occur as the researcher says they did” (Van der Riet & Durrheim 2006:93). This was achieved in this study by providing a rich and detailed description of the methods used to collect and analyse the data. Interviews were recorded and the research supervisor listened to recordings for the purposes of enhancing the dependability of the study. The *triangulation of the data sources* as described above also served to enhance the dependability of the findings; and lastly the *peer reflection and evaluation* undertaken by the research supervisor, aided in this process.

- **Confirmability**
Confirmability is established through taking steps to ensure that the results of the study are a reflection of the participants’ experiences and ideas, instead of the views of the researcher (Shenton 2004:72). Confirmability was achieved through triangulation of the data (as discussed above), through the statement of the researcher’s position, and through providing a detailed description of the methods used. This gives the reader an indication of the researcher’s context, and decision making throughout the research process. The use of an independent interviewer did not impact negatively on the confirmability of the study, as the data from interviews conducted by her were also included in triangulation, and the method of data collection was the same. There were no noticeable discrepancies between data collected by different interviewers. This may be as a result of the interview schedule to provide some structure to the interview.
The last phase in the research process is the writing of the research report. The penultimate heading in chapter 2 contains a brief reflection on the ethical considerations that applied in the research process.

2.8 Ethical Considerations
According to Wassenaar (2006:61) the purpose of research ethics is "to protect the welfare of research participants." Before embarking on any research project, the researcher has the ethical responsibility to ensure that participants’ dignity will be respected, that participants will not be harmed, and that any potential benefits for participants is maximised (Wassenaar 2006:67). A discussion of the ethical considerations pertaining to this study follows below.

- Permission to recruit participants
After being invited to participate in the study, participants indicated their willingness to be interviewed by providing written consent. The consent form (Appendix 5) provided information regarding the study, to ensure the participants were properly informed. The consent form also outlined the rights they are entitled to, such as confidentiality, anonymity, privacy and protection from harm. It was explained to participants verbally and in the consent form that they may choose to disengage from the research process at any point. It did not appear that any of the participants experienced psychological distress as a result of the interview, therefore none of the participants needed to be referred to relevant psychological services.

Additional permission was obtained from participants to record the interviews (Appendix 4), as this is how data was collected. Details regarding the recording, storage of recordings, transcription, and destruction of recordings were provided to the participants.

- Risks
As part of the interview, participants were asked to reflect on the significant stressor that they have experienced in their marriages. Although in order to take part in the
study participants should have already endured the stressor and ‘come out the other side’ stronger, there was a risk that in reflecting on those events might result in emotional distress. The retrospective nature of the study aided in minimising the potential risk. The research interview was not intended as a therapeutic process, and should emotional distress have occurred, participants would have been provided with the contact details of local psychological services specifically the Psychological Services Centre at the University of Fort Hare, FAMSA, or psychologists in private practice.

- Benefits

Participants had the opportunity to reflect on the resilience of their relationship, and the ways that they have successfully endured hardship as a couple. This may assist them in dealing with future challenges.

One of the aims of this study is to gain further insight into the factors that promote resilience in young marriages. In taking part in the research process, and sharing their stories, participants may have the satisfaction of being part of a study that aims at ultimately enriching other marriages. One of the participants spoke of how he likes to share their story to teach others, “because we don’t want other people to be in the situation that we went through.”

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter provided a detailed description of the research process that was followed, including the choice of the research topic, the formulation of the research problem, planning, and implementation and presentation. The ethical considerations that guided the study were also discussed, as well as the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness.
CHAPTER 3

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND LITERATURE CONTROL

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter provided a detailed discussion of the research design and all the methodological considerations relevant to the study. This chapter will elucidate the specific themes, subthemes and categories that the researcher arrived at following the data analysis process, and the subsequent consensus discussion with the independent coder.

The goal of the research was to explore the strengths that have contributed to the resilience of marriages in the early years (under ten years) that have overcome significant stress.

In order to address this goal, a total of ten individual research interviews were conducted with ten participants, made up of five couples. Both spouses were interviewed, but were interviewed separately.

The participants were recruited using the purposive sampling method described in chapter 2. The ensuing table provides a demographic depiction of the research participants with a particular reflection on information that was relevant to the purpose of the study.

Table 1: Demographic details of the research participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple</th>
<th>Length of marriage</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>City of residence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Couple 1</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>East London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple 2</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Port Elizabeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couple 3</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Coloured</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Port Elizabeth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants were selected against the sampling criteria, so were all similar with regards to:

- Marital status
- Sexual orientation
- Being in their first marriage
- Having endured a significant stressor

Most of the participants had been married for eight years or more, with only two out of the five being married for four years or less. Although the researcher did not include religion or spiritual orientation in the criteria, interestingly all of the participants identified themselves as Christians.

The research interviews were guided by a set of questions which informed the themes during the data analysis stage (the research questions are listed under section 2.5 in Chapter 2).

Table 2 (Appendix 6) portrays the major themes, subthemes, categories and subcategories that emerged from the data analysis.

The next section of this chapter will now contain a discussion of the research findings in accordance with the identified themes and their supporting subthemes, categories and subcategories. This discussion will be presented in a storyline supported by selected verbatim extracts from the collected data, balanced with theoretical interpretations as guided by the literature control.

**3.2 Presentation and Discussion of the Themes, Subthemes, Categories and Subcategories**

The findings are divided into six main themes: adjusting to marriage, stressors in relationship, impact of stressor on marriage, factors contributing to resilience,
strengths of the marriage and recommendations for other couples. Each of these themes with their related subthemes will be discussed below.

3.2.1 THEME 1: ADJUSTING TO MARRIAGE

The first theme that emerged from the research questions was that of the couple’s adjustment to marriage. This theme was not the focus of the study, but provided useful contextual background information as to the experiences couples had in the transition into marriage, which gave insight into the formative years of their marriage.

Participants had varied experiences of adjusting to marriage and the responses to the question are grouped into two subthemes, i.e., difficult adjustment and easy adjustment. Difficult adjustment includes the experiences that couple felt challenged by, whilst the easy adjustment emerged as those changes that they were more prepared for and hence found enjoyable.

3.2.1.1 Subtheme 1: Difficult adjustment

In their transition into marriage, some of the participants had to learn to do new things such as cook and do household chores like ironing for their partner. One of the participants noted that it was difficult to adjust to that role of cooking, ironing, etc. but she realised that it was something that her husband appreciated. Knowing that what she was doing was appreciated made it a little easier for her to adjust to making those changes and learning new things. The extracts below reflect articulations by participants who shared experienced this difficulty:

“...ek het nooit kos gemaak, kos gekook en so nie en ek moes nou leer en beginne kos kook vir hom. Ek moes leer stryk; sy klere te stryk, hom versien in die oggend, vroeg opstaan to make his lunch for work. I wasn’t used to that but I had to do it. (I had never cooked before and now I had to learn to cook for him. And I had to learn to iron his clothes, and help him in the morning: I have to get up early to make his lunch for work...)”
“Ek was ’n bietjie kwaad sommige oggende dat ek so vroeg moet opstaan vir hom, maar dit het hom gelukkig gemaak...it means a lot to him (On some days I was a bit angry that I had to get up to early to see to him, but it made him happy... it means a lot to him) ”

The next verbatim extract was from one of the male participants who felt challenged by having to adjust to their different ways of attending to practical tasks.

“...it’s really difficult, because you’ve got your things that you know... your way of doing things...she’s got her way of doing things...but now we’re together...and let’s find a way of meeting half way and carry on...”

Invariably spouses enter into marriage with expectations about the roles that will be adopted in the marriage, and will need to adjust to new roles and role expectations (Schramm, Marshall, Harris & Lee 2005:49). By communicating and doing things their spouse would appreciate couples learned to navigate those challenges. This adjustment was further enhanced by them viewing the new task as something their spouses would appreciate instead of something that their partners expected.

One of the participants came from a family where his parents had divorced. He spoke of his **hesitance to get married** and not wanting to make the same mistakes that his parents made. However, he seemed to be able to take this into consideration without it becoming an issue in his marriage. He was aware that his hesitance to marry was linked to his parents’ divorce.

“I think it’s more the divorce that don’t wanted me to get married and do the same mistakes...but when I got married it was me working on my own marriage and not my father’s marriage”

Another participant spoke about **coming to terms with the reality of marriage** after the fairytale wedding. She spoke about how she felt depressed after the wedding, and having to realise that it is normal to feel an anti-climax afterward.
“...I think there is a part in a woman’s brain that think once you got married certain things is gonna change, but it doesn’t... coz you see you have all this unreal, coz the whole fairy tale wedding and everything...”

Most start off being really ‘in love’ and it is usually through this experience that they enter into marriage. Being ‘in love’ can lead couples to think that their partner is perfect, and they dream of “marital bliss” where they “are going to make each other supremely happy” (Chapman 2004:28-30). This ‘in love’ experience doesn’t last, and the couple have to work at creating a relationship that is fulfilling (Long & Young 2000:19).

This same participant spoke about having to deal with the reality of marriage and realising that her expectations were unrealistic. She also spoke of having to learn not to try to change her spouse and that she is responsible for her own happiness in the marriage.

“It was very difficult for me adjusting to marriage... like (my husband) was, this is who I am, no one can change me, and really if I had to and change his personality it’s like smothering someone, or killing someone coz then you don’t allow him to be himself and his character. So I think a woman holds the key to happiness in a marriage... you are really responsible for your own happiness”

Most newlyweds start out being very satisfied with their marriage, but then experience a decline in satisfaction over time (Davila, Karney & Bradbury 1999:785-786; McNulty & Karney 2004:735). The misconceptions that the participants held about wanting to change their spouses to their satisfaction, appears to be a common unrealistic expectation that partners have and that needs to be altered if couples are going to remain together (Glasser & Glasser 2000:16). Rather than expecting their spouse to ‘make them happy’, couples need to understand that they have are responsible for their own happiness. Glasser and Glasser (2000:13-19) refer to this as letting go of the belief that someone or something is in control, but rather that we “choose all we do or feel”.

The third difficulty in adjustment shared by some of the participants came from the couples having to adjust to a new family structure. One couple found the
adjustment to marriage difficult because their marriage resulted in the formation of a blended family as the wife had a child from a previous relationship. There were difficulties in adjusting to the new family structure, especially in terms of having to adopt two new roles simultaneously, i.e., that of spouse and parent. The participant articulated his difficulties as follows:

“..., he (step son) see that I am like... now I'm like trying to steal his mother or something like that”

“... it’s more like a discipline situation... I’m telling him he is lacking discipline but he doesn’t even listen.”

Creating a blended family can pose some unique challenges for the couple (Long & Young 2000:300). Each member of the new family brings with them expectations about how the family should operate, including how to parent and discipline children. These challenges add to areas that the couple needs to address in adjustment to marriage.

Another participant mentioned her need to adjust to her husband’s family and their different personalities.

“... you really have to adjust because now you have a new family... I’m part of this new family now, you have to know, this person likes that, that person is like that... so you just have to little by little get to know the people more”

This participant’s experience concurs with the view held by Alpaslan (1997:22) that when couples marry they have to be aware that they marry the whole family and not just their partner, this hence requires that couples examine the influences of their families of origin, and work through the differences (ibid.).

Two of the participants mentioned some difficulty in leaving their family of origin.
“...in the beginning it was a bit difficult, I remember when we left my parents I often felt quite sad you know I left their house, but then after a while I really started enjoying the fact that we were a family ourselves”

“Ja it was difficult, I’d say difficult... because I... was the last one in the house, in our house, my family, my mother, and I was the last to, the last one to get married”

The need to detach from one’s family of origin in order to effect the transition to a new relationship with one’s parents is described as an important task that individuals have to undertake if they wish to successfully adjust to marriage (Alpaslan 1997:22; Long & Young 2000:18).

Participants also experienced a change in lifestyle after marriage, together with having to develop a new identity. One participant spoke about having to re-examine his lifestyle choices (partying, playing a lot of sport) and think about the effect it was having on his marriage. He chose to make changes to those areas through looking at things from a different perspective, realising that he is not single but part of a couple. Another participant also echoed this, that part of the adjustment was viewing himself not as single anymore, but as part of a couple.

“...it was difficult, because I was a party animal...I had to... through my wife’s eyes... I had to open my eyes myself to see it... you know, on the eyes of a marriage, and looking through that glasses”

“...it’s not easy... you must realise that you have taken another step... you are in another institution now, you are no longer single”

The understanding that these two participants arrived at is echoed by Long and Young (2000:18), as one of the psychological tasks that couples go through in their formation of a “marital identity”, which requires moving from ‘I’ to ‘we’. It is evident from the participants’ narratives though that this realisation did not happen overnight.
and that it occurred as a result of feedback from their spouses. This highlights the importance of communication in a relationship as a prerequisite to dealing with such difficult adjustment challenges (Alpaslan 1997:82; Long & Young 2000:165).

3.2.1.2 Subtheme 2: Easy adjustment

Participants that experienced their adjustment to marriage as pleasant or easy attributed it to their eagerness and desire to get married. It was something that they really wanted to do. They also found their spouse to be a positive influence on them, as well as spouses making major life decisions, such as moving cities, for the benefit of the marriage. Some of the verbatim narrations are cited below:

“There wasn’t much of a problem with adjustment…it wasn’t difficult, maybe, probably because I was doing something I wanted to do, with someone I wanted to do it with”

“I think it was a wonderful adjustment”

“I think we both adjusted really easily to marriage. We really, we both wanted to get married…we just really enjoyed being married”

“…I actually think I improved after marriage definitely…”

“…(chose to move city and change job because) if you away half the time it is not, for me, for me it was not a good place to be in”

It is interesting to note that this was a view shared by at least half of the participants. It is evident from these narrations that the participants were ready for the transition to marriage, and that they had made considered changes in order to accommodate this
new phase in their lives, hence easing the actual adjustment. McNulty and Karney (2004) assert that having positive expectations for their relationships is helpful in adjustment, if the couples are able to communicate about their expectations. Antonovsky (1987) also concurs that having a positive expectation and the belief that a challenge is manageable enhances one’s coping abilities.

It is vital that couples work through the period of adjustment, whether it was a pleasant and easy experience, or if was more challenging. The patterns and habits formed in the first years of marriage have a significant impact on the quality of the marriage in later years (Schramm et al 2005:47-48). One of the sampling criteria was that couples experience their marriage as healthy and satisfying, so it would suggest that the participants had adjusted positively to marriage, regardless of whether it was ‘difficult’ or ‘easy’.

3.2.2 THEME 2: STRESSORS IN THE RELATIONSHIP

The second theme identified was the stressors the couple had experienced in their relationship. In response to the research questions, each participant noted the stressors they have experienced in marriage, and the most stressful event they have faced. These form the subthemes major stressors and secondary stressors. The major stressors identified were the following: financial difficulty, difficulties relating to pregnancy, having a sick child, and the death of a child. The secondary stressors identified were: adjusting to having children, work stress, having different interests, and communication differences. These will be discussed in more detail below.

3.2.2.1 Subtheme 1: Major stressors

3.2.2.1a Financial difficulty

Financial difficulty was identified as a major stressor by three of the participants, and it took the form of financial difficulty as a result of being retrenched, and as a result of accumulating debt.
One of the participants was **retrenched** shortly after getting married, making his wife the breadwinner. Both spouses, independently, noted this as an incredibly stressful time in their marriage. For this couple, it led to the accumulation of debt. Their verbatim recollections of this stressor are cited below:

“...my hubby had to leave his job... last in first out”

“... I was retrenched unfortunately. Just after I got married, so ja, my wife was the only one working... I couldn’t get a job”

The accumulation of **debt** was a stressor mentioned by three participants. Loaning money from friends and financial institutions, and not being able to pay that money back, was a major source of stress for the couples involved. For some participants the accumulation of debt was attributed to lack of planning, and for another, to the effect of peer pressure. However, regardless of the reason for the debt accumulation, debt was experienced as a significant stressor. Below are extracts from participants who experienced this stressor.

