

**Falling out of romantic love: A phenomenological study  
of the meaning of love in marriage**

by

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**DEDICATION**

For Kasia.

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As stated by Sir Francis Bacon, the English philosopher and author, *knowledge is power*. Through the knowledge I have gained from this research I hoped to better assist my

clients who struggle with the loss of romantic love in marriage. I believe I have become a stronger clinician as a result of my research efforts, and have greatly enjoyed sharing what I have learned with my clients and colleagues along the way. My sincere hope is that this study has also provided a valuable springboard for other researchers who choose to embark on this important quest for knowledge and understanding. Although this research project was a true passion of mine, it could not have been possible without the gracious time and deep insights provided by the research participants who made this study possible.



**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates falling out of romantic love (FORL) in marriage, a relatively unexplored pathway to marital dissatisfaction and divorce. The aims of this study were to identify the underpinnings and consequences of FORL, and to offer recommendations to individuals struggling in romantic relationships and professional clinicians who treat them. Other important goals included identifying factors salient to romantic love and marital satisfaction. Key theories that guided this research include Sternberg's Duplex Theory of Love, attachment theory, social exchange theory, biological theories of love, and taxonomies of love. Purposive snowball sampling was employed to recruit participants from a midwestern state. Using phenomenology, the data were obtained through in-depth, individual interviews of 15 individuals, comprised of 10 females and 5 males, who had lived the experience of FORL.

Results highlighted the importance of family of origin experiences, personal relationship history, attachment style, individual attributes (i.e., self-esteem), mate selection processes, and emotional and physical connection to their spouse at the time of FORL. Further, results showed that FORL is a process, which happens over time, comprised of an identified point of recognition that the love has been lost and is unlikely to return (i.e., the point of no return). Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors included in the FORL experience were also identified and discussed with the participants. The results further indicated that FORL is a common phenomenon and that an intense emotional struggle can accompany it. Finally, strategies to remedy FORL were explored. Clinical implications were outlined, as were recommendations for individuals in romantic relationships.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to examine the phenomenon of falling out of romantic love (FORL) in marriage, which can be a path to marital dissatisfaction and divorce that has received little scholarly attention (Hemesath & Hurt, 2016; Kayser, 1990, 1993; Sailor, 2013). Despite the broad ramifications of FORL, few researchers have chosen to study this phenomenon. As discussed by Kayser (1993), “Whereas previous studies have focused primarily on the process of how partners dissolve their relationships, much less is known about how love declines in a marriage that may or may not end in actual relationship dissolution” (p. vii). As the sparse research and extant literature on this topic necessitated an inductive approach, this phenomenological study investigated the participants’ perceptions of how and why they fell out of romantic love with their spouse. For this study, I employed purposive sampling to recruit 16 adults in a midwestern state who defined themselves as having FORL with their spouse. The goal of this inquiry was to generate new insights and understandings about this phenomenon as well as to contribute to the marital literature and inform therapist education and clinical treatment.

This chapter opens with a synopsis of the background literature that supported the study. I next outline the problem statement, followed by the statement of purpose and the research questions. This chapter also includes a brief review of my methodological approach and includes my perspectives and assumptions. The chapter concludes with the rationale and significance for this study as well as definitions of key terms.

## **Background**

Marital instability has marked the last half of the twentieth century in America (Cherlin, 2010), with divorce rates rising sharply in the 1960's and 1970's (Kelly, 2006). Although the rate of divorce has slightly declined, since the 1990's, its current probability for first marriages is estimated to be between 40% and 50% (Cherlin, 2010) and is even higher for remarriages (Marquardt, Blankenhorn, Lerman, Malone-Colón, & Wilcox, 2012). Several factors, including a shift toward individual happiness (Amato, 2004b), higher expectations for marriage and love (Hurt, 2014; Kayser 1993), and the sexual revolution and feminist movement (Sabatelli & Ripoll, 2004) are believed to have contributed to marital instability.

Scholars have outlined a plethora of benefits adults may gain from marriage (Blackman, Clayton, Glenn, Malone-Colòn, & Roberts, 2005; Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Nock, 2005), although not all marriages are equally beneficial, and relationship quality matters (Berscheid & Reagan, 2005; Kelly, 2012; Kiecolt-Glasser & Newton, 2001; Kim & McKenry, 2002). Because FORL is an under-researched factor contributing to marital dissatisfaction and divorce in America, it clearly deserves further research.

Sonnet 43 by the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning depicts someone intensely in love in the following poem for which she is well known:

### **This thing called love**

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.  
 I love thee to the depth and breadth and height  
 My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight  
 For the ends of being and ideal grace.  
 I love thee to the level of every day's  
 Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.  
 I love thee freely, as men strive for right.  
 I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.  
 I love thee with the passion put to use  
 In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.  
 I love thee with a love I seemed to lose  
 With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,  
 Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,  
 I shall but love thee better after death.

As described by Ackerman (1994), “Love is the most important thing in our lives, a passion for which we would fight or die . . . ” (p. xix). While Browning’s poem offers many descriptions of love, it does not firmly define what it is. Just as important, and the crux of this research project, is the question of how and why one does *fall out of romantic love* with their spouse.

The basic nature of love has been extensively researched (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992). There has, however, been little discussion or research about love as related to mate selection and retention across the course of a marriage. Fehr and Russell (1991) identified 93 different types of love, the most common being maternal love, parental love, and friendship love. To understand the phenomenon of FORL, we first need to understand more about love specifically in romantic relationships, leading us to consider how ordinary people describe love in such relationships.

Love is complex (Carter, 2013), yet simplified verbiage rather than sophisticated terminology is generally used to describe it (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992). Adults often have a difficult time talking about love within their relationships (Carter, 2013). Phrases such as

“I’m crazy about you” or “We are one” (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992) are often used. Similarly, simple language such as “I’ve fallen out of love,” “I’m just not into you,” or “I love you but I’m not in love with you,” might be used to describe the loss of love (Berscheid, 2006). The term love is used frequently to describe various feelings across a range of situations, thereby making it increasingly difficult to define exactly what love is. “We use the word love in such a sloppy way that it can mean almost nothing or absolutely everything” (Ackerman, 1994, p. xvii). In sum, love is exceedingly important, yet illusive and difficult to characterize, and often has many meanings (Berscheid, 2006; 2010).

Barriers to verbalizing and understanding love begin with confusing terminology in the literature, which varies or overlaps considerably (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Berscheid, 2010). First, love is a generic term highly dependent on context (Myers & Berscheid, 1997). Second, there are many different types of love and even a given type is often named differently (Berscheid, 2006). It is unclear what is meant by love as it relates to intimate relationships such as marriage, because its definition is often inconsistent. The term “romantic love” has often been used, but in other studies, “love,” “passionate love,” or “developing love” may appear. Berscheid (2010) cited “erotic love,” “Eros,” “addictive love,” “obsessional love,” and being “in love” as terms used to denote love in intimate relationships. Although researchers sometimes have defined subtle similarities or differences among various types of love, elements have been inconsistently added or dropped across sources, and thus many classifications of love contain unique varieties (Berscheid, 2006).

Numerous definitions of love have been identified by researchers (Ackerman, 1994; Berscheid, 2006; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992; Sprecher & Regan, 1998); there is, however, no universally-accepted term or definition of love for marriage (Berscheid, 2006).

Conceptualizing and defining love is important, because its nature affects both the formation of relationships and the durability of marriage (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992). In this study, narrowing the relevant types of love and corresponding terminology were imperative to achieve a meaningful exploration of FORL in marriage.

### **Key Terminology**

Love takes many forms. To better understand love as related to long-term intimate relationships, I compare and contrast the literature. In Chapter 2 I will delineate other relevant forms of love, including passionate love, companionate love, and consummate love. Since romantic love was the primary focus of this study, I begin with a description of it here.

**Romantic love.** According to Fromm (1956), there is a notable difference between passionate love, also termed *falling* in-love, and the more stable, permanent state of *being* in-love, considered romantic love. Romantic love combines sexual desire, high emotional intimacy (Davis & Todd, 1982; Miller, 2012), intensity and engagement (Berscheid, 2006), but *not* the obsession or anxiety of passionate love (Sprecher & Regan, 1998). It is important to emphasize that sexual desire is a requirement for romantic love and the state of being in-love (Berscheid & Regan, 2005; Berscheid, 2010; Regan, 1998; Regan & Berscheid, 1999). The terms romantic love and being in-love were used synonymously throughout this research.

In Western culture, romantic love is considered to be highly important for marriages (Acevedo & Aron, 2009), and thus represents the underpinnings of marital unions (Dion & Dion, 1991). Furthermore, as indicated by Berscheid (2006), in many countries, romantic love is the *sine qua non* for marriage. In other words, it is an essential factor for mate selection.

**Falling out of romantic love.** Based on what is currently known about Americans and marriage, romantic love appears to be most closely linked to the phenomenon of FORL (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Berscheid, 2006; Dion & Dion, 1991), but due to the sparse extant literature, the definition of FORL can only be derived from what we know about being in love. Lack of sexual attraction, emotional connectedness, and/or a sense of relationship can inevitably be contributing factors to FORL (Berscheid, 2006). When any one or more of these components are missing, the nature of romantic love changes and may be lost. Fluctuations or declines in such components may not result in marital dissatisfaction or FORL, and are often considered to be normal shifts in romantic relationships (Regan, 2017). Alternatively, feelings of “falling out of love” may indicate significant problems in the relationship and can lead to negative outcomes (Regan, 2017). However, it is important to note that FORL is an internal process that may be present in only one spouse, and “may *feel* sudden or may occur over decades before one or both partners recognize its effects” (W. Allen, personal communication, July 26, 2016).

### **Conceptualizing Love**

The evidence is mixed as to whether loving someone and being romantically in love are different. Berscheid (2006) reported that they are indeed different: “When another is liked (a friend) and sexually attractive, that person qualifies for membership in the ‘in love’ category, but if a person is *only* liked or *only* sexually attractive, that individual is less likely to be in the ‘in love’ category” (p. 180). Additionally, in a study using a sample of over 200 undergraduate men and women, Berscheid and Meyers (1996) found that while only one person in that sample fit the in-love category, an average of nine partners fit the love category. Thus, “in love” is a specific type of love, while “love” is generic. The term “in

love” is generally equivalent to romantic love (Berscheid, 2006; Berscheid & Myers, 1996; Myers & Berscheid, 1997).

Rubin (1988) asserted that a sign of immaturity with respect to the science of love is evidenced by a lack of common vocabulary. To be sure, the terms for love in romantic relationships are confusing and varied. Furthermore, there is a lack of research with respect to the phenomenon of FORL. Even so, it seems that healthy long-term relationships matter to Americans, based on the common view that marriage is the cornerstone of stability and security. Further, romantic love is highly important for most Western marriages (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Berscheid, 2006; Dion & Dion, 1991). It is essential to better understand FORL because of the benefits healthy marriage bring to adults, children, and society, such as greater psychological, physical, and financial well-being (Blackman et al., 2005; Nock, 2005), healthier lifestyles, access to higher quality healthcare and safer neighborhoods (Hawkins & Booth, 2005).

### **Literature Review: Highlights and Theoretical Underpinnings**

This section describes the key highlights and theoretical underpinnings from the literature that guided this research. Its contents are further delineated in Chapter 2.

**Scant research and literature.** There is sparse research specific to FORL. Only three key studies have been conducted: Kayser (1990, 1993), Sailor (2006, 2013), and Hemesath and Hurt (2016). Kayser (1990, 1993), a couples’ therapist and scholar, was perplexed by clients who fell out of love. Through in-depth interviews with 49 participants, Kayser (1990, 1993) labeled the process of falling out of love as *marital disaffection*, and described three distinct phases, including the beginning phase, disappointment; the middle phase, between disappointment and disaffection; and the end phase, reaching disaffection. It is worth noting



that Kayser (1990, 1993) did not mention sexual attraction or desire in her definition of marital disaffection; rather it was generally limited to lack of emotional intimacy and indifference toward one's partner.

To better understand and help couples in her clinical work, Sailor (2006, 2013), also a couple's counselor turned scholar, conducted a phenomenological study of eight participants who reported the experience of FORL. Sailor's (2006, 2013) definition of romantic love was loosely identified as intense emotional and sexual connection to one's partner. Although she did not assign specific stages to the phenomenon, common themes emerged, including reduced trust and intimacy, poor self-esteem, and increased emotional pain. Sailor (2006, 2013) observed a gradual decline in marital satisfaction, including a pivotal point at which an individual knew he or she had FORL.

Finally, I conducted a focus group study (Hemesath & Hurt, 2016) as an attempt to explore this understudied phenomenon, which provided preliminary guidance for this dissertation. The research included two separate focus groups, one comprised of individuals who had reported FORL with a spouse, and another comprised of mental health clinicians or clergy who had provided counseling services to couples who had experienced this phenomenon. The participants defined romantic love as emotional intensity, physical attraction, and sexual desire, but lacking the obsession and anxiety of passionate love. Similarities and differences were found between the two groups. Results were mixed regarding specific phases of FORL; however, both groups recognized a distinct moment of knowing that romantic love had disappeared and was unlikely to return, termed the point of no return. Common circumstances leading to FORL were identified by both groups, as well as the realization that some individuals had not been romantically in love with their spouses

to begin with. Furthermore, both groups found that once romantic love was lost, it was difficult to regain. Differences between the two focus groups included what it meant to be “in-love” and whether sexual desire was a requirement for romantic love. The client group specified that sexual desire was an essential ingredient for romantic love and in-loveness whereas providers were ambivalent.

Although similar themes were found among the three studies (Hemesath & Hurt, 2016; Kayser, 1990, 1993; Sailor, 2006, 2013), there were substantial differences in the definition and conceptualization of love. Furthermore, questions remained regarding the course of FORL with respect to the existence of stages, a point of no return, and the opportunity for change either throughout the course of FORL or at its conclusion. Additionally, little was learned regarding the resources employed by couples or individuals to address FORL, the effectiveness of such resources, or other recommendations that could benefit them. This dissertation study would further address these unknowns.

**Conceptualization and theory.** To investigate FORL, it is first important to understand why and how we love. To begin, two taxonomies categorizing love into styles or kinds will be discussed. Lee’s Love Styles (1973) separates love into eight different kinds and Berscheid’s (2006) Meaning of Love categorizes love into four types; both are conceptually helpful in identifying and defining love. Second, the three main theoretical frameworks guiding this investigation – Sternberg’s Duplex Theory of Love, adult attachment theory, and social exchange theory – will be described. Each of these theories could be applied to this investigation by identifying ways in which relationships may become dissatisfying and sometimes lead to FORL. Mate selection, inclusive of personality, attachment formation, and commitment, are also major contributing factors to FORL.

Finally, two biological theories, the Dynamical Evolutionary View of Love (Kenrick, 2006) and the Drive to Love (Fisher, 2006) will be outlined with specific attention to their usefulness in this research endeavor. Biology, reproduction, and advancement of the species is central to each of these theories.

### **Problem Statement**

Research indicates that a significant number of marriages are unsatisfying, as evidenced by the elevated divorce rate in America (Amato, 2004a; Kayser, 1993). Romantic love is considered an essential ingredient in marriage (Berscheid, 2006; Dion & Dion, 1991), yet the lack of loving feelings was the highest-ranked problem presented in couple's therapy, based on the combination of how frequently the problem is presented, how difficult the problem is to treat, and how damaging the problem is to relationships (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). In fact, Whisman et al. (1997) found that one of the most difficult problems to treat in couple's therapy was "lack of loving feeling" (p. 364).

Berscheid (2010) highlighted the problematic gap between clinical practice and research and the imperative to collaborate (see Olson, 1970), which seems to have continued to the present. FORL is specifically and frequently cited in mental health practices as a reason for marital discontent. Since we know very little about this important pathway to marital unhappiness and divorce, and given its impact on individual, child, and family well-being, this study was needed. Moreover, it was important to capture the participants' perceptions and experiences of this unique phenomenon as it has been understudied in the empirical literature and appears to be not well understood among marriage scholars and practitioners.

## **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of FORL, using in-depth interviews with 16 participants residing in a midwestern state. It was anticipated that, by achieving a greater understanding of the factors involved in FORL, its meaning for the individual, and to marriage itself, research knowledge would be advanced and professionals would be better positioned for informing and equipping individuals and couples to deal with this phenomenon. Therefore, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Which factors contributed to FORL?
2. Which feelings, thoughts, and behaviors accompanied the phenomenon of FORL?
3. Which strategies or efforts were used to remedy or address FORL?

## **Research Approach**

Due to the nature of the research topic, I adopted a phenomenological approach for this investigation. On receiving approval from Iowa State University's Institutional Review Board, I conducted in-depth interviews to study the experiences and perceptions of a number of adults who had reported FORL with a spouse.

## **My Role as the Researcher**

As to my background for this study, I own a three-location mental health private practice in which I am a practicing clinician, employing and supervising several mental health providers, and overseeing practice operations, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) specifications, and other required compliance standards. Professionally, I have been a licensed marriage and family therapist and a licensed mental

health counselor for 19 years. Throughout the course of my career, many clients have presented with the issue of FORL.

I have also witnessed the phenomenon of FORL among several friends and family members who have experienced it. These opportunities have allowed me to view this phenomenon through the lens of individuals emotionally close to me, often providing me with a more anecdotal and well-rounded understanding, based on knowing their spouses as well. By virtue of my professional and personal background, I brought practical experience and contextual knowledge to this inquiry.

Although my professional and personal insights and experiences would benefit this study, they could also have been a liability if my own understandings of FORL prevented my approaching the data with impartiality and openness. Furthermore, I was invested in this study and stood to gain professionally by understanding FORL, which would afford me greater competence as a clinician treating this phenomenon, thus providing me more skills, insight, and assistance to offer the treatment population. To address these issues, I did my best to suspend my pre-understandings while interpreting the interview data and findings, yet recognizing that my training and experience could also strengthen this research process (Saldaña, 2013). Furthermore, as a precursor to this study, I conducted focus groups with the intent of gathering alternative points of view to guide this research, instead of relying only on my own knowledge base (Hemesath & Hurt, 2016).

### **Assumptions**

My experience and background as a licensed marriage and family therapist lent itself to five primary assumptions regarding this study. First, romantic relationships are of great importance to most people, an assumption based on both my corroborating research and my

experiences with clients who have reported symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and physical illness resulting from their loss of romantic love (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993; Lebow Chambers, Christensen, & Johnson, 2012; Mearns, 1991). Second, many marriages end in divorce, with spouses sometimes citing FORL as a reason for their marital dissatisfaction. This assumption is supported by the 40-50% divorce rate in America, the observations and information I have gained as a licensed marriage and family therapist, and previous literature (Kayser, 1990, 1993; Sailor, 2006, 2013). Third, romantic love, including emotional connection and sexual desire, is the most sought-after type of love in marital relationships (see Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Berscheid, 2006; Dion & Dion, 1991). This assumption is guided by my research on expectations of marital relationships in America as well as by the results of my treating individuals, couples, and families for many years. Fourth, satisfying long-term marriages are positive experiences for individuals, families, couples, and society, all of whom would benefit from better understanding the phenomenon of FORL. This assumption is guided by research results supporting the benefits of satisfying marriages on finances, emotional health, physical health, children, and society (Blackman et al., 2005). Finally, adults, scholars, and mental health providers often struggle to understand or define FORL, as well as how to address it. This assumption is also borne out of my personal and professional experiences, focus-group findings, and literature reviews, all of which support the notion that there is a significant lack of available research, education, and theory on this topic, and what little is available often contains conflicting and confusing terminology.

### **Rationale and Significance of the Study**

The rationale for this study originated from my professional role as a mental health provider treating individuals and couples presenting with FORL. Relationship struggles are

the most common presenting problem of those entering psychotherapy (Pinsker, Nepps, Redfield, & Winston, 1985), and long-standing, chronic relationship issues rather than distinct, acute problems are presented most commonly in couple's therapy (Doss, Simpson, & Christensen, 2004). Further, lack of love is the most difficult problem to treat in couple's therapy (Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997). Thus, FORL is often discussed in professional consultation groups among providers due to the dearth of theoretical frameworks, education, and training with which to confidently and adequately address this phenomenon. Although marital therapy has been shown to be effective for 70% of couples seeking treatment (Lebow et al., 2012), certain relationship issues can be exceedingly difficult to treat, because even if the issues responsible for relationship distress can be identified, some conditions cannot be changed (e.g., a job as a significant source of anxiety, which cannot be quit for financial reasons; or one partner does not feel sexual attraction or desire for the other, despite efforts by both partners) (Berscheid & Regan, 2005).

Ultimately, the results of this study could have cascading and far-reaching effects for adults, children, and society at large. As asserted by Berscheid and Regan (2005), "the factors associated with the maintenance and stability of marital relationships have been of special concern to relationship scholars because of the importance of the marital relationship to the partners, to their children, and to society" (p. 192). Both mental and physical health are negatively affected when adults experience relationship difficulties (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Therefore, addressing this issue could benefit adults and reduce mental health and physical health problems (Goldberg, 2010). Our highest highs and lowest lows are often linked to a love relationship, and depression or anxiety regularly results from difficult interpersonal relationships or the loss of romantic love (Mearns, 1991). Fisher (2004)

reported that the drive for romantic love is powerful and considerably stronger than the sex drive. “The relationships between couple distress and individual disorders such as depression and anxiety have become well established over the last decade” (Lebow et al., 2012, p. 145). In terms of relationship dissolution, individuals often long for their separated partners for years (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Additionally, “unrequited love is associated with emptiness, anxiety, or despair” (Hatfield & Rapson, 1993, p. 5). Unfortunately, time is considered the only known cure to romantic rejection (Regan, 2017).

FORL is complex, and how to avoid this phenomenon in romantic relationships is not well understood. It can happen to one or both partners (W. Allen, personal communication, July 26, 2016). A major frustration with FORL is that it can occur when a person does not want it to, and may not happen when they want or need to move on from unrequited love. Situations where both partners agree to end the relationship and perhaps when both parties have FORL, appear to be less painful, yet are seemingly not as typical. As such, it would be ideal for everyone to have the capability to FORL, because when one partner ends a relationship, it is not in the best interest of the mate to continue to pine for that individual for years to come, which sadly is not uncommon (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Hatfield & Rapson, 1993). Yet, as researchers, we know very little about how to harness the power of romantic love, keep it healthy and alive, or survive the seeming torture of its absence. Regan (2017) summed it up nicely, “Understanding the types of love that exist, the changes that commonly occur over time in romantic relationships, the signs and symptoms of interpersonal problems, and the coping mechanisms that are available can enable us to effectively alleviate the difficulties that may develop in our love relationships” (p. 216).



Despite the risks of FORL in romantic relationships, there are collective, positive advantages to marriage itself. Some include higher levels of psychological, physical, and financial well-being (Blackman et al., 2005; Nock, 2005), a greater sense of meaning in life, the potential to participate in multiple roles, healthier lifestyles, affordance of better healthcare, and the opportunity to live in safer neighborhoods, to name only a few (Hawkins & Booth, 2005). As indicated by Nock (2005), persons who marry have the advantage over those who do not of “marriage as a social institution, specialization, and the domesticating role of marriage” (p. 18). With regard to specialties, when a couple marries they generally have different skill sets that allow them to accomplish tasks together more efficiently and effectively. Finally, marriage carries legal and moral implications as well as better social treatment and higher self-esteem that create positive assumptions about the parties involved (Nock, 2005).

Although it is possible that married individuals are naturally healthier, wealthier, and more often selected into marriage, Hawkins and Booth (2005) reported that, even if previously healthier and happier people are selected at a greater rate for marriage, “it is clear that marrying has at least some additional effect on improving psychological well-being” (p. 446). It is worth noting that the benefit of psychological well-being associated with being married is closely related to the quality of the relationship (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Kim & McKenry, 2002). Not all marriages have a positive effect on well-being, however. Intense marital conflict and long-term marital dissatisfaction are examples of relationship components that may undermine the benefits of marriage (Kelly, 2012). Similar results have been found between physical illness and marital quality. For example, Wickrama, Lorenz, Conger, and Elder (1997) discovered that as marital quality decreases the chance of

becoming physically ill increases. Hawkins and Booth (2005) described the consequences of remaining in an unhappy marriage as causing “significantly lower levels of overall happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall health along with elevated levels of psychological distress compared to remaining otherwise continuously married” (p. 451). Not only could these outcomes be detrimental to the physical and emotional health of the adult partners, but also to children because of reduced parenting quality.

The outcome of the current study could also benefit children. Although it is true that children from divorce can and often do grow up to be happy and healthy adults, it is generally agreed that being raised in a two-parent, loving household is best (Amato, 2004b; Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Luo, & Stanley, 2002). “Note that merely decreasing the rate of divorce is insufficient, because children raised by discordant but continuously married parents also have an elevated number of emotional and behavioral problems” (Amato, 2004b, p. 963). As reported by Berscheid and Reagan (2005), “conflict is often the source of negative emotional experiences and poor relationship quality in married couples” (p. 51). Adult relationship problems typically lead to stress or other mental health issues for parents, which can harm parenting quality and be disadvantageous for children (Lamanna & Reidmann, 2012). Thus, understanding a phenomenon such as FORL that can lead to divorce or at least an unsatisfying marriage would be beneficial for children. Furthermore, the benefits that adults might gain from satisfying marriages are also advantageous for children. For example, healthier lifestyles, safer neighborhoods, higher quality healthcare (Hawkins & Booth, 2005), and greater financial well-being (Blackman et al., 2005; Nock, 2005) are positives for both adults and children in a marital relationship.

However, the benefits of a satisfying marriage extend beyond the individual and family. Although questions regarding the true scope of the marital advantage have arisen when comparing marriage to other types of current relationships, and its dependence on relationship quality, many scholars believe that societal gains accrue from the institution of marriage (Musick & Bumpass, 2012). Such gains can include the reduction of physical and mental health symptoms, lower government and taxpayer healthcare costs, increased work performance, healthier parenting and outcomes for children, and reduced poverty (Kelly, 2012; Ooms, 2002).

### **Summary**

Although Americans value romantic relationships, our understanding of FORL is in its infancy. There are only three known research studies (Hemesath & Hurt, 2016; Kayser, 1990, 1993; Sailor, 2006, 2013) on this topic. Developing common definitions and language as researchers would be a first step toward exchanging ideas productively and communicating effectively. Ideally, this will enrich our understanding of this phenomenon. The goal of this phenomenological study was to investigate the experience of FORL through the lens of those who have lived it. New understanding of this phenomenon could have implications for the many Americans who at one point or another find themselves in love, and wish to preserve their relationship.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter includes a review of the existing empirical literature pertaining to the phenomenon of FORL. The focus of this review was to gain a better understanding of what is known about FORL, which revealed that it was justified for a study, both because of the sparsity of information and its important implications with respect to individual and family well-being. The literature related to FORL was continually reviewed throughout the research process to help ensure that nothing relevant was missed (Glesne, 2011). In this chapter, two major taxonomies of love will be outlined and related terminology will be defined. Third, the three main theoretical frameworks guiding this investigation will be described, and marital trends will be reviewed. Fourth, conceptual frameworks addressing how and why we love will be outlined, including two major biological theories of love. Fifth and sixth, gender differences in emotional and relationship development and the longevity of romantic love will be reviewed. Seventh, mate selection as related to attachment, commitment, and personality will be discussed. Eighth, three previous studies (Hemesath & Hurt, 2016; Kayser, 1990, 1993; Sailor, 2006, 2013) addressing FORL will be described. Finally, the chapter will conclude with a summary and discussion of the limitations of the literature on FORL

#### **Literature Review Procedures and Findings**

This review was conducted through extensive searches of the Iowa State Library system, JSTOR, Google Scholar, reference lists of relevant work, and assistance from Iowa State University library specialists. Search terms included, but were not limited to, marriage,

love, falling out of love, change in love, when love ends, does love last, marital love, falling in love, types of love, romantic love, romantic relationships, enduring relationships, long-term marriage, divorce, reasons for divorce, benefits of marriage, marital satisfaction, marital dissatisfaction, intimacy, adult attachment, attachment theory, personality, personality and marriage, gender differences, social exchange theory, commitment in marriage, psychotherapy and falling out of love, couple's therapy, effectiveness of couple's therapy, and presenting problems in couple's therapy. I also drew from the professional literature, including clinical books, magazines, and the knowledge of other marriage and family therapy practitioners in my community. Further, over the course of three years, in the practice of daily life, I compiled notes, articles, books, and other resources which pertained to the research topic and developed an extensive list of material, above and beyond my formal literature searches. My literature review revealed scant literature on FORL. Thus, to uncover additional resources and obtain information, I made direct contact with several notable researchers and practicing marriage and family therapists, both at Iowa State University and nationally (i.e., Andrew Cherlin, Paul Amato, Scott Stanley, Bianca Acevedo, Harvey Joanning, Barry McCarthy, William Allen, Ellen Berscheid, William Doherty, and Pamela Regan). Although these scholars and practitioners confirmed an awareness of the phenomenon of FORL, they could only provide a few resources beyond what I had already reviewed. Paul Amato recommended *When Love Dies: The Process of Marital Disaffection* by Karen Kayser (1993), and Pamela Regan recommended her recently published book, *The Mating Game* (2017). I reviewed both and added them as sources.

I wondered why such a concept, seemingly known and accepted by many scholars and practitioners in the social sciences, would not have been more thoroughly investigated.

In general, there have been several obstacles to studying romantic relationships academically, which may explain the lack of research on FORL. First, taboo societal views have traditionally discouraged the study of close relationships. “Widespread belief that relationships, especially close relationships, were not an appropriate subject for scientific study was evident far into the twentieth century” (Berscheid & Regan, 2005, p. 64).

Similarly, there was difficulty recruiting research participants due to the overarching societal view that personal relationships should not be studied and should be kept private (Berscheid & Regan, 2005; Burgess & Wallin, 1953). Through the latter half of the twentieth century the few investigators who attempted to study the topic of FORL faced consequences such as employment termination (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Finally, the topic of love and marriage was commonly viewed as unworthy of scientific study (Burgess & Wallin, 1953). Therefore, researchers only began to focus on the phenomenology of love relationships in the mid-1970’s (Berscheid & Regan, 2005; Garza-Guerrero, 2000).

An additional reason for lack of FORL research was that some believed they knew all there was to know about relationships; thus the sciences should focus on topics that were not explored. Yet others worried that researching love relationships would take the enjoyment out of the experience (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Similarly, some people, including psychologists and scientists, believed that even if research were conducted on relationships, nothing useful could be gained because of their complex, mysterious elements, which were believed to be inaccessible for scientific inquiry and analysis (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Further, researchers interested in the topic struggled with methodological and analytic challenges due to the typical unit of study. Studies first focused on individuals but later centered more on relationships (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Though no less complex, due to

advancements in analytical techniques, we now know that love relationships can indeed be researched and analyzed sufficiently.

To further expand on the complex nature of the topic, as described by Berscheid and Regan (2005), the aim of relationship science is to identify causal conditions which can be used by relationship therapists to help distressed or unhappy couples change their interactions. However, it is challenging to form conclusions regarding FORL because of the interaction of the many complex events and processes involved. For example, relationships are dynamic, ever-changing systems. If one part of a relationship changes, it affects the other parts, which in turn, impacts the whole (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Additionally, as postulated by Harrison and Shortall (2001), studying the exact time frame or process of events such as falling in love can be difficult due to retrospection and memory. The same could be said for FORL. Further, to study FORL requires knowledge from many areas of expertise, including neurology, physiology, human development, social sciences, economics, anthropology, cultural norms, marriage and family therapy, and psychology, to name a few. Berscheid and Regan (2005) explained why this topic may be more difficult to research than others:

People want behavioral scientists to refine their actuarial predictions to the extent that they can make reliable point predictions – predictions custom-tailored to each individual case and its unique circumstances. This, it should be noted, is a difficult, almost impossible, task. Other scientists are not expected to make point predictions about natural phenomena outside of the laboratory. For example, no one ever expected Isaac Newton to predict exactly which apple would fall off the tree and hit him on the head and when it would do so. Physical scientists know that such

predictions usually are too difficult to make outside the laboratory because they depend on too many unknown, interacting, and hard-to-measure events. Moreover, such predictions require the application of laws from several domains (e.g., gravity, wind pressure) but there is no known law – in the material sciences or the behavioral sciences – that can describe the sequence in which several causally connected events are likely to occur. (Lieberson, 1997; Popper, 1964, pp. 71-72)

It seems plausible that research regarding FORL may have been avoided because it is a complex and arduous undertaking (Tashiro, 2014). The possibility also exists that FORL has been sparsely researched because scholars do not find the topic important or worthy of study. This conclusion seems unlikely, however, due to the importance of close romantic relationships (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Berscheid, 2006; Dion & Dion, 1991) and the long-standing value of marriage in America (Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Nock, 2005).

Further, it is possible that some scholars or practitioners view an individual's claim of having FORL as a temporary skewed perception or as a different problem in disguise as FORL. For example, Weiner-Davis (1993), in her best-selling book *Divorce Busting*, speaks of FORL as nothing more than selective memory and faulty thinking regarding the relationship "magic" being gone (i.e., a spouse may not be able to accurately remember the good times of the past because of the circumstances of today). Although there is substantial research that supports Weiner-Davis's (1993) theory that relationship memory is often influenced by current mood, personal views, and other factors, it is worth noting that the skew in memory could be in either a positive or negative direction (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). For example, Karney and Coombs (2000) found a memory bias among wives in a 20-year longitudinal study with a skewed positive perception that the relationship was more



satisfying than it once was. They deemed this potentially a mechanism to sustain the relationship in the long term.

Further, there is evidence in the research that FORL has been lumped together with other common couples' problems. For example, psychologist and author Schnarch (1991) described FORL as being no different than other concerns couples bring to therapy, such as "irreconcilable differences" or "communication problems," which are all the result of emotional gridlock. It is worth noting that neither Weiner-Davis (1993) nor Schnarch (1991) specifically identified the type of love they were referring to when they utilized the phrase falling out of love. The difference between FORL and other common couple concerns or reasons for divorce will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Additionally, some may consider FORL as socially constructed. In other words, a phenomenon created by a culture as a perceived reality, based on shared assumptions, though not necessarily naturally occurring or found outside of that society (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). The *term* falling out of love is socially constructed, yet no less real of an experience than others that have come to share a common name. Consider the term romantic love, which could be described as a social construct, yet is considered a natural, universal human experience (E. Berscheid, personal communication, August 10, 2016), and referred to in many anthropological and psychological studies (Fisher, 2006). Another example is the term "grief," which has been constructed to represent a phenomenon with similar traits across many people. The experience may be somewhat different among individuals, but overall, the essence of grief is recognizably similar. This sentiment of the socially constructed term "falling out of love" as representing a real, human experience/phenomenon was shared by Dr. Ellen Berscheid, University of Minnesota and Dr. Pamela Regan, California State

University, both professors of psychology and major contributors to research on close relationships (E. Berscheid, personal communication, August 10, 2016; P. Regan, personal communication, August 10, 2016). Further, the experience of falling out of love does not appear to be unique to the United States, as other cultures have terms for it, as well. For example, Russians use the term *razliubit* and the Spanish use *desenamorarse* or "*dejar de querer*" for "falling out of love."

Coinciding with the historically scant research on FORL, there has been virtually no clinical literature on lack of romantic love and sexual attraction as presented in marriage therapy, according to Roberts (1992). Thus, it appears that empirically-based clinical frameworks and recommendations specifically identified for the experience of FORL are non-existent. As described by Berscheid and Regan (2005), "Love, and the lack of it in a relationship expected to provide it, has been a 'forgotten variable' in marital therapy even though, as Roberts (1992) wrote, most couples marry because they have 'fallen in love' and tend to divorce when they 'fall out of love'" (p. 429). An additional problem related to FORL includes therapeutic interventions that are often skill-based instead of emotionally-based, which are typically ineffective for issues of an emotional nature. One example is the affective state of love, which is thought to be largely outside of conscious awareness and which functions similarly to other attachment mechanisms (Roberts, 1992).

Although the sparse therapeutic frameworks that mention the concept of FORL are well respected and useful for a wide variety of presenting problems, the phenomenon itself is complex at best. As researchers and practitioners, we are cautioned to avoid a reductionist conceptualization of it so that we can better understand the complex etiology and consequences of the phenomenon (W. Allen, personal communication, July

26, 2016). Unfortunately, many individuals presenting with FORL for therapy have been unable to find marital satisfaction with the limited resources currently available.

Most authors in the marriage and family therapy field do not mention or address the phenomenon of FORL. However, the field of marriage and family therapy is relatively young, and it is not uncommon for practice to be ahead of research (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). This fact may substantiate why FORL does not appear in the clinical literature. If research is not available on this phenomenon, it would follow that the clinical literature would also be missing.

### **Taxonomies of Love**

Two popular taxonomies that categorize love according to separate styles or kinds are reviewed as follows to clarify the terminology for a more clear understanding of these terms as related to my study. They are “love styles” and “the meaning of love.”

**Love styles.** In 1973, John Alan Lee, an influential Canadian sociologist, used ancient Greek terms for love, as well as the color wheel theory of love, to create his own love styles, or “colors” of love relationships, based on his interviews of 120 white, heterosexual participants. The six love styles he derived (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006; Lee, 1973) included Eros, Ludus, Storge, Pragma, Agape, and Mania. Lee suggested there are three primary styles of love (Banas, 2013): Eros is passionate or erotic love. Ludus is uncommitted, game-playing love. Storge is friendship love. The next three styles of love are secondary styles and constitute combinations of two primary styles. Pragma (Ludus and Storge) is logical love. Agape (Eros and Storge) is selfless, giving love. Mania (Eros and Ludus) is obsessional love. One of the distinguishing features of the love styles is that they correspond to personality traits. “Eros, for example, is positively related to agreeableness, extraversion, and

conscientiousness, and negatively related to neuroticism, while Ludus is positively related to neuroticism and negatively related to agreeableness and conscientiousness” (Sternberg & Weis, 2006, p. 7).

