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Can Christian Divorce Support Groups Influence Forgiveness and Health Outcomes in Black Divorcees? A Phenomenological Investigation

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Christian divorce support groups offer a community-based approach to help divorcees heal from their divorce. Yet, their effectiveness in ethnically diverse populations has not been fully elucidated. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate if Christian divorce support groups influence the forgiveness process and lead to improved self-reported health outcomes in Black Christian divorcees. Surveys and focus groups were used to evaluate key variables in 43 participants. Findings demonstrate participation in Christian divorce support groups positively influences forgiveness levels and health outcomes in Black Christians. These findings have religious, mental health, and clinical implications.

KEYWORDS Blacks, Christians, divorce, divorce support groups, forgiveness, health

Marriage outcomes in contemporary America continue to vary by race. Blacks are less likely to get married, but are more likely to divorce compared to Whites (Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Cherlin, Cross-Barnet, Burton, & Garrett-Peters, 2008). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2011), among Blacks ages 15 years and older, approximately 47.4% have never married, 5.7% are widowed, 11.2% are divorced, 4.3% are legally separated, and only 31.3% are currently married. In comparison, 26.2% of Whites of the same age

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have never married, 6.4% are widowed, 10.7% are divorced, 1.6% are legally separated, and 55.0% are currently married.

Most Blacks (87%) identify themselves as religious (Pew Research Center, 2009). Blacks are people of strong faith, yet, divorce rates continue to rise, from 9.7% in 2000 to 11.2% in 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003, 2011). Both religious and secular rationales have been proposed for these trends. From the religious side, some Black pastors have suggested that a decrease in church participation and the desire to assimilate into secular American society has resulted in an erosion of family values that contributes to the growing divorce rate (Moore, 2009). With this high rate of divorce and interpersonal transgressions, Black Christian divorcees must learn to forgive, rebuild their lives, and keep healthy postdivorce.

Previous research has linked religious practice to longevity, lower disability rates, less cognitive decline, increased life satisfaction, and lower rates of mortality (Corsentino, Collins, Sachs-Ericsson, & Blazer, 2009; Hill, Angel, Ellison, & Angel, 2005; Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012). Christianity, the world's leading religion, has forgiveness as its major tenet (Rye et al., 2000). According to Freedman and Enright (1996), forgiveness in clinical terms is the "act of deliberately giving up resentment toward an offender while fostering the undeserved qualities of beneficence and compassion toward that offender" (p. 983). Forgiveness is associated with improved cardiovascular function and physical and mental health (American Psychological Association, 2006; Hurst, 2011; Lawler et al., 2005). Recine, Werner, and Recine (2009) reported that the positive long-term effects of forgiveness on health include improved appetite, better sleep, more energy, increased life satisfaction, fewer physical illness symptoms, less medication use, less fatigue, and reduced fear of death.

Participation in forgiveness interventions has been shown to be effective in restoring fractured social relationships (Ingersoll-Dayton, Campbell, & Jung-Hwa, 2009; Rye et al., 2005; Wuthnow, 2000). Forgiveness levels were shown to increase with more frequent prayer group participation among all ethnic groups (Wuthnow, 2000). This is not surprising because Levin, Chatters, and Taylor (2005) indicated religion offers a form of protection from physical and psychological ailments. This is crucial for Blacks, whose lives often revolve around the church (Butler-Ajibade, Booth, & Burwell, 2012; Levin et al., 2005; Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 2007; Warren & Charles, 2011).

Despite the religious as well as scientific evidence for the need to forgive after interpersonal transgressions, forgiveness can be difficult for many individuals, especially the divorced. The work of Rye et al. (2005) offers valuable insight into why the interpersonal transgressions leading to divorce are so difficult to forgive. Many divorcees believe that they have been wronged by their ex-spouses and can harbor anger and unforgiveness for up to 10 years after their divorce (Rye, Folck, Heim, Olszewski, & Traina 2004; Rye et al.,

2005). This could lead to poor mental and physical health and affect the overall well-being of divorcees.

The divorced can often find help dealing with their pain in Christian divorce support groups that offer an evidence-based approach to guide the divorced through the healing process (Grissom & Leonard, 2004). However, it is still not clear if Blacks in general benefit from Christian divorce support groups and whether these groups are effective in helping the Black divorcees forgive and go on to keep healthy postdivorce. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate if Christian divorce support groups positively influence the process of forgiveness and lead to improved self-reported health outcomes in Black divorcees who participate in these programs.

METHODS

Bracketing Process

The current study was a descriptive qualitative study that used focus groups and surveys. Prior to the commencement of this study, the lead researcher completed the bracketing process, which Portney and Watkins (2009) described as setting aside of all bias and feelings on the topic. To this end, the lead researcher completed the study's focus group questions and the demographic survey and debriefed with the study's recorder.

Sample

In phenomenological research, participants are chosen because of their ability to distill meaning from their unique experiences and for their willingness to talk about it (Pitney & Parker, 2009). After receiving approval from the A.T. Still University's Institutional Review Board, 43 participants from Georgia were recruited using church bulletins, e-mail solicitations, word of mouth, and social media (Facebook and LinkedIn). Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) Black (inclusive of bi- or multiracial); (b) divorced (operational definition: divorce in court, or with final divorce in hand) and divorced but remarried; (c) legally separated; (d) adult men and women; (e) Christian (professing faith in Christ); (f) a willingness to discuss their divorce experience; (g) participation in Christian divorce support groups; (h) ages 25 to 75 years; (i) Georgia resident; and (j) the ability to speak and understand English.

