



Article

The Effects of Religion on Enduring Marriages

David F. Mullins

Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences, University of Saint Francis, Fort Wayne, IN 46808, USA; dmullins@sf.edu; Tel.: +1-260-399-7700

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Abstract: This article adds to recent literature in the study of religion and marriage by examining older couples' use of religion as a cultural repertoire in enduring marriages. The study includes qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with 43 married, Christian couples. Couples reported four predominant social contexts that gave sacred meanings to their marriage: prayer, worship services and sermons, first-rite rituals and communion. These social contexts magnify sacred meanings within religious cultural repertoires by enhancing older couples' perceptions of their marriages as sacred through formal and public recognition of their marriage longevity, lauding their marriage longevity as a blessing from God to be emulated, promoting religious meanings of familism and giving positive marriage outcomes sacred meanings. Negative effects of religion on marriage outcomes occurred among older couples when lived experiences of religion conflicted with their cultural expectations for enduring marriages.

Keywords: religion and marriage; culture theory; sacred marriage; sanctification of marriage; cultural repertoire

1. Introduction

Although recent decades have witnessed an upturn in scholarly interest in research concerning the influence of religion on marriage and the sacred meanings people ascribe to marriage [1–7], almost no research has examined the influence of religion in the marriages of older adults [8]. Despite the greater significance of religion among older Americans [9,10] and the positive association between increased religiosity and improved marital outcomes early in the life span [11,12], little is known about the relationship between religion and marriage among older couples. Previous research has relied on strict standards of what it means to believe, to be religious and to belong to a denomination or congregation, despite inadequacies in capturing how people live [13–15]. “We have to put away biases about ‘real religion’ that have often characterized scientific attempts at explanation” ([16], p. 5). Rather than seeking spiritual meanings exclusively in separate, sacred spaces or treating religion as external to the individual, religion should be sought in the social contexts in which religion, faith and spirituality are reified [17]. To that end, this study uses a cultural perspective to better understand the benefits and harms that religion can have in the enduring marriages of older adults who believe that marriage is sacred.

In this study, enduring marriage is defined as those marriages lasting at least 40 years following MacKinnon and colleagues [18]. Other studies define enduring marriages within a range of 10–50 years or more [19–21]. Restricting marriage longevity to marriages lasting at least 40 years resulted in a sample for this study that shares a unique, common culture. Their marriages survived the deinstitutionalization of marriage [22] and “an economic restructuring characterized by the demise of the industrial economy, the rise of an information and services economy, and a massive increase in employment among women” ([23], p. 293). The couples in this study remained married during an era that arguably experienced the sharpest rise in divorce rates in recent U.S. history [24]. Given the use of

cultural theory in this study, the shared culture of these older, married couples is particularly important. Research indicates several potential links between religion and marriage outcomes. Higher levels of overall religiosity have been linked to greater marriage quality, marriage satisfaction and increased likelihood to remain married [25]. However, uncertain causality is a limitation of previous research because couples who have been married longer exhibit greater levels of religiosity [26,27], which confounds time-order effects in causality pathways. Nonetheless, overall higher levels of religiosity are related to adjustment to marriage, accommodating the needs and expectations of a spouse and adapting to changes resulting from being married [28]. Even among the unhappily married, increased religiosity has been linked to higher levels of marriage satisfaction [29]. Additionally, although religious participation does not appear to directly reduce barriers to marriage dissolution, a strong religious belief in marriage as a lifetime commitment has been linked to higher levels of marriage stability and quality [30,31].

Establishing causality between religion and marriage outcomes is also complicated by the mediating effects of gender [32–35] and race [36–38]. Hansen [39] identified interaction effects between gender and religion in the measurement of marriage outcomes. According to his study, women develop gender- and religious-based values of compassion, self-sacrifice, obedience and humility, resulting in lower expectations of significant rewards from marriage while still being satisfied, regardless of their level of religiosity. There also appears to be an interaction effect on the relationship between religion and marriage outcomes related to dyadic religiosity, with higher levels of shared religious beliefs between spouses, shared religious convictions about the sanctity of marriage and shared religious beliefs concerning lifelong marriage being linked to better marriage outcomes, especially for wives [40].