Hendrick and Hendrick (2006) followed Lee’s (1973) categorization in an attempt to quantify love styles, by creating the Love Attitudes Scale (LAS), thus making it possible to measure how much an individual exhibits each of the six love styles (Sternberg & Weis, 2006). The LAS appears to be a reliable measure (Regan, 2017). It is believed that because each style is related to certain attitudes, beliefs, and personalities, an individual’s love style would predict how quickly or passionately s/he might fall in love, or even if an individual is likely to fall in love (Sternberg & Weis, 2006; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006). Hendrick and Hendrick (2006) asserted that an individual may have more than one love style at a time. One or more love styles may predominate, however. An individual could thus technically engage at the same time in two different romantic relationships using two different love styles. Furthermore, an individual could incorporate components of several different styles into one relationship (Lamanna & Reidmann, 2012). Thus, apparently an individual’s love styles are not static but change over time.

Lee’s (1973) concept of love styles, as well as related work by Hendrick and Hendrick (2006), are significant to this study. First, Lee (1973) developed a way to make sense of love in romantic relationships by categorizing love into styles and relating them to specific character traits. Hendrick and Hendrick (2006) followed up by discovering ways to measure these categories specific to individuals at any given time, thus promoting a capability of understanding more about how individuals love, including how likely they are to fall into love. Their goal was to create a love style profile for individuals that would plot

each of the six love styles possessed by an individual (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006).

Ultimately, Hendrick and Hendrick (2006) transformed Lee's taxonomy of love into a theory of romantic love by which hypotheses could be drawn from quantifiable variables. Perhaps understanding more about love styles and how they relate to falling in love and loving will inform us about FORL. Other benefits of using 'love styles' include broad categories that permit a wider definition of love (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006). Furthermore, the personal love styles of individuals can be used in couple's therapy to assist individuals in understanding their own and their partners' love languages (Sternberg & Weis, 2006). Typically individuals with the same love styles pair together (Regan, 2017) as mismatched love styles can create problems in a relationship (Regan, 2008).

One limitation of Hendrick and Hendrick's (2006) work includes the notion that the stability of love styles over the course of an individual's life are unknown. Furthermore, development of love style profiles has not been attempted because of the need for further research on how they correlate with other variables, such as attachment or personality. For example, with respect to attachment, Fisher (2006) pointed out that childhood, adolescent, and adult experiences influence how easily or often an individual will fall in love. Thus, love-style theory and research is not complete. But, the love styles work of Lee (1979) and Hendrick and Hendrick (2006) incorporates the complexity of romantic love.

**Meaning of love.** Not only was Berscheid (2006) perplexed by numerous taxonomies of love, as a behavioral scientist, she was also interested in how to conceptualize love. She narrowed the varieties of love to four types, each meeting two criteria, i.e., being associated with *different behaviors* and being generated by *different causes* (Berscheid, 2006). She also stated that these four types of love, together, encompass all of love: attachment love,

compassionate love, companionate love/liking, and romantic love. According to her taxonomy, attachment love is a form of automatic protection from harm by being in close proximity to a loving protector. Compassionate love is a giving kind of love or altruism, where benefits to the self are not taken into account. Compassionate love is also termed caregiving love. Companionate love/liking would be equal to pragmatic love or affection. Finally, romantic love includes sexual desire (Sternberg & Weis, 2006). Although Berscheid (2006) stated that there was nothing original about each of these four types, she categorized them as biologically-based and inborn, yet separate from other types.

Berscheid's (2006) taxonomy is beneficial to this study and to couples who report FORL. Through her unique lens, she viewed four different types of love, each associated with a specific cause, and producing distinct behaviors. Originally, Berscheid (2006) posited that an individual could experience more than one type of love in a single relationship, but later deemed this idea as premature, because there is some evidence that certain types of love inhibit other types (i.e., attachment love and caregiving love resist sexuality) (see Wolf, 1995). More research is needed on types of love and the likelihood of each transitioning to other types, as well as which co-exist simultaneously. Ultimately, this information could significantly advance our understanding of FORL. Furthermore, Berscheid's (2006) framework presupposes that people have an innate biological predisposition for developing romantic love, so falling in love is not always predictable or logical, which may explain the frustration of some individuals in their efforts secure or maintain romantic love.

A limitation of Berscheid's (2006) attachment type of love is that attachment styles and orientations in adults may be either healthy or unhealthy, with long-term stability and stages of attachment unknown. More research is needed on attachment and attachment love.

Furthermore, in Berscheid's original presentation of this taxonomy in 1985, she hypothesized that "within a single relationship and at a single point in time, one or more of the four types of love may be experienced" (Berscheid, p. 181, 2006). Looking back, Berscheid (2006) reported that more information was needed on how love progressed over time in order to make that claim, and perhaps some types of love would never lead to others within the same relationship (i.e., caregiving love may not naturally lead to romantic love). Additional research is necessary to clarify the uncertainties regarding types of love.

**Summary.** Although taxonomies sometimes overlap and have similar terminology, they are conceptually useful for expanding knowledge and developing models of love. They allow us to identify multiple types and definitions of love. The overall limitations of taxonomies include confusion with respect to commonly held beliefs about love, often because researchers are conceptualizing love using varied frameworks. Additionally, some researchers' taxonomies overlook essential factors or call for more research in regard to specific elements (i.e., the influence of attachment on love). Thus, utilizing multiple taxonomies is beneficial to compensate for what may not be addressed in a single one.

### **Terminology for Types of Love**

Different types of relationships, including romantic love relationships, are often bound by various agreements and expectations, which, when violated, are a signal that at least one partner considers the relationship to be ending (Berscheid & Regan, 2005).

Romantic love, the focal point of this study, was defined in Chapter 1, as was the related term *falling out of romantic love*. To recap, romantic love is defined as a combination of sexual desire and high emotional intimacy (Davis & Todd, 1982; Miller, 2012), and is synonymous with being *in love*. Berscheid and Hatfield (1969) proposed two additional types of love:

passionate love and companionate love. They also posited that passionate love and companionate love create romantic love. Sternberg's (2006) definition of consummate love will also be outlined. Although there are many kinds of love, I believe that romantic love – discussed previously, passionate love, companionate love, and consummate love were the most salient to this research, as described in the following.

**Passionate love.** Passionate love is the term most often used to describe powerful new-courtship love, with characteristics of obsession, extreme absorption, and sexual desire for another (Crooks & Baur, 2014; Fisher, Aron, & Brown, 2006). Other terms used for passionate love are in love, limerence, infatuation (Hatfield, Pillemer, O'Brien, & Le, 2008). It is important to note that some researchers use the terms passionate love and romantic love interchangeably (Fisher et al., 2006), although I will attempt to differentiate them.

It is often said that passionate love takes place early in relationships, when a loved one is not well known, resulting in idealization and dismissal of a person's faults (Fisher et al., 2006). Once reality sets in and flaws are acknowledged, some adults choose to end a relationship while others may move into a more stable form of love with the same partner. Sometimes lovers become engaged or married during this period of passionate love, later to be disillusioned after realizing the full character or flaws of their partner (Crooks & Baur, 2014). Passionate love is generally thought to be short-lived, perhaps lasting only months instead of years (Crooks & Baur, 2014) and is involuntary and difficult to control (Fisher et al., 2006). It is interesting to note that some researchers believe that passionate love can renew in older couples after children have been launched; as such, passionate love is less likely to exist when roles are routine in relationships (Knox, 1970). Passionate love is often considered to be unsustainable due to the energy required to maintain it at high levels (Fisher,



2006). “Our bodies simply are not equipped to sustain for long periods the physiological arousal associated with passionate love, desire, and other intense emotional experiences” (Regan, 2017, p. 215). Furthermore, it has been postulated that, in marriage, passionate love is likely maladaptive due to the burdens and responsibilities of parenting, holding a job, and running a household (Acevedo & Aron, 2009).

In this dissertation, passionate love will be used to describe the obsessive love that is typically found in new courtships and often phrased as “falling in love,” which is generally considered time-limited. Overall characteristics of passionate love include infatuation, intrusive thinking, excitement, uncertainty, anxiety, sexual desire, and unrealistic idealization (Aron, Fisher, & Strong, 2006; Hatfield et al., 2008; Sternberg, 1987).

**Falling in love.** The *onset* of a strong desire to be in a close, romantic relationship with a specific person is considered to be falling in love (Aron, Paris, & Aron, 1995). Falling in love is generally equivalent to the term passionate love, characterized by infatuation, intrusive thinking, uncertainty, mood swings, sexual desire, and unrealistic idealization. The term falling in love is limited to the early stages of a new courtship and is said to happen at least once in a lifetime for most Americans (Aron et al., 1995). Some say, however, that not everyone has this experience (Tennov, 1979). As repeated elsewhere, the phase of *falling* in love is not to be confused with the more long-term state of *being* in love (Fromm, 1956; Grant, 1998).

Further, Ackerman (1994) described the state of *being* in love as resulting from the process of *falling* in love.

Its rewards of intimacy, warmth, empathy, dependability, and shared experiences trigger the production of that mental comfort food, the endorphins. The feeling is less

steep than *falling in love*, but it's steadier and more addictive . . . . Stability, friendship, familiarity, and affection are rewards the body clings to. As much as we love being happily unsettled, not to mention dizzied by infatuation, such a state is stressful. On the other hand, it also feels magnificent to rest, to be free of anxiety or fretting, and to enjoy one's life with a devoted companion who is as comfortable as a childhood playmate, as predictable if at times irksome as a sibling, as attentive as a parent, and also affectionate and loving: a longtime spouse. (p. 166)

**Companionate love.** As postulated by Berscheid and Hatfield (1969), companionate love is a more subdued and enduring form of love. It is friendship-based, comprised of attachment, commitment, intimacy, and shared beliefs and activities. It does not always include attraction or sexual desire (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Miller, 2012). Companionate love is believed to be stable (Hatfield, Traupmann, & Sprecher, 1984) and is generally regarded as the natural evolution of love after many years of marriage, often developing after romantic love has been established (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Hatfield et al., 1984). Although some partners find companionate love satisfying, it is potentially devoid of physical intimacy (Acevedo & Aron, 2009), which can result in unhappiness or long-term discontent.

For the purpose of this dissertation, companionate love is defined as encompassing trust, commitment, familiarity, stability, friendship and emotional closeness (Hatfield et al., 2008). But, it is not strong with respect to physical intimacy and may be devoid of sexual desire. It is possible in such a relationship to feel sexual desire, but it may be less frequent or intense, and is not central to the tenets of companionate love (Sprecher & Regan, 1998). Companionate love is relatively durable (Berscheid & Regan, 2005) and thought by some to last a lifetime (Hatfield et al., 1984; 2008; Huesmann, 1980; Safilios-Rothchild, 1977).

**Consummate love.** Consummate love was coined by Sternberg (1987), who postulated that Americans seek this kind of love in long-term romantic relationships and define it as being the ideal type of love for marriage. Consummate love includes romantic love (emotional intimacy and sexual passion) and commitment. It is difficult, however, to maintain over time due to factors such as the unstable and uncontrollable nature of sexual desire (Miller, 2012; Sternberg, 1987) and the difficulty of individuals to consistently express intimacy, passion and commitment to their partner in the long-term (Sternberg, 1987).

For the purpose of this dissertation, consummate love is viewed as equivalent to romantic love (emotional intimacy and sexual passion), with the additional component of commitment, but without the obsessive or anxious tendencies of passionate love. An affair could be considered romantic love because there is often no commitment, but an affair should not be considered consummate love.

### **Variable Terminology**

Consider the confusion involved in multiple categorizations, conceptualizations, and taxonomies of love. Among Lee's (Lee, 1977) love styles, Eros is "strong physical attraction, emotional intensity, a preferred physical appearance, and a sense of the inevitability of the relationship" (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2006, p. 153). Storge is friendship love that grows over time and is based on commitment and common interests. Physical interest is not part of Storge. Finally, Mania is considered to be obsessive love, full of jealousy and doubt. Eros and Mania jointly create what Berscheid and Hatfield (1969) described as passionate love, whereas Storge corresponds to companionate love. As applied to Lee's taxonomy, romantic love is a combination of Eros and Storge. Ultimately, as suggested by Berscheid (2006) "love researchers remain in great need of a common vocabulary of love" (p. 182).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Sternberg's Duplex Theory of Love, along with adult attachment theory and social exchange theory, were used to guide this research. Each is summarized here, and its application to the study topic.

### **Sternberg's Duplex Theory of Love**

Sternberg's Duplex Theory of Love (Sternberg, 2006) is composed of his Triangular Theory of Love (Sternberg, 1986) and Love as a Story (Sternberg, 2006). In his research on relationships, Sternberg used a triangle to depict the three components of love: intimacy (emotional), passion (physical), and commitment (decision), and posited that a relationship could have any combination of these, creating different types of love relationships.

Sternberg's theory suggests that eight relationship types can be generated by the vertices of the triangle: non-love, friendship, infatuated love, empty love, romantic love, companionate love, fatuous love, and consummate love. For example, if a couple only had intimacy, the result would be liking or friendship, but having both intimacy and passion would create romantic love. If a couple has intimacy and commitment, the result would be companionate love; having none of the three would create non-love, and having all three would produce consummate love – the ideal situation for most long-term love relationships. For the purpose of this research, however, Sternberg's categories of "consummate love" and "romantic love" equate to being romantically in love, and therefore the loss of consummate or romantic love is equivalent to FORL. Commitment reflects a decision to stay together or maintain love but is not necessarily essential to romantic love. An example would be dating couples who may be very romantically in love but have not yet committed to marriage or long-term love.

Sternberg (1986) provided an important distinction to the three components of love with respect to intimacy, passion, and commitment:

For example, the emotional and other involvement of the intimacy component and the cognitive commitment of the decision/commitment component seem to be relatively stable in close relationships, whereas the motivational and other arousal of the passion component tends to be relatively unstable and to come and go on a somewhat unpredictable basis. (p. 120)

Sternberg went on to say that emotional intimacy and commitment are generally within some degree of conscious control, but there is very little control over sexual desire or attraction to another. Although they are separate components, the three interact: “For example, greater intimacy may lead to greater passion or commitment, just as greater commitment may lead to greater intimacy or, with lesser likelihood, greater passion” (Sternberg, 2006, p. 186).

To add to his theory, Sternberg (2000) claimed that we each acquire love stories that depict what love is or should be, which essentially guides the type of lover we become. “These stories, which we start to write as children, predict the patterns of our romantic experiences time and time again” (Sternberg, 2000, p. 54). As asserted by Sternberg (2000), our love stories develop from various sources over our childhood, such as through books, movies, popular media, or observing love relationships around us. The idea is that the closer our love stories match those of our mates, the more successful a relationship will be (Sternberg, 2006). For example, as Sternberg (2000) articulated:

This is why couples that seem likely to thrive often do not, and couples that seem unlikely to survive sometimes do. Two people may have similar outlooks, but if one longs to be rescued like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* and the other wants a

partnership like the lawyers on the television show *The Practice*, the relationship may not go very far. In contrast, two people with a war story like the bickering spouses in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* may seem wildly incompatible to their friends, but their shared need for combat may be what keeps their love alive. (p. 54)

Sternberg (2000) identified 25 common love stories, but reported that there are likely many more. Examples of the most popular include the travel story – “I believe that beginning a relationship is like starting a new journey that promises to be both exciting and challenging”; the gardening story – “I believe any relationship that is left unattended will not survive”; and the humor story – “I think taking a relationship too seriously can spoil it” (Sternberg, 2000, p. 54). Of importance, love stories are described as being the single most important factor predicting compatibility with a romantic partner (Sternberg, 2000).

Sternberg’s theory applies to this study by clearly conceptualizing the eight different forms that love can take in a marital relationship (i.e., non-love, friendship, infatuated love, empty love, romantic love, companionate love, fatuous love, and consummate love).

Sternberg (2006) identified the importance of three components (emotional intimacy, physical passion, and commitment) for romantic or consummate love. In general, each of these is strongly associated with relationship happiness and satisfaction (Sternberg, 2006).

This theory provides a framework for understanding the phenomenon of FORL, which could occur if any of the components were lost, or if there had never been one or more of the components in the relationship at the beginning. It is worth noting that relationships are generally categorically in flux, even if only slightly, due to individual changes in the level of each component (Sternberg, 2006). Furthermore, it is unlikely that any couple fits purely into

one category, because of subtle differences in the amount of each component that may exist in any relationship (Sternberg, 2006).

Of further interest is Sternberg's view that individuals have at least some degree of conscious control over their emotional intimacy, and a higher degree of control over commitment to a relationship, but almost no control over the passionate or sexual component. This raises the question of what to do to help individuals who have FORL because the passionate or physical/sexual component is missing. Sternberg asserted that it may be easier to arrive at consummate love initially than to maintain it, due to the difficulty of expressing the three components of love over time (Sternberg, 1987). As Sternberg (1987) noted, feelings of intimacy, passion, or commitment are expressed by action, and action in turn, reinforces feelings. If actions or feelings cease to exist and love is not expressed in any one area, consummate love may die (Sternberg, 1987). While Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (1986) has been a useful resource in identifying and conceptualizing the type of love in any love relationship, it does, however, pose a limitation in that it does not address how to deal with FORL once it has taken place.

### **Adult Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory is viewed by researchers as helpful in predicting relationship behaviors (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Although our attachments are strongest in childhood, attachment in adult relationships, specifically romantic love relationships, parallel our childhood attachment to our parents (Ackerman, 1994; Hatfield & Rapson, 1996). Research has also shown that, although there may be some fluctuation, the attachment styles young children may have are often the styles they will have as adults (Tashiro, 2014). Children's interactions with primary caregivers promote enduring working models of close

relationships. As suggested by Fraley and Shaver (2000), this notion is based on the assumption that the same motivational system that creates a close bond between parents and children is also responsible for the bond in emotionally intimate relationships in adulthood. However, this does not automatically mean adults will have the same attachment style as they did with their parents. Instead, it will serve the same basic functions of the childhood attachment relationship, such as feelings of safety and security (Davila & Bradbury, 2001). People generally form significant attachments to a small number of people at every phase of life, producing strong affectional bonds, which are thought to be innate and biologically driven for the advancement of the species (Bowlby, 1979). “That is, the attachment behavioral system presumably evolved because it increased the likelihood of survival and eventual reproduction on the part of members of a species born with inadequate capacities for defense, locomotion, and feeding” (Ein-dor, Mikulincer, Doran & Shaver, 2010, p. 123). Children seek out attachments for safety and survival most often provided by their mothers. Adults do the same thing but attach to different figures. For example, when scared or sick, instead of going to a parent, the adult would tend to seek out their spouse or another adult. These types of attachment behaviors which provide closer proximity and closer bonds to attachment figures are considered healthy and occur at all ages (Bowlby, 1973). The three main attachment types are: secure, anxious, and avoidant.

The goal for adult attachment is to have a sense of stability and security. Those with secure attachments in adult relationships may not have unilaterally smooth love relationships, because love is difficult for everyone (Hatfield & Rapson, 1996). However, in romantic relationships a secure attachment style is associated with greater commitment, trust, and satisfaction, as well as more frequent positive emotions and less frequent negative emotions



than anxious or avoidant attachment styles (Simpson, 1990). Securely attached individuals seem to do the best at achieving satisfying, intimate relationships in adulthood due to having experienced others being there for them (Lamanna & Reidmann, 2012).

Alternatively, not having an early secure attachment could result in marital problems and difficulties with trust and intimacy (Ackerman, 1994). For example, individuals with insecure attachment (i.e., anxious attachment or avoidant attachment) have higher rates of relationship dissolution (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Between one third and one half of individuals of all ages have an insecure attachment type (Ein-Dor et al., 2010). When discussing the health of adult relationships and the phenomenon of FORL, it is important to assess the type of attachment experienced by each individual, which can provide clues to the stability and quality of that particular relationship. As described by Berscheid and Regan (2005), “romantic relationship quality is clearly linked with attachment orientation. However, the evidence with respect to relationship stability is mixed” (p. 318). Attachment styles influence commitment in couple relationships (Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). It could be that particular attachments (e.g., avoidant) would not lead to “falling in love” or a relationship commitment because individuals may be guarded and fearful (Stanley et al., 2010).

Furthermore, Davila and Bradbury (2001) postulated that when there is low attachment to a spouse (in terms of abandonment fear and love worthiness), marriages may be unhappy yet endure through fears. This is more attributable to insecurity than satisfaction. Individuals with anxious attachment can become frightened by closeness and push back in anger or push away due to fear that the loved one will leave (Stanley et al., 2010; Tashiro, 2014). “Once the loved one begins, understandably, to distance himself or herself, the

anxious adult clings once again, and so begins a long cycle of push and pull interactions (Tashiro, 2014, p. 196). Alternatively, when adult closeness begins for an avoidant-attached individual, it is not uncommon for that person to leave or shut down emotionally because of the anticipation of not being cared for and a desire to eliminate further pain (Tashiro, 2014), ultimately limiting their ability to become close to others (Atkinson, 2005, 2014). For some individuals, being alone is easier than having unmet expectations and thereby being hurt. Ultimately, the type of attachment bonds formed in adult romantic relationships can lead to feelings related to security or anxiety that can contribute to the overall health and satisfaction of a marriage (Stanley et al., 2010).

It is also important to consider how attachment might affect self-esteem and thereby impact love. As indicated by Acevedo and Aron (2009), individuals with secure attachment experience tend to have higher self-esteem, leading to greater confidence in themselves and in their partner, resulting in mutual support and development. This yields an increase in security related to the adult love relationship and generates a greater likelihood for romantic love. The opposite is true of anxiously-attached individuals, who may have a greater chance to experience obsessive or anxious love (Acevedo & Aron, 2009).

Some researchers believe that “the attachment style of one’s partner can either magnify or lessen the effects of one’s own attachment style” (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2012, p. 141). Similarly, Berscheid and Regan (2005) reported that a partner’s attachment style is not enough to make a determination on the relationship outcomes due to many other interacting factors, such as the context of the relationship, the partner’s attachment style, and current circumstances. Ultimately, FORL could perhaps be better understood by examining

attachment styles and exploring how different ones promote or undermine long-term relationship satisfaction.

A limitation of attachment theory is that it does not specifically address the phenomenon of FORL. Most individuals are also unaware of their personal attachment style or that of their partner during mate selection and, more broadly, are not well-informed regarding attachment and relationship outcomes.

### **Social Exchange Theory**

In the late 1950's social exchange theory – viewing social behavior as an exchange of goods – was introduced by Homans (1958), a sociologist. Around the same time, Thibaut and Kelley (1959) were developing a similar framework. “While different in important ways, their work converged with Homan’s, strengthening the general exchange approach” (Emerson, 1976, p. 335). Both Homans (1958) and Thibaut and Kelley (1959) focused on the psychology of social exchange, although Homans honed in on the psychology of individual behavior while Thibaut and Kelley concentrated on the psychology of dyad and group behavior processes (Emerson, 1976). Although originally based on an economic model, the tenets of the social exchange theory, including maximizing rewards and minimizing consequences, are useful in understanding the phenomenon of FORL. The theory was first applied to marriages by Levinger (1965). Social exchange theory asserts that all human relationships are formed and maintained by a subjective cost/benefit analysis and a comparison of alternatives. A relationship thus may only develop if both parties believe the rewards and costs are balanced more sufficiently than for competing alternatives such as singlehood (Sabatelli & Ripoll, 2004). Additionally, proponents of social exchange theory suggested this: “The fact that marriages generally have become more unstable than in the

past implies that in some fundamental way they have become less attractive and satisfying and that contemporary married individuals experience less dependence on their marriages compared to past cohorts” (Sabatelli & Ripoll, 2004, p. 80). Could it be that more relaxed social responses to divorce, women entering the workforce, and women’s ability to control pregnancy are among factors that have shifted the reward/cost ratio away from keeping marriages together? Perhaps marriage itself has not lost its luster, even though the benefits of it may have changed.

“Rational social exchange theory principles of rewards and costs apply nicely to the choice and maintenance of friendships, but romantic love defies all principles of reinforcement! Passionate love is fueled by both pleasure and pain (Walster & Berscheid, 1974) and does not lend itself to sensible considerations of social provisions or earning potential” (Cutrona, 2004, p. 995). In other words, we know that during the initial formation of romantic relationships, illogical, passionate love may be all-consuming. However, I propose that the social exchange theory can be applied to relationship dissolution attributable to FORL. If an individual has FORL with a partner, it can be assumed that passionate love is gone; thus the individual would not be disillusioned by illogical beliefs of early love, giving way to a more realistic assessment of their partner and the situation and a more logical assessment of costs and benefits.

The rewards or consequences felt by individuals in relationships may be based on either “hard” losses or gains (e.g., finances, housing, insurance benefits) or on more emotional or intimate types of rewards such as emotional connection or sexual attraction. Neither type of reward is considered to be of greater or lesser value; the value may vary from person to person and couple to couple. For example, sexual attraction may be the most

important reward to one individual while financial security may be most important to another. Usually, many reward mechanisms are simultaneously at play in any given relationship. Due to the complex nature of relationships, even the most straightforward costs and benefits can get entangled in subtle nuances, which can lead to periods of confusion and ambivalence.

“Ultimately, relationships characterized by low levels of attraction, a small number of barriers, and attractive alternatives are likely to end in dissolution, according to proponents of the social exchange theory” (Rodrigues, Hall, & Fincham, 2006, p. 85). For example, if an individual perceives the costs of a relationship to be greater than its benefits, they may choose to leave it. Alternatively, the individual may choose to continue the relationship, unsatisfied, if he or she believes that the exit is compromised because of finances, religious views, obligations to children, or other conflicting values. That is, there is no attractive alternative. It is useful to acknowledge that relationship satisfaction and standards are based on a comparison level that is influenced by an individual’s personal experiences and expectations related to what one feels is deserved (Hurt, 2014). However, there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to maximizing rewards and minimizing consequences, because the process is in the eye of the beholder. In conclusion, social exchange theory in its simplest form can help explain the phenomenon of FORL, through the cost/benefit analysis of relationships, despite its historical underpinnings as an economic model.

### **How and Why We Love: Theories and Conceptualization**

Passionate love has always existed. Passionate love, was, however, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, considered to be both evil and shameful (Hatfield & Rapson, 1996). The Scientific Revolution and the Industrial Revolution changed how the West viewed love through an

increase in the importance of individualism, personal happiness, and reduction of emotional pain (Hatfield & Rapson, 1996). Currently, passionate and romantic love are considered healthy and important aspects of life.

As a means for understanding love, many scholars have produced theories about it (Fisher, 2006). In our quest for understanding the phenomenon of FORL, only the most relevant love theories will be reviewed, with particular attention to why and how we love. As follows, two major biological theories will be outlined.

### **Biological Theories**

Ackerman (1994) said, “If love had not evolved as a binding force between mother and child, and between men and women, we would not have endured” (p. 146). Childbirth would not be worth it for mothers if it were not for love. Couples would not choose to form a pair and bond. Parents would not care for their children. It is clear that evolution selected love as a biological imperative for humans because of love’s significant survival value (Ackerman, 1994). I will now outline two biological theories of love: The Dynamical Evolutionary View of Love (Kenrick, 2006) and the Drive to Love (Fisher, 2006).

### **The Dynamical Evolutionary View of Love**

The Dynamical Evolutionary View of Love (Kenrick, 2006) proposed that love comes in many forms with various objects, including love for intimate partners, friends, and family members. This theory also includes the idea that love develops differently based on instinctive parts of human nature. For example, the love one feels for their partner will differ from the love one feels for children (Sternberg & Weis, 2006). It can be noted that each form of love is meant to address common social problems such as affiliation, status, self-

protection, mate-seeking, mate-retention, and parental care regularly held by humans.

Subconscious evolutionary decisions are thought to be a factor in loving (Kenrick, 2006).

The concept of decision biases is central to this theory and is considered to represent the underpinnings of love. As described by Kenrick (2006), “The mind, in this view, is composed of a set of innate biases that affect what we pay attention to, how we interpret events, what we retrieve from memory, and how we make decisions” (p. 16). It has been asserted that the biases are designed to promote survival and reproduction (Kenrick, 2006). As an example of decision biases, for males is to be more attentive to attractive women of childbearing age and for women it is to be attentive to men of status, with the goal of each gender being to gain desirable reproductive partners and to maximize procreation success (Regan, 2017). Furthermore, this theory postulates that the results of an individual’s decision biases are dynamic because they are affected by another individual’s decisions and behaviors (Kenrick, 2006). Finally, the Dynamical Evolutionary View of Love posits that there are cultural differences with respect to love and behavior, and what would be adaptive in one environment may not be adaptive in another. Ultimately, this theory supports the evolutionary function of love with regard to perpetuating the survival of our species (Berscheid, 2010).

The Dynamical Evolutionary View of Love is helpful to this study because it explains why humans love in many unique ways. Understanding the purpose of love, similar to understanding the definitions and terminology of love, is an important part of uncovering the factors involved with FORL. It is difficult to know why love ends if we do not know why it begins. Furthermore, this theory is sensitive to culture and explains cultural variations with respect to love (Kenrick, 2006). Finally, this theory highlights the role of the subconscious

mind in decision making, which may be useful in understanding why humans make decisions that are not logical regarding love.

One limitation of the Dynamical Evolutionary Theory of Love is that not all of the decision biases outlined by the theory have been empirically verified; most biases, however, have support (Kenrick, 2006). More research with respect to such decision biases would allow for greater predictive potential of the model (Kenrick, Becker, Butner, Li, & Maner, 2003). Another possible limitation is that the model describes “what the different forms of love do, not what they feel like” (Kenrick, 2006, p. 30). For the purposes of this study, what love does is an important contribution.

### **Drive to Love**

Another prominent biological theory is the Drive to Love (Fisher, 2006). This theory focuses on mating drives to ultimately facilitate reproduction by outlining three core motivational systems: attachment, attraction (also termed passionate love), and sex drive (Fisher, 2006). Fisher (2006) explained that love can start with any of these three experiences. Specifically, the sex drive motivates us to have sexual unions with others, attachment creates sustained connections, and attraction encourages preference for a particular mating partner, focusing on that individual (Yovell, 2008). Among the three systems, passionate love is considered the most powerful due to the interactional effects it has on the other two systems and the risks that may come with love rejection (Fisher, 2014). When a relationship ends, there are often frantic efforts by the rejected party to reunite with the loved one in an effort keep the amazing and euphoric feeling alive, as well as to preserve feelings of safety and security. With the loss of romantic love, many individuals experience hopelessness, depression, resignation, and despair, sometimes culminating in suicide (Fisher,



2004, 2006), jealousy, conflict, and violence (Buss, 2006). For this reason, the end of many romantic relationships is usually considered to be distressing and traumatic (Boutwell, Barnes, & Beaver, 2015).

The Drive to Love is relevant to this study because it assists in both outlining the role of romantic love as well as explaining the negative emotional effects of FORL. Negative emotional effects are said to be tied to reproductive drives and attempts to reconnect with the lover so as to not lose reproductive advantage. Another benefit is that, at least on some levels, Fisher et al. (2006) reported that this theory has cross-cultural applicability, due to romantic love's broad effect on the universal goal of reproduction.

Limitations of the Drive to Love, as one might expect, are related to the theory's lack of variation with regard to age, gender, culture, or sexual orientation (Yovell, 2008). Furthermore, as asserted by Fisher et al. (2006), more research needs to be done to understand the flexibility, variability, and durability of romantic love, as well as to understand the complex behaviors that are likely an outcome of cognitive and emotional process interaction.

**Summary.** The current literature on why we love has both strengths and limitations. Through theory, previous research, and common individual experiences, the loss of romantic love is considered painful (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Hatfield & Rapson, 1993; Lebow et al., 2012; Mearns, 1991). Most researchers believe, as the literature and theories of love suggest, that love is a biological drive, often essential for mate selection and reproductive purposes, and ultimately important to the survival of the human race.

### **Marital Trends**

“Definitionally, *marriage* is a long-term mating arrangement that is socially sanctioned and that typically involves economic, social, and reproductive cooperation between the partners” (Regan, 2017). Marriage is also a key task of human development. For example, Erickson’s sixth stage of psychosocial development, intimacy versus isolation, highlights long-term commitments to others, including marriage (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). In fact, approximately two-thirds of all men and women in the United States marry at least once in their lifetime (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

### **Divorce**

Many unhappy marriages end in divorce, including those affected by the phenomenon of FORL. It is helpful to view divorce trends and the state of marriage today from two perspectives popular among family scholars. The *marital decline perspective* and the *marital resilience perspective* (Amato, 2004b). As described by Amato (2004b), the marital decline perspective is essentially the outcome of Americans becoming individualistic, in search of personal happiness, and feeling less obligation or commitment to others. Furthermore, expectations for marriage may be lofty (Kayser, 1993). “As a result, people no longer are willing to remain married through the difficult times, for better or for worse” (Amato, 2004b, p. 960).

Although there are many benefits to marriage, poor quality unions undermine the positives (Kelly, 2012) with consequences such as reduced happiness and satisfaction, lowered self-esteem, escalated psychological distress, and increased health issues (Hawkins & Booth, 2005). Additionally, children can suffer from unhappy marriages if subjected to

conflict and stress, which can subsequently harm parenting quality (Lamanna & Reidmann, 2012).

The marital resilience model views adults as both resilient and adaptable and able to succeed within a wide array of family structures. In fact, “Rather than view the rise in marital instability with alarm, advocates of this perspective point out that divorce provides a second chance at happiness for adults and an escape from dysfunctional and aversive home environments for many children” (Amato, 2004b, p. 960). Furthermore, couples who stay together today are more likely to be in highly satisfying relationships, if their emphasis is on happiness and fulfillment instead of commitment and security (Kayser, 1993). Some scholars argue that greater freedom of choice strengthens, not reduces, the quality of intimate relationships (Amato, 2004b).

Divorce trends in America will now be reviewed to illustrate the contemporary instability of marriage. During the 1960’s and 1970’s, the divorce rate in America rose sharply (Kelly, 2006), from 1.3 divorces per 1000 population in 1933 to 5.3 per 1000 population in 1979 (Glick & Lin, 1986). Divorce declined slightly in the 1990’s under the influence of pro-marriage movements and government-enacted programs, along with a retreat from marriage and the rising occurrence of cohabitation (Sabatelli & Ripoll, 2004). Divorce rates then stabilized, with Americans continuing to experience high rates of divorce. As reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2014), divorce rates have declined slightly from a rate of 4.0 per 1,000 total population in 2000 to 3.3 per 1,000 total population in 2014. However, marriage rates have also declined, from 8.2 per 1000 total population in 2000 to 6.9 per 1000 total population in 2014. Some scholars contend it is too soon to tell if divorce is declining, due to the difficulty of predicting divorce rates and trends

(Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006; Teachman, Tedrow, & Hall, 2006). It is worth noting that erroneous perceptions regarding divorce rates result if such factors (e.g., fewer marriages taking place, rise in cohabitation and singlehood) are not taken into account.

The current probability for divorce is estimated at between 40% and 50% (Cherlin, 2010). Divorce rates are slightly lower for those with college degrees and who marry younger (Aughinbaugh, Robles, & Sun, 2013; Cherlin, 2010; Regan, 2017). Amato (2010) reported that the estimate of 1 in 2 marriages ending in dissolution was most likely accurate when permanent separations were also taken into account.

There has been a shift away from traditional marriage to an individualized view of it based on love (Hurt, 2014; Kayser, 1993). This fundamental shift seems to account for the increased divorce rate in the latter half of the twentieth century (Kayser, 1993). Sabatelli and Ripoll (2004) also reported that “During the 1960’s, 1970’s, and 1980’s family scholarship reflected an awareness that marriage was being transformed by the sexual revolution, the feminist movement, and the widespread shifts in women’s roles that were occurring in society” (p. 79). For example, by 1970, 6 out of 10 women were using birth-control methods (Nock, 2005), sexual activity was no longer tied to procreation or marriage, and religion was less associated with selecting a spouse (Cherlin, 2010). As noted by Kayser (1993), in today’s society people rely more heavily on their spouse for emotional support. In the past, the community or extended family tended to provide more social and emotional support. These trends suggested a shift in the traditional values and norms of marriage in America (Sabatelli & Ripoll, 2004), thereby creating alternative expectations or desires from marriage. Additionally, some might say that the increased divorce rate over the last 50 years is due not

only to individualism, but to high and potentially unrealistic expectations of marriage (Kaiser, 1993; Sabatelli & Ripoll, 2004).

Although somewhat counterintuitive, the greatest reasons for marital breakdown and divorce are generally not hard reasons such as addiction or abuse issues, but instead soft reasons such as lack of communication, affection, and growing apart (De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006; Hawkins, Willoughby, & Doherty, 2012; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1981). Hard reasons generally refer to destructive and more serious issues, whereas soft reasons are considered less severe and more interpersonal in nature. Yet, what one considers a more or less destructive issue is subjective. Worth nothing, loss of love is frequently cited as a reason for divorce. In a study of 500 divorced people by Albrecht, Bahr and Goodman (1983), the top two reasons cited for divorce were loss of love and infidelity. Interestingly, most therapists believe that infidelity is often very closely linked to lack of love (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Growing apart and lowered levels of love or appreciation from spouse were found by Gigy and Kelly (1992), to be factors of divorce. Finally, Huston (2009) maintained that reduced feelings of love, declining affectionate behavior, ambivalence toward the marriage, and spousal withdrawal are associated with divorce.