Data Collection

A demography and health survey was developed for the study using questions adopted from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), the Association of Religion Data Archives, validated forgiveness

instruments, and published forgiveness manuscripts and books (Burns & Whiteman, 1992; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012; Rye et al., 2004; Rye et al., 2001; Rye et al., 2005; Wuthnow, 2000; Association of Religion Data Archives, n.d.). The survey was pilot-tested before implementation with four Black Christian divorced volunteers who met the study's criteria. Revisions were then made to the survey before the initiation of the study. After informed consent, participants selected a biblical alias and completed the survey (Appendix A).

Next, participants participated in a gender-specific focus group. The focus group moderator used a structured interview guide developed for the study (Appendix B). The interview guide consisted of six overarching questions related to the main research questions and several subquestions with probes. The following areas were covered: (a) divorce in Blacks, (b) Christianity, (c) forgiveness, (d) divorce support groups, (e) health, and (f) other, which captured additional ideas on the topic.

All eight focus groups (five for women and three for men) were audio-recorded and hard-copy recorder and observer notes were completed. Summaries of data collected were reviewed for member's check before closing each focus group. At the end of the focus groups, participants were provided with a handout on divorce recovery developed for the study (Appendix D) and a \$10 gift card as an expression of gratitude for their participation.

Data Analysis

Demographic and health surveys were reviewed and cross-checked by the lead researcher and study recorders. The data were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet before importation into SPSS Statistics version 20.0 for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, percentages, standard deviations, and means, were calculated to describe the study sample. All eight focus group transcripts were transcribed verbatim.

To complete the final analysis for this study, the data collected from all focus groups were collated and thematic analyses were conducted using several techniques for discovering salient themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; Portney & Watkins, 2009; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). These techniques included (a) word repetition using manual searches for unique words; (b) key-words-in-context (KWIC) searches using a list of words from the study's research question and variables; (c) comparing and contrasting the verbatim data from each of the focus groups; (d) searching for missing information; (e) looking for unmarked text; (f) pawing or highlighting the text with different color highlighters to identify key phrases; (g) assigning labels to units of information (Pitney & Parker, 2009); and (h) cutting the transcribed information based on subthemes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

A list of major themes for all research questions was compiled and shared with members of the research team for validation. Previously, data summaries were verified with focus group participants during each focus group. This was critical because participants anonymously participated in the study. Next, data triangulations of health information from the demographic survey were compared to data from the focus groups and contrasted to national disease trends for Blacks.

RESULTS

Description of Sample

Forty-three Black Christian divorcees living across a large metropolitan city in Georgia participated in the study. Of the 43 participants, 79.1% were women and 20.9% were men. Participants' mean age was 52 years ($SD = 9.1$) with a range of 35 to 70 years. The majority of the participants were born in the United States ($n = 31$), followed by Jamaica ($n = 5$), Trinidad ($n = 2$), Panama ($n = 2$), Liberia ($n = 1$), Nigeria ($n = 1$), and England ($n = 1$). Most of the participants were divorced (83.7%), and others were legally separated (9.3%) or remarried after divorce (7.0%). The majority of the participants (62.8%) were married only once, 20.9% twice, and 3 men and 4 women in the sample (16.3%) reported being married three times.

Marriages for participants in this study lasted from 1 to 33 years ($M = 12.77$, $SD = 8.89$), with one individual reporting marrying and divorcing the same person twice. Age at divorce ranged from 26 to 69 years ($M = 38.21$, $SD = 15.49$). Length of the time after the last divorce varied widely, from 3 months to 34 years. Most participants (60.5%) reported that none of their biological children under 18 years currently lived in their household. Finally, several women reported that their ex-spouses were pastors and one male respondent was an ordained minister. Table 1 provides additional selected demographic characteristics of the participants including filer status, education, employment, and income. Table 2 describes the denomination and level of religious participation of participants.

Focus Group Findings

DIVORCE IN BLACKS

Overarching Question 1: What is the emotional and spiritual impact of divorce on Black Christians? Under this section, two subquestions were posed to participants: (a) What factors do you believe are leading to the high divorce rates in Blacks; and (b) When you got married, what were your beliefs about God and divorce? What are your thoughts now? Are they the same or have they changed?

TABLE 1 Selected Participants' Characteristics

Variables	Frequency distribution
Filer status	
Self	62.8%
Ex-spouse	23.2%
Both parties	14.0%
Parental marital status	
Divorced or separated	30.2%
Still married	41.9%
Never legally married	18.6%
Not sure/don't know	9.30%
Education	
Less than high school	2.30%
High school graduate	7.00%
Technical school	32.6%
College graduate	41.9%
Postgraduate	16.3%
Employment status	
Employed	67.4%
Unemployed	16.3%
Retired	9.3%
Other	7.00%
Annual household income	
Less than \$25,000	23.3%
\$25,000–\$49,999	37.2%
\$50,000–\$74,999	16.3%
More than \$75,000	16.3%
Not sure/don't know	7.00%

Note. $N = 43$.