Belief in marriage as sacred has been linked to a decrease in the detrimental effects of stressing events and an increase in desirable marriage outcomes among older adults [8,41,42]. Religious beliefs concerning relational values (e.g., forgiveness, commitment and sacrifice) appear to indirectly improve marriage satisfaction and quality [43], and beliefs about the sanctification of marriage may help married couples resolve conflict by preventing conflict, improving conflict resolution and enhancing relationship reconciliation [44]. People who believe that marriage is sacred may also be more likely to remain committed to marriage because they have made a promise to God, they want to abide by God's guidelines for marriage and they believe their marriage is part of God's will [45]. People invest in the sacred, protect that which is sacred, gain satisfaction in the pursuit of the sacred, glean spiritual emotions from the sacred and suffer severe consequences from the loss of the sacred [7]. Goodman and Dollahite [46] report that a belief in sacred marriage that includes a belief that marriage is part of God's plan and that God is involved in the marriage results in marriages that exhibit more stability and unity, increased growth and motivation and higher levels of happiness and peace. Religion is believed to provide meaning to commitment in marriage because it has a sacred purpose and provides people a perspective that helps them stay together during stressing events [47,48].

Religious discourse among couples who believe their marriage is sacred has also been linked to positive marriage outcomes. According to Kusner and colleagues [49], increased levels of religious discourse between spouses, coupled with a shared belief in the sanctification of marriage, decreased the likelihood of negative interactions during periods of conflict. Religious discourse appears to have the strongest influence on people's everyday life decisions when they participate in religious communities that stress the salience of religion's role in everyday decisions [15]. Religious discourse concerning the eternal nature of marriage beyond death has been linked to enduring marriages, as well [48].

Despite the results of previous research indicating positive links between religion and marriage outcomes, there are four important potential pitfalls in much of the extant literature [50]. First, the effect sizes in previous research are often small and can easily be dismissed or over-stated. Second, the virtues that have been linked between religion and positive marriage outcomes are often promoted by nonreligious groups, as well; thus the positive effects may not be the result of religion. Third, most studies have been unable to disentangle religion's beneficial effects from its potentially harmful effects on marriage. Fourth, there has been an overreliance in previous research on self-reports from one

spouse in the relationship. In addition to these pitfalls, there is a need for more research examining the negative effects of religion on marriage outcomes and the role of religion in the long-term marriages of older couples given their higher levels of religiosity.

The present study fills a gap in the current literature of religion and marriage through the use of cultural theory following Swidler [51,52]. In this perspective, culture is not viewed as a reflection of people's way of life, but rather as a causal force in people's actions. As a part of people's cultural toolkits, religion is a component of cultural repertoires that provide "symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views" ([51], p. 273) used to develop and implement various strategies of action when solving different types of problems. Cultural repertoires are developed by gaining cultural skills and cultural competencies that people can selectively pick up or put down when implementing various cultural schema. As a cultural repertoire, religion provides "an image of the kind of world in which one is trying to act, a sense that one can read reasonably accurately (through one's own feelings and the responses of others) how one is doing, and a capacity to choose among alternative lines of action" ([52], p. 275). Social context plays a critical role in religion's effect(s) on action because culture's influence varies by context. "Social contexts systematize and unify culture, magnifying its influence. Culture's effects are strongest where the context demands and enforces public cultural coherence" ([52], p. 169). The present study therefore seeks to better understand religion's positive and negative influences on marriage outcomes in the enduring marriages of older couples within different religious social contexts.

2. Methods

Using a purposive sample design, I interviewed 43 heterosexual couples in enduring marriages who are self-proclaimed Christians who believe that marriage is sacred. The initial two couples were approached for inclusion because they are prominent members of a large Catholic and Methodist church, respectively. Couples were asked to help recruit additional couples for this study at the conclusion of their interviews. No incentives were offered to participate. Interviews took place over a three-year period, beginning in 2011, in the American Midwest.