There are various views as to why some couples traverse the marital years out of the grips of divorce. Many scholars adhere to the emergent distress model to explain lowered marital satisfaction and divorce, positing that all newlyweds are happy and in-love, whereas, maladaptive coping with stressful events and conflict creates dissatisfaction and divorce. In contrast, Huston, Niehuis, and Smith (2001) reported on data from a 13-year, 168-couple, longitudinal study designed to investigate long-term marital satisfaction and stability. Contrary to the popular emergent-distress model, their study supported the enduring-

dynamics model which proposed that not all newlyweds are happy and blissful to begin with and that early relationship patterns persisted into marriage. In other words, early relationship dynamics, even pre-marital dynamics, can predict future marital unhappiness and stability. Further, Huston et al. (2001) found that what happens in the first two years of marriage is predictive of later divorce. Even happy newlyweds were at more risk for divorce if in the first two years they showed greater than normal declines in love and affection. This leads us to believe that love, as well as feelings of being loved, are more telling of dissatisfaction and divorce than conflict (see Berscheid, 2010).

Of further interest, Berscheid and Regan (2005) reported that although high satisfaction matters, relationship stability and commitment are greatly associated with the fluctuation in satisfaction levels over time instead of high satisfaction alone. Thus, couples who had lower satisfaction at the start of the relationship and remained consistent over time, had a higher likelihood of staying together than happier couples who experienced fluctuations in relationship satisfaction (Arriaga, 2001). Paradoxically, it is not always the unhappiest couples who divorce (Regan, 2017), which leads us to consider other factors, such as personality, commitment, and perceived rewards or consequences of remaining married versus divorcing.

### **Marital Happiness: Past and Present**

Until the middle of the twentieth century, most marriages continued ‘till death do us part’ because individuals felt they had no other choice (Hatfield & Rapson, 1996). However, marriages of the past were likely no happier than those of today (Sabatelli & Ripoll, 2004). Families who veered from the traditional nuclear, two-parent family were considered deviant and detrimental to the well-being of children (Amato, 2004b). In addition to stigma, Amato

(2004a, 2004b) cited issues such as poverty, religious views, difficulty in obtaining a divorce, or fear as reasons many did not divorce.

### **Gender Differences in Emotional and Relationship Development**

As reported by Berscheid and Regan (2005), there are many differences in emotional development and behaviors between men and women, which are explained theoretically as either socially constructed or genetically influenced. Socially constructed factors include verbalizing and displaying emotion, which is typically encouraged by females rather than males (Berscheid & Regan, 2005), whereas genetically influenced differences include hormonal or biological factors such as higher testosterone in males, and are linked to greater aggression (McGinnis, Lumia, Breuer, & Possidente, 2002).

Incidentally, some behaviors, such as aggression, are both socially constructed and genetically influenced in that it is typically encouraged more in males than females.

It is believed that societal attitudes about sex stereotypes are responsible for linking males to dominance, assertion, independence, and physicality, whereas females are linked to nurturance, emotional expression, and warmth (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). As an example of these gender differences, consider the experience of friendships. Although there are differences between men and women regarding the degree of self-disclosure and type of preferred leisure activity among same-sex friendships, these differences are attenuated in romantic relationships (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). For instance, when spending time with other men, males prefer to participate in an activity whereas women prefer to converse with one another and provide self-disclosure (Rose & Asher, 2000). However, in romantic relationships there is little difference in the patterns of self-disclosure between men and women (Vangelisti & Daly, 1997). Interestingly, self-disclosure at the onset of a relationship

is common for both genders. However, as the relationship progresses and stressors present themselves, there is some evidence that spouses revert to gender-normed behavior described as women talking more about their feelings and men avoiding emotional discussions (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993).

Regarding emotional support, “women tend to give more support than men do” (Berscheid & Reagan, 2005, p. 43) and generally have more supportive relationships due to enduring personality traits related to emotional expression and caring for others (Spence, 1984). The lack of support in same-sex friendships among men (Fehr, 1996; Bank & Hansford, 2000) is believed to be attributable to elevated emotional restraint among men and fear of being considered homosexual (Berscheid & Reagan, 2005). Worth noting, marital satisfaction is higher for individuals who have attributes that are socially valued for men or women versus individuals who have a sex role orientation which is undifferentiated (Berscheid & Regan, 2005).

Overall, research supports that men and women have the same preferences for romantic relationships including partner attributes such as kindness, intelligence, attractiveness, honesty, and humor (Regan, 2017). Further, both sexes hold many of the same beliefs about love and expectations about relationships such as trust, self-disclosure, respect, and acceptance. However, in a male-female relationship, women’s needs are less fulfilled than men’s (Regan, 2017). Further, “women report higher amounts of discord and conflict – ranging from inequity in housework and amount of ‘free time’ to sexual coercion and violence – in their romantic relationships than do men” (Regan, 2017, p. 292).

Interestingly, and somewhat contradictorily, there is some evidence that men are more likely to fall in love earlier and express their love before women (Harrison & Shortall,



2011; Sprecher & Metts, 1989). One reason for the incongruence of typical gender-normed behavior is that men are socialized to take control in relationships and women may be more inclined to commit if they believe they are loved (Owen, 1987). Commitment may lead women to have sexual relations with their suitor, which would be an evolutionary gain for men (Brantley, Knox, & Zusman, 2002).

In contrast, women are more likely than men to precipitate dissolution of a relationship (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). In fact, two-thirds of all divorces are initiated by women (Brinig & Allen, 2000). Research shows the “less dependent” partner is likely the one who will dissolve the marriage (Attridge, Berscheid, & Simpson, 1995; Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992; Hill, Rubin & Peplau, 1976). Paradoxically, although women are more likely to initiate divorce they also tend to have a more difficult time with breakups including more intense emotional and physical responses than men, although both men and women suffered particularly severe responses (Morris, Reiber, & Roman, 2015).

### **The Longevity of Romantic Love**

There are different views as to whether or not romantic love can endure, given the potential for falling out of romantic love, and if so, for how long.

#### **Does Romantic Love Endure?**

The evidence is mixed as to whether romantic love can be sustained in long-term relationships. Such love should not be confused with passionate love of first attraction, which by most accounts is said to last only a few weeks or a few years at best (Ackerman, 1994; Crooks & Baur, 2014; Sternberg, 1986). Romantic love does not always end in or morph into companionate love, which is generally void of sexual desire and attraction (Acevedo & Aron, 2009). In a meta-analysis of 25 independent studies related to love, including both short-term

(less than 4 years) and long-term (more than 10 years) marriages, Acevedo and Aron (2009) found that romantic love, including sexual attraction and intensity, can indeed last in some long-term relationships. Further, O’Leary, Acevedo, Aron, Huddy, and Mashek (2012) discovered through a random sample of 274 married adults that 40% of individuals married longer than 10 years reported being intensely in love. “Importantly, correlates of long-term intense love, as predicted by theory, were thinking positively about the partner and thinking about the partner when apart, affectionate behaviors and sexual intercourse, shared novel and challenging activities, and general life happiness” (O’Leary et al., 2012, p. 241). Additionally, 29% of individuals in a random sample of 322 New Yorkers who were married over 10 years reported being very intensely in love (O’Leary et al., 2012). In other work, Tucker and Aron (1993) found high levels of passionate love existed across family life cycles of marriage, parenthood, and empty nest. Montgomery and Sorrell (1997) found Lee’s love style, Eros (romantic love), present across four family life stages.

As a result of the few studies showing that romantic love can be sustained, couples may “leave marriages at a lower threshold of unhappiness than in the past” (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2001, p. 16). In other words, couples may split up because of the high expectations placed on marriages and the letdown that results if their marriage does not fulfil their expectations. Alternatively, couples may try harder to achieve what has been deemed possible (Acevedo & Aron, 2009). Worth noting, Acevedo and Aron (2009) suggested that the historical view that romantic love cannot last in long-term relationships is most likely due to confusing definitions mixing romantic love with passionate love, which includes anxiety, obsession, and uncertainty, and often does not thrive.

Sims and Meana (2010) reported that long-term relationships have a dampening effect on sexual desire and satisfaction even in the absence of other relationship problems, suggesting a natural reduction of romantic love over time. That study, consisting of open-ended interviews with 19 married women who had lost sexual desire, found three emergent themes of interference with sexual desire in marriage for women, “the institutionalization of the relationship, over-familiarity with one’s partner, and the de-sexualization of roles in their relationships” (Sims & Meana, 2010, p. 364). Other researchers also regarded habituation, familiarity, and interdependence conflicts as factors causing a reduction in or loss of romantic love (Berscheid & Hatfield, 1969; Sternberg, 1986). Interestingly, many of the women in the Sims and Mena (2010) study reported they liked or appreciated their husbands even if they were no longer sexually interested in them. Perhaps these women were never romantically in love with their spouses, but instead experienced alternative types of love and therefore had other reasons to stay in their marriages. Buss (2006) also asserted that “what comes up, often comes down” (p. 73) when referring to falling in love and FORL. The reason a person may have been chosen as a mate often ceases to exist in the long term and the relationship may therefore end (i.e., beauty and youth replaced by age, financial security lost due to job termination, etc.) (Buss, 2006). Sternberg (1987) also noted that sexual desire, an important component of romantic love, is fickle and often difficult to control or predict. It may be easier to achieve love that includes both emotional intimacy and sexual desire than to maintain it over the long term. Sprecher and Regan (1998) studied 197 Midwestern couples with the aim of examining passionate and companionate love in a sample of young courting and newly married couples. They found that passionate love (defined as sexualized and emotionally intense) declined the longer a couple stayed together.

Some research models and theoretical perspectives of love do not focus on the endurance of romantic love, but instead describe occasional periods of romantic love in long-term relationships through concepts like the interruption model (Berscheid, 1983) and the self-expansion model (Aron & Aron, 1986). The interruption model asserts that a temporary interruption in a relationship, such as a business trip or a short-term separation, may spark passionate love. The self-expansion model states that mechanisms such as trying novel experiences together and learning new things with one another can promote long-term romantic love. The rate-of-change-in-intimacy model (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999) proposed that a rapid increase in intimacy may promote passion, even if only temporarily, in some couples. Finally, evolutionary models (Fisher, 1998) describe distinct systems for the processes of mating, romantic attraction, and long-term attachments. Although romantic attraction may continue to endure in some cases, overall it fades (Fisher, 2006). These mixed results regarding the longevity of romantic love provide clues as to why it is difficult for so many to maintain and why divorce rates have risen.

### **When Romantic Love Ends**

What makes for a happy marriage? Although the conditions and factors responsible for happiness are subjective and certainly not universal, Halford, Kelly, and Markman (1997) defined a long-term, healthy relationship as

a developing set of interactions between partners which promotes the individual well-being of each partner and their offspring, assists each partner to adapt to life stresses, engenders a conjoint sense of emotional and sexual intimacy between the partners, and which promotes the long-term sustainment of the relationship within the cultural context in which the partners live. (p. 8)

This definition may lead us to believe that FORL would hinder relationship happiness.

**Is it best to divorce?** The literature regarding the loss of romantic love as it relates to staying married or getting divorced is mixed. Hawkins and Booth (2005) reported the significant lack of attention research has given to long-term, unhappy, marriages and the individual and societal costs of staying in them. Their study focused on a nationally-representative, longitudinal sample of unhappily married individuals who had experienced continuous dissatisfaction at four separate points for at least 12 years. It seems likely that long-term, unhappy marriages may not be as recoverable as those of a shorter term (Hawkins & Booth, 2005). Furthermore, their results indicated that, despite the negative aspects associated with divorce, “Divorced individuals who remarry have greater overall happiness, and those who divorce and remain unmarried have greater levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall health, than unhappily married people” (Hawkins & Booth, 2005, p. 462). Ultimately, staying in an emotionally dead or unfulfilling marriage can be just as painful and damaging as the dissolution of a marriage (Kayser, 1993).

Waite and colleagues (2002) conducted a study of 645 spouses drawn from a nationally representative database who rated themselves as unhappy in their marriages, in the late 1980’s, and were interviewed 5 years later. Of the spouses who stayed together, two-thirds said they were happy 5 years later; for those who did divorce, most were not much happier following divorce (Waite et al., 2002). It is important to note that these findings and the strength of the study’s conclusions with respect to rebounding have been criticized by some scholars (S. Stanley, personal communication, May 1, 2014). Perhaps the differences among these studies lie in the length of time a marriage has been unhappy. In the Waite et al.

(2002) study, however, it is unknown how long the couples had experienced unhappiness. More research in this area would be helpful.

**Can a marriage still be happy without romantic love?** Studies show that romantic love in America is by and large considered a necessary ingredient for marriage (Dion & Dion, 1991), and when love is absent it creates considerable angst, sadness, or hopelessness in many. Yet, some research suggests that intense love based largely on sexual desire is unlikely to last, or morphs into companionate love in long-term and stable relationships (Coleman, 1977; Safilios-Rothchild, 1977; Sprecher & Regan, 1998; Sternberg, 1988). Can a couple be happy without romantic love? This implies a possible oxymoron. Some scholars say companionate love, comprised of commitment and emotional intimacy, is satisfying and can sustain some marriages, and that companionate love should be expected, with anything more probably being unrealistic; yet it is often reported as insufficient for many (Sternberg, 2006). A challenge some companionate relationships face is “degeneration into a brother-and-sister relationship” (Berscheid & Regan, 2005, p. 427). The possibility of continued marital happiness, despite a loss of romantic love, seems to depend largely on the values and needs of the individuals involved, and these may shift over time.

### **Mate Selection**

“The process of choosing a mate is significant and often difficult for many single adults” (Cobb, Larson, & Watson, 2003, p. 222). Many misconceptions exist regarding selecting a mate (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2012). Cobb et al. (2003) listed nine *constraining beliefs* about mate selection, including “opposites attract,” “love is enough,” “if I try hard enough my marriage will work,” and “I/my partner must be perfect.” Constraining beliefs are inaccurate or unhelpful personal beliefs about mate selection, which limit a person’s choices

for a suitable one (Cobb et al., 2003). Unfortunately, important individual characteristics and relationship qualities necessary for successful long-term relationships are often not taken into account during mate selection (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2012), and many young adults are not sufficiently educated or prepared for marriage (Cobb et al., 2003). Proper mate selection, important for relationship satisfaction and stability, includes factors such as partner interaction, social support, partner beliefs and attitudes, and individual personality and character traits (Kurdek, 2006).

Further, the combination of both sexual attraction and emotional connection are necessary for mate selection in America based on the significance ascribed to romantic love in marriage and their connection to marital satisfaction. Generally, there is compelling support that sexual fulfillment is an important factor in relationship satisfaction; however, there are many aspects to overall marital gratification (Mark & Herbenick, 2014; Sprecher & Cate, 2004). There is some evidence to suggest that sexually unsatisfied couples may still have overall relationship satisfaction (Durr, 2009; Edwards & Booth, 1994). One important aspect of sexual desire is physical attraction, which draws from physical attributes, social status, intelligence and other factors (Regan & Berscheid, 1999). Interestingly, the initial perception of an individual's level of physical attraction can change based on getting to know a partner and other cognitive processes (Lewandowski, Aron, & Gee, 2007). Although it is true that sexual desire tends to decline in long-term relationships (Basson, Brotto, Laan, Redmond, & Utain, 2005), and sexual desire is often variable and difficult to control (Sternberg, 1986), it seems prudent to suggest that entering into a long-term relationship with intact sexual attraction towards one's mate is valuable.

Feeling loved and understood, important, cared for, and sharing personal information are examples of emotional connection (Reis, 1990) and are salient to romantic love. Emotional intimacy is thought to be an innate human goal. However, some individuals struggle with emotional vulnerability and connection, attributable to psychological, interpersonal, or other circumstantial obstacles (i.e., “unwillingness to disclose personally revealing feelings or information to potentially supportive others; partner responses that do not seem understanding, caring, or validating; childhood experiences that foster insecure attachments; and prior relationships that have been exploitative or distressive” (Reis, 1990, p. 27). Mate selection, based on individual characteristics and internal couple dynamics, is highly important due to America’s high marital expectations. Commitment has become equally necessary for marital stability due to the lack of economic, structural, or social constraints, which were present in past marriages (Teachman, Tedrow, & Hall, 2006).

### **The Role of Personality and Knowing Oneself**

“The traits that a partner possesses before you ever start dating, such as his or her personality and values, are among the strongest indicators of whether a romantic relationship will be happy and stable many years later” (Tashiro, 2014, p. 5). There is evidence to support the idea that an individual’s personality, considered to be heritable, stable, and enduring, can and does affect relationships through behavior and basic traits (Miller, 2012; Regan, 2017). Personality traits are distinguishing qualities represented by how an individual thinks, feels, and behaves across most situations (Tashiro, 2014). Five personality traits, have been proven to influence intimate relationships (Regan, 2017). The first, openness to experience, has the least effect. The latter four have a more significant influence on relationships and include



extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Miller, 2012). Worth noting, personality, including the big five traits, have long been considered stable and relatively unchangeable (McCrae & Costa, 2008). However, as described by Hudson and Fraley (2015) some research over the last few decades suggests that personality traits are indeed malleable and based on life experiences (see Hudson, Roberts, & Lodi-Smith, 2012), such as when individuals decide they want to change a trait in themselves. Presently, the research is mixed regarding the stability or changeability of personality.

Unlike personality, an individual's character and disposition are largely based on beliefs or social values (i.e., the importance of honesty) (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Ultimately, an individual's character results from personal experiences with one's family, parents, and peers, as well as exposure to events and life problems (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003) as well as genetic factors (Bates & Wachs, 1994).

Some individuals say their marriages did not last due to not knowing themselves well enough (Wolfinger, 2015). For example, the marriage may have taken place at a young age before having the opportunity to really know themselves and what they wanted in a spouse. Alternatively, while individuals may have felt they knew themselves, their values and preferences changed greatly during their young adult years. According to Glenn, Uecker, and Love (2010) and Whitehead and Popenoe (2006), ages 22 to 25 is the optimal age to marry to achieve the highest-quality union, contributing to both satisfying and stable marriages. Beyond these ages, there is no further advantage to experiencing marital success by postponing marriage (Whitehead & Popenoe, 2006). To the contrary, in a sample of 7,357 men and women, Aughinbaugh, Robles, and Sun (2013) used the National Longitudinal

Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSW79) to examine marriage and divorce patterns. These were their findings:

Among marriages that began at ages 15 to 22, 58 percent ended in divorce. Of marriages that began at ages 23 to 28, 43 percent ended in divorce. Of marriages that began at ages 29 to 34, the percentage that ends in divorced declines further to 36 percent. Hence, the data support the finding that, on average, people who marry later are more likely than younger couples to stay married. (p. 11)

However, Aughinbaugh et al. (2013) cautioned that beyond age 35, this particular study did not have sufficient data to interpret marriage length. Ultimately, deeply knowing oneself and one's partner, inclusive of values, disposition, character, and personality, and acknowledging how these factors contribute to relationship success is important, yet have been understated.

### **Factors That Influence FORL**

Several roles or factors influence FORL, and are discussed in the following.

#### **The Role of Commitment**

The definition of commitment in romantic relationships is an intention to maintain a long-term relationship (Rosenblatt, 1977; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010) and to persevere through difficulties because the relationship is viewed as being valuable (Amato, 2007; Lamanna & Riedmann, 2012). Commitment reflects shared goals, rather than individual goals, with importance placed on maximizing joint outcomes (Stanley et al., 2010). "Combining the intention to be together, to have a future, and to share an identity as a couple, the state of being committed can be thought of most simply as having a sense of 'us with a future'" (Stanley et al., 2010, p. 244).

To commit to marriage in light of the current divorce rate, “. . . . is so hazardous that no totally rational person would do it” (Glenn, 1991, p. 269). However, commitment is based on several psychological processes, some of which are not rational, starting with “positive illusions,” about one’s mate, which help to preserve commitment by reducing anxiety and doubts about the relationship (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Murry and Holmes (1993, 1999) cited several studies which show that those in romantic relationships tend to bring idealistic and positive views of their partner to it, which are not seen by others outside the relationship. Further examples of positive illusions include the tendency for individuals to view their relationship as superior to others, when it is not objectively justified (Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995) and have improbable optimism about the durability of their relationship despite the high divorce rates (see Fowers, Lyons, Montel, & Shaked, 2001; Fowers, Veingrad, & Dominicis, 2002).

Researchers have struggled to define commitment as a static or variable construct (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Individual predictors of commitment include such concepts as attachment style, with secure attachment being associated with willingness to commit, and an avoidant attachment style remiss of commitment (Davis, 1999). However, other factors also influence commitment such as the effect each partner’s level of commitment has on the other partner’s (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). According to Adams and Spain (1999), commitment is indeed a dynamic process that changes over time and situations and is not static. As such, perhaps the construct should be viewed on a continuum instead of an absolute absence or presence. For example, an individual may have a high commitment to the marital relationship, but when children are born and a new dynamic develops between the spouses, that individual may have lowered their commitment for the *emerging* relationship, which

may be qualitatively different than the original. Berscheid and Regan (2005) observed a kind of conditional commitment:

Some contemporary brides and grooms revise the traditional marriage vows to specify more exactly the kind of relationship they are committing themselves to – that is, they commit themselves to the partner and the relationship not ‘so long as we both shall live’ but rather ‘so long as we both shall love,’ foreseeing the possibility that the present relationship may change into one which they do not wish to commit themselves to continuing. (p. 211)

Further, some commitment theorists, also view commitment as a variable based on ever-changing pros and cons which can increase or decrease commitment levels. Kelley (2002) reported that when the pros outweigh the cons, commitment will persist.

An important distinction with respect to commitment as seen by Stanley et al. (2010) is that it is comprised of two key elements, dedication and constraint. Dedication is described as a personal desire to be with a loved one in the future for the joint benefit of both parties. Constraint is described in terms of values and beliefs, such as “finish what you started,” as well as by internal or external pressures, amount of investment, and perceived difficulty of ending a relationship regardless of quality (Stanley et al., 2010). As an additional example of constraint, consider the public nature of marriage and the involvement of others in protecting the marital contract while encouraging joint interests, such as childbearing and financial growth, all of which provide barriers to terminating the marriage (Music & Bumpass, 2012). Stanley et al. (2010) reported that most marriages are likely to be unsatisfying at times, and constraints (i.e., children, financial concerns) help to keep it from ending; in fact, poor-quality relationships often continue due to higher constraints of this type.

Stanley et al. (2010) also asserted that many couples have weakened commitment from the beginning due to initially “sliding” into a relationship rather than “deciding” to be in a long-term union. In other words, cohabitation or having a child prior to making a marriage commitment can make it more difficult for couples to achieve a solid commitment, often resulting in a higher likelihood of divorce or an enduring unhappy marriage (Stanley et al., 2010).

In contrast, early commitment in a relationship functions to transform romantic relationships from uncertainty to stability. Furthermore, “when confident that a relationship will persist into the future, an individual is more likely to behave in ways that do not always immediately benefit the self, but enhance the long-term quality of the relationship” (Stanley et al., 2010, p. 246). This helps to shelter relationships from infidelity and allows spouses to not just focus on immediate gains but on long-term gains through sacrifice, even if it may interfere with individual gain at the moment (Stanley et al., 2010).

Beyond Stanley et al.’s work on commitment, underpinned by dedication and constraint, it is important to briefly outline the research of two other commitment scholars. Similar to other researchers, Rusbult, Martz and Agnew (1998) described how, at times, people persist in marriage for reasons other than happiness. Such behavior has been found to rest on the concept of commitment. Specifically, commitment has been conceptualized from the viewpoint of the investment model that sees relationship satisfaction and the availability of quality alternatives as important but not solely responsible for relationship endurance (Rusbult, 1980, 1983; Rusbult et al., 1998). “In reality, some relationships survive even when an attractive alternative is available, and even when a relationship is not very gratifying” (Rusbult et al., 1998, p. 359). Rusbult (1980) suggested a third important element that she

termed *investment size*. Investment size refers to the importance of the resources attached to the relationship which would be lost if it were to end (Rusbult et al., 1998). Rusbult (1983) reported that the investment model can predict both the development and deterioration of satisfaction and commitment in relationships, and the causes of individuals staying or leaving them.

The work of Michael Johnson (1991) in commitment research has also been useful for its understanding. Johnson's (1991) commitment framework posits three distinct components of commitment: wanting to stay married (personal commitment), feeling morally obligated to stay married (moral commitment), and feeling constrained to stay married (structural commitment). Personal and moral commitment are functions of an individual's attitudes and values, while structural commitment refers to constraints that make it difficult or costly to leave the relationship (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). Johnson and his colleagues refuted the idea that commitment can be summed up as a single entity, firmly believing that all three types must be included in an overarching view of commitment because of their mutual effects on relationship endurance (Johnson et al., 1999).

The major research to date regarding marital commitment tends to view the concept as multi-faceted. Scholars have identified complexities and various aspects of commitment that are similar, yet differ in terms and its categorical breakdown. Like the taxonomies of love, the various commitment theories are useful for expanding our understanding of how and why relationships endure or end. Commitment has emerged as a critical factor for identifying those who continue to live in unhappy marriages rather than leave them (Johnson et al., 1999; Kayser, 1993; Rusbult et al., 1998; Stanley et al., 2010), yet commitment is a useful component of satisfying marriages, as well, because no marriage is perfect.

### **The Role of Change**

As discussed above, there is ample scholarly evidence to suggest that commitment is an important factor in the stability of long-term relationships, because when the marriage is struggling, commitment is the glue that keeps it intact. However, a neglected aspect in the literature is the power of change in marital relationships. For example, consider attraction in relationships, and how partner attraction may evolve and change over time (see Mark & Herbenck, 2014). Although research has found that in long-term relationships both men and women are attracted to appearance, honesty, intelligence, emotional stability, and personality (Regan & Berscheid, 1997; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994), it is inevitable that situations, contexts, and people change throughout life and relationships grow or dissolve (Huston & Levinger, 1978). It is possible that these unknown shifts are responsible for changes in love, commitment, and satisfaction (Sprecher, 1999), despite adequate mate selection processes. To highlight the problem that change creates in forecasting relationships, researchers believe that predicting the future for social scientists is a difficult, if not impossible, undertaking due to ever-changing human behavior, societal norms, and economics (Teachman, Tedrow, & Hall, 2006). As simply but importantly stated by Berscheid (2010), neither relationships themselves, nor the phenomena that occur within them, are static.

### **The Role of the Subconscious Mind**

The role of the subconscious mind is woven throughout the literature regarding love and relationships. To exclude this factor from the study of FORL would be remiss. First, a major component in love formation includes subconscious processes related to human biological evolution (Kenrick, 2006). As asserted by Hazan and Diamond (2000), mating

behavior is strongly influenced by factors that operate outside of conscious awareness. Namely, Fisher (1998) described brain systems, neurotransmitters, and hormones as being strongly related to sex drive, attachment, and attraction, which evolved for reproductive purposes.

Cognitive psychologists have worked to understand the processes involved in the human mind, which has been no easy task. “Perhaps the most important contribution that contemporary cognitive psychology has made to our understanding of the human mind is that most mental activities not only are not accessible to other people – they are not accessible to the very person whose mind it is” (Berscheid & Regan, 2005, p. 228). According to Berscheid and Regan (2005), due to the inability of humans to access many of their own mental activities, researchers cannot simply ask introspective questions about their thinking, such as why individuals immediately knew they were drawn to certain people, because chances are they did not really know the answer. “Cognitive psychologists now know that intuition, gut feelings, chemistry, and “vibes” are manifestations of the workings of the extraordinarily efficient and powerful human mind” (Berscheid & Regan, 2005, p. 228).

One relationship therapeutic framework that attends to the subconscious and behavior is Brent Atkinson’s notion of Emotional Intelligence, which is based largely on the work of well-known psychologist and relationship expert John Gottman (Atkinson, 2014). Atkinson (2005, 2014) postulated that much of what we do is non-conscious or automatic. Referring to the American psychologist Ornstein’s neuropsychology work, Atkinson (2014) stated,

Throughout history, he [Ornstein] argued, we’ve been operating under a great deception – we tend to believe that our thoughts and actions result largely from our conscious intentions. In fact, while our rational mind has a degree of veto power, the



inclinations that fuel our perceptions, interpretations, and actions primarily come from neural processes that operate beneath the level of awareness. (p. 27)

Atkinson (2005, 2014) related his Emotional Intelligence framework to attachment theory, claiming that individuals are wired differently due to both genetics and emotional messages they were given growing up. For example, as he explained, we tend to close certain feelings off or guard ourselves if we were raised in environments that did not provide adequate attachment. This response can lead to maladaptation in future relationships. A recommendation from Atkinson (2005, 2014) for couple's therapy is to work on the concept of mindfulness and being present, not reacting to protective impulses that have been hard wired within us.

In sum, it is possible that during mate selection an automatic, non-conscious, neural process has more to do with our choice of who we marry than we might think. It is also possible that the Emotional Intelligence Couple's Therapy framework relates to FORL, in that spouses react unconsciously based on their hard wired, preconceived notions that self-protection and safety can be gotten through withdrawing, expressing anger, clinging or using other maladaptive behavior in the relationship.

Attention to the subconscious is important to understand FORL because what we are mentally unaware of may hold the answer to why some individuals who experience FORL seem confused or frustrated by the phenomenon. From my experience, many clients who present with FORL in marital or individual therapy desperately want to feel differently and do not understand why, despite repeated attempts and a strong desire to feel romantic love for their spouse, still cannot seem to renew their lost love. Conscious processes such as logic, as

suggested by Atkinson (2005, 2014) may not be applicable to the etiology or solutions generally used to address this phenomenon.

### **Previous Studies on Falling Out of Romantic Love**

After a thorough review of the literature, I identified two studies that focused specifically on the phenomenon of falling out of love. *When Love Dies* by Karen Kayser (1993) was written from her own perspective as a couples' therapist. She was fascinated and challenged by this phenomenon that often presented itself in her clinical work. Her book is based on a qualitative study, including in-depth interviews she did with married persons who identified themselves as no longer loving their spouse. Kayser (1993) reported that her research was unique from others who had researched relationship breakdowns in that she interviewed couples who were disaffected but still together, instead of divorced. Second, other researchers did not differentiate as to the level of disaffection, whereas her subjects were "highly disaffected." Third, her study was done on subjects who were interviewed prior to dissolving their marriage, in an attempt to avoid problems with recall. Kayser referenced a few studies related to marital satisfaction. For example, Pineo (1961) labeled the drop in marital satisfaction as disenchantment and described it primarily as the inability to adjust from romanticism to the reality of marriage. Interestingly, the Pineo (1961) study found lowered levels of confiding in the other, kissing, and solving disagreements as related to individuals' disenchantment. Other studies focused on relationship dissolution and the sequences involved in a breakup. However, none were specific to FORL nor did they attend to the emotional aspects involved (see Baxter, 1984; Hagestad & Smyer, 1982).

Kayser (1990, 1993) viewed FORL as a process and labeled it *marital disaffection*, which she defined as "the gradual loss of emotional attachment, including a decline in caring

about the partner, an emotional estrangement, and an increasing sense of apathy and indifference toward one's spouse" (Kayser, 1993, p. 6). One significant missing piece in Kayser's definition of *marital disaffection* was that she did not mention loss of sexual attraction, as current research about romantic love includes sexual interest as a primary component of romantic or marital love (Berscheid & Regan, 2005; Berscheid, 2010; Regan, 1998; Regan & Berscheid, 1999) and is considered essential for marriage in America (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Dion & Dion, 1991). Kayser (1993) differentiated marital *disaffection* from marital *dissatisfaction*, that is, those who are dissatisfied in their marriage but may not have marital disaffection. That is, they may be dissatisfied with the relationship but still love their spouse. However, she contends that marital disaffection is the result of having recurrent dissatisfaction with the relationship.

Kayser's (1990, 1993) study was based on semi-structured interviews with 49 highly disaffected individuals, recruited through newspaper and bulletin board advertisements in a city in the United States. The sample was 71% female and 29% male. The participants were currently married an average of 13 years (range 2-39 years); 16% had been previously married. On average, the participants were college-educated. The sample sizes were not reported in Kayser (1990) or Kayser (1993). However, some participants filed for divorce or were considering divorce. Some were separated. Some were highly dissatisfied, yet committed to remaining married.

In her research, Kayser was interested in the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of those who experienced marital disaffection. Kayser (1990, 1993) reported that 40% of the participants had doubts about their marriage in the first 6 months, while another 20% had doubts in the 6-month to one-year period of the marriage. The remaining 40% had doubts

later in the marriage. There was no information on the participants' doubts prior to their marriage. As described by Kayser (1993), "Most spouses experience some dissatisfaction or marital doubts during the course of their marriages. However, they do not all fall out of love." Kayser (1990, 1993) found certain factors that exacerbated dissatisfaction and marital doubts, which she referred to as turning points. From a list of 20 such turning points, the major ones included: controlling behavior, lack of responsibility, lack of emotional support, and substance abuse or other undesirable trait (Kayser, 1990, 1993). She reported that it was not turning points themselves, but the accumulation of these stressors which created high levels of disaffection between the couples.

Kayser built upon Duck's work (1982), who offered a framework of relationship dissolution based on three phases, intrapsychic, dyadic, and social. In her own study, Kayser (1990) found three stages of disaffection: a) Disappointment comprised of disillusionment and increased anger, hurt, negativity, thoughts of leaving, and withdrawal emotionally and physically, b) Between Disappointment and Disaffection consisted of continued anger, hurt, negativity, assessing rewards and costs, trying to change the marriage, thoughts of leaving, and withdrawal emotionally and physically, and c) Reaching Disaffection included apathy and indifference and a possible decision to end the marriage (Kayser, 1990, p. 259) also reported that the length of the process of disaffection among the 49 participants varied from 1 to 38 years, with an average of 11 years.

Kayser (1993) reported that efforts by her participants to change depended on their stage of disaffection. But generally, the disaffected individual hoped the marriage would improve and took responsibility by attempting changes. In the disappointment phase, such attempts included pleasing and accommodating the spouse, who was often unaware or

indifferent to any marital concerns. As disappointment advanced to disaffection, the participants continued to make efforts to improve the situation, but were less passive and more active about asserting their needs and wants. About one-third of Kayser's participants were still hopeful the marriage could change. In the reaching disaffection phase, 80% of the participants reported taking action to end the marriage. There were no reports of action in the disappointment phase, and only 20% reported action in the between disappointment and disaffection phase. There were fewer attempts to solve the problems in the last phase. The most common attempt in the last phase, as noted among 27% of participants, was professional counseling. However, this was not often for the purpose of repairing the marriage, but to provide closure or fulfill the expectations of others. Regarding responses to a spouse's disaffection, most were in denial or downplayed marital problems, especially during the disappointment and between disappointment and disaffection phases. The disaffected spouse became more assertive in describing wants and needs. Upon reaching the disaffection phase, the partner's denial had decreased substantially. In the first two phases, the participants reported minor changes in their spouse's behaviors, but any changes they did observe were short lived. In the last phase, there were more efforts from spouses to repair marriages as their denial of problems lessened. In most cases, the participants did not seem satisfied with the changes their spouses attempted. In fact, 12% of the participants reported that they did not want their spouse to make any changes. Nothing would restore their feelings of affection.

Besides the Kayser (1990, 1993) study, there was only one other that specifically looked at the phenomenon of FORL (Sailor, 2013). Sailor, also a couples' therapist, sought to understand the "how," "when," and "why" of the phenomena that plagued some of her

clients. She hoped to benefit mental health providers who work with couples by providing prevention and intervention techniques. In a phenomenological study, 8 participants who experienced FORL were sought. Midwestern participants were recruited through newspaper advertisements and flyers. Data were collected through 60-90 minute interviews. The participants ranged in age from 27 to 74 years, with a mean age of 50.5 years. There were 4 male and 4 female participants.

Sailor (2013) specifically studied the loss of romantic love. She reported that being in love was necessary for marriage and was synonymous with romantic love, inclusive of sexual desire and emotional intensity. "Loss of key components within the relationship resulted in a decrease in the romantic love" (Sailor, 2013, p. 12). These included: loss of trust, intimacy (both physical and emotional), and feeling loved. These led to high levels of emotional pain and a negative sense of self, all of which contributed to the loss of romantic love. Throughout the process, depression, sadness, grief, and loneliness were commonly found. Two other key findings included a *gradual decline* in marital satisfaction which lasted until the *pivotal moment* of knowing that an individual fell out of romantic love with their spouse. As a result, many participants reported feeling like a failure. Some reported not believing in romantic love any longer. Sailor (2006) also described what these participants did once they experienced FORL:

Five of the 8 participants interviewed reported that their marriages ended in divorce sometime after they recognized that they had fallen out of romantic love with their spouse, two of the 8 participants remained married at the time of the interview, and one of the 8 participants was widowed and reported that divorce had never been an option even in light of the loss of romantic love for her spouse. (p. 164)

Clinically, Sailor (2013) recommend that couple's therapists look for destructive themes, improve marital and self-repair skills, increase healthy emotional regulation, and work to be more emotionally available to their spouse. Additionally, she recommended addressing feelings of loss of trust and intimacy (Sailor, 2013).

