

# Religion and the Science of Relationships: Is a Happy Marriage Possible?

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The current article is a commentary on the 4 articles included in this issue regarding religion and the family. Recommendations are made regarding the methodological strategies that might be followed in enhancing the science of religion and family. The 4 articles in this issue are used as examples of how the field can fruitfully proceed in the future. Foremost among the recommendations is that specific hypotheses be developed to explore explicit ways in which certain aspects of religious life might relate to specific aspects of family/marriage functioning.

As Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, and Swank (2001) point out, most married couples in the United States view themselves as religious and see their religious faith as an important influence in their lives. Yet the investigation of the role of religious variables for couple and family functioning has been relatively neglected by marital and family researchers in psychology. In part, this likely results from religious constructs appearing to be soft, “fuzzy,” and within the realm of theology. In addition, investigators select areas of inquiry that are of interest to them, and overall, psychologists are less religious than the general population. If, however, a variety of religious factors is potentially important in understanding couple and family functioning, then it is essential that investigators seek to elucidate how religion is integrated into couple and family life. The goal is not to further a political position that couples either should or should not be religious but rather to understand the myriad ways in which religion can contribute to or detract from healthy relationship functioning and vice versa. Through their own excellent empirical investigations and recommendations to the field, the four articles in the current issue provide valu-

able guidance for how such efforts might progress.

One hallmark of the current investigations that is critical for the future of inquiry in this domain is an emphasis on specificity. Although they are relevant, it is time to move beyond the broad issues of whether people who are more religious have happier marriages, fewer divorces, and better adjusted children. Typically, an investigator explores whether an individual's standing on some religious variable predicts adaptive couple or family functioning. In essence, religious variables serve as the independent or predictor variables in the vast majority of investigations. Mahoney et al. (2001) make an important distinction in differentiating between proximal and distal religious variables. In this instance, *proximal* and *distal* refer not to a dimension of time or physical distance but rather to the degree to which the religious variable under consideration is psychologically close to the dependent variable. Proximal religious variables are those that would appear to be closely related to an outcome of interest in the couple or family, on the basis of some theoretical or psychological model. Typically, proximal religious variables involve specific relationships regarding some specific religious behavior or cognition–emotion. Thus, in this issue, Fiese and Tomcho (2001) investigate whether religious holiday rituals (a proximal variable) are related to marital satisfaction. They note that engaging in joint religious activities provides couples an opportunity to take part in enjoyable and meaningful rituals to-

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gether. Furthermore, they hypothesize that it is not the ritualistic behavior *per se* that is important but rather the meaning that is given to these rituals, that is, the cognitive and emotional experience surrounding the behaviors involved in religious rituals. Their findings indicate that engaging in religious holiday rituals is related to marital adjustment, even once the overall religiosity of the couple is taken into account. Consistent with their hypothesis, husbands' marital adjustment was more closely related to the meaning of the rituals, but wives' satisfaction was more closely related to the ritualistic behavior *per se*. Their findings are noteworthy, and their use of specific, proximal religious variables is an excellent example of the research strategy that is likely to bear fruits in the future.

Similarly, in the current issue, Flor and Knapp (2001) investigate how parental religious values and behavior relate to their adolescents' religious values and behavior. They explore whether parental modeling of religious behaviors and values can explain corresponding adolescent religious values and behavior, or whether parent-adolescent conversations and interactions around religious issues help to explain adolescents' internalization of religious values and behavior. Their findings indicate that both are important. Thus, rather than broadly asking whether religious parents have more religious offspring, they thoughtfully differentiate between religious attitudes and behaviors and explore them within a model of unidirectional transmission from parent to adolescents, versus a bidirectional, transactional model. Again, a focus on specific religious variables that are integrated into a model of couple and family functioning can help to elucidate the mechanisms by which religion might influence family behavior (Mahoney et al., 2001).

