

## Introduction to the Special Section on Religion and Spirituality in Family Life: Delving Into Relational Spirituality for Couples

Annette Mahoney  
Bowling Green State University

Annamarie Cano  
Wayne State University

In light of the ongoing salience of spirituality and religion for individuals across the globe, this special section presents four rigorous empirical studies that tie conceptually based and potentially malleable spiritual constructs to better marital functioning. These studies exemplify an emerging subfield called Relational Spirituality, which focuses on the ways that couples can draw on specific spiritual cognitions and behaviors to motivate them to create, maintain, and transform their unions (Mahoney, 2010, 2013). In this introduction, we first provide a thumbnail sketch of the past 3 decades of empirical research in this area. We then summarize compelling findings from the 4 articles in this special section about 3 constructs that appear to enhance married heterosexuals' relationship dynamics: petitionary prayer for partner, spiritual intimacy, and the sanctification of marriage. In addition, religious/spiritual coping was shown to have promise as a construct relevant to couples' functioning. Finally, our introduction highlights that future research is needed to extend current findings to diverse samples and to uncover spiritual constructs that can harm couples' relationships, particularly couples in distress.

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In the *Journal of Family Psychology (JFP)* as well as other publication outlets, a great deal of research has examined various aspects of couple and marital functioning. For example, in preparing this introduction, when we entered the word "marriage" as a search term into the three fields of Abstract or Keyword or Subject for the years 1980–2009, the PsycINFO search engine yielded 11,828 and SocINDEX yielded 12,584 peer-reviewed articles published in academic, behavioral, and social science journals in English. However, the quantity dwindles when one limits this search to the role of spirituality and religion in couples' functioning. For example, in searching for peer-reviewed studies published in journals from 1980 to 1999 (Mahoney, Paragament, Swank, & Tarakeswar 2001) and from 1999 to 2009 (Mahoney, 2010), Mahoney and colleagues were able to locate only a total of 131 studies where the investigators had formulated and tested specific hypotheses on links between marital and religious/spiritual variables, or around 1.1% of the studies yielded when we entered "marriage" as a search term for this 30-year period. This result is disconcerting given that many people report engaging in spiritual beliefs and practices, both within and outside the context of organized religion. In the United States, for example, 92% of Americans report believing in a God or a universal spirit, 65% pray daily to weekly outside of religious services, and 68% believe that there is more than one true way to interpret the teachings of their religious tradition (Pew Research, 2008). Moreover, socially progressive to

conservative religious groups across the globe offer people spiritual guidance about their decisions about dating, cohabitation, marriage, sexuality in relationships, childbearing, coparenting, and divorce.

To address the need for additional research on religion and spirituality in family life, the *JFP* is publishing two special sections on the topic. We hope that both special sections will entice more researchers to delve into this subarea and generate more scientific knowledge for researchers, clergy, couples or family counselors, and the general public on this understudied nexus. In this first special section, four studies offer intriguing new findings on ways that specific spiritual beliefs or behaviors appear to strengthen generally happy marriages of heterosexual couples. Spiritual constructs examined include the sanctity of marriage, spiritual intimacy, petitionary prayer for one's partner, and religious/spiritual coping with negative life events. Notably, all of these spiritual constructs could apply equally well to same-sex unions or unmarried couples with or without children, although more research is needed to extend findings from these four studies to diverse types of couples (Mahoney & Krumrei, 2012).

To help readers gain perspective on the contributions made by each study in this special section, we offer a thumbnail sketch of peer-reviewed studies on the role of religion and spirituality for couples' relationships. For a more thorough discussion, readers are referred to Mahoney's work on her Relational Spirituality Framework, and critiques and elaborations of peer-reviewed research on faith and family life (Mahoney, 2010, 2013).

A major question for readers might be: What are the consistent findings from quantitative studies across different researchers and labs? In answering this question, it is important to emphasize that most studies (around 75%) on faith and family life have relied on one or two general questions about one spouse's or family member's level of involvement in organized religion. Examples of these

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Annette Mahoney, Department of Psychology, Bowling Green State University; Annmarie Cano, Department of Psychology, Wayne State University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Annette Mahoney, Department of Psychology, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403. E-mail: amahone@bgsu.edu