Kayser (1990, 1993) and Sailor (2013) differed in their research approaches in several ways. First, Kayser's (1990, 1993) study of FORL was not specific to a type of love, whereas Sailor made romantic love the focal point of her study. Second, Kayser (1993) had a goal of understanding the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of disaffected individuals by uncovering the process of disaffection, charting changes in disaffection over time, and testing a hypothesized model of five stages of relationship disengagement, whereas Sailor (2013) was interested in uncovering the essence of FORL and providing knowledge and understanding for clinical work. Third, Kayser (1993) found three phases of disaffection. Sailor was neither specifically searching for phases nor finding them. Instead, she found a gradual decline in romantic love, accompanied by subtle and almost imperceptible changes, followed by a pivotal moment of knowing the love was gone. Fourth, Kayser (1990, 1993) utilized semi-structured interviews and primarily focused on specific events in the marriage that created doubts about the union and corresponding feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. Sailor (2013) also used a semi-structured interview format, but her study was not focused on specific events. Rather, her work centered more broadly on the realization of and beliefs surrounding FORL and the effect it had on the marriage and the participant. Fifth, Sailor (2013) reported a "pivotal moment of knowing" FORL had occurred, whereas Kayser (1993) did not report this in her findings.

There are some similarities in these two studies. Both employed qualitative methods, utilizing interviews for data collection. Additionally, both Sailor (2013) and Kayser (1993) launched their studies as a result of their professional work with couples. It is of particular interest to consider the insight their therapeutic role afforded this research. Furthermore, how did their professional role as couples' therapists guide their research and their efforts to carry out the study? It appears that Sailor (2013) and Kayser (1993) intended to explore and learn about this phenomenon in order to help understand the complexities that plagued their own clinical work. Another similarity was in the findings regarding marital disaffection (Kayser, 1993) and FORL (Sailor, 2013) which were said to happen due to a pile-up of stressors. This pile-up caused participants to doubt even having married, and represented turning points or events for Kayser (1993) and loss of important relationship components for Sailor (2013). The pile-up often resulted in similar outcomes such as lack of trust, lack of support, and lack of feeling loved. Aside from the studies of Sailor (2013) and Kayser (1993), no other work of which I am aware has been done on the phenomenon of FORL. This gap in research and theory demonstrated a need for the current study. As a precursor to the current study, I conducted focus groups to support and guide my work, as outlined below.

My research comprised some elements from both Kayser (1990, 1993) and Sailor (2013), but there were specific differences as well. My goal was to build on both studies to advance the scholarly literature. Like Kayser (1990, 1993) and Sailor (2013), I used a qualitative design. I am also a marriage and family therapist and I wished to understand the dynamics of FORL to better assist my clients and other professionals in the field. There are several questions yet to be answered such as: Are there stages to FORL? Is there a pivotal moment of knowing? Is there a point of no return, at which the likelihood of romantic love



ever returning is crucially low? Should FORL be treated similarly to other common marital problems? Or is it instead distinctly different? My focus group study was the first to sample therapists and clergy who work with couples in my attempt to understand FORL from a different perspective. I hoped that this research could bridge the significant gap between clinical work and research, and add to the FORL literature. Ultimately, I intended to advance clinical practice and gain a better understanding of the “what,” “how,” and “why” of FORL in marriage (as was studied by Sailor, 2013) as well as associated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (as was studied by Kayser, 1993).

My pilot study included focus groups of both couples’ therapists and those who had FORL. This unique design was chosen to validate the importance of combining theory and research with real-world practice. After a thorough investigation of the literature and compelling evidence that there were many ways to love and multiple terms describing each type of love, it seemed prudent to focus on one type as a way to reduce complexity and hone in on the type of love considered by many to be the most salient to marriage in America today, romantic love (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Berscheid, 2006, Dion & Dion, 1991). Sailor (2013) also focused on romantic love. I also chose to launch a phenomenological inquiry, as did Sailor (2013), because little extant research exists on FORL. The importance of understanding the phenomenon through the lived experience of individuals, while setting aside researcher assumptions, was crucial to my research process. Further, although I queried participants about the possibility of stages of FORL in the focus groups, unlike Kayser (1993) I did not have any such expectations. I inquired as to what remedies my participants had attempted in order to address FORL. Gaining insight into how much energy was given to remedy FORL and what worked or did not work, helped me understand the processes

involved. This differed from both Kayser (1990, 1993) and Sailor (2013). Kayser (1990, 1993) investigated actions the participants took after doubt emerged, whereas Sailor (2013) asked what processes occurred and what participants decided to do once they were no longer romantically in love with their spouse. However, neither asked specifically about attempts to remedy. Finally, unlike both Kayser (1990, 1993) and Sailor (2013), I tried to focus on the origins of the couple's relationship, inclusive of what it meant to the participant, what was lacking or missing in the marriage, and what happened to set the union on the trajectory of FORL. It was important to view the relationship as a whole, starting with the participant's perception of their family of origin experiences, the nature of their parents' relationships, and the participant's views and expectations of marital love and marriage prior to FORL. It is often through considering the broader perspective that we can draw meaning.

### **Preliminary Study**

To explore this understudied area and guide my research questions, I conducted two focus groups in the fall of 2014. I specifically chose focus groups for this study as my preferred method of obtaining data because of the sparse nature of research on FORL. Strengths of the focus-group approach included exploring the what, how, and why of FORL in a cost-effective way and allowing participants to recount their lived experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Glesne, 2006). Conducting the research using a group interview format allowed for the emergence of multiple views and emotional processes that could not be feasibly gathered in any other way (Gibbs, 1997). Throughout the focus group sessions, I asked the participants to discuss issues related to the phenomenon of FORL. Although the focus groups were undoubtedly useful, there were limitations. The first shortcoming included the possibility of groupthink, which is defined as consensus attributable to group dynamics

instead of individual thoughts (Fontana & Frey, 2008). Another potential limitation was the need for the researcher to have strong facilitation skills in order to balance information-gathering and managing group dynamics in an effective way (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). I was well equipped to facilitate the focus groups because of my training and experience in conducting support groups and work groups in my professional activities. The focus-group activity proceeded smoothly.

### **Research Sample**

I conducted the two focus groups in October 2014, recruiting the participants for both via snowball sampling using mental health professionals in a large city in the midwestern United States. To qualify for participation in the study, the respondents must have either experienced FORL with their spouse or had worked as a provider of therapy/counseling in support of those who had experienced this phenomenon. To avoid concerns related to ethics or confidentiality, none of the participating adults were my clients.

The first focus group was comprised of seven counselors/therapists who had worked with individuals or couples presenting with FORL. This group will be referred to as the *provider* group. These providers defined FORL, reflected on how clients experienced FORL, and identified treatment challenges. In the provider group, six participants were female and one was male; six were licensed mental health providers and one was a pastoral care provider. Their mean age was 42 (range 30 to 69). The length of time they worked with couples ranged from 3 to 22 years with a mean of 9.4 years. Six participants were married; one was not; none had ever been divorced. Five respondents had children, two did not. All participants self-identified as White. The mean individual income was \$60,000-\$69,000 per year (range \$50,000-\$59,000 to more than \$70,000 per year). All participants were highly

educated, with advanced degrees beyond a bachelor's degree. On average, each participant moderately identified with a particular religion, with responses ranging from *don't identify* to *strongly identify*.

For the second focus group, five participants were interviewed about their experience of FORL with a spouse. This group will be referred to as the *client* group. Each participant reported being married either currently or in the past, and had fallen out of romantic love. Each had been a client seeking relationship assistance from a clinician (not from me). In this group, four participants were female and one was male. All participants self-identified as White. One participant was still married to the person he fell out of love with, two were separated but planning to divorce, and the other two were divorced. The mean age for this group was 44.5 years (range 30 to 59). All participants had children. The mean number of children was 3 (range 1-6). The children were biological children, adopted children, and stepchildren. The mean years of marriage were 15. The mean level of education post high school was 5 years (range 2-7 years post high school). This was also a middle-class sample with a mean of more than \$70,000 (range \$4,999 or less to over \$70,000). Similar to the provider group, these participants moderately identified with a particular religion, with responses ranging from *don't identify* to *strongly identify*.

Prior to launching the focus group investigation, I received approval from the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the study. I used a semi-structured style of interviewing to gather the participants' perspectives. Falling out of romantic love was the focus of the study. Each group focused on what it meant to be in love, and the participants described the phenomenon of FORL, listed reasons for FORL, recounted efforts made to remedy FORL, described how FORL related to marital satisfaction or

success, shared difficult aspects of FORL, and provided ideas on what was important for others to know about FORL.

Similar questions were asked of the two groups, with minor additions or deletions due to provider perspective versus client perspective. I conducted the focus groups on two different nights at my private office. Each focus group lasted two hours, on average. The respondents were not given any financial incentive for their participation but were offered light snacks and beverages before and after the focus group meetings. The groups' comments were documented using digital recorders. The recordings were labeled with identification numbers to ensure confidentiality. I took notes during the focus group activity as the facilitator of the provider and client groups. Tera Jordan, Ph.D., the supervising faculty member of this project, also took notes during the provider focus group. We reviewed our notes later to triangulate and validate the data.

I analyzed and coded the focus group recordings for content. I followed conventional content analysis procedures and reviewed the digital recordings multiple times for accuracy (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). I identified the themes derived from the codes and categories embedded in the data. I noted similarities and differences within and between the focus groups and drew the conclusions.

### **Findings**

The two focus groups, providers and clients, had similar and different views of the phenomenon of FORL. There were similar findings between the two focus groups. Both groups reported the importance of infusing peace and respect into the final outcome of the marriage, regardless of whether that meant either renewed love or the end of the marriage. Both groups also recognized the existence of a "point of no return," viewed as a distinct point

in time of knowing that romantic love was gone and not to be restored. Furthermore, both groups identified themes of ambivalence, confusion, and avoidance throughout the process of FORL, which could be attributed to uncertainty about how to repair the marriage and not wanting to hurt their spouse or children. Both groups acknowledged that some married persons may not be in love with their spouse to begin with, yet married for other reasons. Finally, all the participants reported a gap of several years between the start of FORL and addressing the issue. The three ways most couples addressed it included action involving their self (i.e., individual counseling, reading self-help books), action involving their spouse (i.e., couples counseling, spending more time together), and action involving another person (i.e., talking to a pastor/counselor or family member/friend). These strategies were generally ineffective, and once marital love was lost, they said it was difficult to regain.

There were notable differences between the two groups. With regard to what it meant to be in love, the providers utilized a multi-stage approach and identified infatuation as the first stage of love. As infatuation developed into a different type of love, the couple was often no longer infatuated, but still could be in love. The client group identified being in love as a deep emotional connection combined with sexual attraction and desire. Even though sexual attraction was a requirement for being in love for the clients, the providers did not address this factor. Sexual attraction was not identified by the providers as necessary for enduring romantic love in marriage.

Perhaps one of the greatest differences was the client group's strong view that FORL is fundamentally different than other difficulties that arise in marriage, such as "not feeling compatible" or "not getting along." The provider group often regarded these challenges as analogous to FORL. This appeared to minimize the complexity of FORL and reduce it to a

marital challenge that could be treated by traditional conflict resolution or communication skills training. The client group viewed FORL as a unique and complex problem, requiring different strategies than other seemingly similar marital problems. The providers' responses regarding training and education revealed a significant lack of information on both education and practice with respect to FORL. The providers did not feel adequately prepared to address this phenomenon.

The contribution by these focus groups to advancing our understanding of FORL starts with the groups' uniqueness. No other research studies of which I am aware have utilized focus groups to explore FORL. Information from providers and clients are important to understanding the issues, from theoretical and experiential standpoints. Through such focus groups, more can be known about how clients and providers view this phenomenon.

The consensus among the participants is that FORL is complex with no single definition or common understanding of it. There seemed to be agreement regarding a point of no return where the individual realizes they have lost their romantic love for another; once this happens, it is difficult to reverse. Furthermore, it is possible in some cases that one or both partners had never been in love to begin with. Finally, both clients and providers were steadfast in their belief that, regardless of outcome, the spouses needed to be kind and respectful to each other.

### **Summary and Limitations**

After careful review of the extant literature, it appears that while very little is known about the complex phenomenon of FORL, romantic love is of considerable importance in long-term marital relationships. Much of what we know has been deduced from related literature, such as marital trends and divorce, mate selection, historical views of love, and

popular love theories and taxonomies. Only three studies have been conducted that focus on FORL (i.e., Hemesath & Hurt, 2016; Kayser 1990, 1993; and Sailor, 2006, 2013).

It is hoped that the findings from this research contribute to the literature by advancing our understanding of FORL, including how and why it occurs, as well as attempts to help couples remedy the loss of love, and the outcomes of these attempts. Another goal is to bridge the gap between research and practice by deciphering how FORL can best be conceptualized and treated by mental health providers. A unique aspect of this investigation included addressing the topic from a holistic or systemic approach, by gaining information related to the individual participant and the couple relationship, such as family of origin dynamics and attachment relationships.

From this literature review, it is evident that more research should be conducted on love and marriage in order to expand our knowledge of the phenomenon of FORL and ways to respond to it effectively in a clinical setting. It is imperative that we begin by clarifying and narrowing definitions and terminology. Further, many other considerations related to love, such as attachment, personality, and the workings of the subconscious mind should also be researched in the literature to learn about their effect on romantic love, both short and long term. Not only is there lack of research on FORL and marriage, but as of yet, no research has focused on couples recovering from FORL. This would be an informative goal for future research.



## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experience of FORL based on in-depth interviews of 16 participants in a midwestern state. In this chapter, the study's research methodology will be described and the following areas addressed: (a) research design and rationale for the approach selected, (b) description of the research sample/participants, (c) data collection methods, (d) measures of trustworthiness, and (e) process of data analysis. The section will conclude with a brief overview of the study and a summary.

#### **Rationale for a Qualitative Research Design**

I chose a qualitative approach for this study, specifically because of its research problem and research purpose (Creswell, 2013). First, the significant gap in the literature with respect to FORL necessitated further exploration. Additionally, the complexity of the topic and lack of understanding called for an inductive approach. Furthermore, qualitative methodology is warranted when seeking to understand the context of each participant's experience as well as the desire is to convey the results in a storied or narrative fashion (Creswell, 2013). Ultimately, the purpose of my research project aligned with the tenets of a qualitative approach, which is useful for studying process. As described by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), unlike quantitative research, qualitative research attempts to get to the core of a social phenomenon or activity using the perspective of the research participant. It is imperative to explore the what, the how and the why of the problem and then describe in

detail what has been discovered. As Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) stated, qualitative research is about exploration, discovery, and description.

Finally, using a qualitative approach aligned with my professional skills and experience. Glesne (2006) discussed qualitative research from the perspective of writing on behalf of others and their life stories, an ideal fit for me as the researcher. It feels natural and easy for me to listen to someone's viewpoint or narrative. I do this type of work in my profession as a licensed marriage and family therapist. My days are spent in non-assuming curiosity, asking my clients probing, open-ended questions, formulating interpretations, organizing and analyzing data, assessing, devising treatment plans, and writing detailed case notes. I am not an expert who tries to tell my client what they should be doing and how they should be doing it, but rather in a collaborative alliance, I support the client with reaching his or her goals. Ultimately, my objective in this study was to conduct research that balanced rigor with relevance to real world couples.

### **Rationale for a Phenomenological Research**

Prior to discussing my rationale for choosing a phenomenological research approach, it is important to assert the paradigm I worked from, namely social constructivism, because it in part provided the basis for my methodological choice. Social constructivism is the viewpoint that understanding the world comes from people constructing knowledge between and among each other, not through assuming a universal truth about the world as it really is (Burr, 2015).

Social constructionism insists that we take a critical stance toward our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and ourselves. It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to

challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world. It therefore opposes what is referred to as positivism and empiricism, epistemological positions that are characteristic of the ‘hard’ sciences such as physics or biology . . . . Social constructivism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be. (Burr, 2015, pp. 2-3).

The general viewpoints and attributes of social constructivism are fundamental to the social sciences, including sociology and psychology (Craib, 1997). Moreover, the social constructivist paradigm fits my world view, my professional tenets as a behavioral health provider, and the therapeutic frameworks I use in my daily work.

The methodological approach I decided to use was that of phenomenology which enables a researcher to examine the subjective lived experience of human beings, with the intent of finding a common meaning. The philosopher Edmund Husserl developed phenomenology as a qualitative research method to study consciousness; it is decidedly useful in the exploration of human experience and behavior (Wertz, 2005). As described by Merriam (2009), phenomenological research is appropriate for studying emotional, intense human experiences. “The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence . . .” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). To further expand on seeking the essence of a phenomenon, a core underpinning of the phenomenological approach, Husserl used the concept of *free imaginative variation*, which involves taking a concrete example of a phenomenon and viewing it in every way possible to determine features that are essential to the experience and not just accidental or incidental (Wertz, 2005). A phenomenological study comes to a close,

not through explanation or analysis, but through describing the essence of the participants' experiences (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007). Furthermore, phenomenological inquiry uncovers the essence of participants' cognitive processing of a particular shared experience (Patton, 2002). It combines "what" they have experienced and "how" they have experienced it (Creswell, 2013). According to Wertz (2005), "phenomenology does not form theories, operationalize variables, deduce or test hypotheses, or use probabilistic calculations to establish confidence, as do positivist and neopositivist approaches" (p. 175).

Along with Husserl's phenomenological approach, I used Moustaka's (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach, focusing on the experience of my participants and not my interpretations as the researcher (Creswell, 2013). An important concept of both Husserl's and Moustaka's approach is "epoche," also termed "bracketing," which means the researcher sets aside any preconceived notions or personal experiences and views the phenomenon with new, fresh eyes (Creswell, 2013), as if everything were perceived for the first time (Moustakas, 1994).

Because full bracketing is difficult for most researchers to accomplish (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell et al., 2007; Creswell, 2013; LeVasseur, 2003), LeVasseur (2003) recommended that the definition of bracketing be changed, allowing researchers to suspend understanding as a means for cultivating openness and curiosity, instead of attempting to block the researcher's previous experiences (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, although bracketing and suspending previous experience can be valuable, Finlay (2012) asserted that the goal of phenomenological research was not scientific detachment, but embracing one's own experiences or "(inter)subjectivity," because it's in the passion for a topic that true

understanding is born. Openness to learning, willingness to go beyond what is already known, and having passion for the research is truly how to see with fresh eyes (Finlay, 2012). I strived to the best of my ability to suspend my previous notions on FORL as well as to approach my participants and data with openness and curiosity. Lastly, but possibly most importantly, I have a strong drive and passion to understand the experience of FORL and contribute to the research literature.

### **Overview of the Research Sample**

The sample for my study included 15 participants, 10 females and 5 males, who reported the experience of FORL with a spouse. Eleven of the participants were legally divorced from their spouse at the time of the interview. Four of the participants were still married to the individual with whom they had fallen out of love. However, three were separated and had filed for divorce, with no plans to reunite. One participant was still living with her spouse and undecided about continuing the marriage. Ten of the participants were divorced once, three of the participants were divorced twice, and two of the participants were never divorced (mean number of divorces = 1, range 0-2). Fourteen participants identified as White, one identified as bi-racial, and one identified as Hispanic. The participants moderately identified with a particular religion, with responses ranging from *don't identify* to *strongly identify*. The mean age was 46 years (range 36-63). All participants but one had children. The mean number of children was 2 (range 0-4). The children were both biological and adopted. The average length of marriage was 15 years (range 2-28 years). The average length of time the couple was in a relationship prior to marriage was 2 years and 6 months (range 3 months-7 years). The mean years of marriage when FORL occurred was 8 years 3 months (range 1-20 years). The mean interval of education post high school was some graduate school, with

responses ranging from *some college/technical school* to an *advanced degree beyond college*. This was a middle-class sample with a mean income of more than \$70,000 (range \$40,000 to over \$70,000). Participants moderately identified with a particular religion, with responses ranging from *don't identify* to *strongly identify*. Demographic information by participant is in Table 1, and demographic information for the sample is Table 2 (See Appendix A).

### **Information Needed to Conduct the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate and understand the phenomenon of FORL. Although FORL can happen in other contexts, this study was specific to its occurrence in a number of marital relationships. The information needed to answer the research questions were perceptual, demographic, and theoretical and are as follows:

- Participants' perceptions of feelings, thoughts, and behaviors defining FORL, what factors contributed to the experience, what resources were utilized, how FORL impacted marital satisfaction, and what would be important for other individuals, clinical providers, or researchers to know about FORL.
- Participant demographic information including age, gender, ethnicity, and marital history
- Broad and continual literature review identifying gaps in the research, background and contextual information, and contributing to the theoretical underpinnings of this study. The literature review included marital trends, conceptual frameworks addressing how and why we love, major theories and taxonomies of love, factors involving mate selection, and an overview of previous studies.

### **Overview of the Research Design**

The step-by-step research design used for this study is listed here. More detailed information on each step will be provided throughout this chapter.

1. In a preliminary study, two focus groups were conducted to guide the research questions, methodological approach, and data collection procedures utilized for the main study.
2. Prior to collecting data for the current study, I conducted a thorough literature review to provide background and contextual information, identify any gaps in the research, and to synthesize the relevant areas on FORL in the literature.
3. My proposal defense meeting was held and IRB approval was granted to conduct the study. Ethics and confidentiality were considered of primary importance.
4. A purposive, snowball sampling of participants who had the lived experience of FORL with a spouse was carried out. Potential participants were then contacted by email in which I provided them information about the study. If a particular participant was interested in taking part, I screened them to ensure they met the study's eligibility criteria.
5. To collect my data, I scheduled a one-on-one, 90-minute, semi-structured, digitally-recorded interview with each of the 15 participants to discuss their experience with FORL in their marriage. At the time of the interview, informed consent and demographic forms were reviewed and signed by the participant, and a one-time stipend of \$50.00 was given to each.

6. I analyzed all the interview data collected, with the exception of one participant's data due to not meeting exclusion criteria. Specifically, the participant FORL only after the spouse left the state and filed for divorce.
7. Member checks were conducted throughout the interview process by restating the essence of what the participant reported and questioning the accuracy. Member checks were also completed by asking the participants to validate information I identified in the data and to address missing information.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

A comprehensive review of the literature and preliminary study guided the methodological considerations and data collection procedures for this study. Further, this study was completed with rigor and quality by adding strategies such as audit trails, reflexivity, thick and rich descriptions of the data, and member checks. Ethical considerations were attended to throughout the design and implementation of this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Preceding the research project, ethical considerations, including the safety and consent of all participants, were taken into account. The required consent forms and applications were completed by the participants. Approval was requested and granted from Iowa State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the use of human subjects (See Appendix B). The confidentiality of the participants was of highest priority. No names were affiliated with the data set. Instead, code numbers were used for identification purposes.

At each interview, I outlined the study purpose and procedures, and made the participants aware of the risks, benefits, and voluntary nature of the study. They were provided the informed consent, which assured confidentiality, cited the potential risks, (e.g.,



the topic being studied could elicit negative feelings or memories, possibly creating mild discomfort), and provided a disclaimer that the interview or any part of the research process was not intended to constitute psychotherapy. The informed consent was reviewed and signed by each participant. The participants were advised not to answer anything with which they felt uncomfortable throughout the course of the interview, as it was possible that discussing the experience of FORL could be distressing, and all possible negative effects could not be known. However, they were informed that the risks of participating in this research project were expected to be minimal, with no known serious risks. Psychotherapy resources were offered to the participants upon request, but there were no such requests. Additionally, each participant filled out a contact information sheet and a participant receipt form, acknowledging acceptance of the compensation. All participants were compensated a one-time stipend of \$50.00 for their participation in the interview, and informed that compensation would be provided whether or not they answered all the interview questions. The participants also completed a demographic questionnaire; no names were collected on this form.

### **Recruitment Process**

The participants consisted of a purposive sampling (Merriam, 2009) of 16 individuals in a midwestern city who defined themselves as FORL with their spouse. Purposive sampling was important to this study because of the sensitive nature of the topic and the potential difficulty of finding participants with the lived experience of FORL. Further, a purposive sampling method is most often used in phenomenological research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Patton, 1990; Silverman, 2010) because of the importance of selecting experienced participants with respect to the topic being investigated (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Following IRB approval, the participants were recruited by a snowball sampling strategy. Snowball sampling is used to find participants through networking or a chain of people (Patton, 2001). I sent an email, requesting referrals, to colleagues in the fields of marriage and family therapy, mental health counseling, psychiatry, psychology, family law, as well as to community members in central Iowa, known to me. Included in the email was information about the study for eligible participants. After receiving eligible participant information from the referral sources or direct contact from the potential participants themselves, I emailed invitation letters to them that outlined the project's goals and procedures, and my email address and phone number. If a participant was interested in the study, he/she contacted me by phone or email to enroll in the study. Upon contact, I pre-screened the participant to determine if he/she met the inclusion criteria. To qualify for inclusion, the participants must have experienced FORL with a spouse and be at least 18 years of age. Pre-screening questions included: Are you 18 years of age or older? Have you experienced falling out of romantic love with a spouse?

All 16 participants who were referred to the study were enrolled and completed the interview. One participant's data were excluded prior to analysis due to not meeting the exclusion criteria (i.e., FORL occurred after their spouse left the relationship, moved out of state, and had filed for divorce). The excluded participant was a 46-year-old male. The remaining 15 comprise the sample.

For this study, I sought both male and female participants. After recruiting several females, I specifically asked my referral sources to consider males who might fit the study criteria. This strategy was effective in gaining additional males for the study. Although sexual orientation was not a factor for inclusion in the study, all participants who had FORL

with a spouse were heterosexual. After the last interview was completed, I continued to receive referrals from professional and personal contacts. However, I had closed recruitment due to an already large sample size and limits on time and funding.

To avoid ethical concerns, such as dual relationships, none of the participants were my past or present clients. Additionally, when private health information (PHI) is disclosed by a healthcare provider, a release of information is required by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) (e.g., “Health Information Privacy,” n.d.). Thus, if mental health clinicians known by the researcher wished to refer a client to participate in the study, they were asked to obtain a signed release of information from the potential participant, in order to provide me with their name. The alternative was for the clinician to give the potential participant my name and contact information to reach me directly in order to learn more about the study.

Fewer than half of the participants (6 of 15) were referred to this study by a mental health provider as their client. Yet, all 15 of the participants reported attending individual therapy, couples therapy, or both. Specifically, 9 participants attended both individual and couple’s therapy, 4 reported receiving individual therapy but no couple’s therapy, and 2 described only attending couple’s therapy. Yet nearly half of Americans had someone in their household visit a mental health provider in the previous year (Chamberlin, 2004).

Beyond a high incidence of mental health treatment in the sample, I also recruited more women, by a ratio of 3 to 1. Generally, women are more likely than men to access mental health treatment, as are individuals who have a lower sense of stigma associated with mental health treatment, and an increased level of psychological symptom severity – both of which are more common in women (Komiya, Good, & Sherrod, 2000). Further, women have

better attitudes toward psychological help-seeking (Leaf, Bruce, Tischler, & Holzer, 1987). In fact, Komiya et al. (2000) posited that greater emotional openness was found to increase the likelihood of seeking mental health assistance, and men tend to follow gender-normed roles which limit emotional expression. Perhaps an open attitude about self-disclosure in a clinical setting may replicate other settings, (i.e., sharing personal information more readily with others). In other words, it is possible that men have just as high rates of FORL, but more women than men were referred to participate in this study, probably because women are more likely to present for mental health treatment and/or other self-disclosing activities. Thus, their experiences of FORL are more often known to others. Worth mentioning, the research is generally mixed regarding gender and participation in psychological studies, with either men or women being recruited in greater numbers depending on the study (Woodall, Morgan, Sloan, & Howard, 2010).

It is unknown if a sample where all participants have sought mental health treatment of some kind and two-thirds of the sample is female is transferrable. However, it seems plausible that the individuals comprising this sample may have addressed and processed their emotions more thoroughly than the general population, possibly leading to greater self and/or other awareness. This could have assisted the participants in their ability to answer the interview questions and may have informed their responses.

### **Interview Process**

I conducted one in-depth interview, 60-90 minutes in length, with each of the 15 participants. The interviews were held in a private conference room of a library located in a metropolitan area that was conveniently located for the participant. The format was confidential between the participant and myself as the interviewer. I digitally audiotaped the

interviews, which were later transcribed by a professional transcriptionist, Malinda Mabry, which I reviewed for accuracy. I wrote field notes after each interview, which I utilized as an additional data source.

I paid special attention to preparing for the interview, constructing research questions, and implementing the interview (Turner, 2010). Pilot testing is generally considered important for interview preparation to test interview questions and identify any flaws (Kvale, 2007). The pilot testing for this study had taken place in the Hemesath and Hurt (2016) study, in which the interview questions for this study were refined. I reviewed McNamara's (2009) recommendations for conducting interviews (Turner, 2010) and relied on my expertise and experience as a therapist with interviewing individuals on sensitive topics. I used a semi-structured interview format. The questions were similar for all the participants, with minor additions or deletions due to the uniqueness of each interview. The interview questions were devised using the study's three research questions as a guide, which had been revised after the preliminary focus group study, and with the assistance of my faculty advisor. I also developed the interview guide based on previous literature and theoretical frameworks. The interview questions, including probes, are summarized in Table 3 (See Appendix A).

### **Data Analysis**

I utilized Moustaka's (1994) approach to phenomenology, referred to as transcendental phenomenology, to guide my data analysis procedure (Creswell, 2013). The goal, according to Moustaka (1994), is for researchers to capture the whole experience and develop the "essence" of a particular lived experience by analyzing significant statements and creating meaning units (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Further, "the aim is to achieve an

analytic description of the phenomena not affected by prior assumptions” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 137.)

The steps to Moustaka’s approach to phenomenology are as follows (see Creswell, 2013): First, the researcher determines if phenomenology is the best choice to examine the research problem. For example, “The type of problem best suited for this form of research is one in which it is important to understand several individuals’ common or shared experiences of a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 81). I decided phenomenology was the best choice for this research based on the sparse academic literature on the loss of romantic marital love, along with my frequent professional contact with this topic through client self-report and consultations with my peers. Second, the researcher identifies the phenomena being studied. After reviewing the related literature, I labeled the phenomenon, falling out of romantic love (FORL), based on the terms and descriptions used by clients presenting with this issue. Romantic love was the best fit for the relationship type and characteristics reported by my clients. Third, the researcher must acknowledge the basic assumptions of phenomenology (i.e., the importance of setting aside pre-conceived notions). I recognized that my professional experience provided me with a unique insight and appreciation for this topic. However, I was purposeful about bracketing my previous understanding, to the best of my ability, in order to open myself to new information and perceptions. Fourth, data collection ensues, generally comprised of in-depth interviews with participants who have lived the experience of the phenomenon under study. I accomplished this task by interviewing individuals who reported having FORL with their spouse.

Moustaka’s (1994) final step involves presenting the participants with two broad questions about their experience, specifically *what* has been experienced and *how* it has been

experienced, in order to provide textural and structural descriptions. My two main interview questions were: What feelings, thoughts, and behaviors accompany FORL? (main textual question) and what factors contributed to FORL? (main structural question). Combining the textural and structural descriptions would provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon in my study.

After completing the interviews I reviewed the transcribed digital recordings for accuracy. Next, I organized the data by creating individual participant profiles. Each profile was comprised of a short summary, and included information from my field notes, participant demographic information, and interview highlights. The goal for this was to get to know my participants and their lived experience and have a concise way to organize the data across the 15 participants.

Then I began coding the data. The coding method I used was conventional content analysis, where I identified themes from codes and categories embedded in the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). “In conventional content analysis, coding categories are derived directly from the text data” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). I bracketed and reduced the information gathered in the interviews into quotes or phrases, categorized them, and combined them into themes, producing rich themes. I drew conclusions about the significance of these themes based on the nature, frequency, and occurrence of the participants’ FORL experiences, while factoring in the theoretical and contextual underpinnings of this study. I gave special attention to identifying similarities and differences in FORL between and across my participants. Throughout the analysis, I developed textural descriptions based on *what* the participants described experiencing and structural descriptions

of *how* they experienced it, by attending to context (Creswell, 2013). Finally, I combined both textural and structural descriptions into an overall essence of the experience of FORL.

### **Trustworthiness**

My goal was to conduct this research with rigor and quality by utilizing the recommended guidelines from Lincoln (1995), Guba (1989), Creswell and Miller (2000), Merriam, (1998), and Carlson (2010). As described by Lincoln (1995), “Qualitative research is conducted not to confirm or disconfirm earlier findings, but rather to contribute to a process of continuous revision and enrichment of understanding . . .” (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1994, p. 278). The very nature of qualitative research makes it difficult to have a hard and fast set of rules for quality control, because it seems to rest on flexibility not rigidity. The key, as Lincoln (1995) ascertained, is that we must find a way to trust each other’s research. Ironically, “it’s about creating certainty when life is about ambiguity” (Lincoln, 1995, p. 289).

Carlson (2010) described quality and rigor in terms of the “trustworthiness” of the research. Several common procedures used to enhance the credibility of qualitative research have been identified, including audit trails, reflexivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000), thick and rich description, and member checking (Creswell & Miller 2000; Merriam, 1998), to name a few.

I established dependability in my research by using a set of audit trails that, according to Carlson (2010), “refers to keeping careful documentation of all components of the study, should an external auditor be utilized” (p. 1103). I began my process of audit trails by keeping methodological and learning logs as well as journals using Microsoft Word and email entries I made for myself. My methodological log contained my personal impressions



and analysis of qualitative methodology and techniques, which were useful in my decision to utilize phenomenology. My learning log included my reflections on various topics (i.e., who I am as a researcher, my thoughts on literature I had read), which helped to guide my work. Further, I documented my library and online literature searches, as well as correspondence with other researchers. The latter took place by email exchanges and in-person discussions. My process of data analysis was also detailed.

To ensure trustworthiness through transferability, I used thick and rich description. Qualitative analysis is concerned with finding ways to draw the same conclusions over time and other situations. Thick and rich description of details such as contextual information, participants, settings and data would help to “provide understanding of relevance to other settings” (Carlson, 2010, p. 1104). I was thorough in my recording of the details of this project. I also kept detailed descriptions of contextual and background information important to this research.

I met the criterion of credibility as a researcher for this study through my repeated and consistent involvement in the field of family studies and human sciences as well as marriage and family therapy. I anticipate that my prolonged involvement in this research area will lead to a greater understanding of the phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) and ideally an elevated level of credibility as a researcher. The second procedure I used to establish credibility was reflexivity. Reflexivity is when a researcher speaks to the influence they have on outcomes. As a marriage and family therapist, I need to be especially keen to reflexivity. During my career, spanning almost two decades, many clients have shared their concerns about FORL. A vast majority of them are distraught, wishing things could be different and feeling helpless to change their feelings toward their spouse. In no cases have I

witness the client happy or even neutral about FORL with the other. Through my profession I have gained insight and awareness, but I have also formed assumptions. Reflexivity can begin to be addressed by acknowledging and discussing experiences, assumptions, and backgrounds that could influence interpretations (Carlson, 2010). Although, every researcher has an analytic lens with a unique filter based on their life experience, profession, perceptions, social class and other factors, this should be considered a strength, not a weakness (Saldaña, 2013). I journaled, by way of notes to myself, regarding thoughts, beliefs, and experiences that struck me, which could influence or color my research process. Subsequently, I continuously referred to these journal entries to be sure that I followed up on all ideas generated through the journaling process.

Additionally, I discussed and provided all research results that did not seem to fit the consensus and may be considered outliers or discrepancies in the findings. I used “peer debriefing” after interviews by writing and reviewing field notes to ensure that I was considering all ways of interpreting the data. I continued reviewing my field notes throughout the course of my analysis to compare against the interview transcripts and emerging themes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Lastly, I conducted member checks to follow up with participants to see if I was accurate in my interpretation of the data. I did this throughout the interviews by rephrasing what I thought the participants said, and asking if I was accurate. I also sent email follow-ups to clarify answers or gain more information about particular questions. For example, although not a specific interview question, information about the spouse’s family of origin emerged during several of the interviews. In order to gain information about the participants with missing spouse-family-of-origin information, I emailed the participants to secure this information. In another instance, one participant was

not clear regarding the existence of stages of FORL, but through my correspondence with the participant I could be accurate. All participants responded to my member checks.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the phenomenon of FORL in a number of marriages. It was anticipated that achieving a greater understanding of FORL would better position and equip mental health providers and other professionals who work with couples to effectively assist those facing this phenomenon. Further, this study could have far-reaching effects for society at large, due to the significance of creating and maintaining loving relationships and marriages in adult life, as related to the importance of healthy families.

This chapter presents the key findings obtained from in-depth, face-to-face interviews of 15 participants, most of whom were divorced, followed by a detailed review of each finding. First, I provide a summary of each participant's story. A summary of the key findings are listed in Table 4 (See Appendix A).

#### **Summary of the Participants' Stories**

These summaries of the 15 participants and their circumstances are meant to introduce them and the context of their FORL experience. In order to maintain their anonymity I have used a pseudonym for each.