TABLE 2 Denomination and Frequency of Religious Participation of Participants

Variables	Frequency distribution
Denomination (self-declared)	
Baptist	34.9%
Pentecostal	30.2%
Assemblies of God (AOG)	14.0%
Nondenominational	9.30%
Methodist	4.70%
Anglican	2.30%
Seventh Day Adventist	2.30%
African Methodist Episcopal (AME)	2.30%
Religious participation	
More than once a week	58.10%
Weekly	27.90%
Monthly	7.00%
Quarterly	2.30%
A few times a year	4.70%

Note. $N = 43$.

TABLE 3 Interpretative Themes: Cause of Divorce in Black Christians

Cause of divorce	Example comments and responses
Religion	The church's lack of support for marriage Marrying to meet religious obligations The religious push for prosperity from the pulpit
Moral issues	Homosexuality, pornography, and infidelity
Money	Fiscal constraints or money fights
Communication	Poor communication
Lack of preparation	Poor delineation of and preparation for marital roles Black women want to take charge and that does not work well in marriage.
Societal/outside influences	Hollywood's esteem of divorce filters into the church Everything in our society has an expiration date and that has moved into our marriages Outside interference from family and friends into marriages The lack of role models because of extensive single-parent homes Generational patterns of divorce
Poor commitment	Unmet marital expectations Lack of commitment to marital vows
Poor choices	Poor choices in partner selection; cultural as well as age clashes in couples
Lack of respect	Many couples don't show respect for each other
Slavery	The historical impact of slavery and its role in fragmenting the Black family

Note. $N = 43$.

Using questioning techniques described by Krueger (1994), these questions were posed to participants to gain their perspective on the current reality of divorce among Black Christians. Participants proposed several causes of divorce, some of which were new, whereas others have been previously reported in the literature (Franklin & Boddie, 2004; Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Lu, 2009; Graefe & Lichter, 2002; Varner & Madara, 2009). The interpretative themes that participants felt were contributing to divorce in Blacks are presented in no particular order in Table 3. Sample qualitative responses are also listed here using participant-selected biblical aliases.

Naomi (biblical alias), a 63-year-old U.S.-born divorcee who had been married three times, and Bilhah (biblical alias), a 46-year-old mother of one, remarried after divorce, suggested the following reasons for the high rate of divorce in Blacks:

As a pastor's daughter, my parents taught me to be sexually pure and to hold back my desires, so I was reserved even with my husband and this led to problems in my marriage. (Naomi)

Divorce was hard for me to accept, I got married to be married, I was 23 years old. It was amazing how I sat in a healthy relationship group

and I did not want to accept that I did not even have a man. I wanted to be married so badly he had to leave me, I was not going anywhere, he called me at work to tell me he was leaving and I asked him where he was going. I had to chill out and find myself as a person, as a woman, as an individual. I did not know who I was. I was trying to live a story-book life which was not real. (Bilhah)

Regarding the second subquestion, most participants in this study stated that when they got married they believed that God hated divorce and that marriage was for life. These participants reported that despite their divorces they still held onto these beliefs. On the contrary, four individuals (two men and two women) stated that their views on God and divorce had changed after their marriage, as they were not Christians when they first got married. Most participants (62.8%) filed for their divorce, but reported that they believed that God's grace and forgiveness were available to the divorcee. Many were convinced that God did not want people to suffer in unhappy marriages.

Two participants (Mara and Nehemiah, biblical aliases), both in their 50s and married twice, described in their own words their views about God and divorce.

My struggle was about my divorce and this made me mad as I was forced to break my covenant with God. This was about the covenant I made, but not only me, but what the two of us made with God; my husband forced me to renege on that promise when we divorced. This was a licensed and ordained minister, and I know that he will be judged at a higher standard. I need to keep far away from him. (Mara)

Our vows are important to God, but not to us. Marriage is an institution, without marriages where would we be? I believe in marriage and this helps to build stronger families. Today, we have broken families. In fact, we had stronger families during Jim Crow, segregation, and through discrimination than we have today. It has nothing to do with the amount of resources we have or white oppression; it has to do with the choices that we make and the values that we have. (Nehemiah)

CHRISTIANITY

Overarching Question 2: To what extent does faith in Christ help the divorced to forgive, heal, and keep healthy after divorce? A subquestion in this area was as follows: In what way has your Christian faith (prayer, bible reading, beliefs, etc.) helped you in the forgiveness process?

Most participants reported their faith grew through the divorce process and without Christ they would not have successfully navigated life postdivorce. Some suggested their faith gave them the "stamina" to forgive

themselves, their spouses, and others and to be civil in their social interactions. Additionally, many reported their faith helped them to persevere through depression, suicidal ideation, and exhaustion as single parents, and to learn to love themselves. As an additional source of data, the study's demographic and health surveys were reviewed and they revealed that participants employed a variety of resources to help them cope with the emotional stress of their divorce. Many participants reported using more than one of these mechanisms, including prayer (46.5%), talking with family and friends (23.3%), bible study (14.0%), Christian mentoring or group (11.6%), exercise (7.0%), staying busy (4.6%), pets (2.3%), writing (2.3%), and singing (2.3%). A few participants stated they did not use any of these mechanisms or experienced any emotional distress after their divorce.

FORGIVENESS

Overarching Question 3: What is the role of forgiveness in helping Black Christians heal from divorce? Subquestions in this area were as follows: (a) What is your understanding of the Christian concept of forgiveness? (b) When you think of forgiveness in divorce, what comes to mind? (c) Have you forgiven your ex-spouse? If yes, how do you know it? If no, why not? and (d) When you think of your ex-spouse, how you do feel?