2.1. Sample

Following Sabey and others [8], the sample included older couples ranging in age from 62–92 with an average age of 76. The average length of marriage for the sample is 51 years (range = 41–71). Two participants were divorced before marrying their current spouse of 40 years or more. Almost the entire sample married by the age of 22 ($n = 42$) and within one year of high school graduation ($n = 35$). All of the couples are white and have children and grandchildren with the exception of one couple with no children. Of the 43 couples, 37 percent ($n = 16$) are high income, 49 percent are medium income ($n = 21$) and 14 percent ($n = 6$) are low income. In twenty-three percent ($n = 10$) of the couples, either the husband or the wife had a graduate degree, 28 percent ($n = 12$) of the couples had some college, 47 percent ($n = 20$) graduated high school and one couple consisted of a wife who graduated high school and a husband who did not. The sample includes 22 Catholic couples and 21 Protestant couples: Methodist ($n = 10$), Lutheran ($n = 3$), evangelical Baptist ($n = 3$), Presbyterian ($n = 1$), Church of Christ ($n = 2$), and nondenominational Christians ($n = 2$).

In an effort to enhance the validity of this study given the relative homogeneity of the sample, I sought diversity in participants' narratives related to childhood family traumas. Collectively, 54 percent ($n = 23$ couples) of the couples in this study experienced family traumas as children that have been attributed to marital instability later in life. Of the 86 individual spouses I interviewed, 34 percent ($n = 29$) experienced an event during childhood associated in the literature with later marriage dissolution. Participants experienced the death of a parent during their childhood ($n = 12$), the death of a sibling during childhood ($n = 4$), physical or sexual abuse ($n = 9$), abandonment by biological parents ($n = 3$), alcoholic parents ($n = 17$) or parent's mental illness ($n = 13$). Four couples experienced teenage pregnancy before marriage.

2.2. Procedures

Following Stacey [53], interviews were conducted in couples' homes, with the exception of one couple I interviewed in my office, lasting approximately two hours with each spouse separately followed by an interview of approximately one hour with the couple together. Individual interviews allowed each person to openly and honestly discuss sensitive issues, as recommended by Seymour and colleagues [54]. Couples were then interviewed together to address the limitations of single-respondent interviews noted in previous studies [44,55] and to allow participants to fill in gaps in each other's recollections, share different kinds of knowledge and to remind and correct each other of shared experiences. This methodology aligns with Handel's [56] whole-family qualitative methodology, which provides a greater array of narrative reports of family relationships and a triangulation of perspectives based on the wife's report, the husband's report and my observations [57]. This also allowed for the observation of couples' narratives [58]. I transcribed each recorded interview. Transcripts were then analyzed by coding for common themes in the narratives with a particular focus on the negative influences of religion on marriage outcomes.

3. Results

Although older couples' narratives were rich in descriptions of changes in social contexts throughout their religious lives, most of the changes could be attributed to job transitions, residential moves or factors that could be considered part of the normal life course. However, most couples described actively seeking social contexts in which religion supported their lived experiences of marriage.

Ruth (all names are pseudonyms to protect participants' identities) is Catholic and disagrees with the Church's stand on the use of contraception.

After we had our three children, we just couldn't afford to have any more. I heard that there were parishes that you could go to where there might be a priest who was more likely to say using contraception was okay.

Emma, a member of the Church of Christ, regularly volunteers with her church's food bank, but her husband Harold does not.

It was hard to change churches because Harold had grown up at Nine Mile Baptist, but they weren't big enough to have a real outreach in the community, and that was important to me. God has given me a calling to help the needy, and we wanted to raise our kids in service to others and the Lord.

Andy and Laura are highly involved in their Presbyterian church, although neither expressed what would be considered traditionally strong religious beliefs. Andy shared,

We first went to Main Street Presbyterian Church only because primarily we—well I—was attracted by their position on Vietnam. I had just come back from the war, and it changed me. They had different music. They were a maverick [...] In that sense, I would say we were shaped more by...the social justice message purported by the church. I think that's kind of what shapes who we are as a couple. [...] I was less interested in what the church dogma had to say than I was in what kind of couple we were going to be for the rest of our lives together.

Laura interjected,

We don't need a church to tell us what is right and wrong or what to believe. We learned that from our parents. We were looking for a church that agreed with what we already believed and the way we felt God was leading us to live our lives for his glory.