“...we just went down. Cars, gone, repossessed because we couldn’t manage...both of the cars, because we couldn’t manage, because of the debt from the people”

“...we did not plan things very well because we made lots of debts”

“...we had debts, people wanting their money, financial institutions wanting their money, ja, it was, it was a very stressful one”

“One of the other problems we had is we had a few loans from our side...”
“...when we had financial difficulties...when we ran short on money...we overspent our budget for that month and the following month we were struggling...it had a negative impact on our relationship”

When a couple struggles to meet their basic economic needs it can put pressure on the relationship that can result in them suffering individually and as a couple (Conger, Rueter & Elder 1999:54). Similarly, how a couple manages their finances can lead to a great deal of conflict and stress in their relationship (Alpaslan1997:115; Fox, Benson, DeMaris & Van Wyk 2002:795). This sentiment was confirmed in the responses of the participants, who experienced issues relating to financial difficulty as being particularly stressful in their relationship. Loftus (2004) asserts that financial difficulty can cause this level of distress because money is linked to people’s hopes, dreams, emotions, expectations and sense of security.

Finances are not a topic that couples often talk about openly. Often the topic is only discussed in times of arguments and disagreements, hindering their ability to communicate effectively regarding the issue (Loftus 2004).

“...there were arguments about, about money and about the control of money and the fact that I at times kept quiet about money issues”

This was also reflected in the participants’ responses, with some spouses (in particular husbands) choosing not to talk about issues relating to the finances and in some instances even hiding information from their wives.

“...some of the debts I didn’t even tell my wife”

“I didn’t know that he borrowed money from A and I didn’t know that he borrowed money from B, I only knew that he borrowed money from C”
Because finances may be a topic that is not easily discussed couples may not have discussed and decided upon a method of managing their finances. However, even if a couple has not consciously decided upon it, they will have a system of money management (Pahl 1995:365). The participants were not explicit on how they manage their finances, but it would seem that communication (or lack of communication) about these issues, affected how they dealt with them. Alpaslan (1997:115) identifies financial matters as an important component of the marriage relationship, and strongly suggests that couples discuss and decide on a system of money management (including budgeting) before marriage in an effort to prevent it from becoming a source of conflict within marriage.

In the area of finances, one spouse can make a decision, without the knowledge or consent of the other, which can affect both equally, because when married (in community of property, as one couple was), you are “treated as one financial entity” (Loftus 2004). So if debt is acquired by one partner, it becomes the debt of both, regardless of whether or not the other partner was aware of the debt. In addition to this, keeping debt hidden from a spouse can take a “high emotional toll on couples” (Loftus 2004). Pahl (1995:373) claims that men are more likely than women to “spend on major items without consultation.” This was confirmed in the responses of the participants. Out of the three participants, two of them, husbands, mentioned that they had made decisions regarding finances without consulting their wives.

3.2.2.1b Difficulties relating to pregnancy

Two of the participants shared that struggling to fall pregnant was a significant stressor. Both of the participants that identified this as a stressor were able to conceive, i.e. were not infertile. One participant already had a child and was struggling to fall pregnant after a miscarriage, and the other participant gave birth to a child after a number of years, as is evident from their narrations below:

“...we were struggling, 3 years to conceive a baby”

“...I struggled to get pregnant...”
Infertility is a surprisingly common health problem that can have dire consequences for those couples who desire having children (Schmidt 2010:25). Often, the effects of infertility are more acutely felt by women as a result of the role expectations that are stereotypically placed on fathers and mothers (Letherby 2010:31, 35). Motherhood is expected to be natural for women and they may be seen as having failed if they are unable to conceive, which may lead to them being and feeling isolated (Letherby 2010:32). The stress associated with infertility can cause emotional distress, a breakdown in communication, and an increased level of conflict within the marriage (Crawshaw 2010:74).

Although neither of the participants were infertile, their experiences seem similar to those noted in the literature regarding infertile couples. Peterson, Newton and Rosen (2003:60) cite a study conducted by Abby, Andrews and Halman (1991) that found that couples facing the stress of infertility may be at “different points of adjustment”, that is, one spouse may experience the situation as very stressful and threatening, while the other spouse may view the situation as a “minor inconvenience.” This seemed to be true for one of the participants that mentioned difficulty falling pregnant as a stressor. She identified it as a major stressor, while her husband did not. Peterson et al.’s (2003:65) findings suggest that “while both men and women report infertility as a stressful experience, women perceive it as more stressful and generally seem to be more affected in terms of negative life consequences.”

Another stressor identified, relating to difficulties associated with pregnancy, was miscarriage. One couple (two participants) mentioned the loss of pregnancy as a result of an ectopic pregnancy. The wife became seriously ill and nearly died. She was hospitalised and had to undergo surgery. The pregnancy was terminated during the operation to save her. The participants reported experiencing more distress over the wife’s health, as opposed to the loss of pregnancy. Another participant experienced a miscarriage after the death of one of her children (discussed under the subtheme ‘death of a child’). The participants’ verbatim accounts of these stressors are cited below:

“...I fell pregnant. I didn’t even know that I was pregnant. And I nearly died, because I didn’t know I was pregnant... (the doctor) said you were pregnant, it was in the tube, and girl you nearly died, because it had burst, and was going through the whole
body... (I was in and out of consciousness in hospital) only to find that I'm pregnant. And it's an ectopic. They do the operation, and they tell me, child, you were this close to being dead.”

“...my wife got pregnant...she lost the baby in the process...she almost died from that (ectopic pregnancy)”

“... I had a miscarriage”

The literature commenting on the effect of a loss of pregnancy on a marriage is varied (Mekosh-Rosenbaum & Lasker 1995:128). There are some studies showing that it can lead to the dissolution of marriage, while there are also reports of marriages “getting better” or gaining “new strength” (ibid.). As a result of the nature of this study and the sampling criteria utilised, the marriages of the participants interviewed are likely to fall into the second category. They were able to make it through the stressful situation with their marriages intact.

An ectopic pregnancy is defined as “one that develops outside the uterus. The developing embryo implants in an area other than the endometrial layer of the uterus, which is the normal site for implantation and development” (McQueen 2011:49). Most women who have ectopic pregnancies are usually unaware of being pregnant until they are diagnosed as having an ectopic pregnancy (Mekosh-Rosenbaum & Lasker 1995:131). This was true for the participant who had an ectopic pregnancy. She only became aware of the pregnancy after it was terminated during the surgery she underwent to save her.

Loss experienced in an ectopic pregnancy may be a loss that is not recognised by others, which is likely to impede the mourning process of the grieving woman, and may result in a lack of support from friends and family (Lasker & Toedter 2003:211). The experience of the participants who experienced an ectopic pregnancy seemed to be in contrast to this. The couple did not speak of the loss of the pregnancy as the stressor, but rather the impact that it had on the wife’s health.
One participant shared about the stress caused when she was informed during her pregnancy that the foetus had a **congenital heart abnormality**. She was advised to have an abortion, which she declined. She was told that her child would not survive to full term. He did, but died after a few days (discussed in more detail under the category ‘death of a child’).

“...our baby had a congenital heart abnormality which was life threatening and they told us he wouldn’t survive full term”

### 3.2.2.1c Death of a child

According to Dulude, Belanger, Wright, and Sabourin (2002:116), the experience of having a high-risk pregnancy, and then having to deal with a sick child can lead to distress for the couple. This was true for this particular participant who, together with her spouse, had to navigate through a difficult pregnancy, the birth of a sick infant, and then later the death of that child. The **death of a child** was for this particular couple the most significantly stressful event they had experienced, as is evident from their individual recollections below:

“...initially he actually did quite well, ‘cause we weren’t even sure if he would survive until birth and then once he was born, we didn’t know whether he would survive minutes but he did quite well, he lived for about 3,5 days and then he just got really sick, and then he passed away when he was just over 3,5 days”

“... (the most stressful event)? oh without a doubt it was when (our son) died”

The stress and grief associated with losing a child can potentially ruin a marriage, but it may also bring the couple closer together (Mekosh-Rosenbaum & Lasker 1995:128, 140-141). In this particular couple’s case, their marriage was not destroyed; instead they were able to work through the stressful time. However, this was not something that happened quickly; the couple had to walk a “journey” together, and had a lot of support from family and friends. The ways that the couple
coped with the situation is discussed in more detail in Theme 4 under the factors contributing to resilience.

3.2.2.1d Sick child

Having a very **sick child** was also identified as a significant stressor by 4 of the participants, who had children who had been sick from birth. One couple (two participants) spoke of the stress associated with their daughter being born with an underdeveloped heart, and the other couple (two participants) had a sickly child, but did not mention the cause. The verbatim accounts from the four individual interviews are cited below:

“I think one of the big challenges is I gave birth to a very very ill child”

“I think the main stressful part for us were my son being sick. Like every year he has been to hospitals”

“The stress I have the first time, was when (my daughter) was born. (She) was geboren met een onderontwikkelde hart” (born with an underdeveloped heart)”

“...the doctor spoke to us and he said that she had some kind of a heart problem...and that was... the hardest thing”

Transition into parenthood is associated with higher levels of stress, but these can be heightened if parents are faced with additional challenges such as having difficulty conceiving, or giving birth to an ill infant (Dulude et al. 2002:103).

When a child is diagnosed with a serious condition, parents can react with shock and alarm (McGrath 2001:230). Having a sick child places strain on a marriage and exposes parents to many different, long lasting stressors such as caring for the child,
frequent hospital visits, medical costs, etc. (McGrath 2001:232,234). The incremental nature of these stressors results in higher levels of parental distress and may cause difficulties in different areas of their lives (Berant, Mikulincer & Florian 2003:398). This may be especially true for mothers, which in turn may affect the marriage (Berant et al. 2003:398). With the transition into parenthood being a time that is potentially very stressful, compounded with the stress of having a sick child, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that this would negatively impact on marriage. Studies have been conducted that have found this to be true, i.e. couples with ill children report higher levels of marital distress and dissatisfaction (Berant et al. 2003:398).

However there are also studies that have found that having a sick child does not necessarily have a negative impact on marriage, and some families may even be strengthened by the crisis of having a sick child (Eddy & Walker 1999:11, 24, 25). This seemed to reflect the experiences of the research participants in this present study. One of the participants went on to talk about how the situation with his daughter caused him and his wife to “grow more strong.”

3.2.2.2 Subtheme 2: Secondary stressors
In addition to the most stressful event, participants were also asked about other stressors they had experienced in their marriage. These are discussed below.

3.2.2.2a Adjusting to having children
Five participants identified adjusting to having children as a stressor. For three participants, it was related to finding time together as a couple and adjusting to the new role of parent. While for one couple (two participants) the adjustment was related to the formation of a blended family as the wife had a teenage child from a previous relationship.

“...once the children is there, it's like a whole new ball game”
“... I think our marriage is now more challenged by having another child, because it’s just, our time together is just so much less”

“...when kids come along, not being able to do what you feel like doing”

“...it is a learning curve... I am an instant daddy”

“...sommige kere, dan stry ek en hy baie, ek en (husband) oor (son) reeds en dit het ook n geweldige invloed op onse marriage” (my husband and I often have arguments about my son, and that has an enormous impact on our marriage)

Adjusting to having children would fall within what Gladding (2002:38-39) refers to as an expected life stressor and is associated with the life cycle of most couples. It is a very stressful time for most couples, and may negatively impact on the marriage (Simpson & Rholes 2002:623), but most parents meet the challenge of adjusting to having children relatively well. It is a disruptive time, but the majority of parents are able to adjust and cope, as it seems the participants in this study were able to do (Dulude et al. 2002:102).

3.2.2.2b Work stress

Work stress, as identified by participants was related to both the spouse’s job, and the spouse’s studies. Of the three participants that identified work stress as a stressor, two spoke of it in terms of the impact their spouse’s work and/or studies had on them. The stress of what occurred in the spouse’s day spilled over into the home.

“... at his work, always difficulties at his workplace, so when he goes through stresses during the day he will pick up the phone to me, he said if I can just hear your voice then I can deal with anything during the rest of the day”
“...ons gaan deur baie challenges...stress at work (we go through many challenges... stress at work)”

“(wife) was on call a lot of the time... that was very different and I didn’t expect that... and she was studying on top of that as well, so there was not a lot of time”

“...that was a little bit stressful because my working hours were very long. I worked every second weekend and then on the weekends I wasn’t working I had to study for exams...that was quite stressful”

Marriage is interdependent in nature so the actions of individuals have consequences for the couple (Bird & Schnurman-Crook 2005:145). When both spouses work, it can place added pressure on the marriage, as spouses have to balance the “simultaneous and often conflicting demands and pressures of two careers with those of the family” (Elloy 2001:122). Two of the participants that identified work as a stressor were not working themselves, and referred to the transfer of stress from husband’s work. The stress that is experienced at work is very often brought home, and can impact on the marriage. The impact can be influenced by gender, and the amount of work stress experienced (Schulz, Cowan, Cowan & Brennan 2004).

Work stress was not identified as a major stressor by the participants, so it seemed that it was something that caused distress, but they were able to manage as a couple, without it becoming too much of a problem.

3.2.2.2c Different interests

Two of the participants also noted difficulty in deciding how to spend **leisure time**. There were differences in how to spend the time, and also how much time is spent.
“...whose priorities do you put first? And how often and you’ve got to try and sort that out coz (wife) wants to go mountain biking and I want to go fishing”

“... I’m more the indoor type of person and (husband) is the outdoor type of person”

“... he likes his space, where as I will want to spend every day with him or every hour of the day and he needs that time out”

One of the dynamics that couples deal with is the balancing of individual versus couple needs (Long & Young 2000:14), as indicated by the participants reports above. During couple formation, and throughout the relationship, couples need to consider the tension between what they want and need in the relationship as individuals, and what is best for the couple. This tension can cause distress, as it did for the participants.

3.2.2.2d Communication differences

The main communication difference that was identified by participants as a stressor was related to expressing emotion. Participants noted differences in the way that they and their partners communicated about their emotions, in particular with regards to other stressors they were experiencing.

“Well there has been a few (challenges), especially when it came to communication...I think communication was the major one”

“I uh didn’t open so much to her because see she was not the weaker one but the one who would express more feelings, or she was the one crying, I didn’t cry, because I was thinking of her”
“Ja he’s not one to talk about his emotions, where I um, you know, talk about every single emotion I can identify”

“Sometimes I think I am too verbal, but to me if it is out there then you have to deal with it...ja, where (my husband) is not a very verbal person”

“...there were lots of things that she’s bottling that I was doing wrong, but I was not aware”

“Ja, she was not a communicating person, ja, but I was a communicating person”

“I am usually the talker...and the one that shouts. I’m usually the one that do that...he is such a calm person”

“I can just talk without thinking”

Communication has been described as the “link that creates a relationship between people” (Wright 2000:61), and the “currency of the intimate relationship” (Long & Young 2000:166). When there are differences in ways of communicating, it is understandable that it would cause distress within the marriage relationship. This is particularly brought to the fore when couples are already in distress because of other stressors in the relationship, as was the case with one of the participants:

“...seeing that we were struggling communication came in the fore once again”
3.2.2.2 Difficulties with in-laws

There was only one participant that identified difficulties with in-laws as a stressor. It is included in the write up as it came through very strongly in her interview.

“...them (husband’s family) not wanting to accept me as a partner for (husband)”

“...it took me years to accept that there is nothing I can do about the way they feel about me, this is who I am, this is what I am. If they don’t accept me, I can’t do anything about it”

“... she (mother-in-law) will never approve of anything”

“For better and sometimes for worse, our parents and parents-in-law are intimately, inextricably part of our lives” (Chapman 2009:117)

When couples come together there is an important shift that needs to take place. Before marriage an individual’s allegiance is usually to his or her family, but after marriage, this shifts to his or her spouse. This is an essential element in couple formation (Long & Young 2000:18; Chapman 2009:118). The individuals need to separate from their families of origin, yet maintain healthy relationships with them. This is an essential part of becoming a couple and developing a ‘couple identity’ (Long & Young 2000:18). In this participant’s case, the difficulty was less about her and her husband’s willingness to separate from their families of origin and establish their ‘couple identity’, but rather her mother-in-law’s reluctance to ‘let go’ of her son and accept that the relationship would need to be re-defined.

