

# Praying Together and Staying Together: Couple Prayer and Trust

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Three studies examine the relationship between prayer, unity, and trust. Study 1 ( $N = 29$ ) showed that praying for one's partner predicted objective ratings of trust. Study 2 ( $N = 210$ ) found a significant relationship between prayer with a partner and relationship trust. This relationship was mediated by couple unity. Study 3 ( $N = 80$ ) investigated the relationship documented in a 4-week, experimental study. Participants either prayed with and for their partner twice a week for 4 weeks, or were assigned to a positive interaction condition, in which they discussed positive news stories for the same time span. Prayer condition participants reported significantly more unity and trust for their partner than those in the positive interaction control group. Relational unity was again found to mediate the relationship between prayer and trust. These three studies are discussed in the context of an emerging literature on the relational implications of prayer.

*Keywords:* couple prayer, trust, unity, religion, spirituality

Does praying with someone make you trust them more?

Recently, the spiritual practice of prayer has received attention in several studies that highlight its prosocial benefits in the context of close relationships. These studies have shown that prayer increases gratitude (Lambert, Fincham, Braithwaite, Graham, & Beach, 2010), forgiveness (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, & Beach, 2010), relationship satisfaction (Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, & Braithwaite, 2008), and decreases infidelity (Fincham, Lambert, & Beach, 2010). Such findings have laid a foundation for many other questions and theories as to why and how prayer works as it does to elicit positive outcomes in close relationships.

Prior research, however, is limited to individual prayer for a partner. The current studies advance this line of research by examining the effects of praying *with* and for a partner on trust levels reported in close relationships. We hypothesize that regular joint prayer in relation-

ships will increase levels of trust, and that increased relational unity or emotional "oneness" will mediate this relationship between prayer and trust.

## Trust in Relationships

Interpersonal trust is a key component to any healthy relationship (Eckstein & Cohen, 1998). Indeed, trust is often mentioned (in conjunction with love and commitment) as a cornerstone of an ideal relationship (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1983). Larzelere and Huston (1980) found that trust predicted love and self-disclosure. Gordon, Hughes, Tomcik, Dixon, and Litzinger (2009) found that trust mediated the relationship between forgiveness and marital satisfaction.

Operational definitions of interpersonal trust tend to emphasize the extent to which trusting requires an inherent risk and reward. This risk exists because of the possibility that trust will be placed in an unsuitable partner and that disappointment, pain, or disillusionment will occur. We define trust as the belief that a relationship partner will behave in a reliable, predictable manner.

## Joint Religious Activities and Relationship Outcomes

Although no studies have been conducted that establish a link between prayer and trust,

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some research indicates that participating in other joint religious activities facilitates positive relationship outcomes. For example, the couples participating in a qualitative study by Dollahite and Lambert (2007) suggested that their joint religious activities were integral to their fidelity toward one another and trust is likely to be an important aspect of fidelity.

In another qualitative study, couples reported that even though there were challenges associated with some of their religious activities, they felt that their marriage had an increased sense of meaning as a result of shared religious activities (Marks, 2005). Mahoney et al. (1999) found that joint religious activities and perceived sacred qualities of marriage were positively associated with improved marital functioning and perceived benefits of marriage.

More specifically, attending church together is a commonly studied joint religious activity. Larson and Goltz (1989) found that attending church together increased a couple's level of personal and structural commitment to the marriage, and Bahr and Chadwick (1985) found a significantly positive correlation between church attendance and marital satisfaction. Homogeneity on any dimension of religiosity (e.g., affiliation, attendance, beliefs) promoted similarities between spouses that were conducive to a more stable and satisfying relationship (Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009).

Conversely, differences in levels of engagement in religious participation have been found to cause problems in relationships. Call and Heaton (1997) reported that the risk of marital dissolution is nearly three times greater when the wife regularly attends church and the husband never attends. In a study examining heterogeneity in marriages, differences in core theological beliefs and in religious attendance were associated with increased marital dissolution (Curtis & Ellison, 2002).