All of the participants reported they understood the concept of Christian forgiveness to mean they should follow the model provided by Christ to forgive those who transgressed against them by "turning the other cheek." As Christians, these participants reported they believed if they did not forgive, they themselves would not be forgiven. Participants stated they recognized forgiveness was a continuous process that benefited the one transgressed against more than the offender, and provided a feeling of freedom and peace that led to better health. Jemina, a 40-year-old, legally separated, Nigerian mother of two, captures these findings in her comment.

Unforgiveness is like a chain holding you bound; when you forgive, you set yourself free. (Jemina)

Despite their knowledge of the Christian concept of forgiveness, some participants (16%) stated that, although they understood that transgressions should be forgotten, they struggled in this area. For example, three male participants suggested forgotten transgressions would open up the divorcee to similar "hurts," meaning they had not learned lessons from their past experiences. These men also stated they could forgive, but not forget the pain of their divorce.

When participants were asked to share their views about forgiveness in divorce, all shared in some way that this meant forgiveness of self, the church, and others; reconciliation, friendship, hope, joy, and acceptance as

they move forward with their lives. A few participants (10%) reported that their relationship with their ex-spouses was now one of friendship, and a few women (6.9%) reported serving as a “sounding board” and a “listening ear” to their ex-spouses in counseling them about their current spouses. Finally, another theme of interest in this area was that divorcees who considered themselves “perfect wives” (giving up their careers and dedicating their lives to the marriage) reported they had to work harder to forgive, as it took longer to regain their independence after their divorce.

Most participants (90.7%) reported they had forgiven their ex-spouses, with 9.3% indicating this process was not complete for them. In this study, more men than women reported the forgiveness process was incomplete for them. Forgiveness practices included decreased negative affect, which was exhibited by praying for ex-spouses, caring for them during illnesses, and even burying deceased ex-spouses as reported by these participants. In assessing how participants felt about their ex-spouses, some women (10%) reported that they still loved their ex-spouses although they indicated they were uncertain if this was right or wrong. Additionally, some reported the following feelings: mixed emotions or ambivalence, feelings of freedom and strength, a lack of remorse, compassion, disgust, and concerns about their future as they have lost the potential of their youth. Despite these feelings more than 90% of participants reported growing stronger spiritually since their divorce. Zipporah (biblical alias), a 64-year-old, twice-divorced, U.S.-born respondent, offered comments that reflected some of the summary themes that emerged in the area of forgiveness.

I thought that I would never forgive him, but serving the Lord, loving the Lord, staying in the word, and hanging around other Christians helped me. I was the only person at his open heart surgery. He apologized after his surgery for all the things that he put me through. That helped me a lot, just this apology. He is like my brother. I could never remarry him, nor have a marriage relationship with him. I still take care of him because according to God’s law, he is still my husband. (Zipporah)

DIVORCE SUPPORT GROUPS

Overarching Question 4: What is the role of Christian divorce support groups in the forgiveness process among Black Christians divorcees? Subquestions were as follows: (a) Following your divorce, what was the name(s) of the divorce support group(s) that you attended? For how long did this group run? In what way(s) did participating in the group help you; and (b) In what way(s) did the support group hinder your healing from divorce? In response to these questions, the majority of the participants (86%) reported participating in a DivorceCare support group. The remaining 14% stated that they participated in other nonbranded church divorce

recovery programs along with participation in Vision Anew ($n = 1$), Fresh Start ($n = 1$), Fathers Are Parents Too ($n = 1$), and a veteran's support group ($n = 1$). A few participants also reported participating in one-on-one pastoral counseling and reading self-help books on divorce.

Participants reported their participation in the support groups ranged from 2 weeks to 5 years. Most participants (84%) reported attending the DivorceCare group helped them in the following ways: (a) served as a safety net and a safe haven and helped them to talk openly about their divorce; (b) alleviated their feelings of failure; (c) strengthened their relationships with Christ and prepared them for ministry; (d) enabled many participants and their children to forgive themselves, their spouse, and others more quickly and helped them to move on; (e) helped to increase self-esteem, assertiveness, self-love, coping skills, relational wisdom, and independence; (f) reduced self-blame, depression, anger, insecurities, and judgmental attitudes; and (g) taught them how to be single, how to connect with others experiencing separation and divorce, skills such as budgeting and money management, and how to deal with their pain in a safe way. Barnabas (biblical alias), a 48-year-old, U.S.-born man who had been divorced three times, shared his ideas on the benefits of the support group in his comment:

The class taught me how to forgive, I learned to let go, and this helped me to heal. (Barnabas)

Conversely, 16% of the study's participants reported participation in the support groups hindered their healing from divorce in several ways: (a) having group leaders who overstressed that God hated divorce impacted one separated woman and had her vacillating about filing for divorce in a very bad marriage; (b) the no-dating rule in DivorceCare was a problem for one woman; (c) attending DivorceCare reminded others that they were different and left them feeling abandoned by the church; (d) viewing the mandatory video on reconciliation was not what many wanted to hear; (e) one male respondent reported that he was a gender minority in the group and had to be careful what he shared with the women present; (f) two men reported that the support group did not help them as it did not offer them any meaningful solutions; and (g) one woman reported that coming to the support group had her "digging up pain" that had to be put to rest again and she believed that this hindered her healing.