3.2.3 THEME 3: IMPACT OF THE STRESSOR ON THE RELATIONSHIP

Implicit in the definition of resilience is the notion of surviving struggle, hardship or difficulty (Venter & Snyders 2009:64). The stressors that the participants experienced were discussed in theme 2. These situations had an impact on their relationships both during and after the stressor. Understanding the impact that the stressors had on their relationship provides some context to the resilience that developed in the relationships. The impact that the participants identified were communication change, grief, growth and an impact on their faith in God.
3.2.3.1 Subtheme 1: Change in communication

The issue around communication differences was discussed as a secondary stressor under heading 3.2.2.2 of theme 2. The change in communication is illuminated here, since four of the ten research participants claimed that their communication suffered in their relationship as a result of the stressor they experienced. The purpose of this discussion is therefore to highlight the specific changes in the couple relationship as a result of the stressors. The stressors that the participants were referring to were: having a sick child, difficult pregnancy, debt, and struggling to fall pregnant respectively. The participants did not specify the quality of their communication before the stressor, so the verbatim extracts below are reflective of their subjective experiences and are compared to each participant’s assessment of the level of communication in their marriage. All verbatim extracts are retrospective and as participants were satisfied with their marriages at the time of interviews, it would suggest that the quality of communication returned to previous levels or improved subsequent to the experience of the stressor:

"...dit was nie lekker gewees vir ons altwee nie. Ons het baie min gepraat (it wasn’t nice for us, we spoke very little)."

“...when we were pregnant with... our baby who died, um that was quite tricky because we didn’t um, (my husband) didn’t want to speak about it at all... we didn’t communicate so well during the pregnancy”

“I probably should have handled that (talking about son’s death) very differently but I find that when people are under stress often the negative things are often flexed so I will become incredibly introverted because that’s my place of safety”

“I noticed that she is not communicating, so then I decided to say, I’m no longer communicating as well”
“It was a personal thing for me and I didn’t talk about it a lot. You see, I didn’t tell him, when, when is the baby coming”

Several authors have emphasized that effective communication is an essential ingredient of a satisfying marriage (compare Pollock, Die & Marriott 1989:620; Litzinger & Gordon 2005:409), and can be impacted upon negatively as a result of a significant stressor as illustrated by the participants narratives above and endorsed by Litzinger and Gordon (2005:410) as well as Baucom et al. (2007:690).

The participants’ responses also reflect gender differences in communication, with one wife in particular seeming to want more communication regarding the issue, while her husband did not. This experience of the participants appear to be in accordance with the view of Walsh (1998:113) who suggests that gender differences are also likely to be present in the presence of a significant stressor. Men and women are known to communicate differently, and this can be exacerbated in times of stress. When facing a stressor, it can affect how individuals are feeling in the relationship, which can in turn affect how they communicate (Sanford 2003:100). One of the patterns that can appear is what Baucom (et al. 2007:690) refer to as the “demand/withdraw” pattern of communication. One spouse, usually the woman, will make a request for something to change, e.g. to talk about the issue, while the other spouse, usually the man, will withdraw from the conversation, either to avoid making the requested change, or to avoid an argument, as was evident from the research participants’ experiences.

As men and women tend to communicate differently, they are also likely to communicate differently regarding grief which may be due to how they are socialised, with women tending towards being more open and wanting to talk about it, while men may tend to withdraw and avoid the vulnerability associated with open communication (Kamm & Van den Berg 2001:571)

There are differences in the way that men and women communicate, but these differences are often generalisations, and therefore there will be exceptions to the ‘rule’ (Wright 2000:124). This was the case with one of the participants, a husband who became frustrated at his wife’s resistance to communicate about their particular
issue. He was the one that wanted to talk about the issue, but she did not. This may highlight personality difference more than gender difference, as that participant’s wife referred to herself as “a quiet person... very reserved” and her husband as being “a talking person.”

It seems that this personality difference can also be exaggerated in times of stress, similar to another participant who felt that his tendency towards being introverted was exaggerated during the time of the stressor, and as a result he chose to not talk about the issue with his wife.

3.2.3.2 Subtheme 2: Grief
This participant that was cited in the preceding subtheme was part of the couple that identified the loss of their child as the most significant stressor they had experienced. Their child was diagnosed as having a congenital heart abnormality in utero, and died three and a half days after birth. This was discussed in the previous theme under section 3.2.2.1. Following the loss of their child, the participants experienced very strong emotions and recognised that they grieved differently. For this couple, recognizing this was very important, and helped them to accept that there is no right or wrong way to grieve, which in turn assisted them in supporting each other through the process. Acknowledging that their spouse is also grieving, even though it may be different to how they are grieving, helped them to feel less alone in the process. This was a process that took time to work through.

“...that time with (our son) it was a, it was also an extended, extended grieving slash hope slash very mixed emotions... then you deal with the death process as well, which wasn’t nice at all, you know, so that, that was, was incredibly strong and incredibly strong set of emotions...realising that there isn’t a wrong way and a right way to grieve... there’s your way to grieve and as long as you do grieve and do go through the process... I think it is quite key to get it across to people that are grieving and say hey guys, you are not going to go through it in the same way, but as long as you do it.”
“... I was angry with everybody, especially every single pregnant woman I saw, yet I was never angry with (my husband) and I found that quite interesting, because I was angry with my mother, who had done absolutely nothing”

Literature supports the notion that grieving the loss of a child places considerable strain on a marriage (Mekosh-Rosenbaum & Lasker 1995:140) and that men and women respond differently to loss (McQueen, 2011:55). The grieving process of each parent is unique, and this is even more so when a child dies shortly after birth, as mothers have usually had the opportunity to bond to the child (during pregnancy), whereas fathers typically have not (Mekosh-Rosenbaum & Lasker 1995:129). These same participants also shared about how they handled this stressor differently by taking turns to be strong. During the pregnancy the wife claimed to have handled the situation better, while after their son’s birth and death, her husband reportedly handled it better. They were able to support each other through these times.

In the process of grieving, it is common for people to become very distressed and feel very strong and intense emotions such as anger, anxiety, and sorrow, while others may not (Fraley & Bonanno 2004:878). Feeling strong emotions during the grieving process is to be expected, but not everyone responds to grief in the same way. As was highlighted by one participant, it is possible for that anger to be projected onto other members of the family (Carr 2000:25).

Dealing with a loss takes time, and parents need to allow themselves that time to grieve. The grieving process is not something that the parents must ‘get over’, but rather it is something that they need to integrate into their lives and adjust to. The impact of the grief can usually be felt for a lifetime (Lasker & Toedter 2003:217), as grieving the loss of a child is a “prolonged and difficult process” (Kamm & Van den Berg 2001:579).

As discussed, the loss of a child can place tremendous strain on a couple’s relationship. However, it is also possible that that difficult time can bring spouses closer, strengthening their marriage (Kamm & Van den Berg 2001:570; Story et al. 2004:1145). This seemed to be the case for this couple. In the verbatim extracts that
will follow under the next subtheme of growth, the husband believed that the experience changed the relationship, but brought them closer together as a couple.

3.2.3.3 Subtheme 3: Growth
Three of the participant believed that another impact the stressor had on their relationship was that they grew closer to their spouse. All of those participants were men, and all experienced stressors relating to their children (i.e., having a sick child and experiencing the death of child). These husbands believed that experiencing the stressor in their marriage had the effect of bringing them closer to their respective spouses. This was not something that happened during the time of the stressor, but rather after some time had passed. Two of these participants also felt that the experience helped them to grow stronger, and that they learned from the experience. Below are verbatim extracts from the participants’ interviews:

“...it does bring you a lot closer to each other. It changes the relationship but it does bring you closer, so if you take a step back and you look at that, that’s something good that has come out of it... if you steer it in the right direction it can actually make you stronger... if you can get through this, you can get through the next, and you can get through the next, so, so whatever, and it’s not just in marriage, whatever life throws at you”

“... I think you grow closer together with all this stuff that you deal with, you see, you grow closer together... that connected me and my wife see we grow more strong at each other and we comforted each other... where you go into that same situation... you learn from the previous one, you suddenly remember, ok, that and that I must do, see, that’s what happen once you there”

“The impact it had on the marriage brought us closer to each other, definitely.”
The participants’ experiences seem to suggest that stressors are often erroneously viewed as having only a harmful and negative impact on relationships. Instead these challenges they go through may give couples the opportunity to find potential and capacity in their relationship that they did not realize they had, as happened to be the case for the research participants cited above. This can also lead to the deepening and strengthening of the relationship, as suggested by Story et al. (2004:1145), and echoed by Van Wyk, Owen and Duff-Riddell (2011). These authors suggest that this growth often includes positive changes such as improvement and transformation and is beyond what was experienced before the stressor. Furthermore, developing closer relationships is also part of this process of growth (ibid.).

Another aspect of growth following a stressor is that participants believed they learned from the experience and these lessons that are learned during times of difficulty may be drawn upon and applied in different situations in the future (Pillow, Zautra & Sandler 1996:383).

These concepts are very closely related to resilience, which will be discussed in detail in theme 4: factors contributing to resilience.

3.2.3.4 Subtheme 4: Faith in God
The participants’ faith in God, and in particular their Christian beliefs, came through very strongly in the research interviews. It also appears as a factor that contributes to resilience (refer to theme 4), and as a relationship strength (refer to theme 5).

Three participants spoke of an impact on their faith in God as a result of experiencing a stressor in their relationship. This impact was felt in one of two ways. Some participants felt their faith increased, and some doubted their faith. Below are verbatim extracts by the participants as illustration to this effect.

“...it gave us more faith in what we are doing and what we believe in... gave us more faith as the important things”

“...I didn’t know Him. Dit het gebeur vir n rede, sodat ek die Here moet ken (I didn’t know Him. It happened for a reason, so that I could know Him)”
“I kind of coped until the miscarriage and then after the miscarriage I felt, I didn’t even know if God existed anymore and to me that was very difficult because I had always believed in God from a child... so that was very frightening for me to start questioning all these things”

Enduring a stressful time can lead to questions about faith, the meaning of life and the existence of God. It is possible that a person could experience a loss of faith as a result of having gone through stressful times, but they may also emerge with a stronger faith and a conviction that it was God that brought them through (Lasker & Toedter 2003:214; Van Wyk, Owen & Duff-Riddell 2011). All of the participants identified themselves as Christians, and this played a vital role in their resilience. Their faith in God seemed to give them hope, and was something that connected them as they believed together in something greater than themselves.

Walsh (1998:45) claims that belief systems are “powerful forces in resilience.” Beliefs systems provide the “lenses” through which we view the world, ourselves and our experiences, and they influence our actions. They can also serve to stabilise us in times of difficulty (ibid.). It would seem that this reflects the experiences of the participants. The one participant that reported to have doubted her faith described herself and her husband at the time of the interview as being “strong Christians”, which would suggest that her doubt was resolved.

3.2.4 THEME 4: FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS RESILIENCE

In Chapter 1, resilience was defined as the “characteristics, dimensions and properties of families which help families to be resistant to disruption in the face of change and adaptive in the face of crisis situations” (McCubbin & McCubbin 1988:247). In defining resilience it was stated that a definition for family resilience was used as a suitable definition for couple resilience was not found by the researcher. As a result literature on family resilience has been consulted and included in the discussion where relevant.
One of the research questions required participants to reflect on what they believed to be the reasons they were able to endure, adapt to and overcome the stressors and difficult times in their marriage. Their responses to that question informed this theme, i.e. the factors that contribute towards resilience. The theme is divided into seven subthemes, namely attitude towards spouse, attitude towards problem, support network, faith in God (Christianity), finding meaning through faith, a belief that they will get through it, and relationship strengths. Each of these subthemes are discussed below, and supported by relevant quotes from the participants as well as literature on the topic.

3.2.4.1 Subtheme 1: Attitude towards spouse
The participants’ attitude towards their spouses seemed to be important in strengthening the couple’s resilience. Participants expressed a desire to want to be together, even though things were difficult. The desire to stay with their spouse helped them to get through those difficult times and enhanced their commitment towards each other, as is evident from their narrations below.

“... I want to be with him. You see I am excited to grow old with (my husband)”

“... really want to be with each other, that is the main thing”

“... that’s why it was just so easy to make it work...to fight for it... because we knew that hey, this person, we go a long way, ja, I wanna stay with him”

In a study by Stets and Hammons (2002:9), it was found that personal commitment is vital in binding couples together in the first years of marriage (in particular the first three years). Personal commitment is defined as “one’s attitudes or feelings about the other and the marriage”, with a particular emphasis on the positive characteristics of the spouse and marriage, for example attraction and love. Similarly, Figley and McCubbin (1983 cited in Gladding 2002:46) believe that clearly
expressing commitment and showing affection are characteristics of healthy families. This kind of commitment seemed to have been an essential ingredient in the relationships of participants, who were committed to one another even in times of adversity. They expressed a desire to want to be together, and were committed to their spouse, and this was identified by them as an important contribution to their resilience.

Linked to the idea of personal commitment suggested by Stets and Hammons (2002:9), which includes an emphasis on the positive characteristics of the marriage and one’s spouse, some of the participants spoke very highly of the strengths of their spouses. They seemed to have a very high regard for specific character traits in their spouses and this in turn strengthened their positive attitude towards and liking of their spouses as individuals. Below are the articulations of at least three of the participants:

“...he was very patient... (my husband) is a very generous, giving, patient person and he really goes out of his way to be nice to me... he is always kind to me and good to me and encouraging... I think that has really helped a lot”

“...he is such a calm person”

“... I always commend her for that, she is a strong woman”

Walsh (1998:93) suggests that couples function best when they highlight each other’s best characteristics and strengths, as is evident from the reports of the research participants. Furthermore the contention by Lev-Wiesel (1998:217) that the appreciation of their spouses strengths may be even more relevant for wives (who may be more likely to experience their marriages as satisfying when they can appreciate their husband’s strengths and ability to handle stress) seems particularly applicable to the findings in the present study as two of the three participants who highlighted their spouse’s strengths, were wives.
A similar pattern was also identified by McNulty and Karney (2001:734,944), who found that spouses who were able to acknowledge their partner’s positive behaviours, and excuse their spouse’s negative behaviours in the relationship, tended to judge their relationships as positive, and were able to have positive expectations for their relationship. In other words, highlighting a spouse’s strengths assisted in creating a feeling of satisfaction in the relationship, which may have in turn contributed to resilience and a sense of hope, and may be linked to commitment as discussed above.

In addition to highlighting their spouse’s strengths, participants also spoke of the value of accepting their spouse. For one, this involved accepting his spouse’s past, and for another it also involved accepting her spouse’s personality which was very different to her own.

Similarly, one participant spoke specifically of letting go of the idea of perfection. She had to let go of the expectation that her marriage and her spouse should be perfect. It was helpful for her to acknowledge that neither her husband nor their marriage was perfect and that to expect them to be perfect did not benefit their relationship. The verbatim extracts which elucidate these cognitive shifts are cited below:

“...when you love someone you take them with the baggage and everything. You accept what they have done and just move forward... try to accept what the person may have done, try to believe there is a change and a possibility”

“... I really had to make peace with his personality, like really accepting him for who he is... getting married with all that baggage to me it was very overwhelming, so it took me years to make peace with his past...you must stop trying to want to, want him to be perfect”

“I think it is really important... just to realize that your marriage is not perfect... and I think just to realise that the other person isn’t perfect... (a situation happened and) I suddenly realised that he wasn’t perfect, because I think in a way, in my early years,
I thought I married this perfect person, and then I realised that he had issues as well... that was quite a wake-up call for me and just reminded me not to worship him in a funny sort of way... not to put him on a pedestal, I just realised that he was human as well”

In theme 1, the challenges relating to the participant’s adjustment to marriage were discussed. One of the challenges identified by a participant was that she had to learn to accept that she was not able to change her spouse; instead she had to learn to accept him. It seems that being challenged by this unrealistic expectation, allowed this participant to make the required cognitive shift to alleviate the stress that this challenge generated. Chapman (2009:50) asserts that it is unrealistic to demand perfection from one’s spouse and it is not possible for them (or anyone) to live up to that expectation. Instead he advises that it is more harmonious for the relationship if spouses learn to accept the things about each other that cannot or will not change. Chapman (2009:24) furthermore suggests that the only person one have control over is oneself.

This is linked to “choice theory” proposed by Glasser and Glasser (2000:33) which holds that the only person someone is able to change is him or herself. Many spouses become frustrated that their spouse won’t change, but according to choice theory, true change can only occur when one accepts that the responsibility for change rests with them. By learning to accept their spouses, these participants seemed to create room in their relationships for their spouse to be themselves without judgement.