Reflective of the experiences of the majority of couples in this study, time and again, these couples actively sought social contexts supportive of their beliefs when coping with marriage stressors and planning their futures together. They also sought out different strategies of actions by aligning their religious participation with social contexts in which they had the most power in expressing their beliefs with the expectation that others would respond positively to their religious beliefs and actions. The four predominant social contexts participants linked to positive marriage outcomes, in rank order, were prayer, worship services and sermons, first-rite rituals (e.g., first communion, confirmation, catechism, baptism and weddings) and communion. The couples I interviewed reported that these contexts enhanced their perceptions of their marriages as sacred through formal and public recognition of their marriage longevity, lauding their marriage longevity as a blessing from God to be emulated by others, promoting religious attributes of familism and giving their marriage outcomes sacred meanings.

3.1. Prayer

Prayer was the most frequently-mentioned religious context supportive of positive marriage outcomes for the older, married couples in this study. Prayer is both a sacred religious discourse and a social context in which religious discourse occurs. Participants reported that they prayed about their marriage, their spouse, their family, positive marriage outcomes and marriage stressors. Participants frequently referred to couples praying together and prayer meetings as social contexts supportive of positive enduring marriage outcomes.

Many couples prayed together. They prayed as a married couple about their futures, their relationship quality and their dyadic spiritual growth. Many couples described praying together on a daily basis. Some couples had specific locations in their homes where they prayed. Couples reported praying together for more loving, intimate relationships. Not all, but most, couples described prayers in which they both acknowledged their roles in and sought forgiveness for marital conflict.

Many couples regularly prayed at prayer meetings. Prayer meetings differed from other forms of prayer because they included religious perspectives on enduring marriage from others external to the couples' marriages. Prayer meetings allowed couples to reflect on their marriages by comparing them to the marriages, and other household structures (e.g., divorce, remarriage and singlehood), of others. Additionally, prayer meetings included a mixture of secular and religious discussions that occurred before, during and after the meeting that influenced marriage outcomes through interactions in which couples' lived experiences of marriage and family were ordered within religious contexts enhancing their perceptions of their marriages as sacred, blessed by God and by giving sacred meaning to their relationships with their spouses.

Prayer did not always result in positive marriage outcomes, however. Beth, a retired receptionist who is an evangelical Baptist, said her husband used prayer "as a weapon".

We went to a marriage retreat once, and they talked about praying a hedge around your wife. [...] That's a prayer Hosea prayed when his wife Gomer cheated on him. It keeps you from divorcing by asking God to make things as bad as possible for the wife, so she'll have to go back to her husband. Oh, it makes me mad when he threatens me with warfare prayer! It's like he thinks he has some special prayer he can say that will get me back in line!

Lisa and Sam are highly involved in their Catholic church, although in different ways. One of the few ways they participate together is by serving on the prayer chain committee. When asked during their separate interviews if they could describe the most recent conflict in their marriage, they both shared stories about Lisa not telling Sam about a prayer request she received concerning the death of a member of their parish the previous week. When asked about the conflict during their interview together, Sam said sharply, "She intentionally didn't tell me that Mrs. Jackson died, and that her family was requesting prayers, because she didn't want to go to the funeral." Lisa countered, "That's partly right. I didn't want to go to the funeral, and I didn't go. But I honestly just forgot to tell you about it."

Through an uncomfortable laugh, Sam added, “She’s always conveniently forgotten things. I think that’s how she controls me.”

Missy and Doug are non-denominational Christians who said they do not pray together as a couple and no longer attend prayer meetings, although they both indicated they prayed individually. Their nonparticipation in praying as a couple stemmed from what Missy referred to as Doug’s “not so hidden agenda” during prayer, and what Doug referred to as Missy’s “failure to separate private from public information” during a prayer meeting. According to Missy, when praying together, Doug prays for Missy’s “heart to be softened”, for her “eyes to be opened” and for God to “grant her wisdom” related to issues of conflict between them. Doug, on the other hand, shared several stories in which Missy openly prayed in front of others about what Doug considered to be private matters between him and Missy.

