Can Religion and Spirituality Enhance Prevention Programs for Couples?

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An estimated 4.54 to 5.92 billion people (68.08% to 88.74% of the world's population) profess some religious faith (List of religious populations, 2010). Belief in God and prayer are also commonplace; in the USA, for instance, 92 % of people believe in God (U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008), and approximately 90% pray at least occasionally (McCullough & Larson, 1999). Notwithstanding these facts, social scientists have tended to keep "their distance from religion and spirituality" (Hill & Pargament, 2003, p. 65) and this is especially true regarding the role of religious and spiritual resources in the prevention of couple and family problems or best practices for the promotion of couple and family strengths (Ladd & Spilka, vol 1; Mahoney, 2010). The present chapter addresses this omission by examining how spirituality/religion influences marital relationships. We focus in particular on colloquial, petitionary prayer to illustrate how specific religious and spiritual practices may be helpful in the prevention of marital distress and in strengthening marital relationships.

Conceptual hygiene

In turning to our task, we need to be clear about the overarching constructs of religion and spirituality and the more specific construct of prayer. As reflected throughout this handbook, it has become increasingly common to distinguish religion from spirituality (for more complete discussion, see Volume 1, Chapter 1). Specifically, religion is often used to refer to a more formalized set of ideological commitments associated with a group (i.e., an organized system of beliefs, rituals, and cumulative traditions within a faith community), whereas spirituality is often used to refer to the personal and more subjective side of religious experience (e.g., Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker & Killmer, 2002; Worthington & Aten, 2009). Although

spirituality means different things to different people, between two-thirds and three-fourths of Americans consider themselves to be both spiritual and religious (Marler & Hadaway, 2002).

According to Mahoney (2010), most research relating to religion and the family (79% of marital studies and 76% of parenting studies over the last decade) uses one or two items to measure religious variables (e.g., affiliation, attendance, self-rated importance, Biblical conservatism). Although such studies generally show that religiosity is related to several positive outcomes in family relationships, they provide little information about what specific, modifiable aspects of religious behavior and spirituality are associated with such outcomes. Consequently, it is difficult to determine whether specific religious behaviors have a causal connection to these outcomes, or whether the association is due primarily to self-selection or correlated third variables. In line with these concerns, several studies have reported self-selection bias to be problematic for making inferences from the current research findings on religiosity (e.g., Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2001). Others have highlighted the potential impact of the more expansive social networks found among religious participants and the social support they provide as potentially responsible for outcomes attributed to religiosity (Ellison & George, 1994; Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). Compounding the difficulty of using existing research to guide practical decision making, the global item(s) used show small effect sizes. For example, those who attend religious services frequently are less likely to divorce than non-attenders, but the average effect size is only r = .125 (Mahoney et al., 2001). As Mahoney (2010) so aptly notes, "A central challenge in moving ahead is to develop conceptual models that go beyond a reliance on global religious indices to clarify what about religion matters, for better or worse, in family life." Responding to this challenge will require more concrete behavioral specification of

referents, and the introduction of experimental methods to complement the survey research methods that have dominated research in the area to date.

One specific behavior with great salience and potential practical importance is prayer. Like religion and spirituality, however, prayer has many potential referents and it behooves us to be clear about our usage of this term. William James (1904, p. 464), a founding father of modern psychology, defined prayer as ''every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine . . . '' Certainly this definition fits well for the Abrahamic faiths (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), and appears to have strong parallels in other religious traditions (e.g., Hinduism) even those that are less theist, or even non theist (e.g., Buddhism, Shinto, New Age). Some have even argued that "if prayer is regarded as every kind of communication with the power recognized (by the pray-er) as divine, then, arguably, all individuals pray to some degree" (Breslin & Lewis, 2008, p. 10).