Participants also identified the importance of not blaming their spouses during times of difficulty. The theme of ‘not blaming’ came through very strongly for one participant. She had blamed her husband for getting them into debt, and she noticed that blaming him actually had the opposite effect to the one she wanted. She found that blaming her spouse was not effective in motivating him to make a positive change to their situation. Another participant appreciated that her husband did not blame her, even though it seems that he could have, given the situation. The expressions by the two participants are shared below:
“Don’t blame. No matter what... Don’t blame. Forget about blaming. Don’t blame. Blaming a person, really going back there, it hurts that person so much... that is something I had to work through because I would look at him, and like, it’s because of you we are in this... and it was putting him down, and not lifting him up to want to do something about it”

“...he didn’t put a lot of pressure on me... although he knew the problem was with me, he didn’t put a lot of pressure on me”

One of the myths that couples often buy into is that “if we have a problem, we must decide who is to blame” (Long & Young 2000:15). These myths are “unrealistic messages” that need to be confronted and dealt with to ensure healthy couple development. Long and Young (2000:77) further claim that “blame is not a useful concept” as blaming tends to limit the couple’s ability to jointly work on the problem they are facing, therefore, choosing not to blame helps to create “mutual responsibility for the problem and mutual contribution to the solution.” This seems to mirror the experiences of the participants who did not experience blame as being very useful or beneficial.

A characteristic of healthy families, and in this case couples, is that they look for solutions during times of difficulty rather than assigning blame (Figley & McCubbin 1983 cited in Gladding 2002:46). The participants were able to shift from blaming, to trying to find solutions, and this seemed to assist them in enduring, adapting to and overcoming the stressors they experienced.

Two participants identified the importance of being equals in the relationship, which suggests that power was shared by both spouses. Interestingly, the two participants who identified this as a resilience factor were both men. To these research participants (i.e. husbands), it was important that they shared equal power with their wives in the relationship, as explained below:
“...you have to be equal in this marriage, not I want to be the man and I want to dictate to you and my wife want to dictate to me, it’s just that we have an equal in this marriage”

“...you don’t put yourself above your wife but be equal with each other”

The views of the two male participants contradict the traditional notion of male domination in relationships, as suggested by Alpaslan (1997). This assertion is supported by Stets and Hammons (2002:4) who claim that women are more likely than men to be controlled by their partners and for this reason it is interesting that both participants who identified this as a resilience factor were men.

The inability to satisfy the need for power in marriage can be a formidable obstacle to a happy relationship (Glasser & Glasser 2000:32). When power is unbalanced in the relationship, there is more chance that the relationship will be experienced as unsatisfactory, and may even become dysfunctional (Walsh 1998:94). Conversely, if couples are able to work out the balance of power in their relationship, it can have the effect of enhancing intimacy (Walsh 1998:112), and intimacy can have the effect of buffering stress, which in turn can have the effect of providing a person with a sense of stability, of being loved and of being valued (Hobfoll & Lieberman 1987:19).

3.2.4.2 Subtheme 2: Attitude towards stressor/problem
The responses of the participants suggested that it was not only their attitude towards their spouse, but also their attitude towards the problem or stressor that contributed towards their resilience. A factor that aided in the resilience of participants was that they viewed the stressor (problem) they experienced as a shared problem, i.e. it was not ‘my’ problem or ‘your’ problem, but ‘our’ problem. Having this shared view of the problem helped participants to work together on this shared problem. Building on this idea of a shared problem, two participants shared how they took turns being strong in the relationship, in other words, when one spouse was feeling weak the other would be strong, and vice versa. In doing this,
participants claimed it helped them to get through those very challenging periods, as expressed by more than half of the participants in the present study:

“... for a relationship to work you have to work on it together. Sometimes it takes two to tango”

“... I think (my wife) and I together dealt with it, which is very key... I think we each handled it differently, but we were together handling it differently... we realised that it is not my baby it was our baby... sometimes you just need to dial into one of the partners for a while... then you know the dial might swing to you...a little later”

“...we have actually tried to work together on it”

“We have to get out of this together”

“...even though we didn't necessarily understand how the other person was feeling you know, or dealing with the whole thing... we actually helped each other kind through it in that way ...it was almost like I was the strong one while I was pregnant and he (husband) couldn’t deal with it and then after he died (son), I, I kinda fell apart and (husband) took over the role of being the strong person and actually helped me through it...we took turns kind of being the strong one in the relationship”

Judging from the participants’ responses above, it appears that the couples were able to work on the problems only after they altered the perception of the problem as being a joint one rather than that of one of the partners only. This approach seem to be in accordance with the assertion by Peterson et al (2003:59) that if a couple is able to agree on what the problem is that they are facing, they are more likely to deal with the impact of the problem in a successful way. Furthermore, if the couple perceives the problem as being ‘ours’ they may be better placed to find ways of
coping (Story et al. 2004:1146). This is also echoed by Long and Young (2000:78-79, 85) who suggest that couples are aided by having a shared definition of the problem, and by forming a team (working together) to attempt to solve it. Furthermore, they suggest that thinking about the problem as separate from themselves (externalising the problem) can help to place spouses on the “same team”. Similarly, in Gladding’s (2002:46, 48) description of healthy families that cope well with stress, he highlighted that they are able to view the problem as a shared problem, and are able to work together to find solutions. The participant’s responses seem to be in line with the theory on the benefit of having a shared definition of the problem, as well as viewing the problem as a shared problem that will require joint effort to address.

Another factor identified by a participant, was the benefit of accepting the situation and outcome, and being willing to adapt. It was only one participant that highlighted this, but it came up three times in his interview. He found his acceptance of the situation he was in (regardless of the outcome), and his willingness to adapt to it as important factors in strengthening his resilience in the face of challenges in his marriage. He articulated it as follows:

“I said to myself like we learn to accept what happened to her (daughter) and just to appreciate what we have”

“... I put myself in the situation that I will accept this either way”

“... we adapt to any situation, if you are willing, if you are willing you can adapt to any situation... you have to adapt to the situation you are into, you have to adapt”

In her work with resilient families, Walsh (1998:79,81) emphasises the value of flexibility in facing adversity. Families (and couples) that are able to make use of the resources at their disposal and adapt to changing conditions are more effective at
dealing with adversity. A similar concept is also found in Gladding (2002:48) where healthy families are described as being able to cope with stress by “changing the rules” to adapt to the situation where necessary. The researcher was surprised about the silence of this resilience factor in the narrations of the other participants, especially given the emphasis placed on this factor in resilience literature (compare Walsh 1998:79, Walsh 2002:132, Earvolino-Ramirez 2007:77, Wagnild & Collins 2009:30).

The last category that relates to participants’ attitude toward the problem has to do with how they tackled the problem. Two participants found that **dealing with the problem in small steps** helped them to deal with it more effectively. Getting through a significantly difficult stressor may take time, and coping with the problem by breaking it down into smaller steps seemed to make it more manageable, as cited below:

“... baby steps, tiny little steps, slowly but surely”

“You will get there eventually, but do the right things. You know, follow the right route... Take it slow, and just, you will get there... just take it a step at a time”

Sometimes when facing a significant stressor or challenge, it may become overwhelming, and breaking it down into smaller parts may make it more manageable. Although the process may be slow, having smaller, concrete steps to take in addressing the problem can provide the couple with small, consecutive successes which can increase their confidence as they deal with the stressor (Walsh 1998).

3.2.4.3 Subtheme 3: Support network
Six of the participants identified having a support network to help them through the stressful time they endured. Sources of support were identified close to the couple system, in *family* and *friends*, and also in the wider community, in the form of
church, and support groups. Their narrations reflection on the support of family and friends is cited below:

“...I never imagined something like that happen to us...it took a lot of prayer, friends, family, and that to get us through it”

“... die bystand wat ons gekry het van onse familie af ook... Dit is belangrik om vriende te het ook wat jou deurdra... (the reasons I was able to endure stressful time?) I would say my family and my husband”

“Friends, some of my friends motivated me a lot”

“... family is very important... family I believe is very important... having that open channel amongst family is also very crucial and important... if there is good communication and support during difficult times it’s always easier for you to get through something knowing that you have support from your family they are there for you, they support you... we don’t have a lot of friends, but we do have a few and I do have a best friend... that I talk to if I have any issues and vice versa when he’s got issues”

“... I think it helped a lot because we moved back to (a city) where (my husband’s) family was so he would just spend a lot of time with his parents”

“... I had lots of people around me, lots of friends... good to have a support base around me because my folks were just down the road...we had a lot of support from church...a lot of support, it’s not just us, there’s a lot of external input... especially from the church...(my wife also) linked up with different support groups as well which was good, you know, just to talk to someone who doesn’t have an emotional attachment... the grieving process needed to have external input”
In dealing with crisis and adversity, families (couples) can endure, adapt to and overcome challenges by mobilising and drawing upon the resources that they have at their disposal (Walsh 1998:70; Gladding 2002:46). These can include resources outside of the couple system, such as those mentioned, i.e. friends, family, church and support groups. These sources of support can be essential in promoting a sense of well-being, and may serve to reduce the effects of stressors that may be harmful (Hobfoll & Lieberman 1987:19), as well as help in finding meaning in adversity (Polatinsky & Esprey 2000:715). Conversely, a lack of support may hinder adjustment in times of difficulty, in particular with regards to bereavement (Polatinsky & Esprey 2000:716).

One participant mentioned that his wife attended support groups after the loss of their child. There is tremendous value in finding people in similar situations who are prepared to talk about their experiences, and who will listen and support others (Lasker & Toedter 2003:216). This can help to normalise the situation, and can offer hope and encouragement. Similarly, in her study on resilience in remarried families Robinson (2007:48) noted that utilising social resources, which would include sharing experiences such as in a support group, was a characteristic of resilient blended families. Earvolino-Ramirez (2007:77) also asserts that having supportive relationships helps to foster the development of resilience through the communication and support that is offered in those relationships.

3.2.4.4 Subtheme 4: Faith in God (Christianity)

Faith in God, and Christianity in particular, was seen as an important factor in the participants’ resilience. In theme 3, the impact of the stressor on the marriage, faith in God was also discussed, with regards to the impact that the stressor had on the participants’ faith in God. All of the participants identified themselves as Christians, but only two identified themselves as being part of a particular denomination. This information was volunteered, as participants were not asked about their denomination. Participants felt the impact of faith in different ways. Two believed God is in control of their lives, two felt that they were able to draw strength from God, two believed they experienced God’s grace which helped them, one felt that trusting God helped, and six spoke about the importance of prayer.
Below are extracts from the research interviews to give examples of their responses. The extracts are grouped under the categories named above.

**Faith in God (Christianity)**

“... we are really strong Christians”

“I'm a... believer... both of us, we are believers. We believe in God”

“... the faith I have in Jesus”

“...if it wasn’t for the fact that I am a strong believer...”

“I believe in God... (my faith) it’s important for me... I’m Christian... I strongly believe in my faith”

**God is in control**

“... we both came into our marriage knowing that God was in control”

“... I think a lot of it was digging into an understanding of where God is in the situation”

**Strength from God**

“... something from which you can draw strength from”
“Ek het krag gekry van die Here af en die Here het vir my gewys wat moet ek doen (I drew strength from God and God showed me what to do)”

Help from God (God's grace)

“...ons het deur dit gekom, met die hulp van die Here... weereens kan ek se dat dit is net die Here se genade (we got through it with the Lord’s help... again I can say it was just the Lord’s grace)”

“...it's the grace of God that just kept us together after all those things... I think it was God’s grace... taking strength from the Word (Bible)”

Trusting God

“...we have trust the Lord and pray that He will provide for us”

Prayer

“... it took a lot of prayer, friends, family and that, to get us through... as time went on, more prayer... it could carry us through like anything and prayers... the prayers and that and all the people prayed for us... I'm telling you, more prayer, prayer is the most important thing... I kept on praying that's what I did”

“... I think about prayer now, when you alone and you struggling with a specific issue in your life... God is there and you can talk to Him... we will have prayer... and pray for one another”

“Ja, a lot of prayer”
“Ek moet op my kniee bly. Ek moet gesels met Hom and dit is al wat my weer, dit het my krag gegee ... ons maak elke dag tyd in die aande om te bid en net om die Here te vra om ons deur te dra (I had to stay on my knees. I had to talk to Him and that is all that... it just gave me strength... we make time every evening to pray and ask the Lord to help us get through)"

“... we really prayed that God would heal him and we really prayed for him and really believed that God would heal him”

“... I think through prayer most of our, you know, you pray a lot, nobody wants his child to be sick”

Prayer came through very strongly in the interviews; however the researcher did not find much literature linking prayer to marriage and resilience. In her study on religious orientation in enduring marriage Robinson (1994:214) found that prayer was important for couples in decision-making and conflict situations. The participants in the present study seemed to find prayer more as a source of support and comfort, a way of reaching out to a God they believed in and trusted for help. In a study done by Goodman and Dollahite (2006:154) on how couple’s perceived the impact of God on their relationships, the importance of prayer was highlighted, but they also found there was a lack of literature on the concept. Similarly, In Southern’s (2006:122) review of articles published in the “The Family Journal” over a thirteen year period, he concluded that spirituality, in general, was a theme that had been neglected.

In studies done by Goodman and Dollahite (2006:151) and Robinson (1994:211) on the link between religious faith and marriage, most of the couples claimed that their faith in God was a very important resilience factor. When spirituality or faith is shared, it can be a “couple strength” (Long & Young 2000:21), i.e. a quality that strengthens and unifies the couple. Robinson (1994:207, 213) claims that religious faith can provide a source of spiritual support and comfort during challenging times, and can have an impact on the level of satisfaction couples experience in their
marriage. This seemed to be true for the participants in this study, who reported experiencing God’s help and support as something that enhanced their resilience. For some, this help was recognised as God’s grace, which can be seen as a source of strength (Goodman & Dollahite 2006:149). Robinson’s (1994:207-208) study also suggests that religious faith can enhance other marital strengths, such as commitment.

In Goodman and Dollahite’s (2006:148) study, many of the couples interviewed saw God as a “source of strength” and a “resource to overcome distress and to receive guidance”, which is comparable to the responses of participants in the presented study. Goodman and Dollahite (2006:153) found that every couple they interviewed spoke of God’s involvement in their marriage as having at least one of these three outcomes “(a) stability and unity (through divine help in overcoming challenges and conflict), (b) growth and motivation and (c) happiness and peace.” These outcomes bear a resemblance to the effects spoken of by participants in the presented study, but are not reflected overtly.

3.2.4.5 Subtheme 5: Finding meaning in the situation (through faith)
Linked to the idea of having faith in God, was the notion that participants’ faith helped them to find meaning in what they went through. Participants seemed to find meaning in the situation through learning from the experience, finding God as a result of the difficulty, and through developing a meaning-making ritual. Their faith seemed to inform and provide the context for finding meaning through the stressor they experienced.

The topic of learning from the experience is linked to the discussion on the impact of the stressor on the relationship, reported on in theme 3. The narration below is evidence of the participant’s belief that enduring the situation would help to make him and his wife better and stronger, which would equip and prepare them for future challenges they might face.

“... Believe that the situation is only going to make us better and stronger for the next one. We don’t know what’s gonna be the next one”
Enduring and overcoming challenging situations can help to bolster couples’ confidence in dealing to deal with similar or larger challenges in the future (Walsh 1998:125).

One participant believed that the meaning embedded in the stressor she and her husband experienced was linked to her finding God. She states that she didn’t know God, and believes that the situation she went through was instrumental in her finding faith. This is also linked to the discussion on the impact the stressor had on participants’ faith (discussed in theme 3).

“...want ek het gedink die Here straf my vir my sondes wat ek gedoen het. Ek het gedink die Here kom straf my om hierdie kind so te laat bore, maar aan die ankerkant het die Here vir my kom se dat ek het dit nie gedoen om jou to straf nie. Ek het dit gedoen sodat jy vir My moet ken (I thought the Lord was punishing me for my sins. I thought He was punishing me by allowing this child to be born this way, but on the other hand the Lord came to tell me that He didn’t do it to punish me. He did it so that I would know Him.)”