As alluded to above, several of the current investigations also make the important distinction between specific religious behaviors and internal religious experience involving cognitions, emotions, or a cognitive-emotional interplay. Flor and Knapp (2001) explore how both religious values and religious behaviors are transmitted intergenerationally. Fiese and Tomcho (2001) seek to explain whether it is the behavior within religious holiday rituals or the meaning that is given to these rituals that is important in understanding marital adjustment. Throughout their thoughtful and sophisticated

meta-analysis linking religion to marriage and parenting, Mahoney et al. (2001) differentiate between religious behaviors and internal religious experiences. Likewise, in my own research, I have explored whether adopting religious values about marriage or engaging in joint religious behaviors as a couple are differentially related to marital adjustment (Clayton & Baucum, 2001). A wide body of empirical investigation in various domains demonstrates that cognitions and emotions do not always parallel behavior. Given that a major function of religion is to promote broad worldviews and value systems, differentiating between these internal religious phenomena and religious behaviors is vital.

Not only will focusing on specific, proximal religious variables be important, but these issues should be related to specific aspects of marital and family functioning. As Mahoney et al. (2001) demonstrate in their meta-analytic review, these distinctions already are occurring. Consequently, they present meta-analytic summaries relating religiosity to a number of specific aspects of marital and family life. Regarding marriage, they relate religious variables to divorce rates, global marital satisfaction, commitment, verbal conflict, and domestic violence. Within the parenting domain, they summarize our knowledge relating religious variables to general child-rearing attitudes, beliefs about corporal punishment, actual use of corporal punishment, nurturing, parenting strategies, global family adjustment, and parental coping with child developmental disorders and illness. In her longitudinal study of newlywed couples and religiosity, in the current issue Sullivan (2001) relates religiosity to marital adjustment, divorce attitudes, help-seeking behavior in the presence of serious marital problems, and microanalytic coding of couples' interactions during problem solving. Her findings indicate that cross-sectionally, religiosity is related to more conservative divorce attitudes and higher levels of marital commitment. However, longitudinally, these attitudes do not predict marital satisfaction or stability. Sullivan concurs with Booth, Johnson, Branaman, and Sica (1995) that at least in some contexts, religiosity seems to affect attitudes but not behavior. Understanding this differential relationship between religiosity and cognitions/emotions versus behavior is critical for developing reasonable models of

the role of religious functioning in couple and family life.

Whereas clear and careful elucidation of both religious and couple–family variables is necessary, it is not sufficient for the field to move forward in a scientific manner. In addition, the variables of importance must be integrated into appropriate conceptual and substantive models. For example, in her longitudinal study of newlywed couples, Sullivan (2001) proposes three ways in which religiosity might influence couple functioning: a direct effect model, in which religiosity either positively or negatively influences marital adjustment; a compensation or moderator model, in which religiosity helps to compensate for couples experiencing a variety of marital vulnerabilities; and an indirect or mediator model, in which religion affects other dimensions of marital quality, such as commitment, which over time affect marital stability and satisfaction. These models are not unique to investigating religion and marriage. In fact, Baron and Kenny (1986) have popularized the statistical strategies for testing these various models, and these approaches have been used in multiple fields of study. Sullivan provides an excellent example of how these models can be used in longitudinal research of religion and marriage to answer specific questions.

Direct effect, moderator, and mediator models must then be applied to address specific questions that follow from a psychological understanding of religion and marriage. Mahoney et al. (2001) propose a number of important questions yet to be addressed, and in doing so, thoughtfully differentiate between psychosocial functions and substantive elements of religion and how they relate to couple–family functioning. By *psychosocial functions of religion*, Mahoney et al. are referring to the psychological and social roles that religion serves, regardless of the specific content of religious beliefs and rituals. For example, engaging in joint religious activities might facilitate constructive couple–family functioning because it provides opportunities for the couple and family to interact with each other on a regular basis. As Mahoney et al. note, churches provide families with opportunities to become integrated into a community, provide social support, and offer an opportunity for social activities, regardless of particular religious beliefs about couple–family life. In fact, my own research has attempted to clarify

whether there is anything unique about joint religious activities as opposed to secular couple activities that contributes to positive marital functioning (Clayton & Baucom, 2001). Organized religion might serve as an institution or intervention that promotes a variety of couple and family behaviors that have been demonstrated to be efficacious in promoting adaptive functioning in cognitive behavioral interventions for marriage (Baucom, Shoham, Mueser, Daiuto, & Stickle, 1998). Understanding the psychosocial functions of religion can help to clarify how religious beliefs and religious organization are incorporated into a couple or family's life and influence their ongoing behavior.