Thus, there is reason to suspect that joint religious activities have important consequences for relationship outcomes. However, no studies of which we are aware have examined the effect of the joint activity of prayer on relationship outcomes. We propose that engaging in joint prayer should also be related to trust. But why might such a relationship exist?

## Prayer and Unity

We believe that joining together in prayer promotes a sense of couple unity and that this unity might be a key to understanding the prayer–trust relationship. For our purposes, we define *unity* as a measure of the emotional “oneness” of a couple or group. This can be expressed in shared communication, values, goals, activities, beliefs, experiences, or practices. One of the basic premises of Symbolic Interaction Theory (Blumer, 1962) is that people assign meaning to the people, things, and situations in their lives. From this perspective, interaction with others is based on these meanings, and relationships are the product of the use of symbols that have shared meaning for the individuals involved. We propose that engaging in joint religious activities such as prayer will remind couples of the symbolic meaning of their shared values, which should enhance their unity. As couples refocus on their shared long- and short-term goals, the level of unity and trust experienced in the relationship should increase. Indeed, there is some evidence that prayer promoted empathy and blending of perspectives (Butler, Gardner, & Bird, 1998).

Prayer may also be instrumental in restoring unity following a conflict. In a study examining the phenomenological experience of prayer during marital conflict, Butler, Stout, and Gardner (2002) found that prayer encouraged spouses to shift their focus from their own individual needs to the needs of the relationship and to behaviors beneficial to their partner. Couples in a qualitative study (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006) reported that praying during a conflict helped renew harmony in their relationship. In addition, they reported that their religious participation helped give them a shared sacred vision and purpose. This shared vision is an important component in couple unity. Similarly, Rosen-Grandon, Myers, and Hattie (2004) found shared values to be a key predictor of relationship happiness. We therefore predict that engaging in a joint activity perceived as sacred (such as prayer), should increase the unity experienced by relationship partners and this will, in turn, facilitate trust.

## Unity and Trust

There are reasons to suspect a relationship between unity and trust. Rempel, Holmes, and

Zanna (1985) point out that trust can be fortified by positive past experience of a relationship partner's trustworthiness. Thus, it may be that if a couple has convergent values, goals, and beliefs, they may perceive their partner's behavior as being more predictable. It follows that this greater predictability could make a partner seem more trustworthy. For this reason, a couple with these shared characteristics may be more inclined to trust. Furthermore, Rempel et al. suggest that the most important contributor to trust in close relationships is the confidence that a relationship partner will continue to behave in a loving, caring manner in the future, regardless of the challenges that may come. This aspect of trust could be strengthened by the unifying influence of positive, trust building experiences. We suspect that unity and trust could be related inasmuch as couples with high unity share more opportunities for positive, trust-building experiences. This is especially true given the importance of shared activities for harmony in relationships (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006).

### Overview of Studies

In three studies, we examined the relationship between couple prayer, trust, and unity. We hypothesized that joint prayer would facilitate trust and that this relationship would be mediated by couple unity. In Study 1, participants reported their naturally occurring level of prayer with their partner and then engaged in a 5-min interaction. Their trust for each other was rated by coders that were blind to study hypotheses. We predicted that self-reported prayer would predict objective ratings of trust. In Study 2, we examined unity as a plausible mechanism accounting for the relationship between praying for a partner and trust, using self-report of all these measures. We hypothesized that unity would mediate the relationship.

Because the correlational nature of Studies 1 and 2 preclude inferences about direction of effects, Study 3 examined these relationships using an experimental design. Couples were assigned to pray with and for each other or to share some things they had been learning with each other twice a week for 4 weeks. We again hypothesized that unity would mediate between prayer and trust.

### Study 1

The objective of Study 1 was to determine whether praying with one's partner was related to objective ratings of couple trust. We hypothesized that praying with one's partner would predict objective ratings of trust.

#### Method

**Participants.** The study included 29 undergraduates (14 women) who received extra credit for their participation. Participants reported on their relationship with their romantic partner.