For these couples, prayer resulted in negative marriage outcomes. When their expectations for the religious context of prayer failed to match their lived experiences of prayer, their marriage relationship suffered. Several couples indicated that during conflict, one or both spouses retreated from involvement with each other to pray, which was sometimes taken as a sign of “brooding”, “stewing” or “moping” about the conflict. One wife suggested that her husband’s continued praying about conflict in their marriage was actually a way to disengage from dialogue with her, to prolong the dispute and to “pout because he knows he’s in the wrong”.

3.2. *Worship Services and Sermons*

It appears that attending worship services is important to older Americans, although this could be a reflection of the sampling method used in this study. The frequency of attendance varied greatly among the couples in this study, and attendance patterns varied between individual spouses. Most participants described sermons that framed marriage as sacred, praised those with enduring marriages and provided theological explanations for husbands’ and wives’ roles in marriage. Older couples in enduring marriages were often formally and publically identified as examples to be emulated by other couples during religious services. The social context of worship services and sermons frequently reinforced the values and behaviors of the couples, while at the same time denouncing those who were single, remarried, cohabitating or divorced (see Jenkins [59] concerning religious social shame discourse).

Some of the older couples in this study wielded significant power in their communities by directing the social, moral and theological content of sermons and the worship service by suggesting topics for sermons, arguing points of disagreement and even threatening repercussions for non-compliance when sermons or the content of the worship service (e.g., they type of music played, speaking Latin during mass, the pastor’s failure to wear a tie and inviting a female minister as a guest speaker) conflicted with their religious expectations. Couples frequently referred to churches splitting, terminating ministers, asking congregants to leave the church, seeking new churches themselves and getting more involved in the church to direct religious content so that it coincided with their beliefs, values and lived experiences of marriage and family. For the majority of these older Americans, worship services and sermons reinforced and expanded their religious repertoires in a way that incorporated and supported their lived experiences of marriage, providing social and personal rewards, resulting in positive marriage outcomes. Most couples reported that their expression of dyadic religiosity with their spouse through attendance at worship services and sermons enhanced their marriage outcomes, consistent with previous research [60–62]. For many couples, however, worship services and sermons negatively affected marriage outcomes, especially for those who were already experiencing marriage stressors.

Artie is the wealthy owner of a chain of car dealerships who insisted that his priest deliver a homily against same-sex marriage. He threatened to stop contributing to the local parish and the parochial school’s athletic program, to not purchase new robes for the choir and to send his tithe directly to the Vatican rather than his local parish, if the priest did not comply with his demand. His

wife Helen explained that their son was in the midst of a divorce from his wife because he was gay and that despite Artie's objection, she accepted her son's homosexuality and continued to be a part of his life. "So he's taking out his anger with Burt [their son] and me on the church."

Similarly, Buddy and his wife Megan, whose daughter is gay, stopped attending their Lutheran church because, as Buddy stated, "It seemed like all anyone at that church could talk about was homosexuality being a sin." However, Megan had attended the church since she was a child and had misgivings about their decision to change churches. She would have preferred to return to the church, but Buddy refused, resulting in unresolved conflict within their marriage. Buddy feels that he would be "betraying his daughter" and her wife if they were to return to the church. Megan stated that "Buddy is putting Maggie's [their daughter] feelings above mine".

Several couples reported that it was difficult to attend worship services and sermons during stressful periods in their marriage. Failure of one spouse to attend often inflamed the magnitude of the stressful event because the other spouse felt that not attending worsened the stressors' effects. Mary and Tina are Protestants who both shared stories of their husbands' failed business attempts and inability to keep consistent employment. During these stressful financial periods, both Mary and Tina said that their husbands' failure to attend worship services strained their relationships and weakened their marriages overall because they felt that their husbands were abandoning their religious obligations and commitment to their wives, which the wives viewed as essential components of a sacred marriage.

3.3. First-Rite Rituals

The stories participants shared concerning first-rite rituals were rich in familism and the intergenerational transmission of marriage behaviors and values. First-rite rituals also marked significant changes in couples' roles as husband and wife, father and mother or grandfather and grandmother. Many participants showed me wedding dresses, jewelry, hand-made lace and christening dresses that had been handed down through generations as part of first-rite rituals. First-rite rituals provided face-to-face interactions that lauded couples' positive marriage outcomes to extended family and community, improving their marriage satisfaction, which appeared to be particularly meaningful to the older couples I interviewed.