Similarly, Mahoney et al. (2001) note that substantive elements of religion, including the specific content of beliefs and practices promoted by different religious institutions, might also be important influences in a couple or family's life. For example, Mahoney et al. note that Judeo–Christian theology proposes that maintaining healthy marriages should be placed on an equal, if not higher, priority than fulfilling one's individual desires. To the degree that an individual subscribes to this belief, this might well influence that person's decisions about divorce, weighing his or her personal happiness against the maintenance of the couple and family. Previously, Mahoney et al. (1999) demonstrated that couples who sanctify their marriage by viewing it as spiritual with God's involvement have higher levels of marital adjustment. In the parenting domain, they also propose that it is important to investigate whether parents who sanctify their children or see them as a gift from God are likely to behave toward their children in a more supportive or esteem-enhancing manner. Thus, viewing the parenting role as having a spiritual significance might well influence other parenting beliefs and behaviors. Given that even among highly religious individuals, their specific attitudes, beliefs, and religious behavior showed great variability, an increased emphasis on specific substantive elements of religion is likely to provide much better information in many instances than broad, global indices of religiosity.

In developing appropriate models for addressing substantive and psychosocial aspects of religion, it will be important to take other contextual factors into account. For example, the role of specific religious factors in family

life might well be moderated by the phase of the family life cycle. In the current issue, Sullivan (2001) focuses specifically on the role of religiosity in the first few years of marriage. As she notes, this role might change substantially in other phases of marriage, such as with the birth of children. The introduction of children into the family often serves as a strong stimulus for couples to address religious and spiritual issues, because their decisions are likely to affect the children in addition to the couple. Likewise, Fiese and Tomcho (2001) explore religious holiday rituals among families with preschool age children. Couples might see this time as particularly important in shaping their young children's experiences of holidays. This same emphasis on religious holiday rituals might decrease in importance as children reach adolescence or leave the home. Longitudinal research in this area is rare and expensive but can be valuable not only in helping to explore cause-effect relationships but also in understanding how the role of religion changes over the course of the family life cycle.

As with most aspects of couple and family functioning, the current investigators are sensitive to the importance of addressing potential gender differences in couples and religion. Given that men and women demonstrate notable differences in many areas of marriage in general (Baucom, Notarius, Burnett, & Haefner, 1990) and the genders' roles in religion often differ, taking potential gender differences into account can help to clarify where such differences exist and to dispel unwarranted stereotypes.

In most of the research noted and recommendations made above, the primary emphasis has followed from a variety of models that pose that in some form or fashion, religion influences couple and family functioning. As Mahoney et al. (2001) note, the relationship also might operate in the opposite direction. That is, various aspects of family life might well influence a variety of religious beliefs and behaviors. For example, if a wife develops a serious illness, might her husband's beliefs change regarding the extent to which he views that God is integrally involved in their marriage? If a couple divorces, is it likely to affect one or both partners' religious behaviors in the religious institution in which the couple had been involved? Similarly, religion and family functioning might

reciprocally influence each other, not only at one time period but also across time. Developing thoughtful psychological models and applying statistical techniques to address such patterns of mutual influence are essential to address such questions.

In summary, the study of religion and marriage is important because of the central role that it plays for many couples and families. These associations can be explored in a rigorous, scientific manner using the same methodological and statistical procedures and developing substantive models as are appropriate for studying other aspects of couple and family functioning. Furthermore, it is essential that the role of religion in family functioning not be explored solely by researchers who themselves are highly religious individuals. There are many contexts and ways in which religion might facilitate or detract from adaptive couple-family functioning, and it is important that investigators not conduct research primarily to support their own personal experiences of religion, whether those have been positive or negative. The investigators in the current issue are to be commended for applying these methods and demonstrating how we can incorporate this domain of religious couple-family functioning into our broad theoretical, research, and applied approaches to understanding couples and families.

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