HEALTH

Overarching Question 5: How do Christian support groups help Black divorcees to forgive and maintain good health after divorce? Subquestions were as follows: (a) How would you describe your physical, emotional, and spiritual health since your divorce? (b) How does your present health compare to your health when you were married?; and (c) What, if any,

do you believe might be the connections among health, forgiveness, and divorce?

More than 80% of participants reported they experienced better physical health, more energy, and increased vitality since their divorce. However, some (duplicated count) reported that immediately after their divorce they had either been extremely stressed (44.2%), tired (25.5%), anxious (23.2%), and angry (18%); tearful (27.9%), and even suicidal (5%). Despite this, some participants (30.2%) reported divorce had deepened their level of spiritual maturity and brought them closer to God. Emotionally, some (28%) stated they were now more balanced and felt better equipped for the future.

When they were asked to compare their present health to their health during their marriage, most participants (> 90%) reported their health after divorce was much better. Some of these participants (7%) also stated they had become more health conscious and had even increased their levels of physical activity. All participants in this study stated they understood the connection among divorce, forgiveness, and health and articulated a variety of ways that unforgiveness could hinder the health of divorced individuals. Hagar (biblical alias), a 60-year-old, U.S.-born woman, remarried after divorce, shared her thoughts on these issues.

There is definitely a relationship between divorce, forgiveness, and health as where there is divorce there is brokenness and separation. These emotions can lead to stress which can affect our health, there is no question about that. Sometime stress is subtle. It can show itself as restlessness, or you can't sleep, but once those things begin to subside and release comes, you feel better. (Hagar)

Four health-related questions were asked on the demographic survey to serve as a point for data triangulation. These questions were as follows: (a) Would you say that in general your health is (excellent, very good, good, or poor)? (b) Now thinking about your physical health, which includes physical illness and injury, did you experience any illnesses in the time after your divorce? If so what happened, and for how long were you ill? (c) What if any medications do you currently take? and (d) Has there been an increase or decrease in the number of medications that you are taking? Table 4 outlines some of the data gathered in this section and the health practices and concerns of participants.

LIFE SATISFACTION

When asked about their current levels of life satisfaction, 51.2% of participants reported being very satisfied with their lives, 44.2% reported being satisfied with their lives, 2.3% were dissatisfied, and 2.3% reported being very dissatisfied with their lives after their divorce. In this study, life satisfaction

TABLE 4 Health Practices and Concerns of Participants

Health variables	Percent
Health status	
Excellent	14.0%
Very good	44.2%
Good	41.8%
Poor	—
Medical conditions	
No health concerns	40.0%
Hypertension	28.9%
Other chronic illnesses	22.3%
Diabetes	4.4%
Thyroid disorder	4.4%
Pain and injury	
No injuries	74.4%
Back pain	14.0%
Knee or joint fractures	11.6%
Medication trends	
No medications	58.1%
Increased medication use ^a	27.9%
Decrease in medications	4.70%
No changes/the same	9.30%
Sleep	
No sleep disturbances	30.2%
Sleep disturbances ^b	46.5%
Not sure/don't know	23.3%
Depression	
No depression	9.30%
Ongoing depression ^c	53.5%
Not sure/don't know	37.2%

Note. $N = 43$.

^aMedications used included (a) Verapamil and other high blood pressure medicines; (b) sinus medications; (c) medications for sleep disorders; (d) Metformin and other diabetic medications; (e) steroids; (f) Synthroid and other thyroid medications; (g) Prozac for depression, and (h) Zocor for high cholesterol. ^bSleep disturbances lasted between 2 and 50 months.

^cOngoing depression lasting 2 to 208 weeks and those with extensive depression reported still being under medical supervision.

was tied to number of marriages, with participants who were married once reporting the highest levels of life satisfaction. Figure 1 summarizes the relationship between the number of marriages and levels of life satisfaction.

OTHER SECTION (OPEN COMMENTS)

The “Other” question category was a place for participants to offer ideas that they believed could be beneficial to the researchers.

Overarching Question 6: What final ideas would you like to share with the research team about divorce, forgiveness, and health in Blacks? Participants provided a myriad of suggestions to the researchers. These ideas include the following: (a) encouraging divorcees to attend divorce support