Another participant was able to make meaning out of a terrible situation by creating a meaning-making ritual with his family. This event helped to mark the death of his child, and remember the child’s life. The meaning-making ritual helped to give the family a concrete direction for their emotions (Walsh 1998:84; Carr 2000:291; Lasker & Toedter 2003:217). The participant’s expression in this regard is shared below:

“... you’ve got to at least aim it at the right direction you know, if we just dwelt on this I think you can be in a very dangerous position because you will never come out of it... you’ve got to aim those emotions and aim that and for instance his birthday and the day he died is a couple of days apart and it’s a funny time and but we have started aiming it towards a joyous occasion... we go up to (beach)… and we let off helium balloons and I love it...we do a lot of that... just try and bring the little guy’s life into some sort of focus, some meaning”
Religion and faith are linked to meaning and hope. Faith provides a framework through which to view adversity, find meaning, and gain something positive from a seemingly very negative situation. Having hope and being able to see a “bigger picture” can strengthen couples’ resilience (Van Wyk, Owen & Duff-Riddell 2011). Similarly, in a study done with parents with disabilities, hope and a having a positive outlook were associated with resilience and well-being (Lloyd & Hastings 2009:958). This is related to Antonovsky’s “sense of coherence” (1987 cited in Strang & Strang 2001:128 and Aspinwall & Tedeschi 2010:5) which is compromised of comprehensibility, meaningfulness and manageability. When a couple experiences challenges, the situation may seem chaotic and random, but when they are able to understand what is happening, believe that they have the resources to cope with the situation, and can find meaning in it, their level of distress may decrease.

It is common for positive growth to occur following stress if meaning can be found in it (Polatinsky & Esprey 2000:710). Enduring and overcoming a significant stress can also have the effect of causing people to “attribute meaning and value to even the smallest of things” and have a greater appreciation for what they have (Van Wyk, Owen & Duff-Riddell 2011).

3.2.4.6 Subtheme 6: Belief that they will get through the situation (hope)
When reflecting on their experiences, participants drew attention to the fact that having hope, and a belief that they will get through the situation was useful. This belief was also informed by their faith. They were able to get through very challenging situations by holding on to the belief that they will get through, and that things will get better, as recited below:

“I'm a believer that at the end of the day things will work out... eventually you will get through it...it is just that belief that you will conquer you will get through it you will overcome it and it won't continue forever”

“... I believed that it will come, that actually helped me a lot”

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Van Wyk, et.al (2011) cite a reference by Lynch (1965) that defines hope as “the fundamental knowledge and feeling that there is a way out of difficulty, that things can work out... that there are solutions... hope is the sense of the possible.” They further go on to say that “hope is a key factor in building and maintaining resilience.” Following on from this, finding meaning in adversity was believed to contribute to hope and faith played a role in meaning-making (ibid.). This bears resemblance to the reflections of the participants quoted above.

In addition to believing that they will get through, some participants also held the belief that things will actually get better.

“Believe the situation is only going to make us better and stronger for the next one”

“…you will overcome it and ... it won’t continue forever”

“…we realised that it was just for a period... I think just realising that it wasn’t gonna be like this forever”

Hope has also been described as a “robust resource” in that it implies that despite the situation or the people involved, a positive outcome is possible (Hobfoll & Lieberman 1987:19). A belief that things will get better, having hope, helps in that the outcome is not necessarily tied to the situation or the characteristics of the people involved. It is something that is ‘greater than’, and ‘outside of’ them. The people involved are able to believe in something better even if the ‘facts’ of the situation seem contrary.
The tendency to believe that stress is typically temporary, and that it may ultimately be positive and lead to change, are listed as coping strategies for healthy families (couples) by Curran (1985 cited in Gladding 2002:48), and seem to have positively contributed towards the resilience of the participants in the presented study.

3.2.4.7 Subtheme 7: Relationship strengths
The strengths of the marriage relationship came through as a very strong theme when participants reflected on what they believed to be the reasons they endured significant stress as well as what they believed to be the strengths of their marriage. The discussion on relationship strengths will be expanded upon in theme 5: The strengths of the marriage. The purpose of this is to avoid duplication, and instead to provide a rich discussion of the strengths that participants thought contributed to the resilience in their marriages.

3.2.5 THEME 5: STRENGTHS OF THE MARRIAGE
The following section expands upon the theme of relationship strengths. When reflecting on what contributed towards the resilience in their marriages, many participants spoke of the strengths of their marriage. This theme was further developed when participants were specifically asked about what they believe to be the strengths of their marriage, and what they had done to strengthen their marriages. Their responses to the above questions informs this present theme, which is divided into seven subthemes, namely love, divorce is not an option, communication, strong foundation, supporting each other, humour and faith in God.

3.2.5.1 Subtheme 1: Love
The theme of love came through very strongly in the participants’ responses in various ways and forms, which are grouped together under seven subthemes. The subthemes that will be discussed below in more detail are as follows: affirming love, want to be together, spending quality time together, acts of kindness/service, remembering reasons for getting married, focussing on spouse’s strengths, and respect.
The love that participants spoke of involved action, which requires actively working on the relationship as proposed by Chapman (2004:29). This was clearly stated by one participant who spoke of the need to “keep the candle burning”, which implies that action is required.

“(things done to strengthen the marriage?)...the love for each other, that’s what I think. The feeling we have for each other and it’s like, um, you have to keep it like, you have to keep the candle burning”

Linked to the idea of actively working towards growing the love in their relationship, is the importance of **affirming the love** that you share with your spouse, as pointed out by one participant. Another spoke of the strength of the love between her and her husband, and another told of the commitment she has towards her husband and marriage as a result of this love. She chose not to leave the “mess” because of the love she had for her husband. This was similar to the response of another participant who shared that the love in their marriage kept them together when times were tough, and prevented them from separating. This reflects the love described by Chapman (2004:35) that involves reason and emotion, a conscious act of the will and discipline. The participants’ verbatim responses are listed below.

“...me and my wife we love each other... even if I say twenty times that I love her, I keep on saying that to remind myself of it... you know me and my wife we love each other... we just love each other”

“...it’s just unconditional love. Really. I love (my husband) with my whole being and the same from his side. I think that once that is there you can really overcome absolutely anything”
I also think it was love, somewhere there was love. Somewhere in between there, there was love, that said, I can’t, I just cannot leave this mess, I have to do something to work this out.”

“The strengths? Ek sal se onse liefde vir mekaar. As ons nie rereg lief gewees het vir mekaar nie, so ons seker al geskei het.... Ons is nog steeds bymekaar want ons is lief vir mekaar al gaan ons deur daardie proses (The strengths? I would say our love for each other. If we didn’t really love each other, we would probably have divorced. We are still together because we love each other, even though we went through that process)”

Walsh (1998:114) asserts that relationships are able to endure hardship and strain if they are “offset by much more positive communication, through expressions of love, appreciation, respect, and pleasurable interaction.” Through affirming their love and working on keeping it ‘alive’, participants’ relationships were able to endure hardship and difficulty, and result in them viewing their love as a relationship strength.

Participants made reference to the presence of intimacy, commitment and passion in their narrations, which is reminiscent of the three components noted in Knox and Schacht (2010:50). This suggests that the presence of conjugal or consummate love.

One participant spoke of how he and his wife really want to be together. This desire to want to be together was also noted by participants as a factor that contributes towards resilience which was discussed in theme 4. This desire to want to be together helped them to endure difficult times in their relationship.

“...we really want to be with each other you see, and I think that is what has kept us so close together”

Another facet of love that required action was the time that couples made for each other. Five participants highlighted the value of spending quality time together with their spouse. For some, they had to be creative in finding that time, but all spoke of
the benefit of it. It is clear from their reflections that spending quality time together was something that required action and effort on the part of participants.

“We used to drive to work together in the mornings and in Johannesburg you sit in traffic for 45 minutes... so just little things like that just helped us keep in contact with each other... for us I think just spending quality time together is another thing that strengthens us the most... spend time, just the two of you”

“I think that was really good... we tried to do things together, stuff that we enjoyed... just spending a lot of time together where possible”

“... make time to always be together, make time for yourselves... I think to make time for yourselves is very important”

“... make the moment, if we are together, let us be happy... you need to do things together”

“Ja, mens moet maar altyd tyd maak vir mekaar. Jy kan nie net hulle se as jy lief is vir iemand moet jy werk daaraan. You must work on it (Yes, you must always make time for each other. You can’t just say you love someone, you must work on it. You must work on it)”

In his book, “The Five Love Languages” Chapman (2004:59) identifies five ways (love languages) that couples can express their love for their spouse. One of the love languages is “quality time”. The participants’ reference to spending time together, concurs with what has been described as the love language of quality time. This “quality time” involves giving your undivided attention. The value of spending time together is also asserted by Alpaslan (1997:93) as one way in which couples can
learn more about each other. Gladding (2002:35) confirms that spending time together (quality and quantity) helps couples to share thoughts, feelings and this in turn helps them to face the challenges they may face. Spending quality time together is more than just being in the same place, rather it is time when spouses are able to connect with each other and deepen their intimacy.

Intimacy was identified as a relationship strength in a study completed by Robinson and Blanton (1993:40), and as a component of love by Knox and Schacht (2010:50). This intimacy was developed through spending time together and through couple’s sharing of their lives together. This closeness or “connectedness” is recognised as an important component as resilience (Walsh 1998:84). Both Robinson and Blanton (1993:40) and Walsh (1998:85) speak of the importance of this connectedness or intimacy being balanced with a sense of “separateness”, where spouses recognise that they are separate, unique individuals. In a sense, they are able to be close, and experience it as positive, because there is an acknowledgment and appreciation of difference, which serves to avoid enmeshment (Robinson & Blanton 1993:40; Walsh 1998:85). This was identified by two participants who expressed it as follows:

“giving each other space to do our own things”

"my wife needs space in the relationship”

The research participants clearly valued the practical support they were getting from their spouses as more than half of them made reference to what Chapman (2004:97) describes as the love language of acts of service, i.e., doing ‘the small things’ for one another. Acts of service included helping with housework, preparing lunches and cooking meals, and seemed to be intended as, and received as, expressions of love and care. For some participants, there was the sense that these acts of service did not come easily or naturally, but were worth it because of what they meant to the spouse, again emphasising that love requires action. Below are extracts from the research interviews to illustrate this point:
“I think that’s the thing is that most of the time is the small things that take you through... do things for each other when you can’t do it yourself... he was there helping me and getting me through, doing stuff for me”

“... the small things what she do. It doesn’t have to be big... I do dishes and that sometimes I clean the house”

“Do the small little things for him. Wash his feet sometimes and he sits there and I go fetch water and wash his feet. Bring him some tea. Just surprise him with something in his lunch tin in the morning, yes you have to do all the little things that counts. Buy him some chocolate ‘cause I know he loves chocolate...”

“(strengthen my marriage?) ... like it can be little things like I know for instance that (my husband) would love to come home to a cooked meal and that has always been one of my weaknesses so I am really trying to work on that... just to see the smile on that man’s face... so I had to work on that. Doing the little things that matters... doing little things even like ironing. Some people will think ag but you just have to do that as the wife, but to me ironing for him is a nightmare... I am very aware of what is stressful to him like having to iron for himself in the morning and preparing his own lunch, so I, I really work on that as well... it means the whole world to him if you can just do all that little things for him”

“...being helpful in the house... I’ll jump in and cook things... share the load... just jumping in trying to make life in-house much relaxed”

**Focusing on their spouse’s strengths** was highlighted as a resilience factor by participants, and was discussed in theme 4. It was also mentioned by participant as a strength of the relationship, and was linked to gratitude, i.e. being grateful for their spouse and the things that they do.
The choice of words in the preceding quote also suggests that the participant regarded her husband’s generosity and patience as non-normative, which on the one hand explains why she valued it so much but also evokes the question about what prevented her from expecting the positive treatment she is receiving from her spouse? The results of Robinson and Blanton’s (1993:40) study noted that participants (in enduring marriages) were likely to emphasise their spouse’s strengths and minimise their weaknesses. This tendency to look for the best in one’s spouse and to downplay their weaknesses seems to facilitate the process of resilience and strengthen the marriage.

Love as a theme also emerged in Rautenbach’s (2008:62) study on the strengths of enduring marriages, as well as divorce not being an option, which was also reflected in the responses from participants in the present study.

3.2.5.2 Subtheme 2: Divorce is not an option

Three of the participants spoke of how divorce was not an option for them, and it wasn’t something they had considered. This seemed to be a reflection of their commitment to their spouse and their marriage; as one participant put it, you are “married for life.” It seems that participants and their spouses had an agreement that divorce was not an option for them; they knew they were committed, and therefore threats of divorce did not occur. The participants’ commitment seemed to help them to stay in the marriage, even during times of great difficulty, as cited below:

“... I mean we will argue but never once that we decide listen now it is time that we get a divorce... ja, it (divorce) wasn’t an option, because I mean not just for the sake
... I said to my wife, divorce is not on my vocab, there’s no such thing, it’s never an option

“You partners, in like, married for life, married for life that what you said, through sickness and health and for richer for poorer”

Divorce is widespread in South Africa with almost half of all marriages being dissolved within the first seven years (Botha, et.al. 2009:1). The increasing divorce rate seems to have normalised its occurrence and hence more people view it as a valid option if a marriage does not work out.

Yodanis (2005:645) identified what she called a “divorce culture”, where marriage is seen as conditional and divorce is a way out if things go wrong. This culture is particularly prevalent in countries where divorce is accepted and considered a valid option for couples that are unhappy or dissatisfied, even given the negative effects on the individuals and families involved. This increased exposure to divorce seems to normalise it, making it an acceptable alternative when faced with difficulties in the relationship.

For the participants quoted above, it is clear that divorce was not an option for them, i.e. their views were not aligned with the divorce culture. Marriage is often viewed as contractual; valid for as long as each acts as expected. Another view of marriage, often adopted by couples with a strong conservative religious base, is the view that marriage is a covenant, where the marriage is held in high regard, and that individuals should be prepared to sacrifice for the marriage if necessary (Ripley, Worthington, Bromley & Kemper 2005:317). The covenantal view places greater
value on the marriage, encouraging spouses to work on it and not consider divorce as an ‘easy’ way out if things don’t work.

According to the Divorce Act 70 of 1979 (with amendments) the reasons that can be given for a divorce are the irretrievable breakdown of marriage, mental illness or continuous unconsciousness, and the process of divorce, although very stressful and painful, is relatively simple if spouses can agree on the conditions.

Since divorce was not considered as an option for participants, it would seem that they would have to work on their marriages and persevere during difficult times; they had to find a way to make it work. The resilience factors discussed in theme 4 are likely to have facilitated this process. Rautenbach (2008:65) cautions though that just staying in a marriage is not necessarily enough to make it satisfying or healthy, as many people stay in marriages that are unhappy and unhealthy. However, this does not appear to be the case for the participants in the present study, who all identified their marriages as satisfying and healthy.

The notion of divorce is not an option was also found in Rautenbach’s (2008) and Robinson and Blanton’s (1993) studies. The couples that participated in the studies were committed to one another and had made the decision that divorce was not an option for them. Making this decision seemed to assist couples in enduring difficulty, with a level of security knowing that both spouses were committed to the relationship even in very challenging times.

In contrast to the views of the majority of participants, one participant in the present study spoke of wanting to leave the relationship after her child was diagnosed with a serious illness.

“... ek het gevoel om my man te los en net weg to hardloop. Ek wou net, ek wou net weggaan. Ek kon dit net nie hanteer nie (I just felt like leaving my husband and running away. I just wanted to get away. I could just not handle it)”

This participant was honest with her husband about how she felt, and she said her husband’s faith in God helped them to get through it, and later described this event as a catalyst for her finding God. It is not uncommon for commitment to sometimes
falter, but commitment to the marriage, and to any children involved can be an important factor in staying in the marriage (Robinson & Blanton 1993:40). In addition to this, faith in God was an important part of reaffirming this participant’s commitment to the relationship and choosing to stay in the marriage to face the challenge of raising their sick child.