**Measures and procedure.** Participants completed one scale item indicating how often they prayed with their partner ("My partner and I pray together"), with scores ranging from "never" to "very frequently," in addition to several other measures unrelated to the current study. Participants then engaged in a 5-min interaction with their partner during which they took turns answering several questions about their relationship (e.g., "Tell about where you first met your partner and what your first impressions were," "Describe the future of your relationship," "Describe something your partner did that annoyed or irritated you and how you responded"). Five trained coders, blind to the hypothesis of the study, watched the video data and rated participants on "How much does this person appear to trust his or her partner?" (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*; intraclass correlation = .81).

#### Results and Discussion

As expected, praying with one's partner was positively related to the objective trust ratings,  $\beta = .48$ ,  $t(27) = 2.67$ ,  $p = .01$ . These results indicate that praying with a partner positively corresponds to how objective coders rated the level of trust participants displayed during their interaction. This indicates that the relationship between praying for a partner and trust is not because of demand characteristics or socially desirable responding reflected in self-reports. Studies 2 and 3 built upon this finding by examining our proposed mechanism, *unity*.

## Study 2

Documenting an association between joint prayer and trust raises the question of why such an association exists. The objective of Study 2 was to address this issue and to determine whether couple unity mediated this relationship. We define unity as “feeling at one with a relationship partner or sensing a common shared purpose.” Prior research has not sufficiently examined couple unity as an outcome. We hypothesized that praying for a partner would be related to a greater feeling of unity and, in turn, higher reported trust. That is, unity will mediate the prayer–trust relationship.

### Method

**Participants.** The study included 210 undergraduates (168 women) who received extra credit for their participation and reported about a romantic partner or close friend. Analysis revealed no differences between the romantic partners and close friends on the effect of joint prayer on trust, so participants were combined for all analyses.

#### Measures.

**Prayer with partner.** Frequency of prayer with a romantic partner or friend was assessed with the item “My partner and I pray together,” with scores ranging from “*never*” to “*very frequently*.”

**Trust.** Interpersonal trust was assessed using measures based on a scale developed by Rempel et al. (1985). An example item includes “He or she keeps me informed of things I should know about,” and “He or she is a good source of knowledge,” with scores ranging from “*strongly disagree*” to “*strongly agree*.” The coefficient alpha for this measure in the current sample was .97.

**Unity.** Given the dearth of research on unity, we created our own measure of unity with partner, assessed with two items, “During the last week I felt united with my partner,” and “During the last week I felt at one with my partner,” with scores ranging from “*strongly disagree*” to “*strongly agree*.” These items correlated with each other at .85. They were therefore summed to form a single index. These items were moderately correlated with common measures of relationship satisfaction ( $r = .56$ ; Funk & Rogge, 2007), as well as

commitment ( $r = .64$ ; Stanley & Markman, 1992).

### Results

**Prayer and trust.** We hypothesized that prayer for the relationship partner would be significantly correlated with trust for that partner. The results confirmed that higher prayer scores were related to higher trust scores  $r(208) = .13, p < .05$ , controlling for gender.

**Unity as a mediator.** To test whether unity mediated the association between joint prayer and trust, we used a bootstrapping method developed by Preacher and Hayes (2008) to test for mediation. A confidence interval for the size of the indirect path between prayer and trust is generated and if the values between the upper and lower confidence limit do not include zero this indicates a statistically significant mediation effect. The indirect path of unity was statistically significant, as indicated by finding that the 95% confidence interval (CI; bias corrected) for the indirect path through this mediator did not include zero (95% CI = .15–.34).

### Discussion

Although results were consistent with our hypothesis, the current study is somewhat limited in that the data are correlational and thus do not provide information regarding direction of effects. We addressed this limitation in Study 3 by examining the same variables using a longitudinal, experimental design.

## Study 3

In this experimental study, we examined the effects of a prayer condition and a positive interaction condition on levels of trust among couples over a span of 4 weeks. This study again tested for couple unity as a mediating factor in the relationship between prayer and trust.