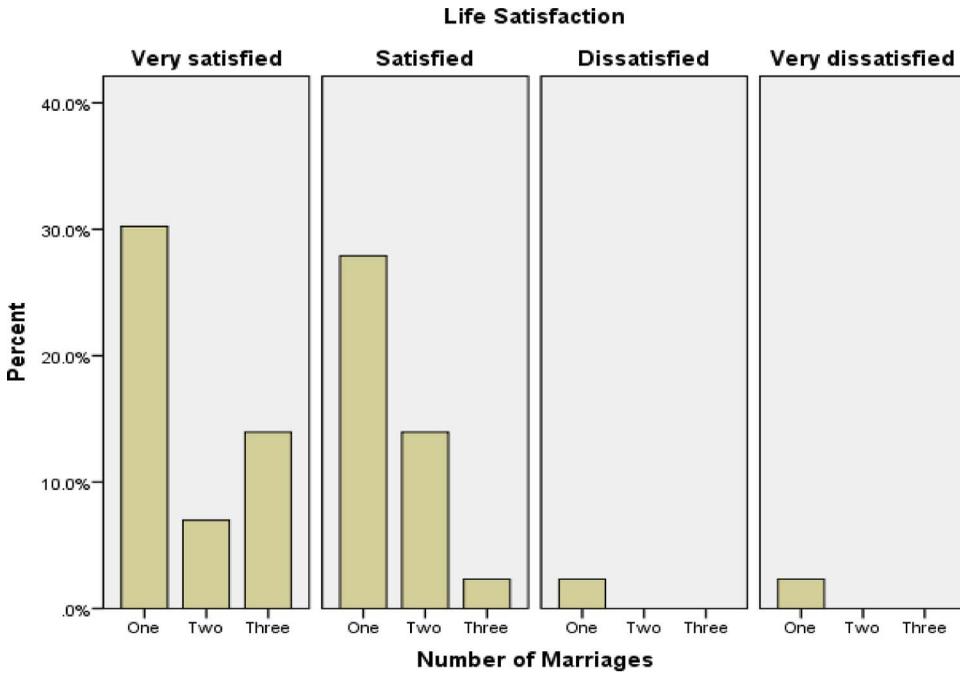


FIGURE 1 Life satisfaction and number of marriages ($N = 43$; color figure available online).

groups more than once; (b) offering counseling, financial management, and other life skills activities for the divorced; (c) speaking directly about divorce from the pulpit and the biblical roles in marriage; (d) offering more church support for single mothers including low-interest loans, schools for children, and benevolence; (e) offering strong singles ministries to assist the divorcee in transitioning to the “single life”; (f) offering family outings and programs for the children of the divorced; (g) providing remarital counseling to divorcees preparing for their next marriage; (h) pairing new divorcees with a “Church Divorcee Buddy”; and (i) removing the stigma of sin from the divorced and incorporating them into church programs.

DISCUSSION

The findings on factors contributing to divorce in Black Christians were as diverse in the church as they are in the secular world. Many of the causes of divorce highlighted in our findings such as monetary conflicts, outside interferences in the marriage, and the lack of role models due to extensive single-parent homes in the Black community, validated current literature in this area (Blackman et al., 2005; Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Cherlin et al., 2008; Lu, 2006; Moore, 2009; Varner & Madara, 2009).

Other findings, for example, the church's lack of support for marriage, appeared paradoxical. If marriages are the basic foundation of the church, then marriages should receive ongoing support from churches. Also, it would seem that the growing number of pastors' wives and or ordained ministers who are also facing divorce in the church reemphasizes the need for a new approach to marriage in the church. If Christian marriages that are in trouble cannot expect to find support in the church, then Black Christian marriages and by extension, the Black community might be in further trouble.

Surviving divorce is a challenge for anyone. This journey, however, can be especially difficult for Christians. Many report they questioned whether God has failed them when their lives unraveled into a divorce. In this study, divorcees used prayer, bible reading, and other spiritual practices to cope with divorce. Subsequently, many participants reported their faith in Christ grew through the divorce experience as they spent more time in prayer, bible-reading, and other religious practices.

When asked to discuss the issue of forgiveness, a tenet of Christianity, most participants reported understanding and exhibiting forgiveness-like behaviors, stating that they felt less negative feelings toward their ex-spouses as a result of participating in a Christian divorce support groups; and some reported caring for, burying, and still loving their ex-spouses. However, for some, the issue of forgiveness was very difficult and a few Christians in this sample revealed that despite their understanding of the biblical concept of forgiveness, they still struggled to forgive their ex-spouses. Despite this, previous research has demonstrated the longer individuals are exposed to forgiveness teachings the more likely they are to forgive (Wuthnow, 2000).

Self-reported health status is a strong indicator of an individual's health, morbidity, and mortality (Good Samaritans, 2012; National Research Council, 2012). Because failure to forgive has been linked to pain and poor health (Lawler et al., 2005), assessing this in this study was critical. In this study more than 58% of the study participants reported excellent to very good health, with the remainder (41.9%) reporting good health. This high level of self-reported health is noteworthy and could suggest as these divorcees elected to forgive and let go, their health (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual) improved as well. No extensive or prolonged health conditions were noted in the sample beyond those seen within the nondivorced Black population (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012; Read, Emerson, & Tarlov, 2005; Tanaka, 2010).

To the issue of forgiveness, the findings of this study indicate participation in Christian divorce support groups influences the level of forgiveness in Black divorcees who participated in these groups. These divorce support groups offered social support, taught life skills, and helped divorcees to find love and forgive themselves. Time spent in these support groups appears to be associated with the level of forgiveness reported by these

participants, but further objective evaluation using validated forgiveness instruments is required.

On the contrary, there were two barriers noted in the research that should be considered when conducting similar support groups in the future. In divorce support groups where men were in the minority, they reported feeling intimidated and hesitant about expressing themselves. Second, there were selected DivorceCare facilitators who overstressed the biblical concept of God hating divorce and who failed to offer solutions for those who needed such tools. These two barriers might be overcome by simply breaking support groups into gender-specific sections and increasing training for facilitators.

Most participants (> 95%) in this study reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with their lives after divorce. Life satisfaction was better for those who participated in religious activities more than once a week compared to those who participated less frequently and validated other research in this area (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2009; Wuthnow, 2000). In an interesting finding, which suggested the need for further exploration, none of the divorcees who had been married twice reported being very satisfied with their current lives, but half of the divorcees who had been married three times reported being very satisfied with their current lives.