As mentioned in the discussion above, commitment to one’s spouse and the relationship was noted numerous times. This commitment seemed to be as a result of the decision that divorce was not an option, but was also linked to love, where one participant in particular spoke of how her love for her husband facilitated her commitment to him and the marriage. Three participants specifically highlighted the importance of commitment to their spouses and their relationship. Their verbatim responses are listed below:

“I can’t, I just cannot leave in this mess, I have to do something to work this out. Because I’m married to him... so, for our dignity, and for me to be able to cover my husband, I have to, I have to stay... you know, I just decided I’m not going anywhere, no matter what”

“...so she would say, there were challenges, but I stood by my husband”

“... I will really go anywhere with him. Even say tomorrow he has to leave the country and I will go with him... I feel really safe with him”

In the literature commitment is viewed as a vital ingredient in a lasting marriage (Carter 2001; Parker 2002; Gladding 2002). This can clearly be validated in the case of the participant who informed her husband that she wanted to leave the marriage as a result of being overwhelmed by their child’s illness. Their ability to talk about her fears then served to enhance her commitment to their relationship and the joint challenge of their daughter’s illness. Commitment, that has been described as one of the components of love (compare Knox & Schacht 2010) can serve as a foundation
for the marriage during difficult times (Carter 2001:2); a “glue” that holds spouses together when circumstances may threaten to tear them apart (Parker 2002:10).

Commitment is an essential ingredient of healthy families and marriages; it involves a loyalty in both good times and bad, and is based on “both emotion and intention” (Gladding 2002:35), i.e., it is not dependent only on emotions; there is choice and action involved. This kind of commitment brings life to the marriage, is strengthened when couples express their appreciation of one another (ibid.) and when couples are committed to both their spouse and the marriage (Parker 2002:10), like seem to be relevant in the case of many of the research participants in the present study.

The converse appears to also be true. If couples are ambivalent in their commitment to one another and their marriage, and consider divorce as an alternative the marriage is likely to be at risk as it makes it more difficult for couples to work together on the challenges they face (Carter 2001:2; Gladding 2002:35).

In her study on why marriages last, Parker (2002:10) found that commitment to the marriage, wanting the relationship to succeed, and viewing marriage as sacred were important components of successful marriages.

One participant shared how he believed marriage is valuable, which is linked to the idea that marriage is sacred. He spoke of how marriage should be fought for and protected. Thus another aspect that seemed to inform the notion that divorce is not an option is that marriage is valuable, and worth the effort and work required to preserve it. The quote from the research interview appears below:

“I don’t think a lot of people realise how precious a marriage is and that it is an amazing dynamic wonderful thing that needs to be protected at all costs, um, its mind blowing the potential impact that a solid marriage has on generations to come”

The view of marriage as valuable and sacred may be informed by the religious beliefs of the participants, who all identified themselves as Christians. This is also reflected in literature, where the value placed on the marriage relationship is seen to facilitate marital commitment and is encouraged by religious faith (Robinson & Blanton 1993:42; Robinson 1994:211). Religious faith also influences attitudes
towards divorce (Sullivan 2001:622, 623), in that the stronger their religious beliefs, the less likely a couple were to consider divorce as an option. Sullivan (2001:622, 623) claims however, that holding these attitudes towards divorce does not guarantee the relationship against divorce (ibid.), and asserts that a couple would still need to work on the marriage in order for it to be successful.

Therefore because marriage is viewed as valuable, and because divorce was not considered an option for participants, they had to persevere during hardship, and work on their marriages, which required hard work. One participant mentioned the importance of not giving up. Four participants spoke of the value of having a desire to work on the marriage i.e. wanting to work on it and see it succeed. Another three identified specific ways that they had worked on their marriages, namely through reading books and attending marriage courses. The verbatim extracts are grouped according to category, and are listed below.

**Perseverance**

“...it’s like just being there, not giving up...not giving up...people just give up too easily... ja, not to give up so easily”

**Desire to work on marriage**

“... him wanting to work at our marriage, him wanting to be right, helped a lot”

“...working on it (marriage) everyday”

“You must work on it... you have to work on that just to keep the flame burning... it does sometimes require effort... it is an everyday thing you must work on”

“...what a couple needs to do, especially in a marriage is they have to work”
Reading books

“... one of the books actually helped us a lot was that Five Love Languages”

“... I must say through that book (Fascinating Womanhood) I've learned a lot. I even made some notes in my diary and when I feel a bit down then I just go back to it and I'll go through it just to remind myself”

Marriage courses

“... (a marriage preparation course) was kinda helpful but I think we had no idea you know, you talk about things like finances and do you want children and that sort of thing, but um I almost think you need a bit more, after you got married.... we did another marriage course about a year after we got married, not because we were having problems, but just because it was available...and actually recently, about two years ago, we did another one, you know, to make sure we were keeping on track”

It is evident from the narrations above that most of the participants took an active interest in their marriages, and worked on ensuring its success. The mechanisms they employed to ensure that divorce was not an option was either through cognitive restructuring (i.e. realising that they need to persevere and view the challenges as opportunities for growth); through emotive regulation (developing the desire to want to be in the marriage); also through self taught methods (i.e. reading books) and through accessing lay counselling (i.e. marriage preparation). All of these mechanisms required effort and action, and it is apparent that the one mechanism also triggered the implementation of another, e.g. their desire to work on their marriage was followed through with action in the form of engaging in marriage preparation and marriage enrichment activities.

Marriage preparation is a topic of interest with books such as “What I wish I knew before I got married” (James 2001) and “Love, Sex, and Happily Ever After: Preparing for a marriage that goes the distance” (Groeschel 2007), to name two.
Marriage preparation programmes are seen as valuable in helping couples to anticipate and address issues that may place them at risk for marital distress and divorce (Valiente, Belanger & Estrada 2002:72). Marriage preparation helps couples set realistic expectations for marriage and to be prepared for what marriage holds and be proactive in addressing it (Alpaslan 1997:5). The research participants in the present study seem to echo this outlook. In addition to attending marriage preparation programmes, participants also engaged in marriage enrichment activities, in particular attending marriage courses, and reading books. The idea behind marriage enrichment is that couples are strengthened through engaging in activities alone, or with other couples. Marriage enrichment serves to maintain or enhance couple health, and is not limited to times of distress (Gladding 2002:50, 51). Alpaslan (1997:8) says that it is important to make a distinction between the different forms of couple intervention so that couples may be referred appropriately. He explains that marriage preparation and marriage enrichment are different to marriage counselling as the aim is education and prevention and not therapy.

It is interesting to note that none of the participants spoke of seeking professional help (in the form of therapy) during times of distress and difficulty. Instead participants drew on other resources they had in their families, churches and community. One participant went as far as to say the he “didn’t go through counselling because (he doesn’t) believe in people counselling (him).” For this participant and others, it seems that the resilience factors discussed in theme 4 were sufficient in assisting them through the difficulty they experienced in their marriage, thus highlighting the value of identifying and strengthening resilience in marriage. It would be interesting to explore the participants’ views of professional intervention in a follow up study as this may also provide feedback that is required to make counselling relevant and appealing to be sought out when required.

3.2.5.3 Subtheme 3: Communication

The topic of communication has emerged numerous times throughout the study. Communication was discussed in theme 2 as a stressor where participants described the stress associated with having different ways of communication and expressing emotion. The quality of communication was also impacted upon by other
stressors in the relationship, and communication suffered during times of difficulty. This was discussed in detail in theme 3. Given the importance of communication, it is understandable that differences in communication and poor quality communication would negatively impact upon the marriage as discussed in previous themes.

In contrast, when communication is healthy and strong, it can strengthen the relationship. It was in this way that communication was highlighted as a relationship strength by participants. Participants identified communication as essential generally and specifically, by giving examples of the specific ways they communicated that strengthened their relationship. This encompassed them addressing the issues in their relationship, speaking about their likes and dislikes, speaking about their marriage, being honest with each other, and keeping in touch with their spouse on a daily basis. The verbatim quotes that follow show the responses of the eight participants who stated the importance of communication as a whole.

“... communication is very important... communication, being open to each other, it’s very important”

“... we got a straight talk, there’s no, you see... if you have problems you have to talk about it, you see, communication is key...”

“... most important is communication”

“... there is nothing that I can’t talk to him about...”

“(things done to strengthen marriage?)... communication, stronger communication... I still go back to communication... a couple has to have communication. Communication and trust”

“... the gate is always open to say how you feeling... we listen to each other”
“Die praat is baie belangrik dat julle moet kommunikeer met mekaar of as jy nie van iets gehou het nie dan moet jy praat en se ek hou nie van dit nie (talking is very important, you must communicate to each other when you don’t like something, you must say that you don’t like it)”

“I think communication... plays a big role in learning to know each other again. Talk, and say how you feel”


In a study conducted by Robinson and Blanton (1993:40,42) on longstanding marriages, they found that many couples agreed that communication was very important in keeping their relationship together, and helped to enhance their “connectedness”. This same result seems to be reflected in the present study.

Open, clear communication is a characteristic of healthy relationships (Figley & McCubbin 1983 cited in Gladding 2002:46), and is linked to intimacy. As couples share their lives together they grow closer, which in turn increases the quality of their marriage making them more likely to experience a happier relationship (Pollock, Die & Marriott 1989:620).

One of the specific ways that the research participants reportedly communicated was to speak about their marriage and address issues as they came up. Three participants shared that they speak to their spouse about the problems in their marriage, and address those issues as they arise. When they noticed that something was wrong, they would address it immediately with their spouse, as is evident from narrations below:
“Speaking to each other. Being open with each other and always... when I see something is worrying her... I will ask and ask until I know what’s going on. I don’t like to leave a situation... she will always ask me how was my day at work and sometimes I am just off. Ask me that like what did I do then I say, no the day was fine and then she will say no, she would ask me, no how was your day at work? Explain man, what did you do, speak to me and then I will start to express myself”

“... you must be open to your partner... communication... so I think that’s one of the best things, communication and to be open to each other... we sat down... I remember we had sessions, both of us... like asking each other, what is it that you want me to change?”

“... ek sal altyd gesels met hom en vra hoekom lyk jy weer vandag so? (I will always talk to him and ask why do you look like that today?)”

The participants in this study seemed to quickly identify when there was a problem, and dealt with it straight away. They spoke about any concerns they had, so as not to let it become something that comes between them. This ability to constructively communicate about issues and resolve them is recognized as vital to the health of a relationship (Robinson & Blanton 1993:41; Walsh 1998:117; Carter 2001:2)

Being proactive in dealing with issues prevents them from unnecessarily developing into larger problems (Story & Bradbury 2004:1143). This type of open and direct communication provides the space for opinions and feelings to be aired and for constructive problem solving to take place (Broman, Riba & Trahan 1996:910).

Similarly, participants reflected upon the value of talking about their likes and dislikes. This communication seemed to help clarify expectations, i.e. what they wanted and expected from their spouse.
“Die praat is baie belangrik dat julle moet kommunikeer met mekaar of as jy nie iets gehou het nie dan moet jy praat en se ek hou nie van dit nie. Dat dit nie weer kan gebeur nie want hoe sal hy weet dat jy nie van dit nie van dit nie maar jy se niks nie? (Talking is very important, you must communicate with each other if there is something that you don't like, so that it won't happen again. How will he know that you don't like it if you don't say anything?)”

“If there is something that... you don't like, or you don't like the way they are reacting to it, to be able to talk about it in a non-critical way... communicate it is a way so that they know you are not criticizing then and that you still love them and accept them”

“... if I come into the lounge and you sit with your feet up on the couch, I wouldn’t be happy with that but then I must tell you that, so that you can know it, if I don’t tell you that, you don't know it, you’ll do it and I will be getting cross for what? For not telling you”

In their book, Glasser and Glasser (2000:146) share some advice given by a couple who had been married for many years. The couple advised that other couples “take the risk of telling each other what (they) want and also risk telling each other what (they) see as not right.” It is not possible that they will always agree, but by communicating it, they are better positioned to reach a compromise (Parker 2002:9). This type of communication enhances intimacy and connectedness as mentioned earlier.

Another important aspect of communication is **honesty**. Four participants shared how honesty and transparency were vital ingredients of healthy communication. For participants, honesty involved not keeping any secrets, not lying, speaking about the facts, but doing so in a caring way. Their expressions in this regard are shared below:
“transparency, is the best thing in the marriage... transparency is a very good thing”

“I think that really is the big thing, just talking to each other and being honest with each other, but when I say being honest, I think you have to be careful not to be rude”

“...there mustn’t be any secrets, especially with money, because money can rip a marriage, it can rip it apart”

“... communication obviously includes um being honest all of the times... there should be no lies involved. So we should always be honest, um you should always talk about the facts. The real issues. The things that matter...”

Healthy communication is “direct, clear, and honest” (Walsh 1998:107), therefore it is important that couples discuss things in a clear and honest way. Honesty is also vital for the development of trust (Wright 2000:72). It is not possible to have a trusting relationship if spouses do not speak to each other honestly. This also links in with the idea of communication enhancing intimacy, as it is not possible to be intimate if the relationship based on lies and dishonesty. The communication that couples highlighted as a strength happened regularly. Two participants shared that they kept in touch with their partner on a day to day basis.

“we have to make time to chat and that is very important... that I know what is going on in your head, what you thinking, what you feeling, how you feeling, are you not feeling well today or you just not in a good mood or in a bad mood, let us all you know, let us be a part of it even if your mood is bad, let me still be part, maybe I can help to cheer you up”
“... hy sal altyd praat van wat by die werk gebeur het. Al die goedjies wat gebeur het deur die dag sal ons praat in die aand voor ons gaan slaap (he will talk always talk about what happened at work. At night before we go to bed we will talk about everything that happened during the day)”

These participants took an active interest in their spouse and the things that were important to their spouse, which is a characteristic of a healthy relationship (Walsh 1998:85). There is a relationship between the quantity (not just quality) of communication in marriage and the level of marital satisfaction, with lower quantity of communication linked to lower marital satisfaction (Richmond 1995 in Lyons, Wanzer & Richmond 1998:328). Therefore, it would seem that by making an effort to communicate with one another regularly, participants were able to enhance and strengthen their marriage.

Two participants stated the significance of admitting your mistakes to your spouse when you are wrong. These participants took responsibility for what they had done, and in doing so were able to move past the problem.

“If you don’t acknowledge what you have done wrong, how can you be able to move forward?”

“... I’ve realised that... I’m the one who made a mistake... I think one thing that helped me is to realise that I’m wrong... I realised that I was wrong... once I’ve realised that... I apologised for everything... then she forgave me”

Admitting when you are wrong can improve communication and deepen a relationship (Wright 2000:82), by providing the opportunity to learn from mistakes so as prevent repeating them in the future (Walsh 1998:125). Marriages that allow room for mistakes, where mistakes can be admitted and accepted, are likely to be healthier and stronger.
3.2.5.4 Subtheme 4: Strong foundation

From participant’s responses, it seems that their relationship was able to take the ‘weight’ of the stressors they experienced because of their relationship’s strong foundation and because of the friendship they had established. Spouses knew each other well, and had spent time working on their friendship. This friendship created a strong foundation together with their shared history and was seen as an ongoing process where they were still learning things about each other even though they had been together for a long time.

“...we know each other...we went out for 10 years, so that is, I think the solidness of our foundation”

“Ons is nou 4 jaar getroud, maar ons het 5 jaar uitgegaan...so ons ken mekaar redelik goed by nou al (We have been married for 4 years, but we dated for 5 years, so we know each other really well by now)”

“... he will always say that he believe in the foundation of a marriage”

“... we’d been married for quite a few years already and it wasn’t as if it was brand new, we knew each other very well”

“You’re supposed to be friends... friends, lovers, husband and wife, everything in total. You know you try, sometimes... when you are in a marriage you don’t where you are... but you’re learning every day, different things... about each other”

“... we are still learning each other... we still discovering each other and we still find out new things about each other”
Having a shared history can provide a good foundation to the relationship, which can aid in dealing with stress (McNulty & Karney 2001:945). This is further enhanced by friendship, which is an important ingredient in a successful marriage (Glasser & Glasser 2000:32). These authors believe so strongly in this that they propose the central message of their book “Getting Together and Staying Together” is to “treat your spouse as you do your best friend” (Glasser & Glasser 2000:146).

This friendship seemed to enable participants to support and believe in each other. This may be linked to the discussion in theme 4, where the attitude towards one’s spouse was crucial in overcoming stressors in the relationship.

“... being there for each other I think that is what brought us through... just being there and supporting each other, me and my wife... that was... major for us... supporting each other and being there”

“(strengths of the marriage?)... the belief we have for each other... truly we believe in each other”

Having physical and emotional support, knowing that they can turn to each other in times of distress is essential in helping couples overcome difficulty (Mekosh-Rosenbaum & Lasker 1995:130; Walsh 1998:85; Glasser & Glasser 2000:146). This seemed to also be true for participants.