### Method

**Participants.** The study began with 116 participants, but 80 undergraduates (69 women) completed all measures at both time points and were included in the analyses. Participants received extra credit for their participation and

reported about their relationship with a close friend.

**Measures.**

**Trust.** We used the same measure of trust from Study 1. The coefficient alpha for this measure in the current sample was .94 at Time 1 and .96 at Time 2.

**Unity.** We used the same two items from Study 1. These items correlated with each other at .81 in the current sample.

**Seriousness of participation.** Because seriousness of participation in the study necessarily influences data quality, at the conclusion of the study subjects answered the following question: "How seriously did you complete the activity that you were assigned to do twice times a week?" Responses ranged from "not at all seriously" to "extremely seriously." The mean response was 4.56 ( $SD = 1.55$ ) on a 7-point scale. Participants' responses ranged from 1 to 7, indicating that they were comfortable admitting to not taking the study seriously.

**Procedure.** All participants completed pretest measures then were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants were then instructed that they would need to complete their assigned activity twice a week to report about their activity. At the conclusion of the 4-week period, participants completed the measures again.

**Prayer with friend condition.** This was the experimental condition, and the 40 participants assigned to this condition were given the following instructions:

Over the next four weeks we would like you to pray with your friend twice a week; once during the first half of the week and at least once during the second half of the week. Sometime not long after you pray aloud with your friend, we ask that you go online and follow a link that will be sent to you through an email. The link will take you to an electronic journal with which you will record certain aspects of your relationship and you will write about your experience praying with your friend.

To help participants understand the type of prayer we had intended them to pray, we provided them with an example prayer and requested that they generate their own prayer and report what they prayed about during each online session.

Below is the example prayer that was provided to participants:

Susan: "God, I pray that you would help Becky to have a good week at work. Also, give her wisdom to make good decisions. Help her to have peace about all of the things that may be bothering her today. And help me to see her every day through your loving eyes. Amen."

Becky: "God, Thank you for Susan. I pray that you would give her patience as she goes to class. Help her to understand what she learns in school and apply it so that she will do well on her test this Friday. Please use me to be an instrument of your love for Susan. Amen."

Participants were told that "These are only example prayers. Feel free to use your own words and pray about personal situations that you may know about in each others' lives." They completed one prayer together with their friend in the lab to ensure that they understood the instructions and could do it on their own for the duration of the study.

**Positive interaction condition.** To ensure that any change in trust levels was not attributable simply to joint activities with a friend that generate positive affect or to the regular, positive exchange between friends that might also generate positive affect, we constructed a "positive interaction condition." In this condition, participants engaged in conversation about a positive news article from the week, and then recorded aspects of their relationship in the online journal. The 40 participants assigned to this condition were given the following instructions:

During this study you will be asked to discuss with your friend the positive news events of the week that happened in the country or the world; once during the first half of the week and at least once during the end of the week. After you discuss this with your friend, we ask that you would follow a link that will be sent to you through an email. The link will take you to an electronic journal with which you will record certain aspects of your relationship and you will write about your experience discussing the positive news events with your friend.

Participants in this condition also practiced doing this one time in the lab.

## Results

**Attrition.** Thirty-six participants failed to complete measures at Time 2. To ensure that attrition did not affect the results of our study, we compared Time 1 trust scores of those that dropped out with those who remained in the study and found no differences between the

groups on the dependent variable of trust,  $F(1,113) = 2.64, p > .05$ , or on unity,  $F(1,113) = 2.04, p > .05$ .

**Effect of prayer on trust.** We first tested our hypothesis that praying for one's friend every day for 4 weeks would affect participants' trust of their friend even when controlling for baseline scores of trust, and level of engagement in their assigned activity. Our hypothesis was supported as participants in the prayer condition reported higher trust ( $M = 5.70, SD = 1.05$ ) than those in the positive-interaction condition ( $M = 5.34, SD = 1.04$ ),  $F(1, 76) = 4.88, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . All reported means were adjusted for the covariates of Time 1 trust and seriousness of participation.