Study Limitations

The number of men who participated in the study could be considered a study limitation; however, it is important to note there are almost three times the number of women participating in divorce support groups than there are men. Therefore, the ratio of women to men in the study might be acceptable. Also, because this was a qualitative study, the inability to generalize the study's findings to the general population, and the fact this study was limited to the state of Georgia are other study limitations.

CONCLUSIONS

Experiencing depression postdivorce is not uncommon; however, the findings of this study and the prolonged depression, pain, and struggle with unforgiveness noted in some participants could be used to inform mental and physical health practice. Additionally, our findings reinforce the need for churches to develop programs that will address the mental and physical health of Black divorcees, and not only their spiritual needs.

The results of this study have religious, mental health, and clinical implications. Some of these data could be used to develop ministries for the Black divorcees. Additionally, because divorce has major implications for the mental and physical health of divorcees, it is critical that health care

providers continue to assess marital status when Blacks are seen in the health care system.

Future Research

Future research is recommended to objectively evaluate the forgiveness levels and health outcomes of Black divorcees who participate in Christian divorce support groups. Additionally, future exploration of divorce in pastors and their wives and the underlying differences in these subgroups compared to regular church attendees should be researched further. Assessing prosperity gospel teachings and how this might be influencing spousal choices and the church's perceived lack of support for marriage also demands further research. Finally, evaluating the influence of third marriages on life satisfaction in Black Christians divorcees also begs further exploration.

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APPENDIX A FOCUS GROUP AGENDA GUIDE

Introduction of Focus Group Team and Facilitator(s)Research Team
Welcome and Introductions of ParticipantsAll
Overview of the Research Study and Focus Group GoalsFacilitator
Overview of the Group's ProcessFacilitator
Establishment of Ground RulesAll
Questions and Answer PeriodAll
Initiation of Demographic SurveyAll
Focus Group Discussions.All
Summary of Discussion and Next StepsAll
Distribution of Incentives and HandoutFacilitator
Adjournment	

APPENDIX B DEMOGRAPHIC AND HEALTH SURVEY

Christian Divorce Support Groups, Forgiveness, and Health Study
A.T. Still University, Mesa, AZ

Directions: *Please answer the following questions as honestly and accurately as possible. Remember, none of this data will be linked to you, but all information will be aggregated and kept confidential. Please do not leave any response fields blank. Once you are done, please return the survey to the*

Facilitator. Also, please let the Facilitator know if you have questions or need help with this survey.

Alias: _____

Code: _____

About You

Age: _____ Sex: _____ Male: _____ Female: _____ Country of Birth: _____

What is your marital status? Married: _____ Divorced: _____ Separated: _____

How many times have you been married? _____ For how long were you married? _____

If divorced, what was your age at your most recent divorce? _____

How long have you been divorced? _____

Were your birth parents separated or divorced? (Check one).

1 Yes: _____

2 No: _____

8 Parents not married: _____

7 Don't know / Not sure: _____

What is the highest grade or years of school you completed? (Check one).

1. Less than high school: _____

2. High school graduate: _____

3. Some college or technical school: _____

4. College graduate: _____

5. Postgraduate degree: _____

Are you currently . . . ? (Check one)

1. Employed for wages/salary _____

2. Unemployed _____

3. A Homemaker _____

4. Retired _____

5. Other _____

About Your Family

How many birth children (< 18 years of age) live in your household on a part- or full-time basis?

What is your personal annual household income from all sources? (Check one)

1. Less than \$25,000: _____

2. \$25,000–\$49,999: _____

3. \$50,000–\$74,999: _____

4. \$75,000 and over: _____

5. Don't know/not sure: _____

About Your Health

Would you say that in general your health is? (Check one)

1. Excellent: _____
2. Very good: _____
3. Good: _____
4. Poor: _____
5. Don't know/ Not sure: _____

2. Now thinking about your physical health, which includes physical illness and injury, did you experience any illnesses in the time after your divorce? If so what happened, and for how long were you ill?

3. What if any medications do you currently take?

4. Has there been an increase or decrease in the number of medications that you take?

About Your Divorce

1. What did you do to seek help for your divorce recovery? (Check all that apply)

Talked with friends: _____

Became involved in a church group: _____

Sought counseling from a minister: _____

Sought counseling from a psychologist/psychiatrist: _____

Attended a divorce recovery or support group: _____

Read books about divorce: _____

Other: _____

Don't know/ Not sure: _____

2. Please indicate who filed for your current divorce or separation? Ex-spouse: __ Self: __ Both: _____

3. During the time after your divorce, for about how many months did you feel like you did not get enough rest or sleep?

Number of months: _____

None: _____

Don't know / Not sure: _____

4. During the time after your divorce for about how many months did you feel sad, blue, or overwhelmed?

Number of months: _____

None: _____

Don't know / Not sure: _____

5. In general, how satisfied are you with your life after your divorce? (Check one).

1. Very satisfied: _____
2. Satisfied: _____
3. Dissatisfied: _____
4. Very dissatisfied: _____
5. Don't know/ Not sure: _____

About Your Spiritual Self

1. What is your religious affiliation/denomination? _____
 2. How often do you attend religious services/Bible studies or listen to religious programs on radio or TV in a given year? (Check one).
More than once a week: ___ Weekly: ___ Monthly: ___ Quarterly: ___ A few times a year: _____
 3. As you consider your life as a Christian divorcee, what do you believe that the church you attend should be doing to minister to the Black divorcee?
-

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. At the conclusion of our meeting as a token of our gratitude, we will have a small gift for you and a package of material on divorce and forgiveness. We appreciate this opportunity to listen to your story. Please call our study line if you have further questions.