One participant in particular was appreciative of the support she received from her husband, especially because she feels that she neglected him during a difficult time in their relationship. For her, knowing that her husband was still there for her provided her with support and hope that they will get through the situation and that their marriage would survive the challenging time.

“...that was very challenging for our marriage, you see, ‘cause my whole life just shifted to (my son), and I actually forgot about (my husband), but the thing is like he was just always there, and I knew he was there”
3.2.5.5 Subtheme 5: Humour and laughter

Four participants reflected on the importance of humour and laughter in their marriage. Humour took the form of making jokes, laughing at the situation, and laughing together. The quotes that follow illustrate participants’ responses.

“Look back and laugh about it... that’s the sense of humour I’m talking about”

“(couple under pressure to find other accommodation)... he was joking to say, I think we must just take a tent and go live next to the beach, you will eat fresh fish every day, so I just said, I’ll really go anywhere with you”

“(strengths that have kept the marriage together?)... I think being able to have a good laugh, ja, that definitely helps and sometimes we do get too serious and then we realise that we actually need to just relax and laugh”

“... we try and laugh a lot... just try and relax with each other and not take things too seriously”

Research shows that laughter is good for you, and is effective in reducing stress, and releasing negative emotion (Van Wyk, Owen & Duff-Riddell 2011). A good sense of humour can similarly act as an effective coping mechanism during times of trouble (Gladding 2002:36), as seemed to have been the case for the participants above.

Walsh (1998:116) describes the benefits of humour in some detail. She describes shared humour as a source of strength, humour can neutralise tense situations, be used to express feelings, help put people at ease, reduce anxiety, facilitate conversation and help restore an optimistic outlook. With these benefits to the relationship it is not surprising that couples would find it to be a source of strength in their marriage. In a similar way, humour can be used to balance out the seriousness of marriage during stressful times (Wright 2000:55).
Despite the benefit of humour, it can be destructive if used incorrectly. If humour is used to express anger or make fun of others it can be very harmful to relationships (Walsh 1998:116). The participants’ responses did not suggest that humour was used in this manner; however it is helpful to be aware that humour should be used supportively in order for it to be beneficial.

3.2.5.6 Faith in God (Christianity)

Faith in God had emerged in theme 4 as one of the resilience factors that enhanced the marital relationship. Faith in God was mentioned because it was impacted upon by the stressor that participants experienced (discussed in theme 3) and because it was seen as a significant factor contributing towards resilience (discussed in theme 4). As a resilience factor, ‘faith in God’ served a supportive function, whereas ‘faith in God’ as a relational strength seems to serve a structural function in that it guides and governs behaviour. Three participants spoke of how their faith in God informed how they conducted themselves in their marriages. Their faith in God provided norms that governed their behaviour.

One participant spoke of how he re-examined cultural assumptions, and chose to rather operate according to Biblical principles. Another relayed how his beliefs guide how he treats his wife, and a third stated how it works to run a family along Biblical guidelines. The participants’ responses are listed below.

“...if you know that, you know with us black people... or let me say the Xhosas, we’ve got a culture that says a man is a man, you can’t do things with your wife, you have to decide all alone, so I’ve realized that no, as the Word of God says, the Bible says, you and your wife are one... I’ve realised that me and my wife are one... I realised, no, I was wrong. I should remove the culture in the marriage... God is not only for one culture... He’s for everybody”

“But there’s a law that you set in a marriage, ok, that’s my own beliefs... that I believe in that you never hit a woman, you see so we never go to that route, I never ever even think about hitting my wife, but she knows that and that is what I believe in you see, so that’s why we are so comfortable with each other”
Healthy families (including couples) have a clear structure that is appropriate for the family’s needs and produces growth (Gladding 2002:37). When structure is clear, so are boundaries, and this enables growth to take place (ibid.). In addition to facilitating growth, clear structure provides a sense of stability and security by helping individuals know what is expected of them and others in the relationship (Walsh 1998:80). For the participants cited above, their Christian beliefs and faith in God provided this structure.

Faith in God can also be seen as a source of unity for the couple. Having shared beliefs about how the family and marriage is organised can serve to strengthen the marriage relationship as a result of the agreement regarding these matters (Robinson & Blanton 1993:42). Long and Young (2000:21) assert that the couple relationship is strengthened when spouses believe in something greater than themselves, as it causes them to “look in the same direction.”

It is interesting to note that participants (most often husbands) spoke in the second person instead of using “I statements”, and frequently spoke of the actions of their spouse, which may suggest the level of ownership they have taken regarding their relationships. This could reflect a limitation of the study, and an area for follow up study, through doing follow up interviews with those who focussed on their spouse and spoke in the second person to further explore the contributions they have made towards their resilience as a couple.

3.2.6 THEME 6: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OTHER COUPLES

One of the last research interview questions required participants to reflect on what they would recommend, i.e. what advice they would give, to couples going through difficulties. All of the themes that emerged in response to this question, except one, have been discussed in earlier themes, indicating that participants recommended what had worked for them. In order to avoid repetition, each reoccurring subtheme
will be discussed briefly and a reference will be made to where that topic was discussed previously in more detail.

3.2.6.1 Subtheme 1: Communication

The topic of communication has been highlighted throughout as an important facet in a healthy relationship. Communication has been discussed in terms of the stress it can cause when spouses have different ways of communicating and expressing emotion (theme 2), the impact a stressor can have on couples’ communication (theme 3), and as an important relationship strength (theme 5).

Participants recommended that couples work on developing good communication, that they address issues in their marriages, listen to each other and be honest with one another. Listed below are a few quotes from interviews reflecting the participants’ responses:

“They would have to start communicating... I would say a couple has to have communication. Communication and trust”

“... I think they need to chat to each other”

“I will tell them communication is important... I would... tell them that healthy communication obviously includes being honest”

“Talk. I think communication is big... speak and listen. It is important to listen. Listen to each other”

“As julie kwaad is vir mekaar gesels met mekaar (If you are angry with each other, talk about it)”
The emphasis that the participants placed on communication as an essential component of a healthy marital relationship is echoed in a large body of marital counselling literature (Bader & Pearson 1988; Alpaslan 1997; Long & Young 2000; Wright 2000). The researcher can also confirm in her capacity as a social work practitioner that the importance of communication is recognised by relationship counsellors and presenters of marriage preparation and enrichment courses.

3.2.6.2 Subtheme 2: Work together on the relationship

Participants recommended that couples work on their relationship and not give up. This is linked to the discussion on participants’ view of divorce, i.e., that divorce is not an option (theme 5), and their attitude towards dealing with problems, i.e., that problems are shared and should be worked on jointly (theme 4). Participants also mentioned no blaming (theme 4), having love for each other (theme 5), supporting each other (theme 5), spending time together, and laughing together (theme 5) as important prerequisites or mechanisms to facilitate this partnership of working on the joint project called marriage. Below are a few verbatim quotes from the participants to illustrate their views.

“... look back and laugh about it... rejoice about the fact that you worked together... which is going to strengthen your marriage... and please, don’t forget, don’t blame... believe in that other person .. it’s going to take time... but just hang in there”

“I think supporting each other... I would just tell them to be there for each other”

“...being there for each other, support each other, to believe that the right thing will happen and it will come... they just have to be there for each other and believe”

“... remember that you are a team, you are working together for the same thing... try to see the good in the other person... encourage them...”
“... people give up too easily... ja, not to give up so easily”

“... not to give up that easily... not to give up easily and to work on your marriage”

The participants’ recommendations seem to concur with literature from relationship counsellors and marriage theorists who emphasise the value of actively working on the relationship right at the outset. Long and Young (2000:18-19) describe the psychological tasks couples have to go through in their development, and point out that couples have to continuously work at their relationships to make them a “zone of safety and nurturance” and to make them fun and interesting. This is particularly vital early on in the relationship.

In their study on longstanding marriages, Robinson and Blanton (1993:40) found many couples entered their marriage with an expectation that divorce was not an option, which helped them to endure the challenges they faced over the course of their relationship, hence highlighting the significance of, early on, having a shared attitude of persevering and working on the marriage instead of opting for divorce. Similarly Carter (2001:2) asserts that committing to and working on the relationship builds a strong foundation which assists couples in weathering difficulties, and that viewing divorce is a means of “escaping” the marriage can place the relationship in jeopardy.

3.2.6.3 Subtheme 3: Faith in God (Christianity)

Participants’ faith (in particular their Christian beliefs) has been mentioned numerous times in their responses. For some, their faith in God was impacted upon by the problem they encountered (theme 3). Others highlighted their faith as an important factor in their resilience (theme 4), and as a strength of their relationship (theme 5). It is not surprising that participants would recommend having faith in God and trusting God, given that it was such a prominent theme. Their recommendations to other couples included suggestions of how to give effect to this faith in God. These suggestions, which ranged from praying, to knowing God and trusting in Him, again
Alpaslan (1997:127) proposes that if marriage partners agree on issues regarding faith in God, it can serve to strengthen the relationship by promoting unity. He urges that it is a topic that is discussed and explored by couples before marriage, thus suggesting the benefit of a shared faith early on in the marriage. The participants’ responses suggest that a shared faith provided a source of support and structure, as discussed in theme 4 and 5, and it may be for this reason that they would recommend other couples have faith in God and pray. Long and Young (2000:21) concur that a shared faith strengthens and unifies couples as it gives them something to look to and believe in that is greater than themselves. This unity enhances commitment and bolsters the relationship in times of difficulty, and may be especially important in the early stages of a marriage, when the couple is forming their identity.

3.2.6.4 Subtheme 4: Having mentors
There was a unique piece of advice offered by one participant that resonated with only one other participant’s narrations up to this stage of the study. This participant
advised that couples should identify mentors who can help them through periods of difficulty and serve as an example to follow. He and his wife did not have mentors, but are mentors to other couples; through their experiences they have been able to help other couples going through difficulty. The extract from the research interview follows below.

“... I think they must identify mentors in their marriages, people who have gone this way... everybody has got hiccups in their marriage... but there are people that you can tell... they are successful in marriage... the reason why I’m saying this... there are people who just got married from our church... they have been looking at us, and they would come to us and say, guys, we’ve seen you making money, we’ve seen you going down, but you are always together. We’ve seen you having kids under stressful situations, we’ve seen you overcoming it, you’re still together, how do you do it?

It is evident from this response that the participant was alerted to their role as unintentional role models from the feedback he received from someone at his church. Similarly another participant spoke of consciously identifying both his own and his wife’s parents as good role models that helped to shape how a marriage and family should be. His articulation on this issue is cited below:

“... we have very good role models... in terms of what a family should or shouldn’t be... they have always helped us a lot... so I think that’s good role models in our lives as well for marriage”

The researcher was struck by the fact that the recommendation of having role models came from two male participants, whilst neither of their female spouses who also formed part of the study, mentioned it. From the researcher’s own experience of Christian culture, the husband is expected to be the leader of the home, and it is possible that the responsibility of this role may cause men to look for positive examples of how to fulfil it. However, this is only one possible interpretation, and could be explored with a larger sample in a follow up study in order to gain a greater understanding of this dynamic.
Doxsee (2004:1) echoes the view of these two participants that having good role models and mentors can be an effective way of strengthening and enriching a marriage whether it is under strain or not. Having a mentor provides an example to look at and someone couples can talk to, someone who has experience they can draw on. Mentors can also provide support, encouragement and a sense of hope during times of stress. For one participant, he and his wife were those mentors, and for another it was his parents and parents-in-law.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research findings. These findings have been discussed together with relevant literature and supported by quotes from research interviews. The research findings were presented in six themes which were informed by the research questions. The themes were as follows: (1) adjusting to marriage, (2) stressors in the relationship, (3) impact of the stressor on the marriage, (4) factors contributing towards resilience, (5) strengths of the marriage, and (6) recommendations for other couples.
CHAPTER 4

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Introduction
The preceding chapters have provided detailed discussions of the research study, research methodology and research findings. This chapter offers a summary of the research methodology and findings, as well as recommendations for practice, policy and further study, and a reflection on the limitations of the study.

4.2 Summary of Research Design and Methodology

4.2.1 Research design
This study was rooted in a qualitative research approach and employed an exploratory, descriptive and contextual research design to achieve the research goal, which was to explore the strengths that have contributed to the resilience of marriages within the first ten years, which have overcome significant stress. Following from the research goal, the research objectives were to explore and describe the following:

- challenges and stressors couples experience during the first ten years of marriage,
- the factors that mediate the impact of these stressors,
- how couples dealt with these challenges, and
- stressors in their relationship and how this contributed to the resilience of the marriage.
4.2.2 Research methodology
Participants were recruited using non-probability purposive sampling methods. For inclusion in the study participants had to meet the following sampling criteria: being legally married in a heterosexual, monogamous marriage, married for ten years or less, experienced at least one significant stressor in the course of their marriage, and currently experience their marriage as healthy and satisfying.

Data was collected through the use of semi-structured individual interviews. The sample comprised of five married couples but the partners were interviewed individually. The reason for individual, as opposed to couple, interviews was explained in detail in chapter 2 of this study. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using the steps proposed by Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson (2002) and Nicholls (2009). An independent coder was used to enhance the credibility of the study.

4.2.3 Trustworthiness
The model proposed by Shenton (2004), which is based on Guba’s (1981) criteria, was used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study according to the following criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. The credibility of the study was enhanced through triangulation, peer reflection and the use of a variety of interview techniques. A detailed description was given of the research process, methods used and research context to enhance transferability and dependability. Data triangulation was used to strengthen the confirmability of the study together with a statement of the researcher’s position.

4.3 Ethical Considerations
Care was taken by the researcher to protect the welfare of the participants. The risks and benefits to those who took part in the study were carefully considered and weighed up. All participants took part willingly, and gave their written consent for involvement in the study, and for the recording of interviews. Participants were aware of their rights, and could withdraw from the process at any time.
4.4 Summary of Research Findings

The research findings were grouped into themes which were suggested by the research questions. The findings are summarised as follows.

4.4.1 Theme 1: Adjusting to marriage

Participants were asked about their adjustment to marriage to provide useful contextual background information to their relationship and the stressor they experienced. Participants’ responses reflected two subthemes, i.e., difficult adjustment and easy adjustment. Learning to do new things, being hesitant to get married, trying to change their spouse, and coming to terms with the reality of marriage were seen as factors that made adjustment difficult. Conversely the participants responded that easy adjustment to marriage was facilitated by an eagerness to get married and being ready for the transition. One of the sampling criteria was that participants experienced their marriages as satisfying and healthy, suggesting that regardless of whether it was difficult or easy, couple had been able to successfully adjust to marriage.

4.4.2 Theme 2: Stressors in the relationship

This study sought to explore the strengths that contribute towards resilience in early marriage. Implicit in the definition of resilience is the idea that there is something stressful and difficult to overcome (McCubbin & McCubbin 1988; Venter & Snyders 2009). The participants were asked about the stressors they had experienced, and these were grouped according to the subthemes major and secondary stressors. The major stressors (i.e. mostly idiosyncratic stressors) were the most disruptive and difficult to endure and included the following: financial difficulty (retrenchment and debt), difficulties relating to pregnancy (struggling to fall pregnant, miscarriage, and foetal heart abnormality), having a sick child, and the death of a child. The secondary stressors (i.e. mostly developmental and hence expected stressors) were other challenges that couples experienced in the course of their relationship, however were not as devastating as the major stressors. They included adjusting to having children (finding time together, adjusting to a blended family), work stress (spouse’s
job and spouse’s studies), different interests, communication differences and difficulties with in-laws.

4.4.3 Theme 3: Impact of the stressor on the marriage
Enduring the stressors listed above had tangible effects on the marriage. These effects were explored and described in this theme, and compared with relevant literature. The stressors impacted upon the participants’ marriages in the areas of communication (communication suffered); grief (marked by strong emotions, and the awareness that they grieved differently); growth (couples grew closer, grew stronger, learned from the experience); and their faith in God (faith increased or faith was doubted). In line with literature on resilience, the participants not only experienced difficulties but were able to experience positive change as a result of working through that stressful time.