**Sandra.** Sandra is a 43-year-old female who was married 12 years to the spouse with whom she FORL. She is recently divorced. Sandra grew up in an abusive and dysfunctional family and reported having no idea what healthy love looked like. She did not choose her spouse, but described progressing or drifting into marriage. Denying and minimizing her partner's poor behavior was the hallmark of her marital relationship, beginning in their

courtship. After many years of being a stay-at-home mother, Sandra wished to make use of her education and decided to enter the workforce. She reported feeling an increase in her self-worth and noticed how it felt to grow, personally. Sandra described beginning to stand up for herself, and her denial of their marital problems lifted. Sandra began to acknowledge feeling undervalued and unheard, alongside their traditional, inflexible roles. Although Sandra attempted to work on her marriage, her spouse felt the relationship was fine and wished it would go back to the way it was, not understanding his role in her unhappiness.

**Jack.** Jack is a 38-year-old male who was married 10 years to the spouse with whom he FORL. He is divorced. Jack described a long history of denying relationship problems. He indicated not acknowledging or addressing issues when he was dating or when married. Over time, he reported becoming more conscious of his mate's traits, which created negative feelings toward her. Jack explained that he and his spouse did not deal with conflict well in that she would become intense, and he would withdraw. Jack reported not being open about his feelings until six months before he moved out, saying he needed space. He tried to get her to wait to file for divorce, because he needed more time, but she moved forward with the divorce. He said that he did not have the tools or skills he needed, interpersonally, to address his marital problems in a constructive or healthy manner.

**Kelly.** Kelly is a 38-year-old female who was married 10 years to the spouse with whom she FORL. She is divorced. Kelly reported that her marriage was built on lies from her husband. She described him as abusive and mentally unstable. She was afraid for herself and her children's safety, and could no longer stay in the relationship. She felt she had no choice but to FORL because she could not deny or minimize the problems any longer. He was not who she thought she married. She described being somewhat of an idealist and naïve –

admitting that she was not used to these kinds of relationship problems. She reported that she continued to worry about him, as a human being. However, she also continued to go to court regarding custody of their two daughters. She has been granted full custody.

**Michelle.** Michelle is a 41-year-old female who has been married 10 years to the spouse with whom she FORL. She is still married to him. Michelle described being a single mom, living with her parents, and feeling very lucky to have a nice guy love her and her child so much. However, their interpersonal dynamics became difficult for her as the marriage progressed and she described them both as changing. She described herself as a go-getter who wanted to grow (e.g., obtain her doctorate, improve her health) while he was more laid back and began doing the opposite. Michelle reported that her spouse broke down a lot emotionally, so she often felt she had to be the strong one. She said she was no longer physically or emotionally attracted to him.

**Janet.** Janet is a 63-year-old female who was married 7 years to the spouse with whom she FORL. She is divorced from him. Janet described having a severely handicapped child from her first marriage. She reported feeling lucky and appreciative to have a guy with similar interests who was kind to her son. She described her mate as seeming to be caring and soft spoken. Janet reported not wanting another failed marriage, so did what she could to be sure this relationship would work. She described going to pre-marital therapy with him, where the therapist expressed concern about some of his comments and his readiness for marriage. Janet went through with the wedding anyway, thinking she could make it work. Her spouse ended up being abusive, both physically and emotionally, leading to her divorce.

**Joe.** Joe is a 36-year-old male who was married 2 years to the spouse with whom he FORL. He is divorced from her. Joe reported caring very deeply for her child from a previous

relationship. He wanted to support the child and her mother. Joe described being physically attracted to his partner. Although he did not feel an emotional connection of any depth, he did feel an emotional connection to her child and her extended family. Joe related that he thought it would all work out and that he was doing the right thing, but admits he drifted into marriage. Joe was in the military and felt that her lack of support while deployed was detrimental to his mental health and well-being. The support did not return when he was home, and although he never wanted the divorce for the kids, he didn't think the marriage was good for any of them as it was.

**Frank.** Frank is a 62-year-old male who was married 5.5 years to the spouse with whom he FORL. He is divorced from her. Frank described ending his engagement to his mate due to concerns, then dating her two more years prior to marrying her. He reported a solid connection with her, both physical and emotionally. After 8 months of marriage, Frank indicated that he started to see her old behaviors. He described his spouse as controlling and reported they had very different values. Frank indicated that they both agreed to end the marriage due to neither wanting to change and having such different values.

**Doug.** Doug is a 40-year-old male who has been married 18 years to the spouse with whom he FORL. He is currently married to her. Doug reported that he has learned a lot in 20 years about what love is. He explained that a significant factor in his affinity for his spouse, at the beginning of their relationship, was her devotion to him. Doug reported coming from an unstable family background. He felt his wife would be there for him long-term. After marriage, Doug indicated his spouse struggled with emotional and physical intimacy, as well as vulnerability; thus she withdrew, and he chased her. This was the same pattern he had observed between himself and his mother. He described feeling that he and his spouse were

“the perfect bad fit” – she withdrew and was scared to be vulnerable and he kept trying to earn her care – until he couldn’t do it any longer. He indicated they were friends who developed patterns that were not satisfying for him in a marriage. Doug and his spouse have been separated for 2.5 months. Although she would like the marriage to continue, Doug is leaning toward getting out.

**Tessa.** Tessa is a 48-year-old female who was married 24 years to the spouse with whom she FORL. She is divorced from him now. Tessa reported that she has multiple sclerosis and sometimes feels scattered mentally, but would do her best for the interview. Tessa explained that she fell in love with her spouse at the time of their marriage, but had more attraction (both physical and emotional) for past boyfriends. However, she indicated that the time was right in life to marry and he was a “good guy.” Tessa reported that her spouse was never very complimentary, but that he was also not negative when they dated. After marriage, Tessa said that her spouse became critical. Although she thought he was “attractive, she did not desire a physical or emotional connection with him any longer; however she was interested in others. When she attempted to discuss her concerns and unhappiness, he seemed to be in denial. Tessa said that she left the relationship as soon as she felt she could financially care for herself.

**Nicole.** Nicole is a 38-year-old female who was married 10 years to the spouse with whom she FORL. She remains married to him. Nicole reported much instability and dysfunction in her family of origin. She described moving 15 times as a child and said her father was absent. She said that her mother was narcissistic and had divorced five times, providing no stability. Nicole described her spouse as stable, caring, and grounded, yet ironically she does not feel happy. She indicated a pattern of his pursuing her and



withdrawing. She reported that attraction and chemistry are extremely important in a relationship, and although she feels it with other men, does not feel it for her spouse. Nicole said that her spouse is a good person and feels conflicted and ambivalent about the relationship and what to do. She believes that living next to her in-laws has been a problem and would like to move elsewhere to see if the marriage improves.

**Laura.** Laura a 59-year-old female who was married 18 years to the spouse with whom she FORL. She is divorced from him. Laura reported that she had been very much in love with a previous boyfriend and was rejected. She remembered feeling worthless. Shortly thereafter, she met her husband, which she described as a rebound. Laura explained that he was a “bad-boy,” she was going to “fix him,” and he needed her. She reported feeling “a little in love” prior to marriage, but was more focused on commitment, fulfilling her goal of having a family, and feeling loved and needed. Culturally, she was used to arranged marriages and thought they seemed to work out. She described having stronger physical and emotional connection with past loves. Her spouse was never home, as he traveled frequently for work, indicating that he was not being there for her physically or emotionally. Although she left him, she reports he seemed happy to end the relationship, yet he continued to portray himself as the victim. She described their divorce as contentious.

**Allison.** Allison is a 45-year-old female who was married 21 years to the spouse with whom she FORL. She is divorced from him. Allison explained that she drifted into marriage, but at the time felt she was in love, yet reported that her sexual attraction to her partner wasn't strong and that she'd had greater sexual attraction to other men in the past. She indicated that he wasn't her type, physically. She indicated being in an abusive live-in relationship prior to meeting her spouse and described her husband as her white knight. He

was kind and everyone seemed to like him, she said. Further, at the time she was finishing college and her friends were getting married. Allison described herself as a perfectionist who had been in denial about the problems in her marriage for many years. She reported that they were enmeshed and that others were shocked when she and her spouse divorced because they seemed perfect. Allison explained that she and her spouse have different personalities and values – she is type A and motivated and he is not. Allison spoke of “her journey” toward recognizing their problems, which began when she became more independent after saving a family business. At the time of the interview, Allison reported feeling confused about romantic relationships, in general, and was in no hurry to remarry.

**Adam.** Adam is a 45-year-old male who was married 22 years to the spouse with whom he FORL. He is divorced. Adam reported that he fell in love with his spouse at the time of their marriage. He said that things changed overnight once they were married, to the point where he said he didn’t recognize the relationship. He said that their physical intimacy ended almost immediately and there were financial issues. Adam reported that he tried to talk to his wife about his concerns, but she would not address them. He indicated that they attended couples counseling, and things improved, but did not last. Adam described her personality as one who would make life miserable for you if she is not getting along with you. Due to these efforts to continue the marriage and having two children, he reported staying in the marriage for 22 years, which turned out poorly, as his former spouse has alienated him from their children.

**Liz.** Liz is a 50-year-old female who was married 28 years to the spouse with whom she FORL. She is divorced. Liz reported that she married her spouse at age 19 because she was pregnant and felt it was the right thing to do. She described coming from an abusive

family of origin, with no positive healthy relationship role models. Liz reported that the “big bomb” in her marriage was their agreement that she would finish her undergraduate degree, after her spouse did, and he would then take over more of the family responsibility as she had done for him. However, he decided to keep going for his master’s degree, and did not keep his commitment to her. Looking back, Liz reported that her spouse had narcissistic tendencies that she didn’t consider when they married, which continued to worsen, over time. She remembers incidents early in their marriage where his mother expressed her needed to be doted on. Liz described feeling she had to take care of her spouse throughout the marriage, and had sacrificed too much, which she did not want to continue.

**Jackie.** Jackie is a 42-year-old female who was married 15 years to the spouse with whom she FORL. She remains married, but had been separated for several months and filed for divorce. Jackie reported feeling their marriage was a castle built on sand. Jackie said that she had married for the right reasons (i.e., being in love) and that emotional and physical intimacy were important in their relationship. Over time, as she revealed, her husband lied about many important issues. For example, 13 years into the marriage he lost his job and told her that he was laid off, but he was actually fired. After that, she discovered several other lies, which she described as a significant turning point in her realization that she had FORL. Jackie indicated that over the years of marriage they had led separate lives and no longer talked much. However, she had not admitted to herself that there were any problems. Overall, Jackie said she wished she would have paid more attention to her needs and what was going on in the relationship earlier.

### **Description of the Findings**

The findings of this study fit the spirit of equifinality, meaning that numerous pathways can lead to the same outcome (Lerner, 2002). The principle of equifinality originated in the field of biology, but applies to any open system, including social systems (Hammond, 2010). Equifinality is often used to describe convergent outcomes of complex systems (von Bertalanffy, 1968). The results of this study also fit the main tenet of General Systems Theory, postulating that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). In other words, FORL must be viewed through systems thinking, which considers how all parts interact to create something different than what each individual part contributes.

The findings from this study are grouped under three major categories. First, the results pertaining to romantic love and marital satisfaction will be presented. This section contains overarching views of love and marriage and will frame the remaining findings. Second, the pathways to FORL will be outlined. The pathways section comprises the major contributing elements to FORL. Although each of the 15 participants described a different pathway leading to FORL, 10 prominent factors emerged as contributing to those pathways. Third, other salient findings are listed under the category of the dimensions of FORL, and will include the topics of mate selection, rewards and costs, stages, point of no return, efforts made, emotional struggle, advice, common experience, and gender differences. The findings will be listed concisely below, then expounded upon in greater detail, as the chapter unfolds.

1. **Elements of romantic love and marital satisfaction.** These findings are salient to romantic love and/or marital satisfaction: First, emotional and physical connection are both necessary for the state of being in-love and marital

satisfaction. The elements comprising this state, as described by the participants, are the same as the definition of romantic love in the existing literature. Second, in-loveness is a continuum. Being in love is not a fixed, static term, but instead, participants referred to their in-loveness on a continuum – in other words, it is possible to be not in love, a little in love, a lot in love, or anywhere between.

Third, although all of the participants felt they were in love with their mate, early in their relationships, they later FORL with them, and there was variation in the level of emotional and/or physical connection compared to previous romantic relationships.

2. **Pathways to FORL.** Pathways to FORL were comprised of a variety of stepping stones or elements. The following factors emerged from the data as contributing to FORL: (a) what each partner brings to the relationship by way of individual attributes (i.e., self-esteem, needs and wants, values, emotional health, communication style, coping skills), previous relationship history (i.e., past romantic relationships), and family of origin dynamics (i.e., role models, abuse, conflict resolution patterns, attachment style), (b) poor mate selection process, (c) minimal rewards, (d) lack of emotional and/or physical connection, (e) extraneous factors (i.e., stress, in-laws), (f) minimizing or denying early relationship problems, (g) emerging realizations or awareness leading to negative thinking and/or feelings about self, spouse, or relationship, (h) changes in participant or spouse, (i) participant and spouse behaviors/negative incidents, and (j) coping deficits in the participant or their spouse.
3. **Dimensions of FORL.** Other salient findings regarding FORL included:

- *Patterns.* Four patterns to FORL emerged (a) red flags, (b) attempts to re-connect, (c) indifference, and (d) done - FORL had occurred.
- *Point of no return.* A majority of the participants indicated a point of no return in the marital relationship, defined as a point where acceptance of FORL had taken place by the participant and there was no plan or desire to reconcile the relationship.
- *Efforts made.* Various individual and partnered attempts to resolve marital issues ensued throughout the process of FORL, including (a) individual therapy, (b) couple's therapy, (c) pastoral support, (d) participants talking with their spouses, family, or friends about problems, (e) being kind to the spouse, (f) providing support to the spouse, (g) personal soul-searching, (h) reading self-help books, (i) attempting to fix the situation themselves, (j) agreeing to an open marriage, or (k) entering into an extramarital affair.
- *Emotional struggle.* The participants expressed emotional struggles throughout the process of FORL, including (a) concerns regarding children, (b) not having the family unit together, (c) not wanting to be divorced, (d) regret for not seeing warning signs prior to marriage, (e) not leaving sooner, (f) feeling judged, (g) being uncertain about the morality of their decision, and (h) hurting or concern for their spouse.
- *Advice.* The participants shared advice regarding various aspects of FORL. The most common advice given for professionals, such as marriage therapists, was to meet the client where they are. Advice given for individuals in early romantic relationships included (a) know yourself, (b) go slow, (c) know your

mate, (d) be healthy emotionally, (e) pay attention, (f) be honest with yourself, (g) make decisions by both thinking and feeling, (g) don't ignore warning signs or intuition, (i) get educated on healthy relationships, and (j) know what to look for. Advice cited for those already in marriage include (a) know yourself, (b) put each other first, (c) expect change, (d) work hard, (e) engage in the process, (f) pay attention, (g) don't ignore your feelings, and (h) communicate. Finally, some participants recommended individual or couple's counseling, both before *and* during marriage.

- *Common experience.* The results indicated that FORL is a common phenomenon in society, although not everyone may label it “falling out of love.”

An in-depth review of each finding can be found as follows. Embedded in the reviews are descriptions of the pathways to FORL found in this study, intended to provide support and detailed explanation of the complexity discovered in the data. The intent of this section is to provide a “thick and rich description” of the findings that emerged, such that the reader can gain familiarity with the lived experience of the 15 participants who have graciously share their perspectives. The goal for a qualitative inquiry is to allow the participants to speak for themselves. Included throughout are direct quotations from the participant interviews intended to provide meaningful illustrations of the findings.

### **Elements of Romantic Love and Marital Satisfaction**

The findings in this section cover important facets of romantic love and/or marital satisfaction. Representing the dominant patterns, the majority of participants (n=13) reported that both emotional and physical connection/chemistry characterized the state of being in

love. Similarly, 14 participants reported the same two elements were essential for satisfaction in marriage. The less dominant patterns included 3 outlying participants who believed both elements were important, but were uncertain how essential physical connection was to either satisfaction in marriage or being in love. These findings are important contributions to the existing literature. First, the phrase *falling out of love* leaves one to guess what type of love is being lost. Second, gaining information about what makes for satisfying marriage (i.e., the presence of both emotional and physical connection) may aid our understanding of FORL.

Jackie illustrated her perception of the importance of emotional and physical connection in romantic relationships. Her experience reflected the seamless and non-assuming interplay between her and her partner regarding sexual intimacy. She also identified the importance of emotional intimacy over physical intimacy, however asserted that both are essential, and co-created among the partners.

Ideally you would have both [emotional and physical connection]. I think if one becomes less prominent, it can still be fine....When I'm with my boyfriend, sometimes we have sex and sometimes we don't. It's about the mood of the day. If I leave and we haven't had sex, I don't assume the relationship is doomed, but he and I are on the same page that way. Honestly, if I felt he and I weren't on track emotionally, I would be more worried. But, for a marriage, both need to be present and agreed upon, otherwise, one party feels left out or neglected...but it does fluctuate with time.

And as illustrated by Jackie, "We liked each other. We enjoyed spending time together...so it was, you know, physical and emotional and romantic...it was the whole deal."



Adam illustrated the emotional and physical elements of being in love, identifying the anemic nature of only an emotional connection or only a physical connection, maintaining that the combination of both is magical.

I think you can love somebody on an emotional level, um, I think you can lust somebody on a physical level, but I don't, I guess I wouldn't consider that fully qualified...love...but when you have both of those, that's where the magic happens.

The state of being in love was also frequently characterized as a special kind of love, set apart by sexual interest, as well as a sense of inevitability. This finding is useful because it further delineates the type of love being studied and the type of love relationship in which FORL is likely to occur. As Joe described, "...if you don't find the person physically attractive, then you're not going to fall in love with them....I mean, you can love your neighbor but you don't necessarily, you're not in love with your neighbor." As illustrated by Jack, "I would say it is feeling a strong connection with someone and feeling like that's reciprocated, um, knowing that is kind of the generalized feeling for, like, all types of love, even non-romantic love...I think it's maybe...a deeper connection, uh, some sort of a stronger attraction."

Beyond emotional and physical connection, additional components of in-loveness described by some participants included respect, reciprocity, wanting to provide support and care to their partner, desire to share interests and experiences, feeling happiness and/or enjoyment in their partner interactions, and missing the partner when they are absent. As illustrated by Joe, "In my opinion to be in love is when you just care for somebody more than you do yourself, I guess, is the simplest answer." Tessa shared,

...feeling, um, like you want to do things with someone, that you um, I'd say respect...you enjoy time together, you um, I mean, like I suppose you still, it's not necessarily butterflies, cause you can't have that forever, but you just feel like they're the person for you and that you know that they feel the same about you.

There was uncertainty on the part of four participants when they articulated what it meant to be in love. For example, these participants stated, "I don't know" during their responses, two of whom provided minimal answers, and two of whom could not respond to the question. As illustrated by Allison, "So, I can definitely say that my idea of what that means is one hundred and eighty degrees different... and you know just recognizing, oh my word! I don't know, if I even know what romantic love is, now." Another example comes from Sandra, "That's the biggest question of the whole thing, um, well, I guess that would be...I think of love as a feeling, um, but it also, I don't know...." This finding is useful because it further informs the research about the complexity of love, indicating that indeed views of love change over time. The participants' ideas of romantic love seemed to shift, based on their experiences, which did not match their original beliefs or expectations about love. It is also possible their needs or values changed, thus creating a new, albeit confusing perspective about romantic relationships and love.

Also, all 15 participants reported feeling in love with their partner early in the relationship. This is an important finding and contribution to the research because in attempting to understand FORL it is useful to assess how the participants felt about their mates early in their relationships, as well as how love changed. As described by Adam, "At the beginning, yep...I felt that... we both kind of fell pretty hard for each other." In fact, 14 participants reported being in love with their partner at the time they married. The exception

being one female participant who chose to marry quickly due to an unexpected pregnancy. However, after marriage, she too reported feeling in love with her partner.

Worth noting, although feelings of in-loveness existed early in the relationship, as indicated by all the participants, the intensity varied. A definitive “yes” or “no” in response to questions about feeling in love with one’s spouse was often not stated, but answered somewhere on a continuum between yes and no. For example, when Laura was asked if she was in love with her mate at the time of their marriage, she replied, “A little...and I’ll tell you, on my wedding day, I was ready to walk down the aisle and I saw him at the end of the aisle and I said, ‘This is doable.’”

Seven of the participants reported a relatively weak connection in one or both of the dimensions of emotional and physical connection to their mate early in the relationship. In fact, some felt a stronger emotional and/or physical connection to past mates. Specifically, two participants felt a stronger emotional connection, three participants felt stronger physical connection, and two participants felt both stronger emotional and physical connection to previous partners. To illustrate, having a stronger emotional connection to past partners, consider Joe’s example:

In college, there was, you know, a couple of relationships that I was in....I can think of one...where I got to know her family really well...we had a very emotional, strong emotional connection...but, I’m a sophomore in college...you make bad decisions when you’re young and then I of course, made those bad decisions that ended that relationship. But it was an emotional, um, relationship that was stronger than that of my actual marriage, absolutely.

Examples of participants who felt stronger physical connections to past partners are as follows. Described by Doug, “Yeah, it was different, um, I don’t think I was as attracted to her as I was in some of my other relationships.” As illustrated by Kelly,

I would say, uh, attraction wise, it was weaker than the other relationships...there was a person in my life who I really loved so much, and I probably will always love this person...we were together in college, so we had to split. So, I believe I loved that other person more...when it comes to attraction...but I think my husband, when I married him, I think I loved him more for...the life and the future which you can provide together.

And as depicted by Doug, “You know, like this is someone who’s going to be a really great mom, who’s going to be, um, really like present and committed to her life and, um, where maybe other people I’d been maybe more physically attracted to, but, uh, she seemed more like a keeper.”

Conversely, three of the participants reported the same or stronger connection, both emotionally and physically, compared to past relationships. Adam said, “I would say my first love, I had a very strong physical and emotional connection to her, but I was also a teenager in high school, so it was hard for me to, um, you know, to compare the two, other than she was the first person I felt both of those...at a similar level or maybe at a level above my first relationship...”

Five participants did not describe how their love experience compared to previous relationships, as this question was not asked in the interview, but was revealed during the data analysis. However, the results are important and a unique contribution to extant literature because they suggest that decisions to marry were generally based on other factors

than the amount or strength of romantic love felt by the participant. There appears to be a dichotomy between thought and action in that most participants believed that to be in love and to have marital satisfaction, required both emotional and physical connection. However, some chose mates whom they felt less romantic love toward than past partners.

### **Pathways to FORL**

To recap, various direct and indirect elements related to the individual, partner, or couple comprised the pathways to FORL, including (a) what each partner brings to the relationship by way of individual attributes (i.e., self-esteem, needs and wants, values, emotional health, communication style, coping skills), previous relationship history (i.e., past romantic relationships), and family of origin dynamics (i.e., role models, abuse, conflict resolution patterns, attachment style), (b) poor mate selection process, (c) minimal rewards (d) lack of emotional and/or physical connection, (e) extraneous factors (i.e., stress, in-laws), (f) minimizing or denying early relationship problems, (g) emerging realizations or awareness leading to negative thinking and/or feelings about self, spouse, or relationship, (h) changes in participant or spouse, (i) participant and spouse behaviors/negative incidents, and (j) coping deficits in the participant or spouse.

**What each partner brings to the relationship.** One of the most significant and overarching pathways to FORL that emerged from the data is what each partner brings to the relationship. As illustrated by Liz, “Everyone brings a suitcase with them into that relationship and they’re going to open up and unpack...it’s going to come, and so being aware of that, other people’s suitcase, and how that’s going to affect your suitcase, is super important.” This pathway includes many factors such as personality, previous relationship history, family of origin functioning, history of abuse, issues of attachment, self-worth,

emotional health, and coping. For example, as described by Sandra, “I have come from kind of a hard background...where I couldn’t, um, I eventually left but, um, so that was kind of my starting point was, uh, as a child, not really being able to stand up, so I just left. I kind of let it happen, let it happen till I finally, like, moved on.”

Further, excerpts from Allison’s interview illustrated what she brought into her relationship, including family of origin dynamics, previous dating relationships, as well as individual personality.

My [mother] is very controlling with my father, very controlling with her kids...um, I did not have a particularly healthy relationship with my own father. He wasn’t around a lot...my dad worked a ton... and was not emotionally available....I sought approval from men during mostly some college years because of that...I don’t think I ever heard him say, ‘I love you’, ever....You know, I thought when I was growing up, I thought my family had it all cause that’s the way it was projected...I had to be this perfect, I mean, I had perfections long before I met him [spouse]...I had previously been in a relationship that was very unhealthy...I was so ashamed...the way I was raised, that did not happen to people in my family...and I didn’t heal from that...It was like this instant connection, because I was afraid I would never be loved by anybody, because the verbal and emotional abuse had gone on for a long time...so when my former spouse, ‘X’, shows up in my space and is willing to help me work through things, is willing to stand up to this person who still would show up at my town home...it’s automatically this connection, and so the courtship was six months...you’re like in this bliss, and like, in my case it was like a fairy tale, right? I went from six months ago being picked up by my neck and shoved into, or thrown

into a wall, to this guy....I didn't heal in between....I don't think I had a lot of criteria, because I was so broken...at the time, the criteria was, he treated me well....we're on a beach and he's on one knee with this gargantuan diamond asking me to marry him and the weird part was, I knew at dinner this was coming and I didn't think I was ready, but I didn't know how to say 'no'.... I didn't want to break the fairy tale....

Family of origin is defined as an individual's parents and siblings (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). The family of origin findings were not expected in this study, but emerged throughout the interview process. In fact, the only probe question listed in the interview guide about family of origin was regarding the participants' parents' relationship. As the interviews continued, additional inquiry on this topic was added because the responses seemed to connect with mate selection and marital expectations and provide useful information on how the participants viewed romantic love relationships and marriage. The participants gave more detail about family of origin than was anticipated, likely because they felt it was pertinent to the interview. A majority of participants (n=10) reported having inadequate role models for healthy relationships in their family of origin. Poor role models generally represented indifference, abuse, poor conflict resolution, addiction issues, or other negative attributes in the marital relationship of their parents. As Liz reflected,

...my role model was a super abusive father...and I was the oldest child, so you know where that puts me in that situation of taking care of everything....There were no role models in my life or positive healthy relationships other than teachers that I hung out with afterhours who were married...but familial, zero.

Five participants reported positive or neutral parental relationship role models. Positive role models generally included working together, showing warmth, affection, positive communication, and nurturance; while neutral role models had neither positive nor negative relationship attributes as observed by the participant. Kelly described her parents as positive role models:

...I guess that they had a good marriage, you know. They were people who you could see that they care for each other. They argue sometimes. They didn't hide emotion and put that everything is always awesome...they were talking to each other...and for us, me and my brother...they always stayed together on the same decisions...Generally, I think my family is very close.

Jack described his parents as being somewhat neutral role models:

I grew up in like, you know, my parents were, are still married, and, um, but...I couldn't tell you the first thing about their relationship...now, or at any point. Like that just wasn't ever... it never seemed like they were at odds with each other. But...they never did really have very many, like, date nights or anything.

The findings related to positive relationship role models appeared to be useful in contributing to the participants' foster healthy expectations about their own romantic relationships and marriage. Negative relationship role models impacted the participants in various ways, sometimes contributing to their knowledge base about what they wished to avoid in their own romantic relationships and other times serving as a guide to compare their own relationships (i.e., "at least it's not as bad as where I came from"). For example, growing up in an environment with negative role models seemed normal and it was not until they were older that they understood that it was not ideal. For those with neutral models, it



seemed they did not know how their parents felt about each other, thus had no guide for what ideal marital relationships should look like. Overall, being raised around negative and neutral relationship role models seemed to confuse participants as to what they should expect in romantic relationships.

Additionally, family of origin dysfunction was described by six participants, four of whom reported significant abuse or neglect, one who reported both neglect and addiction issues, and one who reported addiction issues in their family of origin. As recounted by Sandra, “I came from a really bad family where my dad was abusive to my mom. We were all abused and so that was my example. So, like, okay, I’m not going to do that, you know, and so that was my baseline, which was pretty low.”

Further, nine participants reported that their spouses came from challenging families of origin, comprising five spouses who had experienced abuse or neglect, two spouses who had experienced both abuse and addiction issues, and two spouses who had experienced addiction issues in their family of origin. As Doug said,

She describes her father as scary and controlling and her mom as passive and absent. She was molested by her uncle a few times, told her mom, and she swept it under the rug. Her parents lived parallel lives, separate finances and vacations. She never had arguing or affection modeled for her...sex had been hit or miss, earlier it was not great, then I found out later, I found out recently that it was because she paired me with, in her mind, with like I said, authority men, she had an uncle that abused her when she was young, and I kind of got put in that category. Not because I was anything like that...but just, that’s you know, it’s just how it worked in her mind. The findings related to family of origin abuse, neglect, and addiction are

important contributions to the research on FORL. Similar to negative role models, the existence of abuse, neglect or addiction in one's family of origin seemed to create ambivalence or confusion about interpersonal relationship dynamics and expectations of relationships among the participants. Sometimes these family-of-origin experiences were used as a means to improve their own relationships through knowing what they wanted to avoid. However, it still did not seem to help participants know the qualities of healthy relationships. Alternatively, sometimes family-of-origin dynamics generated a low standard by which some participants compared their current relationships, often assuming theirs were adequate because they were less horrible than those of the past.

Old wounds presented themselves regularly in many of the participant interviews, indicating insecure attachment issues in four of them. Insecure attachments originated from attachment theory, which is rooted in evolutionary biology. As Aronoff (2012) stated, "Basic attachment and bonding experiences within the family limit or make possible very different types of future interpersonal experiences" (p. 316). Insecure attachments are defined as relationships where a child's bid for a caregiver's proximity or nurturance have been unreliable or rejected (Fearon, Bakermans-Kranenburg, van IJzendoorn, Lapsley, & Roisman, 2010). Attachment styles are thought to be relatively stable throughout an individual's lifespan, including the impact on their adult relationships (Tashiro, 2014). This finding in regard the effects of family-of-origin influences is a significant contribution to the literature because it could help to explain the underpinnings of FORL. Specifically, it represents less than the ideal foundation for any relationship.

An example of early insecure attachment issues comes from Nicole: "My mom was narcissistic. She's been married five times... people have walked in and out of my life. I, you

know, I don't get attached to people because who knows when they're going to leave." Doug offered a comparable perspective:

You know, I've thought a lot about this, through therapy...we had like the perfect bad fit that worked for us for a long time and, um, you know, or pattern was like, she, she really struggled with any kind of emotional, for a long time, physical intimacy connection, vulnerability, and so her pattern was to push away and kind of protect and mine was to chase. You know, to try and take and earn the love...which was very similar to, to me with my mom. She was very present in a real early part of my life and then because of an abusive relationship with my dad, really kind of withdrew, and then I took care of her and I kind of tried to earn her being more present again. So it felt very familiar like that. Um, so, we lived in that pattern for a long time until we just, until I couldn't anymore.

**Mate Selection.** Mate selection emerged as an important element in pathways to FORL. Different reasons led participants to turn a relationship into marriage, regardless of the degree of emotional or physical connection, which was not always expected. One might assume that feeling in love at the time of marriage is the primary reason for marrying. However, the factors involved in mate selection among the participants varied widely. The reasons which emerged, beginning with the most commonly cited, were as follows: (a) individual characteristics making for a solid partner, (b) physical and/or emotional connection, (c) I am lucky you love me, (d) get me to a better place, (e) drifting or progressing into marriage, (f) common values, goals, and/or interests, (g) things will improve, (h) commitment, and (i) do the right thing. At the time of marriage, all of these reasons were seen as worthy for mate selection, by the participants. An example of "lucky

you love me” was described by Michelle: “...I was ecstatic. I mean, I was just absolutely ecstatic and we got officially engaged over Thanksgiving...everyone in my whole family was so happy...thought I was going to be alone forever with this kid and everything else and I was constantly told, you are so lucky, you’re so lucky.” This leads one to wonder if Michelle’s concerns about being alone as a single parent combined with others’ enthusiasm about her finding a partner who was accepting of her child, influenced her mate selection decision differently than if she had met her mate under other circumstances. That is, if Michelle would have been childless, would her mate selection choice have been the same? This finding emphasizes the importance of timing and development in the mate selection process.

Likewise, timing was a significant factor in a relationship drifting into marriage as illustrated by Jack:

Well, let’s see, at the time, I would say...all of our friends were getting married...Everybody goes to college at the same time and then everybody’s getting married at the same time, so I figured that was what I needed to be doing, so it, uh, it made sense and so that was who I was in the relationship with then...who you know, I was thinking about marrying...we’d started talking about it probably way too early in the relationship...it was always kind of a conversation point and always sort of like the direction that it was headed, uh, and nothing really happened to, I guess get off of that direction, um, but then like, when I look back at it, there’s also things like...she wanted to have a summer wedding, so that meant she had to book the church and all the facilities like a year before that, so at some point we reached a point where she

was like, I want to get married this summer, so then it was like working backwards from that.

Each participant listed more than one factor that contributed to their mate selection decision. Kelly said, "I think it was a combination of a few factors...I think it was time to get married, probably, a little bit. Then, I felt he actually was quite a good person...I felt he would be a good husband and a good dad and that we would both be able to build a nice family, because we shared the same values." An excerpt from Laura's interview illustrates her mate selection process according to five reasons (physical/ emotional connection, drifting into marriage, lucky you love me, things will improve, and commitment):

And so I thought, I'm about that age. He's here. He was actually a rebound boyfriend and so I realized you know, in hindsight, I was so wounded and wondering whether...was I lovable...was I romantically in love with him? A little. You know, but that wasn't my prevailing force...it's time, he's there, let's go with this...and I've been rejected by somebody that I truly did have that with. Oh my gosh, probably the most important person that I had that with in my life, and so now am I really lovable, cause that person ended up, you know, betraying me, cheating on me with somebody else, and so I thought, I'm not lovable. I'm not worthy. Here's somebody that seems to be okay...I better grab onto him because it may not come back again...and so to me it was like, yeah, just kind of the perfect storm of everything... it's time, and he's there....and we'll just go with it, and besides, I'm committed to a family and I'm committed to this paradigm, and I'm committed to all that and I'm pretty competent, so I'm going to make it happen...I think he was sweet and sort of, he would rub my feet and sort of doted on me, so I think I thought, okay, this guy, this guy cares about

me and he, he adored me a little bit and so that's going to be enough... he was really handsome and he was tall and he was funky and sort of you know, not my typical guy...he took me out on his motorcycle and he sort of like, oh, and he had long hair...he had that little bit of a bad boy...he had been in trouble...and I thought, oh, he's my rebel. And besides, he just needs me, cause I'm very good and you know, kind, and I'm going to reform him and all this is going to be just great...I know he had sort of a fractured family of origin, but I didn't know the whole detail, which again, made him more lovable because he was obviously going to be wounded and I was going to fix him.

The following illustrates two factors that Liz used in her mate selection (individual characteristics and doing the right thing):

Um, I want to say the big one, for me, um, was that he was responsible, like he, um, even though we entered the whole situation in kind of backwards, it was, there was stability. There was, um, we were poor as heck, but there was like this, a sense of security, even though financially it wasn't there, um. He was a hard worker, um, an absolutely wonderful dad, um. We were super young, like 19, twins born six months after we were married, so, um, the way he responded in that situation was absolutely positive...and could have ran the other way and chose not to...he's a good guy and I'm pregnant and it's the right thing to do.

The results as to the reasons the participants chose to marry are important contributions to the research because they could provide useful information to FORL researchers as to what mate selection processes are more advantageous for long-term, satisfying marriage.

In making a decision to marry, eight participants reported perceiving they knew, at the time of mate selection, what they were looking for in a long-term mate, as the following comments illustrate. Jackie recalled,

I thought I did, yeah...well, I was 26 and I thought I knew everything. You know, I'd been out of college for two years and I had a good job and you know, I got this, I got this all figured out, you know and he was...on a good path at the time, and, um, like I said, we were together for seven years before we got married and part of that was time for both of us to get our ducks in a row, get out of school, do what we needed to do, so that I wouldn't be 40 and divorced. Because I was going to do all this stuff ahead of time and make sure that we had this foundations. That was my thought process.

Adam said,

...my mother loved me unconditionally and she was the...strongest woman that I've ever known...I suppose in some ways she's the standard in terms of unconditional love that I look for in a spouse...I think I've seen you know, other examples, you know of, um, friends' parents...that I saw were happier...how they...treat one another...obviously I don't know everything, right, but what I see you know helped set an example... that looks like something I would like...

Staying together in her marriage was important to Laura because her parents and others did:

I saw people in my cultural community and in other communities that seemed to have good marriages, but of course I would only see them at social events and so on and so forth, and you know, now because of the work I do, I know they were struggling too, um, and um, no my parents did not have a good, you know, good

marriage but they were in the era where you stayed together no matter what...and so the bottom line is I thought, that you know, I don't know, I guess I thought that's what it was.

However, seven reported not really knowing what they were looking for in a long-term mate at the time of mate selection. Of these seven participants, three said they had no idea what they were looking for, and four other participants had only some idea of what they were looking for in a long-term mate.

Instead of knowing what qualities to seek in a mate, six participants reported knowing what they did not want in a long-term mate – generally based on past relationships or family-of-origin experiences. Doug said, “I have some really good examples of what not to do... you know my parents married each other, divorced, remarried each other, divorced, remarried other people, divorced, married other people, and then my dad did another time. So, I had a lot of, yeah, this is what you shouldn't be doing.” Another participant, Frank, stated, “My mother was the strong one, my father complained about everything. I don't care what it was, he bitched about it. All I knew was that I didn't want it...this is not going to be the way I'm going to do this. So, in other words, by example, by bad example.” As recalled by Sandra, “But again, that's all I knew...everything in my life has been a climb.”