For the most part, participants in this study shared little spiritual, theological or faith-based rationale for attending first-rite rituals, although the same was not true for incidences in which they chose not to attend first-rite rituals. Instead, couples' narratives focused on the importance of promoting familism and pro-marriage outcomes. Through their expression of religiosity by attending first-rite rituals, couples reported showcasing their marriage outcomes symbolically through the presence of their children and grandchildren. It was also common for these older couples to describe the passage of time by mentioning first-rite rituals in their lives (e.g., their wedding day, their children's christenings or a grandchild's first communion). First-rite rituals often signaled recommitment to their marriage, their roles as parents and grandparents, their involvement in the church and their relationship with each other.

Not all of the effects of first-rite rituals were beneficial to marriage, however. First-rite rituals resulted in negative marriage outcomes when one or both spouses challenged the religious context in which they occurred.

Irene and Drew are Catholic, and both have strong opinions about marriage. Irene believes that the entire extended family should attend every wedding within the extended family as a sign of support for the family as a whole. However, Drew believes strongly in Catholic traditions related to marriage. He refused to attend Irene's nephew's wedding because the nephew told Drew he, "...believed less in God every day".

Drew said, "I found out later that the bride dropped the F-bomb during the ceremony. What kind of a crap wedding is that? If that had happened and I was there, I would've got up and said, 'Hey Father, give me a break. What are you condoning here?'"

Irene indicated she was more concerned about how “the family” perceived her relationship with Drew and his commitment to the extended family than she was about her nephew’s spirituality. “Everyone kept asking me where Drew was”, Irene told me. “It was so embarrassing. I know he didn’t go on religious grounds, but he should have gone to support me and the family.”

Several couples described similar circumstances in which their beliefs, values and lived experiences of religion did not align with their expectations of religious contexts associated with first-rite rituals. “The biggest fight we ever had was when I refused to be godmother to our grandson Jake”, Betty, who attends the Church of Christ with her husband Don, told me. “I told Don, ‘I can’t because his mom is Catholic. [...] I’m not going to promise to make sure he’s raised Catholic when I don’t believe that and ain’t Catholic.’” Don said, “It was a real honor to be asked to be Jake’s godfather. I was deeply hurt that Betty couldn’t look past her own needs to see how much it meant to me.”

3.4. Communion

Communion was not frequently mentioned in couples’ narratives, but it seemed to be salient to those who did mention it. When asked how he and his wife express conflict in their marriage, Riley, a retired Catholic sanitation worker replied,

Not much throwing for us but lots of yelling when we fight. At one time that would've included profane language, but not anymore because I don't use that language anymore. That has to do with receiving Holy Communion. I told Jesus that I wouldn't use that kind of foul language and then receive him in my mouth.

Janet is a retired Catholic school teacher who said, “There’s nothing more sacred to me than taking Christ in my mouth, and I couldn’t do that if I divorced Jason.” Both Riley and Janet indicated positive marriage outcomes related to respecting their spouse and improved communication with their spouse as a result of their participation in communion.

In contrast, Debra, a liberal Lutheran, and Dianne, a conservative Baptist, indicated there would be conflict in their marriage if their husbands failed to participate in communion. Both of these wives described childhoods in which their fathers regularly attended worship services, but did not participate in communion. Their fathers’ nonparticipation in communion was a source of serious conflict in their parents’ marriages, and as teenagers, both Debra and Dianne decided they would not marry anyone who did not attend regularly with them and participate in communion. Debra shared that, “I didn’t care what he believed, but my future husband would never embarrass me in front of the whole church like dad did mom. If Will [her husband] shouldn’t take communion, then he better get things straight with God before we go because we’re taking communion together.” Dianne said, “...I always volunteer to set up the Lord’s Supper because I know we have to go and stay until the end for sure. He would go anyway, but I don’t want him having no excuses to skip communion.” For Debra and Dianne, the thought of their husbands not participating in communion was a source of potential conflict.