**Effect of prayer on unity.** Our second hypothesis was also supported as participants in the prayer with friend condition reported higher unity ( $M = 5.49, SD = 1.64$ ) than those in the positive-interaction condition ( $M = 4.88, SD = 1.62$ ),  $F(1, 76) = 4.69, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .06$ . All reported means were adjusted for covariates of initial unity and seriousness of participation.

**Unity as a mediator of prayer with friend and trust.** To test whether unity mediated the relationship between experimental condition and trust, we again conducted a bias-corrected bootstrapping analysis recommended by Preacher and Hayes (2008). Experimental condition functioned as the independent variable with Time 2 trust as the dependent variable, and Time 2 unity as the mediator and Time 1 trust as a covariate. The confidence interval (bias corrected) for the indirect path through unity was  $-.45$  to  $-.01$  and did not include zero, indicating that unity was a significant mediator of prayer for friend and later trust.

## Discussion

Consistent with our hypotheses, praying with a friend increased one's trust of that friend. Furthermore, praying with a friend increased unity with the friend, and this unity mediated the relationship between prayer and trust. These findings demonstrate how joint prayer may be instrumental for increasing trust in a relationship. They also suggest that unity is the mechanism whereby this effect occurs.

## General Discussion

Three studies showed a consistent pattern of results in that praying for and with one's relationship partner was related to enhanced trust of that relationship partner. Study 1 showed that self-reported praying with one's partner predicted objective ratings of trust between romantic partners. Study 2 found a significant correlation between prayer for the partner and higher trust scores, and implicated unity as a mediating factor in this relationship. Study 3 used a longitudinal, experimental design to test for causality and the direction of this relationship. To ensure that the higher trust levels were not simply an outcome of positive couple interaction, a "positive interaction" condition was included, in which participants discussed positive news events together. Consistent with our hypotheses prayer with and for a partner did produce an effect on trust scores relative to control participants. In addition, prayer increased the unity in the relationships of those who prayed and this unity mediated the relationship between couple prayer and trust.

This research sheds new light on the relationship between unity and trust in close relationships. In addition to identifying unity as a mechanism responsible for this relationship, it may be that prayer also enhances trust insofar as it reduces other behaviors that damage trust. For example, recently, Fincham, Lambert, and Beach (2010) found that prayer decreased levels of infidelity. According to Whisman, Dixon, and Johnson (1997), infidelity in couple relationships is one of the "most damaging problems" experienced by those seeking couple therapy. One crucial stage in healing a relationship damaged in this way is the rebuilding of trust (Olson, Russell, Higgins-Kessler, Miller, 2002). Thus, perhaps prayer may lead to higher levels of trust over the long-term of the relationship because prayer was shown to reduce infidelity (Fincham et al., 2010). Furthermore, Lambert, Fincham, Marks, and Stillman (2010) found that prayer was related to less problematic drinking behavior. Again, insofar as such problematic drinking behavior decreases trust directly, or leads to relationship damaging behaviors that influence trust indirectly, prayer may increase trust by reducing such behavior.

At the level of theory, Symbolic Interaction Theory (Blumer, 1962) may explain the results

of our studies insomuch as the symbolic meaning of praying together may highlight shared values and contribute to the unity partners experience in their relationship. The symbolic meaning attributed to jointly petitioning a higher being on behalf of shared couple goals could explain, at least in part, the consistent pattern of findings across our studies.