The finding that seven participants did not know what qualities to seek in a long-term mate is a salient contribution of this study, having not been addressed in previous FORL research. This lack of knowledge about mate selection could reflect the inadequacy of positive relationship role models in the participants' families of origin and/or the lack of knowledge they had regarding positive mate selection. Additionally, it is possible that issues resulting from abuse, neglect, or addiction in the family of origin (i.e., insecure attachment,



inadequate conflict resolution skills) may have set the stage for difficulties in the participant's adult relationships, including lack of awareness of healthy relationship qualities.

Further, at the time of mate selection, 10 participants did not consider the costs or rewards of the relationship. In other words, they did not consciously take an inventory of the relationship or individual qualities of their mate and determine if it was a good personal fit. Concerns about the relationship, if acknowledged, were ignored or minimized. As recounted by Jack, "No, I think I avoided that, like, almost intentionally, like when there were issues, like, and there weren't big issues, but when there were little issues, I just completely ignored them, um, and generally it was assumed that it would not be an ongoing issue." Laura reported, "I overlooked the bad, I mean, I just downplayed and minimized the bad." And Liz stated, "I don't think at that point in my life I was really processing it in that way, um, a lot of fear...I mean, there was positives and negatives on both sides of it...but I don't know that I sat down and said, 'let's do this' or 'let's not do this'...."

Further, three participants made excuses for their partner's behavior or tried to fix them. As explained by Sandra, "...as time went by, my friends are, like, he's a jerk. I'm like, you just don't understand, like, he doesn't mean it. He doesn't realize he's rude, like, I made excuses...I mean, a ton of excuses, and he, you know, everybody's different, everybody communicates differently... he'll realize and I'll help him realize."

Five participants reported considering cost and rewards as part of mate selection. As Frank elaborated,

There are two columns...goods and bads...they're always there...I saw a very weak spot in her...I taught martial arts...I would go away for the weekend on a tournament, and I'd come back and it was...you can't do anything but what I tell you for three

days. You owe me three days. Why would I owe you three days? ...it got more and more extreme. You have to quit teaching...Well I'm not quitting, so I guess we're not getting married...over time it was repaired, and we actually did get married about two years later....

Finally, as described by eight participants, important details were not considered during mate selection; they married for the wrong reasons, or they simply did not think the decision through. As Laura recalled, "No, no, I didn't have any kind of clearheaded analysis...at that young age, I didn't have that kind of analysis on much of anything. I was making all emotional decisions and I was making them quickly and impulsively and then picking up the pieces when everything fell apart." Similarly, immaturity was stated by three participants as a factor in the mate selection pathway of FORL. Adam said, "...looking back, yeah, there's definitely a maturity, lack of maturity on both of our parts..." As further explained by Tessa, "Yeah, I mean, he would say, well maybe we should just take a step back and whatever, because I think at the time, you know, I was very immature. I had jealousy issues, different things like that and, um, I think it was, I was his first and only physical relationship."

**Minimal relationship rewards.** As discussed previously, many of the participants entering into marriage did not consider the rewards and costs during mate selection. However, all the participants reported the examination of rewards and costs, as they reached FORL, which for many, contributed to the decision-making process to end the relationship. The exception was one participant who stated that she continues to weigh the rewards and costs, and has not made a decision about her marriage. The rewards of the marriage most often identified were keeping children in an intact family (n=10), as well as more stable

finances and lifestyle (n=2). As cited by Jackie, “Absolutely, yeah, I mean, I analyzed that to death, oh yeah, to death...because I was so hell bent on not raising them that way. I mean, my oldest is literally almost to the day the age I was when my parents split.” Also, as Tessa commented, “But it was still kind of scary for me financially, because here I was in this big house with a pool in the backyard and a physician husband, and this and that, and um, like I said, everybody likes him fine. I mean...he’s not a bad person by any means. But, um...I wanted to be happy; happy is big.”

Other rewards mentioned by one participant each included safety and security in marriage and a shared history. As Liz reasoned, “...it was a big investment that I made...a shared history, a big investment...that first grandchild born, our daughter getting married, not having to deal with all of that peripheral, you know, new wife...I’ll never get married again, but boyfriend, whatever, um, all that stuff I wouldn’t have to worry about.”

Two participants reported there were no rewards left to consider, while 14 of the participants reported that none of the rewards were truly considered rewards at the time of the interview. As evaluated by Sandra, “...there are great benefits, but I did not, even those were not fun, they were painful.”

Only a few costs were commonly identified across the participants. Four described significant emotional pain or depression by staying in the relationship. As pointed out by Joe, “...my parents came to visit...and I told them, like this is not going to work and they were like, oh, you’re going to make it work. I’m like no, I’ve been trying, you know and at this point in time I know it’s not healthy for me to continue psychologically, cause I’m emotionally unstable right now....” Four listed emotional and/or physical abuse by the spouse, and in two of these cases, there were serious personal safety concerns. Four

participants described non-abusive, negative partner behavior such as drinking, arguing, lying and not working. Four reported children being hurt by the parents' continued relationship. Other costs of staying in the relationship expressed by participants included loss of emotional, spiritual, and/or physical intimacy. For example, one participant, Joe reported that the spiritual connection was paramount, and that the emotional and physical connection fell apart without the spiritual component. "And so you start to balance it all out and falling out of love is much easier than falling into love in that situation, because of the three, I'm you know, 0 for 3 there – emotional, physical, spiritual." The following responses were expressed by only one or two participants: giving but getting nothing in return, interest in attractive alternatives, spouse's lack of motivation, intense conflict, conflicting values, and raising children alone.

**Lack of emotional or physical connection.** Another common pathway to FORL was the lack of emotional and/or physical connection between the participant and partner. All of the participants reported emotional and/or physical disconnection from their partner accompanying FORL. This finding was important because it suggests that FORL is tied to the loss of emotional and/or physical connection to one's spouse. As assessed by Tessa, "I don't have a problem with sex drive...but I think when I look back on it, I really didn't want to have a sexual relationship with him. He was still a very attractive guy. He's still a very attractive guy, but any time he touched me, there was just like, ewwww." As described by Adam, "Yeah, it was probably just an erosion, I guess...It just got to the point where you know, the physical attraction was gone, and after all of the emotional damage had been done, I think that was probably the last straw for me." Said Kelly, "I think both were fading slowly...the physical attraction still was there, a little bit, you know, but I think the trust was

the most difficult part....” Generally, this disconnection was bi-directional (emotional and/or physical withdrawal from both spouses, at some point in the marriage), with the exception of two female participants, who described their spouses as more clingy, instead of withdrawing. This finding indicates that not all individuals react the same way – depicting some spouses withdrawing and others holding on in response to relationship problems. Nicole described trying to disengage from her spouse:

...I just needed some time and I can’t like, find myself and figure out what’s going on in my own head when I have somebody else up my ass asking me a thousand questions...he worships the ground I walk on. He would do absolutely anything for me. He, um, I mean, for the most part, he is, he’s what every girl dreams of having and I’m like, who, like I’m such a bitch. I’m a terrible person because I have what most people would die for and I don’t even, like, I don’t even want it.

And Michelle spoke of disengaging from her spouse:

...he was like crying, sobbing, and wanted me to have sex with him, right now. So I had sex with him while he was sobbing...I will never do that again...I have always said that I will never, ever, I don’t owe anyone sex or anything...that did not feel good and I will never do that, you know, I won’t, I never owe someone, um, physical or emotional intimacy that’s not there.” (Michelle)

**Outside influences.** Three participants cited outside factors such as high stress, exhaustion, or problems with in-laws as contributing to their FORL. This finding is salient because it represents issues outside the individual or relationship as also problematic. Further, this finding highlights stress and insufficient coping skills as a possible pathway to FORL. For example, Tessa noted that “...eight years into the marriage [her husband] decided

to go back to medical school...which is a huge stress on him, um, and so the relationship got worse just because of the stress..."

Tessa also reported her mother's new, positive relationship as contributing to a change in her thinking about her own marriage, suggesting the seemingly unpredictable nature of FORL.

...after my dad died my mom started dating a family friend...And this guy was not my father and was not as cool or as sharp as my father...but all of a sudden my mom's laughing and smiling and enjoying life and that, to me, made a huge impact, because I saw a huge difference in her happiness and so that said to me, you know what, I don't want to live my whole life just being kind of...just existing.

**Denial of problems.** All of the participants reported minimizing or denying problems earlier in their relationship. The most common reasons included wanting to believe in the partner's goodness, having young children, and attempting to avoid a failed relationship. This finding is important because it could assist researchers in understanding decisions to discount negative aspects of the relationship. Understanding reasons for denial may help to prevent problem avoidance in the future, which could assist couples in tackling them before they become detrimental to the relationship. Janet, for instance, said,

...I didn't want to fail again...I was afraid...I asked him to go through pre-marital counseling and, um, he did for a while, but, um, the counselor didn't really think that...he was ready...I remember he got mad about that and...the counselor ended up telling me that he would see me for some issues that I had...but 'X' [partner] needed more intensive therapy...I took real carefully into account what the counselor was telling me, but I had an intuition that I could fix, I mean that things would work out

okay and...that all we needed to do is love one another and that things would work out.

A few things in the early years...I ignored. You know, you would ignore stuff

because you don't want to think about it or because it might be hard or whatever...

Her lifestyle and perfection delayed her disengagement from her spouse, with whom she was FORL:

...for me personally, it was like, and there were signs along the way in the last 10 years...I just didn't want to see because I was too caught up in having the perfect life. And the house was designed and built in the perfect suburban neighborhood and the perfect school district and I was too caught up in being the perfect mom and wife and parent and everything else.

**Emerging realizations.** All the participants referred to gaining "realizations" about their relationship, such as a spouse's blaming or lying, lack of emotional and/or physical connection, lack of support, concern for safety of self and/or children, personal unhappiness, nothing in common, would not be married if were not for the kids, giving but not getting anything back, spouse/situation is not going to change, and I've fallen out of love. These realizations developed over time and led to more negative thoughts regarding one's spouse, oneself, or the relationship. As Joe stated,

...I recognized that when I was away, I was more of a punching bag for being away...so of there was anything that was wrong, it was my fault for being away...I looked back and I saw all these other spouses that were supporting their deployed military members, and I didn't receive that same type of support. And I remember thinking, 'Well, this is crap.'

And Sandra recognized her own shortsightedness:

Yeah, when his best friend is like, 'leave her alone', stop picking on her...if that guy thinks that, why don't I, like why am I not standing up for myself? Why am I not seeing that?

The following thoughts occurred after these realizations emerged: "What is going on here?" "This isn't right" "Maybe it will get better" "I'm not getting my needs met" "I can't do anymore to fix it" and "I can't do this anymore." Further, some participants described beginning to think about their own importance and worth or even alternative partners, demonstrating the eroding relationship and shift in thoughts about self and others. Tessa knew in a few years that things had changed:

...I started seeing it probably within the first, like, three or four years, that you know, I would get, I kept thinking things were going to get better or change or something like that, once we um...got through one hurdle and the next hurdle or what not...After we had the first child, he...made me nervous with his, um, moods, reactions to um, money...different things like that.

Liz began to reflect on her own needs after her children were grown:

Yeah, when they [children] started to get pretty self-sufficient, um, we just, we grew apart...we had nothing in common...I was like, no, I don't, I can't, I'm not taking care of you, anymore. I'm done. I'm not going to do this anymore. My children are grown, I need to be me. I've sacrificed a lot and I love them to death, but I sacrificed a lot and you didn't...

Doug observed the change in his own marriage years before:



You know, but, but I realized along the way, like wait a minute, what's happening?

This feels different than before we were married...So, there were lots of times through the years, but it wasn't until about seven years ago I think that I realized, I'm not in love anymore...So, that was about...twelve years in.

Not only did increased awareness and realizations lead to negative thoughts, but negative feelings emerged, as well. Feelings were variable across participants; however, they were generally negative and directed toward one's self, one's spouse, or the relationship. Understanding feelings involved in FORL is crucial to researchers for understanding the essence of the phenomenon in question. The most common feelings accompanying FORL, as described by the participants in this study, included self-blame, regret, disappointment, being under-valued, not listened to, shamed, heartbroken, fear, criticized, uneasy, dissatisfied, less attracted, disrespected, anxious, hurt, nervous, confused, surprised, irritated, lost, empty, indecisive, ambivalent, hopeless, disconnected, angry, suspicious, cold, depressed, miserable, upset, sad, ill, living a lie, and resentful. As realized by Michelle, "We just didn't seem like we should be together." Tessa described feeling devalued by her spouse:

...My ex-husband really didn't mean to. It's just, I don't know what it was...he just made me feel like I was, I was not that great...his life was important and his views were important and what I was doing was not.

Frank described the difficulty of being at home with his spouse:

....it got to the point where...driving home, I started feeling it. I started feeling anxious and tense just pulling in my own driveway. I hadn't even gotten in the house yet....She wants to talk about something...eggshells. Watch how you phrase it...I'll give you an answer, but I didn't tell you what my heart says....That is a very big part

of the falling out of love. You're protecting yourself beyond all feeling...To me, it's like you can look at this person you're married to and it's cold. You don't feel anything. It's gone. You could bring a boyfriend in, and I really don't care.

Doug depicted the lack in his marriage:

...it's not like, you know I'm more advanced than her or anything, but we are just, we have always been in very different places and, and even when she was more vulnerable, more connected, more willing...just wasn't enough...There just wasn't enough depth, connection, intimacy. Anything.

Nicole remarked on being unable to respond to her spouse:

...he's always bringing up, how come you never chase me around? How come you never, you know, made the first move? How come you never...finally the other day, I was like, cause I don't feel like I want to...I have found myself becoming more annoyed and just super irritated with things that I've always been able to overlook...I'm not one to cry, so I've cried more in the last 6 months than I have in my entire life...I mean he even, just last week he was like texting me, why don't you initiate sex anymore and I was like...you know, it's just not there.

**Behaviors.** Spouse and participant behavior comprised yet another segment of the pathway to FORL. For simplification purposes, the behaviors listed will be broken down into three categories: common behaviors between the participant and spouse, behaviors unique to the spouse, and behaviors unique to the participant. This is an important finding because it further assists in our understanding of FORL.

Common behaviors of both the participant and the spouse, as described by the participant included an uptick in arguing, passive or withdrawing behaviors, and physical

intimacy behavioral changes – generally a reduction and/or disinterest in intimacy. As stated by Laura, “We had not had sex in seven years...but in the end it would have repelled me to even have his foot touch mine in the bed.” As described by Jackie, “It got to the point where we didn’t even talk. We weren’t mad...it wasn’t animosity. We just plain didn’t talk.”

The most common spousal behavior accompanying FORL, as expressed by the participants, were repeated negative actions of the spouse, followed by the spouse not taking responsibility for his/her part in the marital problems. Other terms which emerged from the data referring to the negative actions included “dominoes”, “realizations”, “big bombs”, “specific events”, “tips of the scale”, and “red flags.” As indicated by Joe, “And so you know, when did it happen, you know, the dominoes just fell.” Reported by Liz, “...the scales tipped and I really, I mean there was a couple tips of the scales. The move to Des Moines...saying at counseling I needed it more than he did, so you should probably go and do that appointment cause I’m good, and then when he moved out all of the sudden... I mean there was all kind of these little things...” All of these terms refer to incidents or actions which built up and propelled the participant into a different frame of mind regarding the relationship.

Sandra depicted a religious conflict, and being made fun of for her convictions:

So, he’s, um, atheist...If I mentioned God at all, I was made fun of and asked if I believe in fairies and unicorns, so that’s one wonderful thing now, is that I can believe anything I want and not get made fun of...You can be what you want to be, but I’m going to make sure you know I think it’s dumb.

Additionally, three participants reported emotional and/or physical abuse from their spouse. Of her spouse’s abuse, Janet said, “...I was out doing the dishes and wiping the

dishes and he came out of the bedroom with a belt, with a big belt with a big buckle and he started hitting me with it, because that is how their dad punished him.” This finding is an important contribution to the literature, because it represents yet another pathway to FORL—physical abuse.

Alternatively, the most common participant behaviors, as reported by them, included passivity or not standing up for themselves, attempts to address the issues, and withdrawing. As explained by Adam, “...the physical relationship kind of was non-existent, shortly after we got married...I did feel rejected, you know, I did check out emotionally, quite a bit, because I felt like, okay, what’s wrong?” Noting the tension, Tessa said, “...I got to the point where I didn’t share anything with him, just because I knew I would be criticized any time I did...if I didn’t follow his rules, there would be that moodiness, um, so I would find ways to skirt around it, you know.” As reported by Jackie,

...my marriage was almost very parental. In the early years he said, ‘I’m not good with money, you do it’. I’m like, ‘okay.’ So I did. And then you know, I took care of the money, and I always planned the birthday parties, and I made all the phone calls, and I did all these things. I was very, very coddling to him and so, I kind of, in a way, can see some of how it got that way.

According to three participants, their spouses reported seeing no problems with their marriage, though the participants were experiencing FORL, having verbalized their unhappiness to their spouse. This finding is useful because it suggests a difference of perspective between the spouses. It is possible one spouse is in denial or alternatively the spouse’s needs are not being met, causing a perceptual disparity. As illustrated by Doug, “...I remember four years ago, um, about four years ago sitting with her and saying, I can’t do this

anymore and I am miserable and depressed. I struggled to even come home, and she'd say, what are you talking about? I am completely content. I don't want anything to change....We'd be in completely different places." As further illustrated by Sandra,

....yeah, he's like, what can we do to get her to be who she was? How will we fix her so that she can, our marriage will be perfect again? And the therapist was like, 'she wasn't happy. She's not happy and she doesn't want it the way that it was', and he was, like, well that's ridiculous....

**Someone changed.** Additionally, the results indicated that one or both partners changed, after marriage. In fact, four participants reported that they themselves had changed in the marriage, including personal growth, change in values, or change in needs. Change was generally considered the outcome of a natural progression that could not be predicted. However, some participants felt their spouse put forth more effort when dating or concealed information during courtship which came to light later in the marital relationship. This is an important contribution to research on FORL because it further exemplifies its complexity, and speaks to the seemingly unpredictable nature of the phenomenon. Michelle spoke of significant changes she and her partner underwent:

I was very overweight and, um, had, I think, a lot of self-esteem problems. I still felt very bad about, um, being a single parent... so when I met 'X'...sweet guy, big guy, you know big teddy bear guy, um, he was pretty active...I mean, I would say I was working out but... he would run 5K's and do things like that and that really impressed the hell out of me...I continued to put on weight...and I had weight loss surgery...and, um, in that time, he's probably gained a hundred pounds...I love to go out and do things...I socialize a lot and, um, he's started to just kind of be the

opposite and he really wasn't like that before...I told him when we separated, you need to go see a counselor or you need to figure out what's going on. You need to empower yourself whether we end up together or not. You need that, and he has said, he's described it as he wasn't giving himself permission to have fun because he didn't think that's what parents did.

Five participants reported that their spouse had changed. As illustrated by Tessa, "I think he changed. I think he, he just slowly morphed into his parents." Finally, two participants reported they both had changed. It did not appear that change itself was an issue, but change became problematic when it differed from the other partner and/or was not honored or celebrated between them.

**Coping deficits.** The results also suggested deficits among the spouses which contributed to FORL. Three participants reported that they themselves had deficits that negatively impacted their marriage. This finding is useful because it suggests that these participants shared responsibility for their relationship problems. Tessa said, "I think my ex probably wasn't okay with himself as much as he could have been, and I think I definitely didn't have the strengths I do now...you know. It's like the old adage, I mean, I wish I...knew then what I know...." Though Jack didn't think his wife had changed, he explained that he had, accepting his role in their break up:

She didn't change, like she was 100% her, start to finish... um, my reactions definitely changed over time...I would have just ignored it, but now I'm like, I would notice it and acknowledge that I did not like it, um...I wouldn't say anything to her, but I would just feel differently about it...I didn't tell her everything until probably six months before I moved out, and then it was...I don't want to do this anymore. It

wasn't, here are the things we need to work on...I convinced myself that it was a good thing that we didn't talk about it, because I remember I was with a group of, like, friends on a car ride, and they were talking arguments with their wives and I was like completely honest with them. We never argue, just don't, and like, I was proud of that then, but now I realize that was not a good thing...I think the relationship would have been saveable at any point with the right tools, which I did not have...even at the end, but if I would have been able to communicate the feelings, like, early on, when we would have issues...it would have never got to that point.

Affairs outside their marriages were also reported by some participants as a result of marital discontent (n=3), specifically to supplement the marriage (n=1), and following an open marriage experience, requested by the spouse (n=1). This finding is important because those who had affairs did not condone the behavior nor did they believe they would ever participate in an affair. Again, this finding shows the unpredictable and unhelpful events that occur in the process of FORL. As Laura explained, "...there's a lot of people that are...just living in a marriage just cause they think it's good for the kids, um, but they're really out of the marriage, and I'll tell you, I did have an affair... with an old boyfriend...on a weekend and that was empty too..." Tessa described her affair:

I actually had an affair with my best friend, which was crazy cause I never thought I would do that, so, because I just didn't feel like I had a partner....I fought against it for a long time....I think it was probably just to, um, actually feel like I had some worth. In fact...he's been a good friend forever...I was never attracted to him whatsoever...and so...all of that attention and all that, you know.

## Dimensions of FORL

The dimensions discussed in this section are salient findings which emerged from the data regarding FORL, including its stages, point of no return, efforts made, emotional struggle, advice, and common experience.

**Patterns.** When asked about the prospect of FORL having stages, the results were mixed. Nine participants reported the likelihood of stages. However, seven of those had difficulty naming them. Adam reflected on stages he probably went through:

You know, I think if I look back at all my emotions over the time, you know, and saying when did I fall out of love entirely... there probably are stages that I went through. I can't put any labels or tell you what they were, but yeah, I think there are definitely, you know, when I felt the rejection, you know, that was like a cut, yeah. And then I felt like that led into other things...not talking effectively about things, not working through things, that was just another cut in the relationship and ultimately ended up causing us to really not even, at some points, not even really like each other.

Conversely, six participants reported that there were no stages, yet four of them stated that it felt more like a process, and shared elements involved in that process. Overall, the essence from the participants indicated fluid patterns to FORL versus specific stages. The consistent patterns were: a) Red flags: “recognizing the bliss was never there”, “red flags”, “warning”, “realization...I don't think this is working”; b) Efforts to remedy the concerns: “trying to re-engage”, “last ditch effort to fix it”, “trying to please”; c) Indifference: “ambivalence”, “indifference”, “I don't care”, “acceptance that this is how it will be”; d) Done – FORL has occurred: “giving up”, “I'm done”, “decided need to separate.” Instead of



stages, the data suggested the four components are general patterns of the FORL process. An illustration of the first pattern came from Joe:

I remember saying to her, when I had my gas mask and all my chem gear on my back, and I said, I don't know how to say this, but something feels strange about this...I think that was my first acknowledgement that this isn't working. I'm ready to get on a plane. She's nice enough to drop me off...the trouble I'm having is leaving 'x' [child] and 'x' [child]. My trouble is not leaving her....

**Point of no return.** Additionally, 13 participants indicated a *point of no return*. This was a term I coined in my work with clients, based on curiosity about some of them who seemed unable to ignite their will to try to renew the relationship. As defined by most participants, the point of no return was where acceptance “that it was over” had taken place, and they had no plan or desire to reconcile the relationship. The point of no return seemed to align with stage four, i.e., being done, or the final stage of FORL. In some cases, the participant was still married to the spouse. However, many were contemplating divorce or separation at this point. Laura described sticking it out for 17 years, but knowing that her marriage was over:

How long do I wait? What do I do? And it wasn't until my dad became ill and I took care of him as a hospice patient in my house and helped him die...I would say, will you [spouse] go in and see if dad's okay? I just, I woke up in the middle of the night and I'm just sure he's not breathing and he'd, you know, say he's fine. So no emotional support [from her spouse] or whatever through that whole thing. I just thought, gosh, I'm watching somebody die. It causes you to look at your own mortality. I didn't really get any deep support in that. This person is still emotionally

unavailable and distant and if I don't get out of that now, I'm doomed...I did get out right after that, so about 17 years in...I was unhappy in year one and I stayed 17 more...hoped that it would change...I was escalating toward the commitment that I made. I didn't really have the courage to get out, and I'd probably still be rotting there, frankly, except I had a guy that caught my eye...but I think a lot of people still stay in. Even if they're there because of the fear of the unknown, I mean, and I see that in my clients all the time, the money...I haven't worked. I haven't done whatever and so I'll just stay in this hell hole. Even though we're not really in a marriage and then you're playing out all sorts of dysfunctional sick crap, that, um, just, I think just sort of takes your soul away.

Adam explained when he had reached the point of no return:

I think I probably knew for sure when we were going through counseling and she decided she didn't want to really have the spotlight on her and talk about things that were bothering me in our relationship. I think I probably knew at that point it's really over...but falling out of romantic love probably happened earlier than that in terms of a consistent feeling. I mean, there were times where we could you know, recapture that moment for a brief period, but it didn't really last very long.

And Tessa spoke of reaching the point of no return more than once:

But he [spouse] tried for a period, there was that honeymoon period of about three or four years where he stopped doing that kind of stuff and then it just went back...then there was another point where I was just like done, and I still kept trying cause I wanted to stay together for the kids' sake...I'm going to stay until my youngest

daughter is out of high school, but then I just hit that point again where, I'm just...done.

The point of no return was quite clear to Jackie:

It was a point of no return, because I knew that he, and even to this day, he wouldn't admit to any of that. I know that he was never going to own up to it, to apologize for it.

**Efforts to save the marriage.** The participants and their spouses attempted to remedy their marital problems included attempts. This is a useful contribution to the research because knowing what did not assist couples in avoiding FORL could help with development of clinical recommendations for individuals and couples presenting with FORL. Twelve of the participants said they sought individual therapy and 11 sought couple's therapy. Three sought pastoral support. Of those who sought individual therapy, all but one reported greatly benefiting from therapy, which they generally described as processing thoughts and feelings, personal growth, or healing (i.e., understanding oneself, one's own role in the marriage, what deteriorated in the marriage, and feeling validated). The one participant who said he did not benefit reported that he had attended Christian counseling for only one visit, due to feeling judged. Consider Allison's explanation of how individual therapy was useful for her:

The biggest thing was helping me process and heal. Processing what I did to contribute to the end of the relationship and how that, working together with the issues we had as a couple, contributed to each other. It was also a validation. Sometimes when I was in the thick of it, I would start to second guess my reality. Therapy helped me to get grounded around that and really process things from a centeredness space instead of a chaos space.

Further, six participants who attended couples therapy found it to be helpful despite their eventual FORL. This is an important finding because clients may find benefit in therapy even if the marriage does not remain intact. Specifically, four of those participants described gaining assistance through understanding themselves and their spouse better and learning about the relationship. Frank reported considerable counseling:

So, four to five and a half years...counseling once a month...there were counselors that, they'd interview me, they'd interview her, then interview [us] together...can't say coming to me will keep you married or get you a divorce, but you're going to learn. And that's the person I learned a lot from about relationships, in general...I could have stayed married. If I had taken my values and changed them to what she needed, I would still be married...she was ready too. I think she gave up because I think she wanted a divorce, cause she didn't want to change either.

Two of the participants found couple's therapy to be effective earlier in the marriage; however, those gains were reportedly lost over time. Concepts such as communication, affairs, and rebuilding were the focus of those sessions. Conversely, four of the participants who attended couples therapy reported that it was largely ineffective. This is an important finding because it provides insight which may be of great clinical use regarding treatment planning and recommendations. Of these participants, three described the poor outcome as resulting from the spouse and/or participant not wanting to participate, and one participant indicated that she could not be honest with the therapist about the problems in the marriage, because she was fearful of her abusive spouse. Adam described his and his spouse's counseling attempts and outcome:

I mean, we worked on some action items and tasks...during that therapy...we did have better intimacy and better emotional connection. And yeah, we did work on, um, some of those things, and you know, it helped in our relationship for that period of time, and then once we didn't go anymore, it was like we just reverted back...then she decided to stop going when it came time to talk about what he needed her to do differently... I could have probably forced the issue if maybe I had wanted it more myself, and I own that too, that we didn't go.

All 11 of the participants who attended couple's therapy said they did not use the term FORL in their sessions to describe their presenting problem. This result is important because it suggests that providers need to assess for FORL and listen closely for other related connections (e.g., loss of emotional or physical connection). It is possible that those in marital therapy did not mention FORL because it seemed like a significant negative blow to the marriage, or they did not use the term, but described their concerns in other ways.

Of the three participants who used pastoral care, two found it unhelpful and one found it somewhat helpful. Again, this is useful information to helping professionals who are providing services for couples. Frank described how therapy was not helpful: "I listened and tried to think I was keeping an open mind...but I also somewhat discredited it [because the priest had never been married]...it was a lot more of the Biblical version of marriage. They don't care if you don't like it anymore, you're married."

Fourteen participants said that they talked to their spouse directly about the problems. This finding is useful because it suggests the participants communicated their concerns at some point, albeit it may have been too late (e.g., the participant brought it up late in the process of FORL; the spouse did not understand the seriousness of the situation, or the

spouse or participant was not interested in or able to making changes to adequately address the concerns). Delving further into their process of communication would be beneficial. As illustrated by Doug,

I was a good husband...occasionally, I would come out with 'I'm not satisfied, something needs to change' and whenever I would do that she would try and show differently, but it would only last like a couple weeks and, and she, you know, then I would, I would kind of behave again...

Seven of the participants described talking to family or friends about their problems, although such sharing was not indicated as contributing to their FORL. However, one participant reported that her parents' expression of their acceptance and understanding of her decision to divorce was helpful. Reasons participants gave for not talking to their family or friends about their marital struggle included issues of privacy or not feeling comfortable to do so.

Although only specifically stated by two participants throughout the interviews, it was clear from their comments that the majority of them invested patience and enormous time into their marital relationship. These results are significant because it suggests FORL is not a phenomenon that occurs quickly or is taken lightly. So implied Liz:

...I was married 28 years, and so that time span was all focused on children...doing the right thing for 28 years...it was really when my children started to get ready to fly out of the nest. Um, well, it was probably before that, I should say it was probably before that. On my paper, I put 20 years but it was probably earlier than that..."

**A significant finding about FORL.** Further, although the participants indicated they experienced FORL with their spouse an average of 8 years and 11 months into the marriage

(range of 1 to 20 years), they indicated having inklings or beginning thoughts of unhappiness an average of 2 years, 9 months into the marriage (range of 0 to 14 years). Thus it took approximately 6 years from the first inklings of FORL to end the relationship. This is a significant finding because it suggests FORL is not a hasty process and that there may be time to stop it from occurring if interventions are begun sooner rather than later.

Other, less common tactics to remedy their marital issues included attempts to fix the situation themselves by being extra kind to their spouse, providing support to the spouse, planning romantic trips, soul-searching, negotiating with spouse, and/or reading self-help books. Kelly focused on helping her spouse:

I kept working harder and harder to help him...so I put aside myself, my feelings...I was trying to be there for him and do things how he wanted, how he would like...and I was trying to help take any chores...he could just focus on fixing his life...I really wanted to save the family.

Liz consulted self-help books:

Well, yeah, I read books, but that was again, one sided. I mean, there was lots of times when I would be looking at some sort of self-help book to figure out, like communicating, like, here's what I have to say and how he's going to respond according to the book, and it didn't work.

Laura tried getaways for her and her husband:

We had money, and so I would plan getaways... I said, every six weeks I want us to go somewhere, so I got a beautiful bed and breakfast in La Jolla, a cozy little place, and we flew there. We flew to Hawaii and never had sex. So, I was constantly trying to re-ignite that, constantly trying to take us away.

Doug strived to connect with his wife:

...I would ask her to be a little more present, or, or connected, or come out and play more or things like that and so, did kind of a stance of trying to negotiate that....

One participant reported having an affair as an attempt to supplement or stabilize her marriage. Two participants noted that they and their spouse agreed to try an open marriage to remedy their marital problems. These findings are useful in researching the efforts of couples to remedy their situations through having other relationships because they indicated that both affairs and attempts at open marriages were not beneficial in avoiding FORL. Doug described their attempt at open marriage:

She suggested open marriage...to give me a chance to find, like something else, like she knew I couldn't give her or that she couldn't give me...she's like, I'm tired of not being able to give you what you need. I want us to work and if you can get some of this emotional intimacy that you're talking about with someone else, then maybe, maybe we can be okay. So she set me up with her friend...it was weird...it didn't work out with the friend...but you know what it did do, what I really appreciated, was that it made our relationship, um, equal cause we had to talk about everything if it was going to be okay, if it was going to work, and we had to trust each other. We had to respect each other, we had to, um, be vulnerable and it made it show up in a way that she never had before and I just, I've really appreciated that part of it...and in that way it was really good for us, um, I think it was...better for her than it was for me...she did date some people...probably about five months ago, I actually met someone that I started dating and had an instant, like emotional connection to her, just, and it was just really great. It was meeting some of those needs and she got



really, really jealous...and we were still doing the open marriage thing and had been for a while and I hadn't really found anyone to date for the most part, um, but she had and it was working fine, um, but when she could see that I was getting some of those needs met elsewhere, it was really hard on her and she got, she started getting really mean.

**Emotional struggle.** When asked about the struggles of FORL, all 15 participants reported that they struggled emotionally through the process of FORL. These results are important because they speak to the difficulty of FORL, suggesting the experience is emotionally painful. The most common aspects of this emotional struggle were concerns regarding children (i.e., wanting to protect them, not wanting to hurt them, concern about their welfare), not having the family unit together, and not wanting to be divorced. As illustrated by Liz, "I really think adult children don't deal with divorce as easily as the little children do. It's so traumatizing for them and my son had just gotten married and it was so traumatizing...my boys didn't speak to me for, from May to September, it was really difficult." As described by Janet, "I felt so terrible that I failed again..." According to Kelly, "Actually, I'm very sad I don't have, I don't have family anymore. It's...very hard. I hate holidays, I hate vacation. Everything that I used to love...now, it's very painful." Other struggles included regret for not seeing warning signs prior to marriage, not leaving sooner, feeling judged, being uncertain about the morality of their decision (self-care versus being selfish), and hurting or concern for their spouse due to still caring for them or loving them in some way. As indicated by Janet, "...I still had feelings for him, but...what was totally necessary for a good marriage and to be healthy and stay together, wasn't there." Laura needed to move on:

I always felt sorrow for him that he could never get the courage to face his stuff, because I think there was a deep nugget of a really beautiful human being that he never uncovered and never had the courage to let shine... You know one of the many questions I'm going to say [to God] why do some people decide, I'm going to heal my life and why do some say 'I'm not going to' [say]... why do some people take that journey and others don't.

**Advice.** Fourteen of the participants reported understanding their own FORL experience and offered words of advice for both professionals (individual therapists, couple counselors, clergy, etc.) and individuals dealing with romantic relationships. These results are a useful contribution to the literature because they provide recommendations from those who have lived the experience. The most common suggestion for professionals by the participants was to meet the client where they are at. Allison shared her experience with a marriage counselor:

Marriage counselors, I don't know, I only know one personally, like, that I've been in front of, and he's, he's an amazing soul, um, funny, when I made my decision and I went back to him and I'm like, I made my decision, I'm done. You know, and he celebrated with me and he gave me permission to celebrate. And he was like, he just, the look on his face, to know that I was free, freeing myself... he meets you where you're at and that's what I'm trying to do for people in my life, right now... People just need permission sometimes, to be... And it's about the being and it's not about the doing... but learning how to be comfortable in being, but also knowing that someone's there for your 'being self', even if it's ugly and hideous and gut

wrenching, that they're still there. I mean, that's to me what a counselor provides - no matter how horribly you show up.

**Before and after marriage:** Advice for individuals in romantic relationships was provided by the participants for two separate time frames, *prior* to marriage and *during* marriage. The most common advice given by the participants was to know oneself prior to marriage, followed by recommendations to go slow, know your mate, be healthy emotionally, pay attention, be honest with yourself, make decisions by both thinking and feeling, don't ignore warning signs or intuition, gain education on healthy relationships, and know what to look for. As suggested by Laura, "...I would advise anybody, clearheaded thinking, clearheaded thinking... the perfect balance of clearheaded thinking and emotional thinking." And as advised by Tessa, "...try to marry your best friend, you know, or try to be with your best friend, but... a lot of times there's no attraction there...so it's hard to say."

Adam offered this view:

I think I would just slow down. I would have slowed down. If I could talk to myself at that point, I would say, don't rush into it. You know, you have, you're caught up in the moment, caught up in the feelings of, this is perfect, this is right, let's do it, but there's, we didn't have any reason to rush into it, so I think I would have told myself to slow down, spend some more time getting to really know this person face to face, um, you know, make sure that you know you have a lot more in common. Make sure that you share the values. Makes sure that you share the same life goals...how do you see the roles...once you start living together. I think it's probably having dialogue around those things. And talking about, um, you know, what's important to each person and I don't think we really did that a lot. We talked superficial level stuff at

that age, and at that point and we didn't really get into the deep level of really understanding what was really important to us at the core, both of us...I think part of it too is really each person knowing themselves completely...And I don't know if you know yourself ever completely 100% but...and it's a process too, right? I'm definitely a different person now than I was when we got married. I'm a different, I'm at a different level of maturity in terms of relationships and what I know I can give and how I want things to be and what my ideal definition would be now...of a spouse versus what it was then.