4. Discussion

Research has linked religion with positive marriage outcomes [12,46,63], and this study extends that body of research by focusing on social context and the positive and negative effects of religion on marriage outcomes among older Americans. Previous research explicating the links between religion and marriage outcomes has generally demonstrated small effect sizes, weak predictive power and little implication for those wishing to promote marital functioning, because it has not focused on the sources of sacred meanings concerning marriage and how people use their beliefs about marriage in their relationships [8,64], especially among older couples. As Goodman and Dollahite [46] suggest, there are specific pathways through which couples connect religion with marriage, and this study contributes to a broader understanding of how older couples in particular use religion as part of their cultural toolkit to construct religious repertoires related to their beliefs about the sanctification of marriage.

This study goes beyond the concepts of distal and proximal measurement of religiosity [6] in the study of marriage by examining the positive and negative effects of religion in the enduring marriages of older couples. This study answers the call for more investigations into the negative effects of religion on marriage outcomes. Using a cultural perspective on religion following Swidler [51,52], I examined the magnifying effects of social context on religious repertoires among older couples in the American Midwest. The findings in this study suggest that religion influences marriage outcomes positively when religious repertoires align with couples' lived experiences of long-term marriage. However, marriages suffer when spouses' religious repertoires are inconsistent with their lived experiences, religious expectations and beliefs concerning what they believe to be the sacred aspects of their enduring marriages.

4.1. Prayer

The social contexts of prayer in the form of spouses praying together as a married couple and in the form of prayer meetings magnify the sacred meanings older couples ascribe to sacred marriage, thereby eliciting positive marriage outcomes. In addition to their own individual prayers, older couples described praying with their spouse and prayer meetings as forms of dyadic religiosity that enhanced their feelings of closeness, intimacy and togetherness. Additionally, praying together as a couple and prayer meetings promoted familism and a sense of community as they prayed for their families, shared stories about their families with others and prayed for other couples and families in the community. Most couples who prayed together as a couple and attended prayer meetings indicated these activities enhanced their relationship, brought them closer together with each other and their community and ultimately resulted in more positive marriage outcomes.

Not all of the couples in this study indicated that prayer resulted in improved marriage outcomes, however. For some couples, prayer promoted isolationism and retreatism. Others indicated that praying together with their spouse proved to be counterproductive, especially during conflict, because prayers took on an accusatory tone, placing blame and culpability for the conflict on the other spouse and effectively driving a wedge between them as a married couple. In some cases, prayers were intentionally designed to openly discuss the other spouse's perceived role in conflict under the guise of praying for the spouse's spiritual edification. In each of these examples, praying together as a couple or participating in prayer meetings resulted in worse marriage outcomes by increasing and prolonging marital conflict. Participants reported that the perceived violation of the sacred nature of prayer and the sacred meanings they ascribed prayer as part of their cultural repertoires greatly magnified the negative impacts of prayer in their marriages. Participants indicated that if the same statements had been made outside of prayer, they would have had less impact on their marriage due to the sacred context of prayer.

4.2. Worship Services and Sermons

The vast majority of the couples indicated that regular attendance at worship services and sermons was an expectation in long-term marriages that results in favorable marriage outcomes. As a general rule, couples indicated that their spouses' involvement in the worship service or sermons as lay speakers, hymn directors, choir members, ushers or through other forms of involvement in the church that supported the worship service and sermon had positive effects on their marriage outcomes. Specifically, couples perceived an increased sense of community, sense of togetherness, sense of intimacy and a religiously-evoked love for one another that stemmed directly from God's presence in their marriage and family during worship services. Older couples are often well-versed in their religious repertoires within the social context of worship services and sermons. The couples in this study reported that worship services and sermons gave their marriage sacred meanings and that the longevity of their marriage was a result of and testament to their beliefs in the sanctification of marriage.

Over-involvement in the church, however, had negative consequences for marriage. Some spouses indicated that their spouse was sometimes too involved in church business, suffered stress from serving in certain roles or spent too much time away from family due to religious obligations. Conflict also arose when couples disagreed about church teachings presented in sermons, which primarily occurred when those teachings did not align with their lived experiences of marriage and family. Failure to attend worship services together during stressful events magnified the negative effects of the stressful event. Some participants indicated that if they did not attend worship services together with their spouse, the worship service lacked its positive effects and “didn’t feel like a Sunday”. For older, married couples, participating together in worship services is a cultural expectation of their enduring marriages that is bounded by limitations on excessive participation that negatively affects the marriage relationship or that divides the couple due to inconsistencies between their cultural repertoires.