4.4.4 Theme 4: Factors that contribute towards resilience
Following on from the previous theme, theme 4 explored the specific factors that contributed towards the resilience of the participants. The factors that were identified by participants were grouped according to the subthemes listed below:

- attitude towards their spouse
- attitude towards the problem
- support network
- faith in God/Christianity
- finding meaning in the situation
- belief that they will get through/hope
- relationship strengths

The attitudes that participants held helped them to get through the difficulties they experienced. They drew on the resources that were available to them in their support network, were able to find meaning and hope in the situation, and drew strength from their faith in God.
4.4.5 Theme 5: Strengths of the marriage
In the previous theme the strengths of participants’ marriage emerged clearly. This was built upon in theme 5 when participants were asked to reflect on what they believed to be the strengths of their marriage, and what they had done to strengthen their marriages. The main strengths of marriages identified were love; divorce not being an option; communication; having a strong relationship foundation; humour and laughter; and lastly faith in God.

The love that participants shared was not just an emotion, but involved commitment and action. Participants were active in expressing their love to their spouses. The participants’ commitment to each other was also reflected in their attitude regarding divorce not being an option for them. As divorce was not an option for them, they had to persevere and work on their marriages and some did this through reading books and engaging in marriage enrichment activities. Communication between participants was frequent, open and honest. They addressed issues as they came up, admitted their mistakes, and kept in touch with one another.

Participants were friends with their spouses, and supported and believed in them. They enjoyed laughing together and found that a healthy sense of humour helped in dealing with stressful situations. Their faith in God was also important in guiding and shaping their behaviour towards their spouse.

4.4.6 Theme 6: Recommendations for other couples
Participants were given the opportunity to share advice they would give to couples going through difficulties. They reflected on their own experience and what had worked for them, hence there was a great deal of overlap with other themes. One unique recommendation included the suggestion that couples find mentors who could be a good example and a source of support in challenging times. The other recommendations offered were to have good communication, to work on the relationship and to have faith in God.
4.5 Conclusions
The goal of the study was to explore the strengths that have contributed to the resilience of marriages in the early years (under ten years), that have overcome significant stress. The participants’ reflections and experiences concurred strongly with literature on factors that enhance resilience in individuals and families. It was interesting that even though the participants had been through very difficult and challenging times in their marriages, they had not sought professional help in the form of therapy. Instead they drew on other resources that they had at their disposal. This reinforced the key ideas that emerged as strong undertones in this study, i.e., that challenges in a marital relationship can be overcome if couples focus on their partners’ strengths and actively work towards enhancing the resilience in their marital relationships.

4.6 Limitations
• Although it was not a requirement for inclusion in the study, all of the participants identified themselves as Christians. Their beliefs strongly influenced their world-view and how they conceptualised resilience. Because of the bias of the sample, the voices of other faiths and/or atheist/non-religious participants were not available to compare the differences and similarities that might have arisen.
• The semi-structured research interviews were conducted individually. An additional conjoint research interview may have provided insight into couple dynamics which could have added richness to the discussion.
• Participants all resided in either East London or Port Elizabeth in the Eastern Cape, thus only being reflective of a very small portion of people in one of the country’s most disadvantaged provinces.
4.7 Recommendations

4.7.1 Recommendations for practice

- The research findings may be useful in therapeutic work with couples. The factors that participants identified as vital in contributing towards their resilience may be helpful to add to the understanding of resilience and can be used in strengths-based interventions with couples in marital crisis. The research findings highlight the importance of strengths and resilience factors in overcoming stress, and may be useful to those working with couples in ensuring that strengths are recognised and enhanced. The results of this study could be used to develop continuous professional development (CPD) workshops where the results can be shared with other professionals to encourage further discussion and study into this area of practice.

- The findings from this study could be used in marriage preparation programmes to help couples enter into marriage with realistic expectations to help them to adjust to marriage and enhance their resilience.

- Similarly, the findings could be used in marriage enrichment programmes, to strengthen the resilience of couples in the early years of marriage, and

- Lastly, the findings provide valuable insights into areas that need to be emphasised in marriage preparation programmes with engaged couples, especially around how to prepare for and deal with both developmental and idiosyncratic relationship stressors. Another interesting inclusion could be exploring the potential of relationship mentors and role models, should it resonate with couples.

4.7.2 Recommendations for further study

- This study could be replicated with a sample including participants with different religious orientations.

- Further study could be conducted taking an in-depth look at any one of the stressors noted, with a focus of that specific stressors impact on the relationship.

- A case-study of one particular couple could be conducted to get a richer look at the dynamics involved in couple resilience.
• Faith in God came through very strongly in the study, with a particular focus on prayer and trust as elements of exercising ones faith. Perhaps future study could look specifically at this concept and its relationship to marriage.

• A comparative study where the spouses are interviewed separately (like in this study) but with the focus on the difference in the partners responses both from a gender perspective and from a family of origin perspective could yield interesting recommendations for couple interventions.

• A longitudinal study, perhaps quantitative in nature, could be conducted with couples in the early years of marriage, and then at set intervals after that (for example at five years, then ten, etc.), to investigate the interplay between relational stressors and relational resilience over time.

4.7.3 Recommendations for policy

Previously in the study, it was outlined how healthy marriages contribute towards healthy families and in turn influence the development of a healthy society. Given the potential ‘ripple effect’ there may be value in the development of strengths-based, resilience-enhancing marriage preparation and marriage enrichment programmes which are accessible to a wide range of couples across the country. Marriage preparation programmes are usually run in a religious setting, and this is a deterrent for some (Valiente, Belanger & Estrada 2002:72). If the appropriate funding is made available, programmes such as these could be developed and made available through government institutions like the Department of Social Development, and family-orientated NGOs such as FAMSA.

Although divorce is a painful and stressful experience, it is relatively simple if spouses can agree on the terms, as marriage is essentially a ‘contractual agreement’. Perhaps provision could be made for couples to legally choose covenant marriage, which is more difficult to enter and to exit. Covenant marriages have been instituted by more than 20 states in the United States of America (Sanchez, Nock, Wright and Gager 2002 cited in Rautenbach 2008). Couples are expected to attend premarriage counselling, sign a declaration, and if they choose to divorce, they are required to prove the reason for divorce from a list of previously
agreed reasons, e.g. adultery, prison sentence, domestic violence, or substance abuse (ibid.).

4.8 Concluding Remarks
This study has explored the strengths of marriages within the first ten years; marriages that have overcome significant obstacles, and have emerged resilient and healthy. The findings of this study suggest that having faith in God, being committed, having love, and being willing to work on one’s relationship are all essential components of a resilient marriage.

In conclusion, the researcher would like to share a thought by writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery (cited in Long & Young 2000:21) which sums up the value of couples working together on their marriage, being committed and having a shared vision:

“Love is not looking into each other’s eyes; it is looking in the same direction”
References


Appendices

Appendix 1: Daily Dispatch Article

Where are SA's happy couples?

Seeking: Secrets to successful marriage

By TARALYN McLEAN

The secret to successfully surviving the first decade of marriage.

If you have the inside track on how to negotiate, communicate and get over serious obstacles in the course of true love, East London masters student Lauren Abcouge would like to speak to you.

Abcouge, a social worker in private practice, is in the second and final year of her Masters in Clinical Social Work at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University.

To complete her studies, she needs to complete a research project. I noticed from people around me, and then from looking at statistics on divorce at Stats SA, that a lot of marriages in South Africa tend to end before 10 years," she said yesterday.

"Instead of looking at the causes of divorce, I want to look at those who have managed to make it through difficult times,"

Abcouge said she would probably only need to interview them once.

"To qualify to be a part of this research, volunteers should be legally married and currently in a heterosexual, monogamous relationship. They should be in their first marriage, and married for 10 years or less, regardless of their age.

Another key requirement is that volunteer couples should have weathered some type of storm in the course of their relationship. This could range from fertility problems to infidelity, illness, financial ruin or the death of a child.

The reason for this is that Abcouge is interested in learning how couples worked through those types of issues without breaking up their marriage.

She wants to know how the couple bounced back and where or what is the source of this resilience.

According to the latest statistics available from Stats SA, divorces have been on the increase for the past two years. Last year saw 30,752 divorces, representing an increase of 4 percent compared to the 29,084 divorces recorded in 2008. However, there are still far more couples getting married than divorcing; in 2009, 117,168 civil marriages took place.

"This is a chance for couples who have made it through tough times to share their stories," she said.

Copies of the Daily Dispatch in the Eastern Cape are available at www.dailycapital.co.za.
Dear sir/madam,

I am a social worker in private practice in East London. I am currently enrolled for a Masters degree in Clinical Social Work at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. I have to complete a research treatise as part of the requirements of the course, and the title of my research is: An exploration of the strengths that contribute towards resilience in the early years of marriage. At present I am making preliminary enquiries to establish if such a study would be feasible. My request to your organization is to identify potential research participants who meet the following criteria:

- Legally married, heterosexual couples, married ten years or less, who are in their first marriage
- Who have endured a significant stress in their marriage (e.g. infidelity, death of a child, chronic illness, infertility, financial ruin, victim of violent crime, etc) and have overcome it
- Who experience their marriage as satisfying
- Who has completed marriage counseling at your organisation (where applicable)

The study seeks to explore the couples’ experiences of enduring significant stress, with the aim of identifying the factors that contribute towards the resilience in their relationships. Confidentiality agreements will be made with the institutions and participants, and the research study will conform to the ethical guidelines and requirements of the University. I would appreciate it if you could indicate if your institution has this kind of information available, and whether you would allow me to access it for the purposes of this research. Furthermore I would appreciate it if you could comment on whether this research would fulfill a need for your organization.
My research supervisor is Mrs. Veonna Goliath from the Social Work Programme. She can be contacted at 041-5042197 or Veonna.goliath@nmmu.ac.za

Your kind assistance is appreciated.
Yours sincerely

L.L. Aboagye
Clinical Social Work Masters Student, NMMU
lauren.aboagye@gmail.com
Appendix 3: Letter to proposed participants

Dear

I am a Social Worker in private practice in East London, and am studying towards a Masters Degree in clinical Social Work at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. Part of the requirements of the degree program is that I complete a research study. I have great respect for the marriage relationship and am interested in finding ways to better understand, assist and strengthen the marriage relationships I encounter in practice. The divorce rate in our country is alarmingly high, with almost 50% of marriages ending in divorce in less than 10 years.

The focus of my study will therefore be on exploring the strengths that contribute towards resilience in the early years of marriage. In particular, marriages that have endured a significantly stressful situation or event, for example infertility, financial ruin, the death of a child, infidelity, illness, etc. In particular I am interested in exploring the experiences of those couples that endured a significant stress, come through it, believe that they are stronger for having gone through it, and currently experience their marriage as satisfying.

This study can only be affected if I am able to obtain participants who would not mind to share their experiences on the question posed above. To this end I would need to conduct one individual interview of approximately one hour with you and your spouse respectively. The day, time and location of the interview can be arranged to suit you. The content of the interview will be recorded, but at all times confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured. The study will conform to the ethical guidelines and requirements of the university, and I will enter into individual confidentiality agreements with each person interviewed.

My research supervisor is Veonna Goliath, and she can be contacted at 041-5042197 or Veonna.Goliath@nmmu.ac.za. My contact details are 082 838 2870 or lauren.aboagye@gmail.com
Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and I hope to hear from you.

Yours sincerely

Lauren Lee Aboagye
Social Work Clinical Masters Student
Appendix 4: Permission and release form

USE OF AUDIO RECORDINGS AND WRITTEN MATERIAL FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES – PERMISSION AND RELEASE FORM.

Participant Name: _____________________________________________

Contact details:
Address: _____________________________________________________
_________________________________________________________________
Telephone no: _________________________________________________

Name of researcher: Lauren Lee Aboagye

Level of research: MASW (Clinical Social Work)

Brief title of research: An exploration of the strengths that contribute towards resilience in the early years of marriage

Supervisor: Ms. V. Goliath

Declaration

(Please sign in the blocks next to the statements that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Signature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The nature of the research and the nature of my participation have been explained to me verbally and in writing.</td>
<td>Signature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I agree to participate in an interview and to allow audio-recordings of these to be made.</td>
<td>Signature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. The researcher will outsource the task of transcription. The person doing the transcription will sign a confidentiality agreement, to ensure confidentiality is maintained.</td>
<td>Signature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Once the data has been transcribed the recordings will be destroyed.</td>
<td>Signature</td>
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</table>

Date:
Witnessed by researcher:

137
Appendix 5: Consent form

Consent form

I. __________________________________________________________, agree to participate in this research.

The following points have been explained to me;

1. Participation is entirely voluntary and I can withdraw my consent at any time.

2. The focus of this research is on the factors that contribute towards resilience in the early years of marriage.

3. Participation is limited to one, semi-structured interview, with the possibility of a further personal interview if the researcher requires clarification on any point.

4. Although no discomfort or stress is foreseen, should I experience any discomfort or stress I reserve the right not to answer any question at any time during the interview.

5. Should I experience discomfort or distress the researcher will provide details of counseling services, for example FAMSA, or psychologists/social workers in private practice.

6. Participation in this research is entirely confidential and information will not be released in any individually identifiable form.

7. The researcher will answer any questions I wish to ask about this research now or during the course of the research process.

8. The results of the research will be made available to me if I so wish. Should I require a copy of the research, I will communicate this to the researcher and provide the researcher with my postal details.

____________________________    ___________________
Signature of participant             date
Lauren Lee Aboagye: email: lauren.aboagye@gmail.com
Tel: 0828382870

Research supervisor: Veonna Goliath
email: veonna.goliath@nmmu.ac.za
Tel: 041 5042197
### Appendix 6: Table of consolidated themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1: Adjusting to marriage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Difficult adjustment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to do new things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hesitant to get married</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coming to terms with the reality of marriage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Try to change spouse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusting to new family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change of lifestyle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Easy adjustment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted to get married</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2: Stressors in relationship</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Major stressors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retrenched</td>
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<tr>
<td>Debt</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficult pregnancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggle to fall pregnant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miscarriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congenital heart abnormality in utero</td>
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<tr>
<td>Death of a child</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sick child</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Secondary stressors</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusting to having children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding time together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work stress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spouse’s job</td>
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<td>Spouse’s studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Different interests</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leisure time</td>
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<td>Communication differences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expressing emotion</td>
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<td>Difficulties with in-laws</td>
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<tr>
<td>Theme 3: Impact of stressor on marriage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subtheme: Change in communication</td>
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<td>Subtheme: Grief</td>
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<td>Subtheme: Growth</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subtheme: Faith in God</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 4: Factors contributing to resilience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subtheme: Attitude towards spouse</td>
<td>Want to be together</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strengths of spouse</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance of spouse</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Letting go of idea of perfection</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Not blaming</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Equals in relationship</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subtheme: Attitude towards stressor/problem</td>
<td>Shared problem</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Took turns being strong</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Acceptance of situation and outcome</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Willingness to adapt</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dealing with the problem in small steps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subtheme: Support network</td>
<td>Friends</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Family</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Church</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support group</td>
<td>God in control of situation</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Faith in God</strong></td>
<td>Strength from God</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help from God (grace)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trusting God</td>
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<td>Prayer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Finding meaning in situation (through faith)</strong></td>
<td>Learn from experience</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Find God</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Meaning-making ritual</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Belief that will get through situation</strong></td>
<td>Hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Believe they will get through</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Believe things will get better</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: relationship strengths</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theme 5: Strengths of marriage</strong></td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Love</strong></td>
<td>Affirming love</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Want to be together</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Spending time together</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Focusing on spouse’s strengths</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Divorce not an option</strong></td>
<td>Commitment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marriage is valuable</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Persevere</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Work on marriage</td>
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<td>Reading books</td>
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<td>Marriage courses</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Desire to work on marriage</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme:</strong></td>
<td>Address issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Talk about likes/dislikes</td>
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<td>Honesty</td>
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<td>Keep in touch with spouse</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(day to day happenings)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Admitting mistakes</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Strong</strong></td>
<td><strong>Knew each other well at time of</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>foundation</strong></td>
<td><strong>stressor</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Friendship</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Still learning about each other</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Support and believe in each other</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Humor/laughter</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Subtheme: Faith in God</strong></td>
<td><strong>Norms that govern behaviour</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>(Christianity)</em></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Theme 6: Recommendations for other couples**

| Subtheme: Communication          |                                  |
| Subtheme: Work together on       |                                  |
| relationship                      |                                  |
| Subtheme: Faith in God           |                                  |
| Subtheme: Having mentors         |                                  |