general questions include how often participants report they have attended worship services or how important religion is to them. Based on these types of global items, the following findings have consistently emerged about marriage: (a) greater salience of religion and attendance at any place of worship increases the chances of getting married and being satisfied with one's marriage, and (b) greater religious attendance or depth of involvement in organized religion decreases the risk of divorce, infidelity, and domestic violence. These findings imply that religion may offer people spiritual resources that facilitate marital functioning. However, five problems exist regarding this inference. First, like other demographic variables (e.g., education, income) that are often statistically linked to marital outcomes in large, heterogeneous samples, the effect sizes generated by single-item indices of religiousness are fairly small and thus easy to either dismiss or overstate. Second, general markers of religious participation offer little insight into why higher religiousness is tied to better marital functioning in nondistressed samples. For example, it is easy to argue that greater religious attendance is not tied to better marital outcomes because of unique spiritual behaviors or cognitions about marriage often promoted by religious groups, but, rather, only reflects certain relational values (e.g., high importance placed on getting married or the perceived benefits of marriage) or virtues (e.g., high importance placed on love, commitment, forgiveness, sacrifice) also often promoted by nonreligious groups or worldviews. Third, global items about religious involvement make it impossible to untangle specific spiritual beliefs or behaviors focused on marriage or romantic unions that could be helpful or harmful. By analogy, ample research in the psychology of religion and spirituality has found that some forms of religious/spiritual coping with life stressors, such as collaboratively turning to God for support, are prevalent and tend to reduce psychological distress, whereas greater spiritual struggles during times of stress, such as feeling angry at or abandoned by God, are relatively rare but robustly predictive of poorer mental and physical health outcomes. Fourth, the bulk of research on marriage and religion/spirituality has used self-reports from one partner in a relationship rather than relying on reports from both partners or on observational data, and most studies have used cross-sectional research designs rather than longitudinal or experimental designs that allow for causal modeling. As a result, it is easy to argue that mono-method bias and the interdependency of dyadic data inflates associations that have been found or that unmeasured "third" variables may account for found associations (Mahoney, 2010, 2013). Fifth, nearly all samples in these studies consist of American and predominantly apply married heterosexuals, though a few studies have explored the role of faith for nondistressed, committed same-sex couples (e.g., Mahoney & Krumeri, 2012; Oswald, Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Clausell, 2008; Rostosky, Otis, Riggle, Brumett, & Brodnicki, 2008). Thus, the finding that greater religious participation or salience tends to be correlated with better marital quality cannot be generalized to clinic-referred couples where religious or spiritual processes may be more likely to contribute to dysfunctional marital processes. By analogy, it is risky to generalize findings from research conducted on physically healthy individuals to people diagnosed with a serious medical illness or disease.

With this background in mind, the impetus for this special section was to attract research that examined specific spiritual

cognitions or behaviors that may shape family relationships for better or worse. Each of the studies in this special section moves beyond general measures of spouses' involvement in organized religion or spirituality and investigates specific spiritual beliefs or behaviors that have strong theoretical reasons to influence marital adjustment. Such conceptually grounded basic research that is also methodologically and statistically sound helps open the way to integrate spiritual resources into evidence-based prevention work to help people select compatible partners and help intact couples avoid deterioration over time in the quality of their unions. In addition, couples' therapists and clergy need scientific insights into particular spiritual beliefs or behaviors that can be part of the solution or problem when people seek couples, marital, postdissolution, or divorce counseling. In short, for both theoretical and practical reasons, more research is needed on specific, malleable spiritual variables centered on relationships that may motivate couples to form and maintain well-functioning unions.

Fincham and Beach's article builds upon prior longitudinal and experimental studies on partner-focused petitionary prayer (PFPP). PFPP refers to individuals praying for the well-being of their partner, such as praying for good things to happen to the partner or for God to watch over him or her. In short, PFPP is a psychospiritual process. Like other forms of prayer, PFPP involves an intrapsychic communication process between a human and a spiritual target to whom the human is directing his or her thoughts or feelings. But with PFPP, the individual's private prayer activity is about one's romantic partner or spouse. This construct has no obvious secular parallels and thus conceptually fits squarely within the psychology of religion and spirituality. Furthermore, the current study uses longitudinal data and sophisticated statistical analyses to help rule out competing hypotheses for why PFPP is tied to desirable relational outcomes. In two studies, Fincham and Beach found that PFPP was longitudinally related to higher commitment, with this association being partially mediated through enhanced relationship satisfaction. These findings extend prior work showing that PFPP leads to desirable relational criteria (e.g., higher agape or selfless love, decreased extradyadic sexual behavior) and enhances the benefits of a marital education programs. Additional research is needed to determine whether certain prayers could undermine relationships. For instance, praying privately for God to escape from or change a partner's unwanted behavior, rather than confronting relationship problems, may reinforce maladaptive relational dynamics, perhaps especially for distressed couples.