4.3. First-Rite Rituals

First-rite rituals held significant cultural meanings for couples in this study, although the sacred meanings older couples attribute to first-rite rituals do not appear to be primarily theological in nature. Instead, older couples appear to exhibit a strong culture of familism related to religious first-rite rituals that promotes positive marriage outcomes. The formal and public recognition of marriage and family achievements consistent with older couples’ religious repertoires of enduring marriages enhances their perceptions of their marriages as sacred because they believe their marriages have been blessed by God. Framing their marriage longevity during significant wedding anniversaries as a blessing from God also improves their marriage and relationship satisfaction. One husband described the minister’s blessing during his 50th wedding anniversary celebration as “a reward for all the hard work it takes to stay married and raise a family”.

Couples reported negative effects of first-rite rituals on their marriages when spouses failed to participate in the rituals, thus signaling dissonance in their cultural repertoires. Additionally, couples reported that when their religious beliefs differed from those of their children or grandchildren, first-rite rituals were dysfunctional and had lasting negative impacts in their relationships with their families. One wife indicated that she has not seen her daughter or her daughter’s family since she refused to attend her daughter’s wedding to a Muslim man. As this mother’s story exemplifies, the impact of non-participation in first-rite rituals can have lasting negative effects on marriage outcomes and families.

4.4. Communion

Communion was the least mentioned social context in which religion influenced marriage outcomes for older couples; however, its impact appeared to be significant. Dyadic participation in communion was an expectation some spouses had for marriages they believe to be sacred. The symbolic ties between the individual and Christ during communion were transferred to the symbolic ties these spouses viewed as part of their marriage relationship. Their cultural construction of the sacred nature of communion affected how they communicated with their spouses, even to the point of excluding their use of profanity during conflict. The thought of the failure of the spouse to participate in communion was perceived as an indication that the spouse was “not right with God”, indicating a spiritual distancing from God and therefore a distancing within their relationship. When participation in communion was not a component of a spouse’s religious repertoire, participants believed the marriage would suffer.

4.5. Limitations and Implications

Despite the strengths of this study (e.g., the focus on older adults, three-stage interviews and the focus on both the positive and negative effects of religion on marriage), it is not without its limitations. First, it is not possible to establish direct causal pathways between religion and marriage outcomes. As part of culture, religion has the ability to influence moods, organize and evaluate reality, regulate

conduct and influence the formation of social bonds [44]; however, religion does not form marriage outcomes. Instead, religion is part of the cultural toolkit couples use to form strategies of action within marriages they believe to be sacred that appear to indirectly affect marriage outcomes. Second, given the relatively homogeneous sample in this study consisting primarily of educated, heterosexual, financially-stable, Caucasian Christians, this sample may not represent the population of older adults overall or the population of enduring marriages overall.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study indicate that cultural theory can play a salient role in research concerning the dual nature of religion in marriage and family life. It is my hope that this study will promote dialogue and future research concerning the positive and negative effects of religion in families, especially as related to the ways religious practices, rituals and beliefs can both strengthen and polarize relationships. The small body of research that does explicate the potentially harmful effects of religion in marriage indicates that religious dissimilarities in attendance patterns and core theological beliefs influence the type and frequency of arguments in marriage [65], as well as the likelihood of marriage dissolution [66,67]. These religious dissimilarities have also been linked to an increased propensity for intimate partner violence in couples in which men held more conservative beliefs about the Bible than women [68]. In contrast to much of the extant literature, which has focused on the constructive aspects of religion and spirituality in marriage, the present study demonstrates that older, married couples sometimes use religion to wound each other and deepen marital conflicts. This study suggests that dissimilarities in older couples' cultural repertoires concerning their beliefs and religious practices related to the sanctification of marriage can diminish marriage outcomes and that the effects of these dissimilarities can be magnified in certain social contexts.

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