To Frank, paying attention was primary:

Pay attention...you need to pay attention to what your mind tells you. So many people put it off. Oh, I'm not going to pay attention to that...Oprah Winfrey once made a statement...'humans are the only animal that will run toward danger'. The others know better. We ignore it. I thought, that's quite a statement. You need to get back to realizing that this is what it is. You have to pay attention to what you feel.

The participants' most common recommendations to individuals *during* marriage were to know yourself, put each other first, expect change, work hard, engage in the process, pay attention, don't ignore your feelings, and communicate. Liz spoke of spouses changing during the course of their marriage:

I think both parties have to be open to...the other person is not who they were when you first got married. I was not that 19-year-old person that you saved from a terrible childhood...I'm not that person. Thank God. There's lots of healing and growing, and they have to grow in the same direction. They can't grow in two separate directions, which is what happened... growing parallel... you keep checking in and you're, um,

respectful and, um, encouraging...More than what's for supper, I mean more like, how are you feeling?

**The value of therapy.** Three participants recommended individual or couple's therapy, both before and during marriage, to understand oneself and the relationship. This is an important finding because it suggests positive source of outside support. Jack gave his advice to avoid FORL:

Oh just like lots of hours with therapy, and, um, you know, figuring why I react to certain things in certain ways, figuring out what it is I'm looking for in a relationship, and, um, what I do, you know, when I'm stressed, or when you know, um, yeah... all my triggers....if I was advising myself. I mean, pretty much every decision was the wrong one, and, like, throughout the entire thing so, um, I would have lots of advice for myself. Um... I mean, for other people, it's just, um, figuring out how to understand what you're feeling and then just communicating that directly and then dealing with, um, I guess what that means.

**Common experience.** Fourteen participants indicated that FORL is a relatively common experience. These results suggest that FORL is something worth investigating as it is not a unique phenomenon. As judged by Adam, "I don't think it's unique, I mean, I guess I can't comment on anybody else, specifically, but I mean, I can't imagine I'm the only person that's gone through this..." Tessa agreed:

Oh my, everybody but their dog...that's been married for a while, um, has fallen out of love with their spouse, and then there's the other half that I just noticed, they're still madly in love with their spouse, but they don't know their spouse is a dog, um,

you know...like you wonder if people are clueless or whatever, but yeah, I know people that are still married that have fallen out of love with their spouse.

Several dimensions to the phenomenon of FORL were found, including the conceptualization of FORL as a process, which occurs over time. Distinct stages were not identified, however loose patterns emerged. Additionally, the existence of a point of no return was indicated, which signifies the moment when the lost love was acknowledged by the participant and the chance of reconnecting were slim. Further, a variety of unsuccessful efforts to remedy the dissatisfaction in the marriage were attempted by the participants. As a result of their experiences several suggestions were provided to assist others in avoiding FORL. Finally, considerable emotional pain appears to be involved in FORL, which is believed to be a relatively common experience.

To conclude this chapter, a summary of the qualitative findings are presented in Table 4, below. In the following chapter, the results will be discussed relative to previous research and implications will be provided.

**Table 4***Summary of Findings from Qualitative Analyses (n=15)*

Findings	Percent of participants
<b>Elements of Romantic Love and Marital Satisfaction</b>	
Emotional and physical connection essential for romantic love	87%
Emotional and physical connection important to marriage	93%
Felt in-love early in the relationship	100%
Weak emotional or physical connection early in relationship	47%
Felt stronger emotional or physical connection to previous mates	47%
<b>Pathways to FORL</b>	
What each partner brings to the relationship	
Poor role models	67%
Family of origin struggles (participant)	40%
Family of origin struggles (spouse)	60%
Insecure attachment characteristics	27%
Inadequate mate selection process	
Did not know what to look for in a long-term mate	47%
Did not consider costs and rewards of the relationship	67%
Did not consider important details/married for wrong reason	53%
Costs and rewards were considered at the time of FORL	100%
Lack of emotional and/or physical connection	100%
Extraneous factors (i.e., stress, in-laws)	20%
Minimizing or denying early relationship problems	100%
Emerging realizations leading to negative thinking	100%
Someone changed after marriage	
Participant changed	27%
Spouse changed	33%
Both changed	13%
Coping deficits of participant	20%
<b>Dimensions of FORL</b>	
Point of no return	87%
Multiple efforts to remedy FORL	100%
Significant emotional struggle	100%
FORL is a common experience	93%
Advice offered by participants regarding FORL (i.e., before marriage, during marriage, for professionals)	100%

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the experience of falling out of love (FORL) in marriage, by conducting in-depth interviews with a sample of 15 individuals who reported FORL with their spouse. Pursuant to the tenants of the qualitative tradition of phenomenology and in line with the constructivist paradigm guiding this research, participants' perspectives are paramount. The goal of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, including the what, why and how of it, in order to assist both professionals who provide relationship counseling and those struggling in marital relationships with respect to FORL.

This chapter provides the interpretation and implications of the findings presented in Chapter 4, with a more integrated view. The discussion will focus on the themes (i.e., pathways) which best answer the research questions and additional findings salient to this research. The three main research questions this study explored provide the organization for this discussion. First, which factors contributed to FORL? Second, which feelings, thoughts and behaviors accompanied FORL? And third, which strategies or efforts were utilized in remedying or addressing FORL? However, to begin, I briefly discuss how the findings were conceptualized in this study by drawing on the principle of equifinality.

#### **Different Pathways to FORL**

My data analysis revealed that there are many different pathways to FORL, and each consisted of multiple "stepping stones" or contributing factors. As such, appropriate for this study was the concept of equifinality, which postulates that a given outcome or endpoint can



be reached by more than one path or set of conditions (Lerner, 2002). Those who experience FORL arrived there by multiple pathways. W. Allen (personal communication, July 26, 2016) stated that it would be remiss to reduce FORL to one pathway alone, which is supported by the findings of this study. For example, some participants indicated that their FORL occurred because of “hard reasons” (e.g., lies, abuse, addiction), whereas others reported primarily “soft reasons” (e.g., loss of similar interests, lack of communication, withdrawing, feeling disconnected). Sometimes there were both hard and soft reasons for FORL. These findings were consistent with previous research citing reasons for divorce (Hawkins, Willoughby, & Doherty, 2012). For example, as described by Hawkins, Willoughby, and Doherty (2012), “the two most common reasons given for seeking a divorce were ‘growing apart’ (55%) and ‘not able to talk together’ (53%)” (p. 453), along with 18 other reasons, including hard reasons such as physical abuse (13%).

Similar to many pathways leading to FORL, the phenomenon of FORL can be considered one of the many paths to relationship dissolution. Although there has been a vast amount of divorce research to date, FORL is not included in the divorce literature, and very few studies have been done on FORL at all (Hemesath & Hurt, 2016; Kayser, 1990, 1996; Sailor 2006, 2013). Specific research on the phenomenon of FORL was called for due to the scant extant literature. FORL is qualitatively different than specific reasons listed for divorce found in some of the divorce literature, such as those found in Hawkins, Willoughby, and Doherty (2012) (i.e. disconnection, communication problems, financial disagreements, drugs or alcohol, sexual problems). FORL is a unique construct which encompasses an accumulation of marital difficulties and associated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors culminating in the loss of romantic love for one’s partner. Worth noting, there were no

variations in the findings of this study after considering the participants' years of marriage, length of relationship prior to marriage, or age at the time of the marriage related to FORL.

### **Discussion of the Findings on the Research Questions**

A discussion of the findings according to the research questions related to the pathways to FORL follows.

#### **Research Question 1:**

##### **Which factors contributed to FORL?**

The first research question was to determine which factors the participants understood as contributing to their FORL. My data analysis conceptualized these factors as the pathways to FORL, which are described in the following.

**Partner characteristics.** A major contributor to FORL is what each partner brings to the relationship as individual attributes (e.g., self-esteem, needs and wants, values, emotional health, communication style, coping skills), previous relationship history (e.g., past romantic relationships), and family of origin dynamics (e.g., poor role models, abuse, conflict resolution patterns, attachment style). As poignantly stated by Liz, "Everyone brings a suitcase with them into that relationship that they're going to open up and unpack...it's going to come, and so being aware of that, other people's suitcase, and how that's going to affect your suitcase, is super important."

Family of origin is defined as the nuclear family, comprised of one's siblings and parents (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). Only one family of origin question was originally included in my interview protocol (i.e., parent's relational dynamics). However, more information emerged during the natural progression of the interview process and, subsequently, more attention was given to this question. Ten participants said they lacked the

positive role models of healthy marital relationships in their families of origin, as represented by their parents' indifference and ineffective conflict resolution (e.g., fighting, abuse). As described by Walsh (1993), "Healthy relationships are distinguished not by the absence of conflict but by effective conflict management, requiring open disagreement with good communication skills for resolution" (p. 50).

Six participants described growing up in challenging family systems. Also of interest, nine of the participants' spouses came from such families, some suffering from addiction, abuse and/or neglect, that is "family patterns that [were] unworkable and associated with symptoms of distress" (Walsh, 1993, p. 9).

Further, four participants indicated having insecure attachment styles. As supported by previous literature, one outcome of childhood maltreatment, including neglect and abuse, is an insecure attachment style, which is comprised of avoidant attachment and anxious attachment (Baer & Martinez, 2006). Attachment styles can be malleable but generally endure throughout life (Tashiro, 2014), often affecting romantic relationships in adulthood (Hatfield & Rapson, 1996; Simpson, 1990). Four of the study participants indicated they had problems in adult relationships, such as difficulty getting close to others, and/or anxious, reactive, or withdrawal behaviors. These outcomes corroborated those of previous research, suggesting that persons with avoidant attachments are prone to fear of intimacy, prefer distance in close relationships (Brennan, Shaver, & Toby, 1991), and cope with stress by using denial or withdrawing (Dozier & Kobak, 1992). Alternatively, anxiously attached individuals are more likely to have obsessive tendencies toward romantic partners, and express greater fear, anxiety and low self-esteem (Collins & Read, 1990). Overall, those with insecure attachments have higher rates of relationship dissolution (Ein-Dor, 2010).

The contribution of the findings of this study to the literature are substantial because, until now, there has been *no mention* of family of origin dynamics, attachment style, or lack of role models as possible pathways to FORL in married couples. In describing unhealthy family dynamics, Nichols and Schwartz (1995) stated that “such families function automatically and mechanically, rather than through awareness and choice” (p. 295). This rationale could explain the findings from this study that indicated that individuals from certain family patterns are not assessing their romantic relationship decisions adequately. Moreover, the lack of positive relationship role models may have limited their knowledge of healthy relationship characteristics, and insecure attachments have made navigating and securing fulfilling romantic relationships difficult. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that no families are problem free and that a disordered individual is not always the result of undesirable family-of-origin behaviors, just as a healthy functional individual may not have been raised in a healthy family (Walsh, 1993).

Additionally, individuals brought other elements to their romantic relationships, beyond family of origin experiences. For example, four participants described recently having exited abusive relationships upon meeting their spouse, whereby they viewed any relationship as better, as long as they were not being abused or treated poorly. Further, five participants described having low self-esteem, and three had children from a previous relationships, feeling lucky to have a partner love them and their children. Not only did these attributes affect the participants’ interactions and behaviors with their new partners, but also their mate selection decisions, which will be discussed next.

**Mate selection.** At the time of mate selection, seven participants had little idea about what they were looking for in a long-term partner. Mate selection was as much about what

the participants did not want as what they did. Other factors determining mate selection decisions included desirable mate characteristics. Some selection factors demonstrated positive dynamics between the partners (e.g., physical and/or emotional connection, common values, goals and interests, and individual partner characteristics). However, there were also largely passive (e.g., drifting/progressing into marriage). Additional factors seemed to originate from a deficit (e.g., I'm lucky you love me, get me to a better place) as illustrated by participants who were single parents at the time, had been in previously abusive relationships, or had low self-esteem. Finally, other mate selection strategies included minimizing concerns (e.g., things will improve), or championing personal convictions (e.g., doing the right thing). For example, a couple of the participants had married to "do the right thing" because of an unplanned pregnancy or to love and care for a partner's child. Overall, there were many influences on the participants' choice of mate, but most did not know what to look for in a spouse at the time.

Conversely, when the participants were asked their *current* thoughts about important components of satisfying marital relationships, 14 reported that both emotional connection and physical interest/chemistry were essential. This finding indicated that most of these participants' views about love and relationships had changed over time in response to their life experiences (Ben-Ari, Lavee, & Gal, 2006). This was also corroborated by Sailor (2006) who stated, "Only by looking back could the contrast between romantic love *then* and romantic love *now* be made" (p. 148). Personal growth was an important factor for a number of the participants as they described gaining a deeper understanding of themselves, from the time they were married to where they are now. Although during their mate selection, the participants had seemed less realistic or knowledgeable about love and marriage, their

current views of love seem more realistic and complex, including the natural fluctuations in relationships. Together, these perspectives point to some participants' lack of knowledge or understanding about their self, love, healthy relationships and marriage, or conversely, that denial, needs and wants, self-esteem, or that other personal factors were paramount in their decision making during the mate selection process.

The findings from this study regarding mate selection are important contributions to the extant literature. Mate selection processes may hold significant clues to the phenomenon of FORL. Moreover, no previous research has explicitly focused on mate selection and FORL. Future research might explore if the avoidance of undesirable attributes in romantic relationships is just as advantageous to mate selection as seeking positive attributes. Another area worth investigating is how best to educate individuals on healthy mate selection. Finally, knowing how individuals in long-term satisfying marriages make mate selection decisions would be helpful to understanding FORL.

**Emotional and physical connection.** An essential task of this study was to define the type of love being referenced in the phrase *falling out of love*. First, few scholars have addressed the topic of falling out of love, and those who have did not attend to the type of love implied (Kayser, 1990, 1993; Schnarch, 1991; Weiner-Davis, 1993). Further, the meaning of love is highly dependent on context (Myers & Berscheid, 1997), and there is varying terminology for multiple types of love (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Berscheid, 2010). Overall, consistent and clear terminology is much needed in love research (see Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Ackerman, 1994; Berscheid, 2006; Berscheid, 2010; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992; Myers & Berscheid, 1997; Regan, 2017; Rubin, 1988; Sprecher & Regan, 1998). The results of this study indicated that the kind of love generally referred to as *falling out of love*

is romantic love, consistent with the views of a number of scholars (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Berscheid, 2006; Dion & Dion, 1991) and existing definitions of romantic love that include both emotional intimacy and sexual desire (see Berscheid & Regan, 2005; Berscheid, 2010; Davis & Todd, 1982; Fromm, 1956; Miller, 2012; Regan, 1998; Regan & Berscheid, 1999). This result from the current study is a significant contribution to the extant literature, not only for clarifying the terminology of love, but also for identifying the type of love meant by *falling out of love*, which is imperative for helping professionals. To be most effective, they also need to be clear about what their clients are communicating and use empirical research to guide their therapeutic work (Abdul-Adil et al., 2010; Meyers, Durlak, & Wandersman, 2012).

Further, the results of this study confirmed that both emotional and sexual connection (i.e., romantic love) are important to the state of being in love (n=13) and for long-term marital satisfaction (n=14). These converging outcomes, supported by previous literature, point to romantic love and being in love as synonymous (Fromm, 1956; Grant 1998) and are important contributions to the research on love. Additionally, these findings resonate with earlier work citing romantic love as fundamental to (Dion & Dion, 1991) and important in marriage (Acevedo & Aron, 2009). These results also reinforce the distinction between the state of “being in love” and “loving,” which is set apart from sexual interest and a sense of inevitability (Myers & Berscheid, 1997). These connections had not been made by other researchers who had studied FORL. In this study, emotional connection included such elements as mutual appreciation, wanting to do whatever they can for their partner, enjoying time and experiences with their partner, missing them when they are apart, thinking of them when they are not around, mutual respect, trust, sharing common interests, and feeling they

are the right person for them. Physical connection included reciprocal sexual desire, enjoying hugging and kissing, and using other expressions of affection and sexuality with their partner, which sometimes included a physical reaction when thinking about or being physically close to them.

Additionally, the results of this research support Sternberg's Duplex Theory of Love (2006), including his triangular theory of love (Sternberg, 1986), and love as a story (Sternberg, 2000, 2006). To recap, the Triangular Theory of Love (Sternberg, 1986) includes emotional connection (intimacy), physical chemistry (passion), and commitment (decision), which combine to make eight possible relationship types: non-love, friendship, infatuated love, empty love, romantic love, companionate love, fatuous love, and consummate love. The results of the current study supported the eight types of love and the three main elements of the Sternberg's vertices. For example, Sternberg (1986, 2006) reported that consummate love is considered the most sought after type for marriage because it comprises all three vertices (emotional intimacy, sexual chemistry, and commitment). The findings from the current study indicated that romantic love (emotional intimacy and sexual chemistry) is important to long-term marital satisfaction. Although only three participants in the current study mentioned commitment as a factor in satisfying marriages, all were romantically in love with their mate at one time and had made the "decision" to marry (i.e., make a commitment). Thus, commitment to their spouse was implied by the participants in this study, which fits Sternberg's definition of consummate love. With the loss of emotional and/or sexual intimacy, commitment to the relationship was also eventually lost by most of these participants, except one who was undecided about continuing her marriage. This abandonment of commitment produced what Sternberg coined as "non-love," and in this



study was the result of FORL. Further, having only commitment (without emotional or physical connection) is considered “empty love,” according to Sternberg (1986). This definition resonated with my participants’ experience who described the pain of continuing in the marriage due to commitment, but lacking physical and emotional intimacy. In other words, their marriage continued at least for a time, though unhappily, because of one or both of the partners’ FORL.

The second part of Sternberg’s Duplex Theory of Love conceptualized love as a story (Sternberg, 2006), i.e., matching love stories being the best indicator of long-term relationship satisfaction. Over 25 love stories have been identified which dictate our beliefs and expectations about love relationships (Sternberg, 2000, 2006). The results of the current study support the importance of matching love stories. For example, Joe’s view of relationships seemed to describe the sacrifice story: “I believe sacrifice is a key part of true love” (Sternberg, 2000, p. 53). Joe believed that providing for his partner and her child were true expressions of his love and chose to marry in order to provide for them. However, his spouse did not appear to have the same love story as exemplified by her lack of support for Joe during his military deployment and upon his return. Although these findings resonate with Sternberg’s Duplex Theory of Love (2006), this study did not gather data from the spouses of the participants regarding their love stories. Overall, more research is needed to fully investigate love stories as they relate to FORL.

All 15 participants described feeling in love (i.e., both an emotional and physical connection/chemistry) with their partner early in the relationship. However, the level of romantic love each participant felt for their partner prior to marriage varied (i.e., amount of emotional connection and/or sexual attraction). For example, seven participants in this study

cited having a stronger connection emotionally and/or sexually for a previous romantic partner. Interestingly, the participants did not think this contributed to their FORL, in light of the findings from this study and previous literature indicating that emotional and physical connection are necessary for romantic love and marital satisfaction (Berscheid, 2006; Davis & Todd, 1982; Miller, 2012). Consider the participant Allison, who reportedly had to force herself to feel physical attraction for her partner, yet was “in love” enough to marry him, which suggests that her level of love was sufficient. Further, she like other participants considered other factors than romantic love in her decision to marry (i.e., her partner’s characteristics making for a solid spouse: “I am lucky you love me; get me to a better place”; “drifting” or progressing into marriage; common values, goals, and/or interests; things will improve; commitment; and doing the right thing). In fact, existing research supports some of these factors, such as, “I am lucky you love me” and “common values, goals, and/or interests”. For example, in a study by Sims and Meana (2010) some women were found to have consciously chosen their spouse based on their being responsible men or good providers, “despite having felt stronger sexual desire for other men in their past” (p. 368). However, it is important to note that the women in that study were generally happy in their marriages (Sims & Meana, 2010). There is no known previous literature about courtship love and its effects on satisfaction in marriage or FORL. Concurring with these findings, Kayser (1993), described the early relationships of those who later became disaffected as inclusive of love, caring, and affection, but not sexual connection. However, Hemesath and Hurt (2016) reported that some individuals were not [very] romantically in love with their spouses at the beginning of their relationships. Additional research would be useful in determining if there is an optimal level of emotional and physical connection in courtship that contributes to the

likelihood of satisfaction in marriage or alternatively to FORL in marriage. Also, it would be useful to examine evidence of an optimal level of romantic love (emotional and physical connection) for continued satisfaction throughout the course of the marriage.

Further, comments regarding love in the early phases of the relationships in this study, such as Laura's stating she was "a little" in love, indicated that romantic love is based on a variable continuum, instead of being in a discrete "yes" or "no category. In other words, it appears that in-loveness is continuous. This is a unique contribution to the literature because there was no previous mention of romantic love as existing on a continuum, only being dichotomous, i.e., being in love or not being in love. Additional investigations could shed light on how levels of emotional and physical connection (i.e., romantic love) relate to mate selection as well as to satisfying and enduring marriages. Beyond romantic love, it also seems useful to regard all types of love on a continuum instead of their clear absence or presence (P. Regan, personal communication, August 10, 2016).

All 15 participants reported that a lack of emotional and/or physical connection accompanied FORL, which was consistent with earlier literature stating that FORL is likely attributed to drops in emotional connection, sexual attraction, and feelings of inevitable loss of relationship (Berscheid, 2006). Most often this lack of connection happened over a period of time, and was not sudden, as Kelly indicated: "I think both were fading slowly...." Generally the loss of physical and/or emotional connection happened after repeated negative actions or incidents, usually by their spouse. This lack of emotional and physical connection over time was also supported by Hemesath and Hurt (2016) and Sailor (2006). The loss of emotional connection over time was also identified by Kayser (1990, 1993), as was physical connection to some spouses through separation, although sexual connection was not

addressed. Though not found in the data, it is worth noting that FORL may *feel* sudden, even if the process spanned decades (W. Allen, personal communication, July 26, 2016).

Also, unforeseen changes in one or both partners were commonly cited by 11 participants as contributing to FORL, which is supported by Huston and Levinger's (1978) report that change is an inevitable part of life, resulting in relationship growth or its end. Further, despite adequate mate selection, unplanned shifts in relationships can create changes in love, commitment, or satisfaction (Sprecher, 1999), suggesting that change in one or both partners can impact romantic love. The construct of individual change was not cited as a contributing factor by either Kayser (1990, 1993) or Sailor (2006, 2013); however, spousal change was found by Hemesath and Hurt (2016) to be salient.

Related, yet also worth considering is that some individuals may tolerate lower emotional or physical connection yet not experience FORL (Kayser, 1993). What makes the difference between the participants in this study who FORL and other married couples, given similar relationship dynamics, who may not FORL? Results from previous research have found that relatively happy marriages sometimes break up more often than unhappy marriages, especially if there has been a sharp fluctuation in happiness (even if levels are still high) (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). In other words, consistently unsatisfied couples might remain married more often than happier couples whose satisfaction dropped, even if they are more satisfied and happy with their marriages than the unsatisfied couples. Other explanations for couples who may not FORL despite low levels of romantic love may be due to commitment, lack of extenuating stress, coping skills, attachment style, denial of problems, differences in self-esteem, phase of life, religious beliefs, more perceived rewards than costs of staying in the marriage, or, alternatively, more perceived costs than rewards of

leaving the marriage (i.e., financial, fear of leaving). Also denial about the relationship is supported by previous literature citing a tendency for long-term married couples to minimize concerns and sustain the relationship (Karney & Coombs, 2000). As applied to FORL: Could personal growth, life experiences, self-esteem, or the institution of marriage itself alter feelings of romantic love for a spouse? Ultimately, the topic of why some individuals FORL and others do not, when shown the same or less romantic love, deserves more exploration.

**Patterns.** The findings of this study indicated a process with respect to FORL reflective of key patterns as reported by nine participants. Of the six who stated that there was no discernible progression to FORL (i.e., stages), four described FORL as a process. FORL was mentioned as unfolding in a patterned process in six participants: a) Red flags, b) Attempts to re-connect, c) Indifference (likely still living with spouse due to children, commitment, or other reasons), and d) Done: FORL has occurred (likely considering separation or divorce). The essence of FORL as a *process*, inclusive of patterns found in this study, seemed more individualized and flexible than the assertion of stages, found by Kayser (1990, 1993). There were many inconsistencies in the data with respect to these patterns. Thus it seems premature to draw formal conclusions. However, these findings connect with some of Kayser's (1990, 1993). For example, each of the aforementioned patterns found in this study were embedded in the three stages found in Kayser's study (1990, 1993), including attempts by the couple to reconnect in the beginning, middle and end; feelings of indifference in the end phase, and thoughts of being done in the end phase. Alternatively, each of Kayser's (1990, 1993) phases consisted of several thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and were more complex than the phases found in this study. Also, the first pattern found in this study, red flags, was classified as a turning point in Kayser's (1990, 1993) research, and although

important to disaffection, were not regarded as a phase. Hemesath and Hurt (2016) also found mixed support for the existence of stages to FORL. Alternatively, Sailor (2013) did not find stages in FORL. Ultimately, more research should explore the stages or process with regard to FORL, as these patterns could be useful in assessing it.

**Point of no return.** Thirteen participants in this study indicated a point of no return, which was loosely defined as a point in the relationship where acceptance had taken place and the participant had no plan or desire to reconcile their love. This decision was accompanied by the sentiment that once romantic love was gone, it would be too difficult to resurrect, and that there was nothing either the participant or their mate could do to reverse the loss of romantic love. At the point of no return, the participant and spouse might still be living together, but were likely considering separation or divorce.

This finding is an important contribution to the literature because it helps identify dimensions of FORL that could be useful in future research and treatment evaluation. This result was supported by Hemesath and Hurt (2016), Kayser (1990, 1993), and Sailor (2006, 2013). For example, Kayser asserted (1993), “Even in cases in which the partner made substantial changes, the respondents described a ‘point of no return,’ that is, a point beyond which feelings could no longer be restored” (p. 88). Sailor’s (2013) alternate term for point of no return was the “pivotal moment,” i.e., knowing that romantic love is gone.

**Other contributing factors.** Three participants discussed extraneous factors that contributed to FORL, such as one of the spouses pursuing higher education (e.g., medical school, graduate school) and difficulties with in-laws. In other words, problems already present in the relationship were magnified due to increased stress from an outside source and the inability for one or both partners to cope effectively. Although only reported by a few

participants, these outside factors are a useful finding to add to the extant literature and are worthy of future investigation. It would be interesting to further research the implications of stress for FORL. No other FORL research has cited the stress of outside factors in this regard.

**Costs and rewards.** Examining the costs and rewards of the marriage, although not common on entering into the union, were very common among the participants when reaching FORL. In fact, many had unrealistic expectations of the relationship or no expectations at all when it began. Further, some over-estimated their ability to change their partner and/or were in denial about factors in the relationship that were concerning. The finding that costs and rewards were often not considered by the participants during their mate selection is an important contribution to the literature. However, more research is needed to flesh out how this affects FORL. Factors contributing to this lack of consideration are likely related to distortions somewhat common in a new relationship (see Kayser, 1993).

Alternatively, it could be surmised that participants wishing to marry the mate would create a possible diversion from that goal, if rewards and costs had been assessed. Finally, due to the illogical component of passionate love, it is possible that using logic, at the time of mate selection, was not likely. Of further interest, does the same lack of consideration take place during the mate selection processes of individuals who then enjoy long-term satisfying marriages? Additional research on mate selection, including the benefits of assessing the costs and rewards of the relationship, would further add to the literature.

At the time of their interview, all 15 participants reported the examination of rewards and costs, which for many contributed to the decision-making process to end the relationship. However, comparing rewards and costs was not directly reported by the participants as a

cause of FORL, likely because this examination came after several other contributing factors (e.g., spousal behaviors, realizations, lack of emotional or physical connection).

Supporting these results are the tenets of social exchange theory and the idea that relationships are formed and maintained by evaluating costs and benefits (Levinger, 1956; Sabatelli & Ripoll, 2004) and that those which have low perceived rewards are likely to end (Rodrigues, Hall, & Fincham, 2006). The results of this study are also supported by Hemesath and Hurt (2016) and Kayser (1990, 1993) showing that the evaluation of costs and rewards occurred as part of FORL. The findings, which include a comparison of costs and rewards, are important contributions to the research on FORL. Ultimately, it appears that the tenets of social exchange theory can be applied to marriages (Levinger, 1956) and FORL.

### **Research Question 2:**

#### **Which thoughts, feelings and behaviors accompany FORL?**

The participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors were essential to this investigation because the overarching goal of this study, to fully understand FORL, was best gained through capturing detailed descriptions of their lived experiences, employing a phenomenological approach.

**Thoughts:** Relationship problems perceived by the 15 participants were first denied or minimized, then gave way to "realizations," or increased awareness, eventually leading to a change in love. Examples of the participants' thoughts or realizations included believing the relationship lacked emotional or physical connection, feeling personal unhappiness, feeling blamed or lied to, realizing the spouse or situation wasn't going to change, and noticing negative partner traits. The increased awareness or realizations were generally brought on by unanticipated changes in one or both spouses or negative spousal behaviors.



Other thoughts included comparing the rewards and costs of the relationship, as well as considering marital separation or divorce.

Denial was a significant theme related to emerging realizations. As such, it is possible that addressing denial early on would have given the participants the optimal chance at turning problems around, before major relationship damage had been done. However, they also could have ended the relationship during their courtship. As supported by previous research, denial has a fairly significant place in most new relationships which furthers the union (see Kayser, 1993). Additionally, a concept called illusionary intimacy describes distorted perceptions of one's partner, during early courtship, based on the way the individual wants the partner to be (Kersten & Kersten, 1988). These distortions can emerge based on what is needed from the relationship (Graziano & Musser, 1982). In other words, we see what we want or need to see. Moreover, for many people, denial is the result of their past life experiences (see Dozier & Kobak, 1992), which resonated with several participants in this study who fit the mold of needing or wanting to see the best in their mate, or whose early life experiences encouraged denial for coping (i.e., low self-esteem, single parenthood, negative relationship history).

The prolific use of denial during mate selection and early in the process of FORL is an important contribution to the extant literature. Providing some support, Kayser (1993) reported that denial was used as a coping skill by about one quarter of respondents at the beginning of disaffection, although used much less (4%) at the end. Denial prior to marriage or during mate selection was not discussed. Neither, Hemesath and Hurt (2016 nor Sailor (2006, 2013) specifically addressed denial. Further investigation is required to more fully

examine the effects of denial on FORL. It would also be useful to study the role of denial in satisfying long-term marriages.

This finding is important to the extant literature because it contributes to understanding the thought process of those who experience FORL. The results of this study supported previous research in that it appeared that “spouses were using different lenses in viewing their partner” (Kayser, p. 45, 1993), compared to earlier in the relationship. Also, concurring with the findings of this study, Kayser (1993) described the following thoughts comprising disaffection: emerging awareness of a partner’s negative traits, recognizing the marriage was not going as planned, both self and spousal blame for problems in relationship, evaluation of rewards and costs, and thoughts of leaving the marriage. Additionally, Sailor (2006) reported that spousal qualities which were once considered positive were now viewed as irritating, annoying, and provoking. Specific thoughts regarding FORL were not reported by Hemesath and Hurt (2016).

**Feelings:** The feelings identified by the participants with respect to FORL varied considerably. However, a dominant pattern was that of emotional struggle. In fact, all the participants described having significant emotional pain during the process of FORL. They had mixed feelings toward their self (i.e., self-blame, regret, and shame), toward the relationship (i.e., indecisive, ambivalent, lost, surprised, confused, hopeless, tried as hard as they could), and toward their spouse (i.e., under-valued, not listened to, criticized, less attracted, disrespected, anger). Their feelings emerged following certain realizations and increased awareness of the nature of their marital relationships.

The results of these findings were a useful contribution to the extant literature because they provide a fuller understanding of FORL. Further, many of the feelings

associated with FORL were supported by previous literature. In fact, the theory of the Drive to Love (Fisher, 2006) informed us why a partner who has FORL sometimes says they did their best to fight for the relationship, despite difficulty in finding the energy to pour into it – the drive just wasn't there. Moreover, feelings of confusion and indecision may be present because, as previous literature has suggested, there is a fundamental contradiction in marriage in that it is intended to meet both institutional and personal goals (Amato, 2004b). As such, the participants often wrestled with the good of the family, community, and others versus fulfilling their own individual needs and desires – all of which have been in direct conflict with each other.

The results of this study were also supported by Hemesath and Hurt (2016) who described the following feelings individuals can have in the process of FORL: guilt, shame, confusion, anger, tired, fear, regret, apathy, and failure. Additionally, Sailor (2006), reported feelings accompanying FORL that included emotional pain, grief, exhaustion, devastation, fear, feeling unloved, and low self-esteem; later emotions could include loss of trust, anger, hatred, disgust, repulsion, and disrespect for one's partner. Finally, Kayser (1990, 1993) described the feelings of disaffection as anger, hurt, disillusionment, loneliness, hopelessness, hurt, ambivalence, and pity associated with FORL. Essentially, all the previous literature concurred with the salience of the emotional struggle that is part of FORL.

**Behaviors:** The most common participant behaviors were passive such as not standing up for themselves, attempts to address the issues, and withdrawal. Interestingly, they seemed to happen in this order. The participants generally reported denying problems, then gaining some level of awareness, followed by attempts to change things, and then withdrawing again. Having affairs was also cited as a behavior for some of the participants.

However, these affairs were not identified as a major factor in FORL, but more of a symptom of the problem. At the time of the interviews, the participants themselves took a fair amount of responsibility for the outcome of their relationship, including admitting to their own shortcomings. However, FORL was more frequently conceptualized as a result of problems with the spouse and/or the overall dynamics of the relationship versus self-blame.

This finding is a salient contribution to the existing literature, rounding out thoughts, feelings and behaviors, which together formed the experience of FORL. Previous literature supports this finding. For example, Sailor (2006), described behaviors of disaffection including infidelity, jealous behavior, abuse, control, criticism, and arguments. Hemesath and Hurt (2016) found both emotionally and sexually withdrawing behaviors, and Kayser (1990, 1993) described problem-solving behaviors and actions to dissolve the relationship.

The most significant spousal behaviors were specific events or incidents, also referenced as “big bombs,” “red flags,” and “dominoes.” For example, Tessa described her spouse’s frequent negative, angry moods and Allison began to feel like her marriage was “fake” based on her husband’s actions not matching how he presented himself during courtship. Other examples of spousal behaviors included but were not limited to controlling behavior, lack of emotional support, as well as not taking responsibility. Over time these behaviors compounded and propelled the participants into a different mindset regarding the relationship and their feelings toward their partner.

The behaviors associated with FORL were complex. There were spousal behaviors, participant behaviors, and behaviors common to both parties. The most common mutual behaviors were an increase in arguing, withdrawing behavior (i.e., reduced emotional connection), physical intimacy changes (i.e., reduced physical connection), and changes

within one or both partners. In regard to change, generally when the participant changed behavior, it was toward positive goals or personal growth. However, when the spouse changed, it was either toward stagnation or negative behaviors.

**Research Question 3:**

**Which strategies or efforts were used to remedy or address FORL?**

The participants engaged in both individual and partnered attempts to remedy the situation. A majority had sought couple's therapy (n=11) and/or individual therapy (n=12), and a few had sought pastoral support (n=3). FORL was not specifically mentioned by the participants in their couple's therapeutic endeavors. My own experience as a clinician has been similar in that when a couple presented con-jointly for therapy, they did not mention FORL as the problem. But it was not uncommon for it to arise in their sessions. Even if the couple was entering marriage therapy, they might not yet feel they have FORL, or wished to refrain from using the term so as to continue working on their marriage or not hurt their spouse.

Empirical research has found that couples therapy positively impacted 70% of those receiving treatment (Lebow et al., 2012). However, as Whisman, Dixon, and Johnson (1997) found, one third of couples may not improve from couple's therapy, the most common reasons being unwillingness to change, lack of commitment, and the severity of problems, identified by significance of length or intensity. Although more research is needed, the findings of the current study refute previous suggestions for simplifying FORL by equating it to other common marital problems (i.e., communication issues, lack of intimacy) (see Schnarch, 1991; Weiner-Davis, 1993). Moreover, the providers in the Hemesath and Hurt (2016) study regarded FORL as analogous to other typical couple challenges, although the

clients in that study disagreed, reporting that FORL is unique and requires different treatment strategies and conceptualization. Overall, FORL appears to be more complex than the standard problems couples bring to therapy. For example, communication problems may be noticed early in the process of FORL and worsen over time, contributing to FORL. However, simply treating communication problems, especially when FORL has progressed, will likely not provide positive outcomes for the marriage. In other words, communication problems may be a stepping stone on the pathway to FORL. But a broader perspective, inclusive of all factors specific to each case is likely needed for optimal outcomes (i.e., the attachment style of each spouse, personality, expectations, goals, where in the process of FORL the couple/individual is, other contributing factors to dissatisfaction, etc.). Additional research on clinical interventions and a theory for FORL are strongly needed.

Hence, most individuals have found individual therapy to be helpful generally for processing their thoughts and feelings, nurturing personal growth, and providing healing. Likewise, most participants in this study who attended couple's counseling, found it to be helpful by and large for gaining understanding about themselves, their spouse, or the relationship and found it useful for skill building (i.e., communication), working through affairs, or rebuilding the relationship, earlier in the marriage. Unfortunately, those gains did not seem to last. A few participants found couple's counseling to be ineffective, because one or both parties did not want to be there, which corroborated with previous research (Whisman et al., 1997); could not be honest about what was really going on in the relationship (i.e., abuse), or the therapist ended the treatment (i.e., for danger of abuse).