APPENDIX C FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

A: Divorce in Blacks:

Script (Please read): *The rate of divorce in Blacks has continued to rise nationally and this has major significance for our society and nation. We are conducting these discussion groups to get your opinion on why this might be happening and to delve more deeply into your experience as a Black divorcee in the United States.*

Overarching question: What is the emotional and spiritual impact of divorce on Black Christians?

1. What factors do you believe are leading to the high divorce rate in Blacks? (Probe: Is it issues around money, children, love, infidelity, etc.).
2. When you got married, what were you beliefs about God and divorce? What are your thoughts now? Are they the same or has this changed?

B. Christianity:

Overarching question: To what extent does faith in Christ help the divorced to forgive, heal, and keep healthy after divorce?

1. In what manner has your Christian faith (prayer, bible reading, beliefs, etc.) helped you in the forgiveness process? (Probe: Did your faith help or hinder you in this process?)

C: Forgiveness:

Overarching question: What is the role of forgiveness in helping Black Christians heal from divorce?

1. What is your understanding of the Christian concept of forgiveness?
2. When you think of forgiveness in divorce what comes to your mind? (Probe: What changed with forgiveness (emotionally, psychologically, etc.)?)
3. Have you forgiven your ex-spouse? If yes, how do you know this? If no, why not? (Probe: If your spouse walked into the room right now, how you would feel?)
4. When you think of your ex-spouse how you do feel?

D: Divorce Support Groups:

Overarching question: What is the role of Christian divorce support groups in contributing to the forgiveness process among Black Christian divorcees?

1. Following your divorce, what was the name/s of the divorce support group that you attended?
 - a. For how long did this group run?
 - b. In what way did participating in the group help you?
 - c. In what ways did the support group hinder your healing from divorce? (Probe: How do you know that your forgiveness was tied to this group?)

E: Health:

Overarching question: How do Christian support groups help Black divorcees to forgive and maintain good health after divorce?

1. How would you describe your physical, emotional, and spiritual health since your divorce?
2. How does your present health compare to your health when you were married?
3. What if any do you believe might be the connection between health, forgiveness, and divorce?

F: “Other”:

1. What final ideas would like to share with the research team about divorce, forgiveness, and health in Blacks?

APPENDIX D
DIVORCE, FORGIVENESS, AND HEALTH HANDOUT FOR BLACK
CHRISTIANS

Blacks or African Americans make up 13.1% of the United States population, or 42 million people (U.S. Census, 2010). As the Black population has grown so has its rate of divorce. Blacks are experiencing a higher rate of divorce than other racial/ethnic groups, and about 15% of African Americans over 25 years of age are divorced or legally separated. This is of great importance to our society, as divorce has been linked to increased stress, depression, pain, illnesses, unforgiveness, and premature death (Sbarra, Law, & Portley, 2011).

Forgiveness is the bedrock of Christianity and has been proven to provide a barrier that protects individuals from illnesses and diseases. Forgiveness means to let go of resentment toward another person, but this can be difficult after divorce. However, living with unforgiveness has proven to be detrimental to one’s health. Additionally, withholding forgiveness violates the core principles of Christianity, which is built on forgiveness. As Christians, only by forgiving others, do we receive God’s forgiveness (Matthew 6:14). Therefore, Christian divorcees must work to forgive themselves, their ex-spouse, and others for past hurts. Only by forgiving can people move on and be healed after divorce. This is critical because forgiveness has been linked to better physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

Despite this knowledge, even Christians can have a problem forgiving after divorce. Seeking counseling or participating in a Christian support group is a great way to get the forgiveness process started. Support groups are one of many community resources that might help you cope with your divorce. So, what can you do to continue your divorce recovery process? Here are some ideas.

- Pick a place to start. Do something small; this could lead to big results.
- Spend time daily in God’s word for the renewing of your mind.
- Learn to pray for those who have wronged you.
- Work to forgive yourself and others. Remember, this is a continuous process.
- Speak to your Pastor or other Christian friend whom you trust about your concerns.

- Build and nurture same-sex relationships and surround yourself with new friends.
- Learn new skills and hobbies. This is a time to rebuild your life.
- Reach out to those in need in your community and give back. Giving what you need has great healing potential.

Several divorce resources are available to assist you with dealing with the pain of your divorce.

The following is a list of resources that you might find useful:

- Children and Divorce: Retrieved from <http://www.childrenanddivorce.com>
- Dads Divorce: Retrieved from <http://www.dadsdivorce.com>
- DivorceCare Support Groups: Retrieved from www.divorcecare.org
- Divorce Source: Retrieved from <http://www.divorcesource.com>
- Single and Parenting: Retrieved from <http://www.singleandparenting.org>
- Visions Anew: Retrieved from <http://www.visionsanew.org>

For more information and to continue with your recovery after divorce, please give us a call.