Goal Theory (Fincham & Beach, 1999) is another framework that could be useful in explaining the relationship between prayer and trust in that prayer may play a role in the shift from a focus on short term to long term goals and investments. Fincham and Beach (1999) suggested that conflict can be seen as the result of a shift from constructive, prorelationship goals to more individualistic, emergent goals that promote adversarial interactions. They further suggest that distressed couples do not necessarily lack problem-solving skills, but rather have difficulty reverting to shared goals during conflictual interactions because of their focus on emergent goals (e.g., getting their way). Inso-much as prayer can be used to chronically prime shared goals, couples should be able to restructure their interactions to reach their more constructive relational goals. As couples refocus on their shared goals through prayer, the value and depth of meaning that the relationship holds for them should be more salient. Accordingly, the level of unity and trust experienced in the relationship should increase.

### Limitations and Future Directions

These studies provided valuable insights into the functioning of prayer between close partners but are subject to several limitations. First, our findings are based on a population of relatively young, educated, and racially homogenous participants. For these reasons, more research should be done with samples that vary in age, relationship status, and ethnicity. Furthermore, the samples were predominantly women, suggesting that the effect may be driven by women. Future studies should recruit a higher number of men.

Second, it is also worth mentioning that there may be cultural factors at play in this sample that make it a generally more religious one. As suggested by Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, and Beach (2010), those living in the southeastern United States may have a cultural

bias toward prayer and religiosity, in general. However, this may actually be a strength of the studies because it makes differences between those in the prayer and control conditions more difficult to detect as many control participants may have been engaging in couple prayer naturally. This implies that our findings of increased trust are especially salient.

Although 90% of Americans pray at least on occasion (McCullough & Larson, 1999), it is important to note that these findings were generated with a sample of participants who noted that they were comfortable with prayer. The findings may not apply or even be relevant for those who are uncomfortable with prayer. It is therefore important to limit the practical implications of our findings to contexts where they are culturally appropriate and acceptable. Also, it is entirely possible for prayer to be used in a negative way in a couple's relationship. If a couple has an unhealthy power balance (Garner, Butler, & Seedall, 2008) or is unable to maintain a nonjudgmental attitude, potential harm might be done to trust in the relationship through prayer. Specifically, some individuals might use joint prayer as a platform for criticism or as a tool for manipulating their partners.

### Implications for Practitioners

As discussed, trust is an important relationship outcome (e.g., Rempel et al., 1985). For religious clientele, prayer may be effectively used to build or repair trust in couple therapy. Beach et al. (2008) propose several instances in which prayer could be used in couple therapy. For example, rather than simply taking a "time out," (a practice often used in couple therapy in which couples segregate themselves for a period of time to cool off during an argument), couples could interrupt negative patterns by praying with and for each other. Consistent with the call for more research on spiritually oriented interventions (Aten & Worthington, 2009), Beach et al., (2010) incorporated prayer into the most widely investigated marital distress prevention program (PREP; Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999) and showed that it enhanced outcome for wives, relative to standard PREP, in a large sample of African American couples. Prayer enhanced PREP included instructing the participants to pray for each other at the first signs of conflict.

In addition to potentially interrupting negative behavioral sequences that emerge in conflict, the results of the current study suggest that in cases in which trust has been violated (e.g., infidelity), couple prayer could be one potentially helpful element in helping restore trust and unity to the relationship. Other related research shows that such prayers could also effectively reduce future instances of infidelity (Fincham, Lambert, & Beach, 2010). Thus, prayer, with certain populations where it is appropriate, may play a role in couple interventions.

Finally, we offer the following important caveat. The demonstration that joint prayer can increase trust in relationships does not, ipso facto, mean that it should invariably be used to do so. There are likely many routes to increasing trust in relationships and some may turn out to be far more powerful than joint prayer. Nonetheless, joint prayer will remain as one arrow in the quiver of the well rounded practitioner that may be used when circumstances are appropriate (e.g., in working with a highly religious couple that eschews secular interventions).

### Conclusion

Our three studies add to an emerging literature on the function of prayer in close relationships. We found that naturally occurring joint prayer was related to greater trust and that participants who engaged in a four week couple prayer intervention increased their levels of trust. We also found that couple unity mediated this relationship. These studies provide valuable insights on prayer in the context of relationships and lay a foundation for future research and intervention regarding the connection between spiritual practices and relationships.

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