The Sabey, Rauer, and Jensen study is ground-breaking by targeting older couples (average age 71) and investigating whether the perceived sanctity of their long-term marriages (average years of marriage 42) predicted 64 husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction. Although older Americans report higher rates of religious attendance than younger Americans and often turn to religious/spiritual resources to cope with medical or psychological problems, this study is the first to examine for this age group whether viewing one's marriage as being imbued with spiritual character and significance is tied to greater marital satisfaction. Furthermore, the authors examined whether compassionate love mediated links between sanctification and marital satisfaction using multileveled, actor-partner interdependence modeling. Conceptually, diverse religious traditions teach that spouses should exhibit compassionate love, which refers to putting a partner's needs above one's own needs as a way to show with caring, concern, and support to the

other, especially when the partner seems to be suffering. Sabey et al. found that wives' reports that their marriages reflected sacred qualities predicted greater marital satisfaction on the part of both spouses, and these links were partially mediated by husbands' and wives' degree of compassionate love. This pathway was particularly robust for wives whose husbands were in poorer physical health and may require greater care by their wives. Thus, this study identifies sanctification as one specific spiritual belief about marriage that may function as a resource for older couples, or, given the cross-sectional design, be a reciprocal outcome of long-term, well-functioning unions.

Kusner, Mahoney, Pargament, and DeMaris's study with a sample of 164 married couples undergoing the transition to parenthood also advances work on the sanctification of marriage as well as introduces a new construct called *spiritual intimacy*. Spiritual intimacy refers to engaging in spiritual disclosure about one's own spiritual journey, questions and doubts with one's partner, and providing nonjudgmental support when a partner shares his or her spiritual disclosures. The study uses advanced statistical analyses that require longitudinal data to provide compelling evidence that a given spiritual construct may be causally related to a given marital construct. Criterion variables in this case were positive and negative behaviors that spouses exhibited when they discussed their top three marital conflicts, videotaped during pregnancy and when the couple's first infant was 3, 6, and 12 months old. Using bivariate fixed-effects regression modeling, the authors found that both spouses' reports of the sanctity of their marriage predicted more observed positive behavior by one or both spouses, and spouses' combined reports of his and her spiritual intimacy predicted more positivity and less negativity by both spouses. The fixed effects analyses used increase the confidence that each spiritual construct uniquely predicts the observed marital constructs and the linkages are not due to unmeasured factors that are stable over time, such as personality traits, education, and intelligence. Multivariate analyses that controlled for interdependency of dyadic data, marital love, and communication skills likewise indicated that spiritual intimacy and sanctification of marriage offer couples two unique sources of motivation to manage their core conflicts in a kind, constructive manner, recognizing that other spiritual factors may escalate conflict.

The Pollard, Riggs, and Hook study tackles the challenging task of integrating two large and distinct bodies of research—romantic insecure attachment styles and religious/spiritual coping with stressors—to predict 81 married couples' marital well-being. The authors assessed two dimensions of insecure attachment: anxious and avoidant attachment. The authors also assessed two factors that may be less familiar to couples' researchers but are well established in the psychology of religion and spirituality: positive and negative religious/spiritual coping. The brief positive coping scale used in this study reflects a respondent's efforts to seek a collaborative alliance with God to cope with stress, such as turning to God for comfort and love and help to take action, relinquish anger, or forgive oneself. Negative coping scale captures struggles with God in coping, such as feeling punished by or questioning God's love, as well as feelings of being abandoned by one's religious community or believing the devil caused the negative life event. Sophisticated actor-partner interdependence model analyses yielded complex findings. As expected, positive religious/spiritual coping buffered the deleterious relationship between attachment

avoidance and marital adjustment. However, religious/spiritual struggles unexpectedly reduced the negative impact of the partner's attachment anxiety on the respondents' marital adjustment. In sum, this study offers a promising initial effort to examine how specific forms of religious/spiritual coping can exacerbate or buffer marital relationships from deleterious effects of attachment insecurity on marital satisfaction.

In closing, this special section presents four rigorous empirical studies that tie conceptually based and potentially malleable spiritual constructs to better marital functioning of nondistressed, heterosexual couples. These studies exemplify an emerging subfield called *relational spirituality*, which focuses on the ways that diverse couples can rely on specific spiritual beliefs and behaviors, for better or worse, to motivate them to create, maintain, and transform their intimate relationships (Mahoney, 2010, 2013). The articles in this special section offer compelling evidence about three constructs that appear to enhance couples' relationship dynamics: petitionary prayer for partner, sanctification of marriage, and spiritual intimacy. In addition, religious/spiritual coping was shown to have promise as a construct relevant to relationships. Future research is, of course, needed to uncover spiritual constructs that could damage relationships. For resources to pursue such work (e.g., copies of measures), researchers can go to <http://www.bgsu.edu/arts-and-sciences/psychology/graduate-program/clinical/the-psychology-of-spirituality-and-family.html>. Hopefully, this special section will spur more research on ways that religion and spirituality can help or harm couples' relationships and encourage more interchange between family psychology and the psychology of religion and spirituality. In the next issue of the *JFP*, we will present another special section of studies that investigate individual markers of spirituality and religion and how they are related to aspects of parenting and family relationships.

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