Other efforts to remedy the situation included participants (n=14) attempting to talk to the spouse about their problems, about half (n=7) talking to family or friends. Additional

strategies mentioned included showing kindness, providing support for the spouse, personal soul-searching, reading self-help books, or trying to fix the situation themselves. Many participants initially blamed themselves and attempted to fix the situation by trying harder, ignoring their feelings, or changing their expectations, which appeared to work for a time. Talking to the spouse was not effective in the long term, which seemed to be mostly because either the spouse didn't feel the problems presented by the participant were valid or didn't share the same feelings. Some spouses attempted to change or repair problems discussed by the participant, but they were largely ineffective. Overall, family and friends were supportive of the participants, and sometimes had quite a substantial influence on their decision to leave the relationship. For example, in a few cases, the family or friends were concerned for the safety of the participant, and in another case, the extended family felt the participant's spouse was taking advantage of the participant. Mentioned by only one or two participants were affairs and an open-marriage arrangement, but these strategies were not effective. Although they did provide some stabilization and met some of the participants' needs, they caused other problems such as guilt or jealousy. Overall, these findings suggested that none of the efforts of the participants were useful in addressing FORL, which is an important contribution to the literature because it suggests a true need for empirical research and better clinical recommendations.

Kayser (1990) described numerous problem-solving actions of participants, included talking to the partner about their concerns, attempts to please their partner, marriage counseling, and actions to dissolve the marriage (i.e., contacting an attorney, saving money, seeking alternate housing). Hemesath and Hurt (2016) reported remedies that included self-help books, talking with the spouse, friends, or extended family about their concerns,

individual counseling, temporary separation, attempts to re-engage with their spouse through couple's counseling, spending quality time together (i.e., date nights, trips), and having a child. Worth noting, if the marital counseling took place after the "point of no return" had been reached, it was not done to repair the relationship, but for other reasons (i.e., end the marriage with professional assistance, cope with pressure from the spouse or others). Sailor (2006, 2013) did not address remedies or problem-solving actions.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the analysis and findings of this study, I offer recommendations for (a) individuals entering into romantic relationships, (b) mental health providers and other professionals working with relationship issues. More in-depth discussion of the recommendations follow.

#### **For Individuals Entering Romantic Relationships**

Based on participant recommendations and the results of this study, individuals who are considering entering into romantic relationships or are in the early phases of one should: First, work toward being a whole, happy individual prior to mate selection. This includes considering one's own past relationships, family of origin, personality, goals, and phase of life and how each may impact mating choices. Doing this work as part of premarital counseling may be too late, as research suggests that many people drift into marriage and make decisions based on their past, low self-esteem, insecure attachments, phase of life, etc. without realizing it or considering the long-term implications. Second, understand the elements that are typically most suitable for a healthy and satisfying long-term, romantic relationship. If you did not get this information from positive role models, you can find it through other reputable sources. Once given this information, use it as a guide to your own



romantic relationships. Third, a plan to “fix” your mate or believing things will get better (i.e., after getting married, when having a child, when moving) should never be assumed. While it is true that first impressions are not always accurate and it can be appropriate to offer second chances, well-established behavioral patterns are likely to endure. Fourth, recognize and expect that a natural part of human development is growth and change. This often includes shifting wants and needs. Because individuals evolve, relationships also grow and change. The key is for the partners to grow and change in ways that complement each another, or at the very least not be at odds. Fifth, consider both your thoughts and feelings when selecting a mate. In other words, combining logic with emotion is more thorough than either strategy alone. For example, it is important to have similar values and goals (thought/logic) as well as enjoy kissing one’s mate (feeling/emotion). Sixth, it is essential to have a reasonable level of both emotional and physical connection early in a relationship. Although it should be expected that these two elements will wax and wane over the course of a long-term relationship, the depletion of either, especially prior to mate selection, should not come with the assumption that it will improve after marriage. Concerns about one or both should be considered a possible “red flag,” and you should ask yourself if you are in denial or minimizing any factors in the relationship. Seventh, listen to your intuition, get real with yourself, and pay attention.

Once the couple is in the marital relationship the advice for partners derived from this study are as follows: (a) Listen to your intuition, get real with yourself, and pay attention, (b) nurture the relationship, (c) put each other first, and (d) make a 100% effort to save the relationship. There is no guarantee your efforts will succeed, but you can rest assured that you did everything you could.

**For Professionals**

A major goal of this study was to provide direction for mental health providers and relationship professionals in regard to FORL. The study participants suggested the first recommendation below, however did not provide other insight for professionals. The remaining points were generated by the study's findings and from my experience as a licensed marriage and family therapist. However, it is important to keep in mind that individuals who already have FORL may not find some of these recommendations useful, because as Kayser (1990) suggested, therapy has different goals depending on the phase of FORL. Additional research needs to be conducted to test these recommendations.

1. Meet them where they are. Generally, if presenting with FORL there is confusion, shame, or other painful emotions. Provide validation and support as they work out their thoughts and feelings. This recommendation was given by the participants of this study, because therapists who were able to provide a judgement free space to discuss their thoughts and feelings was regarded most beneficial.
2. Consider additional methods to implement education for young adults regarding healthy romantic relationships and elements important for enduring and satisfying long-term relationships (i.e., education on mate selection included in high school or college curriculum). This could be implemented through additions or enforcement in policy requiring public high schools or colleges to teach relational content, beyond sexual education (i.e., Title IX). This recommendation was given because the results of this study suggest a relatively poor understanding of qualities in healthy romantic relationships and marriage.

3. Encourage individual therapy and explain the benefits of understanding and knowing oneself prior to selecting a mate. Discuss and assess the client's past and how it can affect mate selection choices (i.e., relationship role models, previous relationships, phase of life, self-esteem, etc.). Again, this may be ideal for a high school or college curriculum, or relationship development programs, as not all individuals will seek therapy. This recommendation was provided due to the results of this study suggesting a significant part of mate selection is based on individual dynamics prior to meeting the partner.
4. Encourage couple's counseling prior to marriage and explain the benefits of understanding each other, and what both partners bring to the relationship, including expectations. The goal for this work would be pre-engagement instead of pre-marriage as many couples who seek pre-marital counseling are doing so only weeks in advance of the wedding, and often as a requirement of their religious organization. Consider utilizing empirically based couple's assessments such as PREPARE/ENRICH (Olson & Olson, 1999). This recommendation was based from the results suggesting what each partner brings to the relationship impacts the other and the relationship dynamics as a whole. Most participants did not address the costs and rewards when entering into marriage (i.e., drifting into marriage) which pointed to the need for greater thought and care going into the decision making process of marriage.
5. Identify and ask for clarification regarding the meanings of the terms being discussed (i.e., what is meant by "intimacy," how is "love" defined). In other words, assure you are "speaking the same language," conceptually. This

recommendation was gleaned from previous literature suggesting that love terminology is confusing, as best (Berscheid, 2006), as well as the results of this study and others (Carter, 2013) which suggest a difficulty for many individuals in articulating love. Additionally, in my work as a mental health provider, I have seen many examples of miscommunication based on assumptions about what is meant by a term (both related and unrelated to love terminology), calling for increased clarity of terminology.

6. Offer recommendations for mate selection. For instance, provide awareness regarding passionate love lacking logic or reasoning and the importance of waiting at least a year to decide if the relationship is right for marriage. By that time, passionate love will likely have been replaced by a more stable, reasonable type of love, such as romantic love, where faults can be identified or acknowledged. Additionally, Tashiro (2014) recommended seeking a mate you like more than you sexually desire due to qualities such as fairness and kindness making up three quarters of romantic love, whereas sexual chemistry is responsible for 25%. Further, when seeking an enduring romantic partner, three considerations are necessary: personality, attachment style, and behavior in adult relationship (Tashiro, 2014). Personality traits are also important to take into consideration, because they have been proven to influence relationships (Miller, 2012). Additionally, the success of a relationship involves both parties agreeing on the type of love they are entering or have matching “love stories” (Sternberg & Weis, 2006; Lee, 1977). This recommendation was based on results from this study indicating that issues involving mate selection is a factor for FORL.

7. Assessment is essential in addressing FORL. In couple's or individual therapy, conduct a full assessment of each individual, including family of origin, personality, mental health and substance abuse history, coping skills, values, needs, expectations, self-esteem, previous relationship history etc. Supporting this recommendation, the previous items were found in this study as salient for understanding the context of relationships and possible factors in FORL. It is hoped this information will provide a conceptual framework for providers as well as incite interventions therapists can utilize to address FORL.
8. If there are concerns of insecure attachment, work on reducing negative reactions which are detrimental to the relationship. This may be accomplished by utilizing dialectic behavior therapy or other therapies intended to reduce intense emotional reactions (i.e., emotionally-focused couples therapy). Also ensure positive self-repair skills (i.e., the ability to change internal negative processes) (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007; Gottman 1994). This recommendation was gleaned from my work as a practicing marriage and family therapist and my review of the literature on attachment.
9. If clients are presenting earlier in the process of FORL, consider recommending behaving in loving ways toward each other, because sometimes action does create actual feelings (i.e., "act as if" strategy from solution focused therapy) (Weiner-Davis, 1993). For example, if we wait to feel a certain way before we act, it may never happen, but acting in positive ways may get us to the feeling we are hoping for. However, sexual intimacy that is not wanted is not recommended (see Muise & Desmarais, 2013). This recommendation was suggested due to my experience

and training as a marriage and family therapist and my review of the literature for this study.

10. Similarly, discuss with clients the idea that thoughts create feelings, which is a prominent feature of cognitive therapy (Leahy, 2003). If we think positively about our partner and our relationship, our feelings may follow (see Kayser, 1990). This recommendation will likely not be effective if suggested toward the end of the FORL process because the decision to end the relationship may have already occurred. This recommendation was suggested due to my experience and training as a marriage and family therapist and my review of the literature for this study.
11. Skill building, including behavior modification and communication skills are highly recommended for situations where FORL has not already taken place or is at the end of the process due to the potential lack of motivation toward the relationship. Note: Emotional issues, such as fostering emotional intimacy, are best addressed by working through perceptions and anxieties rather than skill building (Reis, 1990). This recommendation was supported by my experience and training as a marriage and family therapist and my review of the literature for this study.
12. Alternatively, discernment counseling, a new technique for couples, is indicated when one or both spouses are in the final stages of FORL (see Doherty, 2011). This unique, 1-5 session therapeutic model is designed specifically for couples who are on the fence about the relationship, or where one spouse is leaning in and the other spouse is leaning out of the marriage (Doherty, 2011). The goal is to take the pressure off the marital situation by not providing marriage therapy, but

instead discussing what they have both brought to the relationship, how they each view the situation, and what they would each like to do. Through discernment counseling, clinicians assist individuals in formulating their own working model of the meaning of love in marriage, the role of commitment, or alternative benefits to marriage, etc. It is possible that some form of love (possibly not romantic love) or purpose strong enough to sustain the marriage will emerge. The end goal is to come to one of three decisions, end the marriage, continue as status quo (not ready for decision), or move toward marriage therapy and actively working on the relationship. This recommendation was supported by my experience and training as a marriage and family therapist and my review of the literature for this study.

Finally, this research generates ideas regarding public policy. As mentioned in item number 2, above, relationship education which extends beyond sex education could be added to high school curriculum. Alternatively, couples could be required to take a relationship/mate selection course prior to applying for a marriage license. Although as stated elsewhere in this dissertation, the couple may already be engaged and not likely to cancel a wedding. Further, stipulations could be implemented prior to divorce. For example, the state of Iowa requires mediation for all couples entering into divorce proceedings prior to litigation, with the goal of reducing the burden on the judicial system, decrease costs, as well as lessening the potential of a bitter divorce for couples. This also presumably benefits children of divorcing families, not only financially, but emotionally, through reduced animosity and better co-parenting. Additionally, the state of Iowa requires a couple to participate in marital conciliation counseling if requested by either party of the union.

However, there are very few rules surrounding conciliation counseling (i.e., no specified number of sessions, session length or content) and the outcome of required couple's counseling is likely poor. In fact, requirements would be fulfilled for each party if they simply appear for a conciliation session. One solution might be for states to consider implementing a version of the discernment counseling model (1-5 sessions) described in item number 12 above, which outlines a specific, time limited therapeutic process and is not couple's counseling, but rather a discussion about the relationship, each partner's contribution to the marital issues, and expectations for the future. The intentions of this model would be to set the couple on an upward trajectory regardless of their decision to remain married. Additionally, different professionals could begin working more closely together (i.e., divorce attorneys and marriage and family therapists/counselors/social workers) in an attempt to reduce negativity among divorcing couples, encourage collaboration, and help ensure the couple is confident about their decision to divorce (see Doherty, Willoughby, & Peterson, 2011). This is currently being implemented between my mental health practice and a group of family law attorneys in central Iowa. These recommendations are supported by the focus group study (Hemesath & Hurt, 2016) which found both providers and clients reporting the importance of avoiding negative dynamics among partners, following divorce.

### **Other Salient Findings and Discussion Points**

Other notable findings or points worthy of discussion follow. They include participant uncertainty, FORL as a common experience, commitment, and gender.



### **Participant Uncertainty**

Although most participants could answer the interview questions, and many important findings were gleaned from this study, there were moderate amounts of confusion and uncertainty on their part with respect to articulating love (n=4), knowing what qualities to look for in a long-term mate (n=7), and/or what makes for satisfying marriages (n=3). Several conclusions can be drawn from this uncertainty. First, it indicates a lack of knowledge about romantic love and healthy relationships. Second, these results are consistent with previous research noting the complexity of love and difficulty talking about it in romantic relationships (Carter, 2013). Third, there is a significant disconnect when communicating about FORL because of the consistent dearth of terminology, which is often confusing and overlapping (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Ackerman, 1994; Berscheid, 2006; Berscheid, 2010; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992; Myers & Berscheid, 1997; Sprecher & Regan, 1998).

### **FORL as a Common Experience**

Fourteen participants reported that FORL was a common occurrence and were aware of others who had it. This is consistent with related research suggesting that a lack of loving feelings ranks as the highest of problems presented in couple's therapy, based on the combination of presentation frequency, difficulty treating, and level of damage to the relationship (Whisman et al., 1997). Hemesath and Hurt (2016) also found FORL to be a relatively common experience. Because there is very little research on this phenomenon, the commonality of the experience has not been fully examined. As such, it would be useful to have a comparison group.

### **Commitment to Marriage**

Worth noting, 12 participants did not include commitment when discussing their marriages, whereas three mentioned it throughout their interviews. These three remained committed to their spouse despite their negative thoughts and feelings as the marriage went on. This implies that *constraint* commitment, that is, comprising values or other pressures to remain married, were at play instead of *dedication* commitment, which is a true desire to be with the mate (see Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010). Of interest, and concurring with these results, constraint commitment is a major contributor to individuals electing to stay in unhappy marriages (Stanley et al., 2010). Similarly, this research concurs with the work of Johnson (1991) who posited three parts to commitment (i.e., personal commitment – wanting to stay married; moral commitment – feeling they should stay married; and structural commitment – constraints making it difficult to leave). To illustrate, two of the participants in this study stayed in the marriage for many years, despite being dissatisfied. Doug described trying for years to attain his mate's love/attention (as he had with his mother). He eventually shifted the narrative of the relationship from what he hoped for in marriage to simply being a good husband and father. Doug stayed for six additional years after recognizing he had FORL. Laura remained 17 years after realizing in the first year of marriage that she had FORL. She continued to hope the relationship would change and tried hard to make it work, reportedly making many excuses for her spouse. The final participant who discussed commitment, Janet, left her marriage one year after FORL, due to abuse, but had remained married a total of 7 years. Janet reported feeling considerable denial and heartbreak during FORL. As discussed in the previous chapter, participants in this study FORL an average of approximately 9 years into the marriage, the average length of marriage being 15 years.

Based on the results of this study, and as reported in previous literature, there is some evidence that commitment maintains the marriage longer than the union would have continued otherwise (Stanley et al., 2010). As such, it may take denial, minimizing and excuses, or reframing expectations to continue in the marriage, but eventually commitment waned for all of these participants.

Additionally, some earlier work indicated that those who drift into marriage or have children prior to marriage have lower levels of commitment (Stanley et al., 2010). Interestingly, in this sample, 5 participants had children or were pregnant prior to marriage (4 of the participants themselves had a child and 1 participant's mate had a child – out of the 5 only one was the biological child of the participant and mate with whom they FORL). Additionally, 6 participants reported “sliding” into marriage. One participant reported experiencing both having children prior to their marriage and drifting into marriage. Thus, 10 of the 15 participants either had children involved prior to marriage and/or drifted into marriage, which may have accounted for the lack of commitment they discussed in these interviews. However, more research is needed to investigate how factors such as children, cohabitation, or sliding into marriage affects commitment and FORL. With that said, the role of commitment is valuable to the institution of marriage. If commitment did not exist, it is possible that most marriages would end, even those that are largely satisfying, because even the happiest marriages have problems.

It appears that the commitment theorists who view commitment as a variable based on ever-changing relationship costs and rewards (Kelley, 2002) are accurate. Indeed, commitment is a critical factor in identifying who continues to live in unhappy marriages

rather than leaving (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Kayser, 1993; Rusbult, Marz, & Agnew, 1998; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2010).

### **Gender in Research**

In preparation for this study, careful account was taken of what scholars had to say about gender in research. Some researchers reported that women volunteered more often than men in relationship studies. Therefore, special effort should be taken to recruit males or the results may only be generalizable to females (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Thus, previous literature is inconclusive regarding how pronounced gender differences are in relationship behavior (see Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997; Winstead, Derlega, & Rose, 1997).

My data analysis found no notable gender differences pertaining to FORL. This is an important contribution to the research because it suggests that men and women tend to fall in love for the same reasons, want the same things out of a marital relationship, and presented with FORL in the same ways. This finding was supported by Sailor (2013). Hemesath and Hurt (2016) indicated only one gender effect observed by providers of couple's therapy in that wives presented themselves more frequently as needing support to cope with FORL. However, this could be the result of women seeking therapy more often than men, in general (Komiya, Good, & Sherrod, 2000). Kayser (1993) also found minimal gender differences in her FORL study with the exception of males exhibiting slightly more avoidance in their coping style. Also, as evidenced in previous literature, both men and women were attracted to the same partner qualities in long-term relationships (i.e., appearance, honesty, intelligence, emotional stability and personality) (Regan & Berscheid, 1997; Sprecher, Sullivan, & Hatfield, 1994).

Contrary to gender stereotypes (see Berscheid & Regan, 2005), males in this study were exceptionally in tune with emotional insight and personal growth, throughout the interviews. For example, both male and female participants made emotionally insightful recommendations such as being present, paying attention, listening to intuition, gaining emotional intelligence, understanding one's feelings, and attending therapy.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were a number of limitations to this study. To start with, as the sample of participants was from a midwestern state, the findings may not be transferable to adults in other regions of the U.S. Additionally, this was a snowball sample and participants were recruited using other mental health providers and professionals available to the researcher. Although nine the participants were not referred by counselors or therapists, all of them had sought counseling support or therapy in the past regarding issues with their marriage (i.e., marriage therapy, individual therapy, pastoral care, Christian counseling). The participants may have been more homogeneous than the general population and certain adults may have been more likely to participate in counseling. For example, women are more likely than men to attend mental health treatment, as are those who have greater emotional openness and associate less stigma with mental health treatment, both of which are more common in women (Komiya, Good, & Sherrod, 2000). Moreover, the participants' experience with therapy/counseling could also have been a strength of the sample for this study. Specifically, having had therapy could suggest that a number of the participants had thought about their marital relationships and FORL in considerable depth, making their insights into the phenomenon quite useful.

An additional limitation is that other cultures likely view love and the role of love in marriage differently than Westerners, so the primarily midwestern Caucasian cultural context may have been limiting. Only one ethnic group was represented by one Hispanic woman. Further, only the perspective of those who had FORL were considered, not their mates. No other relationship types, besides marital, were included in this study. Finally, longitudinal information would not be available in this data set as only one interview was conducted with each participant. However, a possibility for future research of a longitudinal nature would be to follow couples from their dating period to their marriage, and five or more years afterward. A longitudinal study may also reduce an additional limitation to this study, which is the possibility of limited respondent recall of their experiences, due to problems with retrospection and memory. Although it has been found that a skew in memory can be either positive or negative (Berscheid & Regan, 2005), there was the concern that memory is influenced by current mood, values (Weiner-Davis, 1993) and life circumstances.

My profession as a licensed marriage and family therapist, and other experience with the phenomenon under study, made it important for me to acknowledge what I brought to the research. Although I tried to suspend my previous knowledge and experience in couple's therapy to the best of my ability, qualitative research by nature is subjective. However, my hope was to use my knowledge and experience as an asset to this investigation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Another notable limitation was the sample size ( $n=15$ ), although it seemed important to sacrifice breadth for depth to address our nascent and limited understanding of the topic (Hurt, 2012). Thus, I felt that a small, non-random sample was suitable for an in-depth

investigation of this understudied lived experience. A small sample was also appropriate for a more in-depth qualitative study.

### **Areas for Future Research**

Throughout this research process, areas of future research were gathered for consideration. To begin, although this study focused on romantic love and rested on the premise that romantic love is often considered most satisfying for long-term marriage (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Dion & Dion, 1991; Berscheid, 2006), presumably there are couples who are highly satisfied in marriages represented by other types of love (i.e., companionate love, compassionate love). For example, some researchers report that companionate love is the end result of most long-term relationships (Berscheid & Regan, 2005; see Coleman, 1977; Safilios-Rothschild, 1977). It would be useful to study satisfying marriages represented by companionate or other love types. Specifically, it would be useful to study components identified as salient to the deep emotional connection often found in companionate love (i.e., social support of partner) and how these components contribute to long-term marital satisfaction.

A related area of future research could include investigating various aspects of the course of a relationship as related to FORL. Sternberg (1986) suggested that relationships will go through different states as a function of emotional connection, physical connection, and commitment. Yet, while sexual desire and emotional connection are thought to be important for long-term, satisfying love (Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Dion & Dion, 1991), there is a question regarding how much of each component is ideal. For example, past research has suggested that a portion of sexually unsatisfied couples have overall relationship satisfaction (Durr, 2009; Edwards & Booth, 1994). How does the intensity of emotional and physical

connection matter to the likelihood of FORL? Is there a specific pattern that is more or less likely to result in FORL? (i.e., changes over course of relationship, length of time in a specific phase or type of love, type or intensity of commitment, intensity of emotional and physical connection during courtship). Further research in this area is also supported by Sternberg (1986).

Another suggestion for researchers who study topics related to FORL would be to tighten the definitions and terminology for love and relationships setting each term apart with a definition recognizable and accepted by most researchers (e.g., romantic love, being in-love, companionate love). The results from this study as well as previous research support the call for more concise terms for love (see Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Ackerman, 1994; Berscheid, 2006, 2010; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992; Myers & Berscheid, 1997; Rubin, 1988; Regan, 2017; Sprecher & Regan, 1998).

Another important area of future research on marital issues could draw on the results of this study. It is too early to tell what effect, if any, family of origin dynamics, insecure attachment, lack of positive relationship models, prior relationship experiences, low self-esteem, or single parenthood prior to entering into marriage would have on FORL. For example, as indicated by Lamanna and Riedmann (2012), the attachment style of one partner interacts with the attachment style of the other, which complicates the role of attachment in marital relationships. Thus, further investigation on each of these topics as related to FORL, including interactional effects of what each partner brings to the relationship, would be quite useful.

Prospective research could be enriched by using a larger sample. For example, gender differences were not examined in this study. Hence, future research investigating gender



differences regarding FORL is recommended. Further, only heterosexual mostly Caucasian couples were interviewed for this study, same-sex and ethnically diverse couples should be included in future research to further our knowledge of FORL. Additionally, examining dyadic views of FORL would be useful to this research by including both partners in a relationship would be participants in the study. This approach could focus on the dynamics within the relationship, which is supported by systemic thinking and General Systems Theory (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995).

It would also be helpful to further study the implications of both partners' commitment to the relationships and FORL. For instance, commitment is generally weakened by such practices as “sliding” into rather than “deciding” to form a marital union, as well as cohabiting or having children prior to marriage (Stanley et al., 2010). Further, the inability to form a solid commitment in a relationship often leads to divorce or enduring unhappy marriages (Stanley et al., 2010). Thus, more research on commitment and FORL is called for.

Future research regarding relationship education would also be useful. Consideration of how individuals learn about love, romantic relationships, and components of satisfying marriage is warranted because previous literature indicates that there is a lack of preparation and education for marriage for many young adults (Cobb et al., 2003). Empirically based strategies for healthy relationship education would also be useful. Another consideration for future research is that most couples seek therapy when they are substantially distressed, not when problems are milder or for basic skill development and education (Markman & Rhoades, 2010). “Clearly, practitioners need to find a more effective way to reach more couples and reach them sooner, before the most serious and difficult problems to treat

develop” (Markman & Rhoades, 2012, p. 171). A possible advantageous solution might be through couple education programs, which exist today (Markman & Rhoades, 2012). It also seems valuable to consider providing education and awareness of relationship dynamics and marriage prior to the beginning of long-term relationships, as during high school. It has been my experience as a clinician, providing pre-marital therapy, that once the dress has been bought and the invitations sent, it is highly unlikely the couple will call off the wedding, regardless of the uncertainty of the health of the relationship or clinical recommendations.

Another prominent area for future research regards the loss of sexual attraction and desire for one’s mate. Although, important for romantic love and marriage (Berscheid & Regan, 2005; Berscheid, Davis & Todd, 1982; Miller, 2012; 2010, Regan, 1998; Regan & Berscheid, 1999), sexual connection is difficult to control and predict and is challenging to modify (Sternberg, 1987; Sternberg 2006). Although some marriages can be satisfying with low levels or absent sexuality (Sims & Meana, 2010), expanding research on the unstable, yet the often essential components of sexual desire and attraction would also be valuable for this research area.

Further, empirical research on the areas of unconscious processes, chemicals, pheromones, biological factors, and/or other non-conscious elements which may be involved in FORL are important to consider (Atkinson, 2005, 2014). For example, a major element in the leading biological theories of love is the subconscious mind as it relates to mating behavior (Kenrick, 2006). Further, this notion is supported by Fisher (1998) who has done extensive research on neurotransmitters and other hormones in relation to sex drive, attachment, and attraction. Relatedly, researchers could review the brain imagery of those in love. Does the brain change depending on type of love one feels?

Longitudinal studies of married couples, although costly, would be the most ideal and promising method for FORL research due to the ability to obtain data about the rises and falls in satisfaction and events or changes occurring within the marriage and individual lives of each partner over the course of time (Berscheid & Regan, 2005). Longitudinal studies would also attenuate the possibility of memory bias.

Because most scholars agree that generally speaking, marital relationships naturally deteriorate over time (Berscheid & Regan, 2005, p. 404) policymakers and researchers could look for different ways to conceptualize marriage so it is viewed as more realistic and possible to uphold. How can we join ideas about romantic love and individual pursuits with long-term marriage?

Another area of future research would be mate selection, because research suggests that important individual characteristics and relationship qualities are often not taken into account (Lamanna & Riedmann, 2012). For example, what kind of individual character traits are most likely to ward off FORL? As described by Tashiro (2014), “Although supportive friends, self-confidence and communication skills contribute to healthy romantic relationships, a much stronger predictor of romantic success is the type of partner you choose in the first place” (p. 5). Therefore, it would be beneficial to investigate why Americans get married and how they relate to FORL, as well as how factors known to be positive for mate selection (i.e., partner interaction, social support, partner beliefs and attitudes, and individual personality and character traits) (Kurdek, 2006), fare in respect to FORL.

We know couple’s therapy is beneficial, in fact: “The research shows that couple therapy positively impacts 70% of couples receiving treatment” (Lebow et al., 2012, p. 145). However, resources and interventions regarding the lack of romantic love presented in

clinical work are limited at best (Berscheid & Regan, 2005; Roberts, 1992). Many of the traditional techniques utilized by marriage therapists are not effective for this group because they are not specifically designed for those who have FORL (Kayser, 1993; Roberts, 1992). As a result of minimal scholarly attention on FORL, mental health providers are not well equipped to address this issue as presented by clients entering treatment. New research and theoretical frameworks for couples therapy would likely guide clinicians to a better understanding, and thus better interventions and treatment of the problem, and ultimately better outcomes for clients.

Further support for increased evidenced-based practice recommendations comes from a study by Hemesath and Hurt (2016), in which providers described couples work as particularly draining and difficult to manage. When asked what would be helpful, the practitioners named professional support and peer consultation as significant. Professional support could include more training opportunities both through formal graduate training and postgraduate continuing education. Also requested was additional theory about the topic of FORL, and peer consultation among providers. However, it was acknowledged that, peer consultation, although helpful, can be time consuming and costly since providers can't be compensated financially while engaging in peer support. Ultimately, strategies to provide support for clinicians treating those who have FORL is an important area for further research.

All of this suggests that conducting research that is relevant to the "real" world is imperative, which is supported by the interplay between clinical practice and research (Berscheid, 2010). The use of translational research is recommended. "Translation research involves the study of how best to transfer evidence-based knowledge into routine or representative practice, and by definition requires involvement and input of the end-user in

the pipeline” (Cox, 2014). The recommendations from research need to prove useful in clinical settings beyond the academy, and conducting research that balances rigor with relevance is necessary. With the landscape of marriage changing, we need to find ways to assist couples and individuals in navigating the new terrain. Once gathered, it is critical for new information on this topic to be disseminated to both couples and providers for practical and useful application. This could be accomplished through increased attention to this phenomenon in graduate training programs, and continuing education programs, through social media or other resources which may be available to the general public such as couple’s education programs.

The verdict is mixed regarding how likely it is for couples to become happy again after a period of unhappiness (see Acevedo & Aron, 2009; Berscheid & Hatfield, 1969; Buss, 2006; O’Leary et al., 2012; Montgomery & Sorrell, 1997; Sims & Meana, 2010; Sprecher & Regan 1998; Sternberg, 1987; Tucker & Aron, 1993). Because of the lack of consensus, more research needs to be done that focuses on the likelihood of couples being satisfied, especially following FORL. The belief is that it is easier to repair marriages where there was once a strong romantic love than where there never was, or that was minimal (Kayser, 1993).

Although, according to previous literature, personality is considered a significant factor in relationship success and stability (Miller, 2012; Regan, 2017; Tashiro, 2014), this study did not measure personality as it relates to FORL, nor did the previous studies on FORL (Hemesath & Hurt, 2016; Kayser, 1990, 1993; Sailor, 2006, 2013). Specifically, the five major traits—extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, and openness to experience—have been proven to influence intimate relationships (Regan, 2017), and should be further studied to address how personality affects FORL.

Finally, the meaning of love in marriage only seems accessible by looking back over time and experiences (Ben-Ari, Lavee, & Gal, 2006). Is it plausible that individuals may have a difficult time defining and discussing being in-love (Sims & Meana, 2010), and possibly FORL after many years and life experiences? It would be worthwhile to further investigate life experiences and personal growth as related to shifts in values, needs, and desires, and the subsequent impact on the perception and experiences of romantic love and marriage.

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## APPENDIX A. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

**Table 1. Demographic information by participant**

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Years Dating Prior to Marriage	Years Married to FORL Spouse	Still Married to FORL Spouse	Years into Marriage discovered had FORL	Divorce Filed from FORL Spouse	Number of Divorces	Number of Children
Joe	Male	36	2	2	No	1	-	1	2
Jack	Male	38	2	10	No	7	-	1	2
Kelly	Female	38	2	10	No	7	-	1	2
Nicole	Female	38	1	10	Yes	10	No	1	2
Doug	Male	40	2	18	Yes	12	Yes	0	3
Michelle	Female	41	1.5	10	Yes	9	Yes	1	3
Jackie	Female	42	7	15	Yes	14	Yes	0	3
Sandra	Female	43	3	12	No	3	-	1	3
Allison	Female	45	1	21	No	20	-	1	2
Adam	Male	45	.5	22	No	18	-	1	3
Tessa	Female	48	4	24	No	10	-	1	3
Liz	Female	50	.25	28	No	20	-	1	3
Laura	Female	59	2	18	No	1	-	2	3
Frank	Male	62	4.5	5.5	No	2	-	2	0
Janet	Female	63	2	7	No	1	-	2	4

**Table 2. Demographic Information by Sample**

<b>15 Total Participants Aged 36-63</b>	<b>% Percentage</b>	<b>N, Number</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	.25	5
Female	.75	10
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White/Caucasian	.87	13
Hispanic	.07	1
More than one Race	.07	1
<b>How Strongly Identify with a Particular Religion</b>		
Do Not Identify	.20	3
Somewhat Do Not Identify	.13	2
Moderately Identify	.20	3
Somewhat Identify	.20	3
Strongly Identify	.27	4
<b>Highest Level of Education Received</b>		
Some College/Technical School	.07	1
College Degree	.40	6
Some Graduate School	.07	1
Advanced Degree (Beyond College Degree)	.47	7
<b>Household Income per Year</b>		
\$40,000 - \$49,000	.13	2
\$50,000 - \$59,000	.20	3
\$60,000 - \$69,000	.07	1
\$70,000 or more	.60	9

## APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND PROBES

**Table 3. Development of key questions and probes for the interviews**

Research Question or Theory	Key Questions	Probe Questions
Sternberg's theory of love, taxonomy of love	What does it mean to be romantically in- love?	How do you know if you are in- love? What components play a role? (Emotional, physical, etc.) How is it different than other types of love you have experienced or are aware of?
Sternberg's theory of love	Describe your love for the spouse (prior to marriage) prior to FORL	Was there emotional intimacy, sexual desire, and commitment? Did you feel in- love?
Personality, commitment, social exchange theory, attachment theory	What factors played a role in mate selection?	Did you know what you were looking for in a mate? How did your parent's relationship play a role? What relationship components were pivotal in your decision to marry (i.e., interests, love)? What individual traits were considered? Did you consider rewards or costs?
RQ2: What feelings, thoughts, and behaviors accompany FORL? (Kayser, Sailor)	What feelings, thoughts, and behaviors accompany FORL?	What did it mean to you? What was lacking or missing in the experience of love? What happened? (i.e., r-ship history, expectations, etc.) What was the story if your relationship?
RQ1: What factors contributed to FORL? (Social exchange theory, Sternberg's theory of love, Kayser, Sailor)	What factors contributed to your falling out of love?	What were first clues? Can you describe these factors? Were there attractive alternatives or a change in costs and rewards? Did emotional intimacy, physical desire, or commitment change?
RQ2: What feelings, thoughts, and behaviors accompany FORL? (Kayser, Sailor)	Were there turning points, stages, or a point of no return?	What were the defining moments of any turning points, stages, point of no return?

<b>Research Question or Theory</b>	<b>Key Questions</b>	<b>Probe Questions</b>
Commitment (Sternberg's theory of love, attachment theory)	What efforts were made by you, your spouse, or others to remedy the situation?	Did you try to address emotional intimacy, physical desire or commitment? How much energy was put into these efforts? How did your spouse react?
Exploration of the experience of FORL	If you sought mental health counseling or marriage therapy, in what ways was FORL addressed through this treatment?	How were your presenting problems conceptualized in therapy/counseling by you, your spouse, or your therapist? What were the results of these efforts? What seemed to help most or least?
RQ3: How does FORL relate to marital satisfaction and success? (Sternberg's Duplex Theory of Love)	How do you believe FORL relates to marital satisfaction/success?	What delineates marital success (i.e., which components are essential)? Is emotional intimacy, physical desire, and commitment essential? What else is important?
Exploration of the experience of FORL	Which aspects of this phenomenon (did/do) you struggle most?	Have these struggles been resolved?
Exploration of the experience of FORL	Is this the first time you have FORL?	Do you have other similar experiences to compare to?
RQ1, RQ2, RQ3: What factors contributed to FORL? What feelings, thoughts, and behaviors accompany accompanied FORL? How does FORL relate to marital satisfaction and success?	What else is important for counselors/therapists or researchers to know about FORL love?	Looking back, is there anything you notice or observe about the experience that you believe others would benefit by knowing? What, if anything would you change about the experience?

## APPENDIX C. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

**IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY**  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board  
Office for Responsible Research  
Vice President for Research  
1138 Pearson Hall  
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207  
515 294-4500  
FAX 515 294-4207

**Date:** 4/27/2016

**To:** Crystal Hemesath  
208 S 84th St  
West Des Moines, IA 50266

**CC:** Dr. Tera R Jordan  
4380 Palmer Bldg, Suite 1364  
Dr. Brenda Lohman  
2330 Palmer, Suite 6230

**From:** Office for Responsible Research

**Title:** Individual Interviews for Dissertation Research

**IRB ID:** 16-150

**Approval Date:** 4/26/2016      **Date for Continuing Review:** 4/25/2018

**Submission Type:** New      **Review Type:** Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- **Use only the approved study materials** in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.
- **Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study**, when documented consent is required.
- **Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes** to the study by submitting a Modification Form for Non-Exempt Research or Amendment for Personnel Changes form, as necessary.
- **Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.
- **Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses**, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.
- **Complete a new continuing review form** at least three to four weeks prior to the **date for continuing review** as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please be aware that IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. **Approval from other entities may also be needed.** For example, access to data from private records (e.g. student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. **IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.**

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.