Several different types of prayer have been identified. One taxonomy offered by Poloma and Gallup (1991) identifies ritual prayer (recited through reading a text or from memory), petitionary prayer (includes requests to meet specific material needs), colloquial prayer (use of everyday conversational language to communicate with the divine, ultimate power etc.) and meditative prayer (being in the presence of the divine, thinking about the divine). Many other taxonomies of prayer exist but it suffices for our purposes to simply note that researchers will need to be clear when describing the effects of prayer because the impact of ritual or meditative prayer could be quite different than the impact of petitionary or colloquial prayer. The focus of our own research on prayer, reviewed later, is colloquial, petitionary prayer, a form of prayer that invokes the deity's help in response to specific needs, using the individuals own language rather than a set or "memorized" prayer. We focus attention on this form of prayer because it may be a

response to ongoing stressors and life events, and because of its ability to serve as a point of connection with family members, but this should not be taken to imply that other forms of prayer (e.g. meditative or ritual) are a less valuable focus of future research attention or that other forms of religious and spiritual activity should be ignored by researchers.

Review of theoretical work that links religion and spirituality to marital and family outcomes

Early on, William James sought to understand why humans were religious, and what practical benefits spirituality brought them. Both psychology and religion, James observed, converged on the view that humans can be transformed by forces beyond their normal consciousness. As a result, he argued that intense, religious experiences should be studied because they provide a microscope of the mind by showing us in enlarged form normal psychological processes. Although theoretical analyses offered by subsequent psychologists, such as Maslow and Erikson, placed greater attention on the relationship between religion and mental health, the focus on the individual remained. Allport, who helped shape social psychology, paid attention to how humans use religion in different ways but, ironically, retained a focus on the individual. Each of these scholars provided influential contributions that are considered classics in the psychology of religion but they offer little when it comes to understanding religion and family functioning. Indeed, Parke (2001) noted that research on religion "is rarely represented in the scientific journals devoted to family issues" (p. 555). However, this state of affairs is beginning to change. Recently a theoretical framework relating specific aspects of religion and spirituality to family relationships has emerged, as has one relating prayer to intimate relationships in general. We now turn to briefly review each of these theoretical developments.

Relational spirituality

Mahoney (2010, p 807) has developed a relational spirituality framework to "help stimulate in-depth questions that have or could be asked about religion's unique role in family life." Defining spirituality as the search for the sacred and religion as a "a search for significance in ways related to the sacred" (Pargament, 1997, p. 34), she identifies three avenues through which religion and spirituality can be integrated into family relationships, namely, 1) family member(s)' individual relationship with the divine, 2) imbuing family relationships with sacred properties, and 3) family member(s)' relationships with broader religious communities. These three sets of mechanisms are portrayed as ones that can operate at any of three stages of family relationships, their formation (creation and structuring of relationships), maintenance (conserving the relationship) and transformation (changes in the structure or processes of distressed relationships).

Mahoney (2010) argues that a family member may draw on his or her felt connection to the divine to determine goals for family relationships and how to deal with obstacles thwarting such goals. She notes that most religions offer theological directives about the deity's wishes about family relationships and the conduct of family life. Accordingly, a person may rely on his or her relationship with the deity in forming and maintaining relationships as well as in coping with relationship problems.

In addition, a family relationship may itself be experienced as an expression or vehicle of spirituality. For example, people may perceive a family relationship as having sacred qualities (e.g., see it as sacred, holy) or to see it as a manifestation of God (e.g., an expression of God's will or infused with God's presence). This mechanism relating spirituality to family relationships, labeled "sanctification," has already spawned a productive line of research (see Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Alternatively, family members may engage behaviors together

that substantively center on spiritual issues, such as engaging in religious rituals or intimate spiritual dialogues; these pathways presumably could deepen both an individual family member's felt connection to the divine and the sense that the relationship itself possesses a distinctive spiritual dimension that may not apply to other relationships.

Finally, a person's search for the sacred can take place in a spiritual community that influences and supports various aspects of family life. Certainly highly religious couples report that their religious community supports faith practices that, in turn, help maintain their views of the spiritual nature of marriage and parenting (e.g., Dollahite & Marks, 2009). Some faith communities may also provide access to resources that can also be obtained via involvement in secular groups, such as integration into a broader community, facilitating access to recreational or social service organization and the provision of general social support. Such tangible provisions may lead researchers to ask whether the unique feature of a spiritual or faith community, its concern with the sacred, impacts family life above and beyond effects found in supportive secular groups of like minded people. This question is clearly a difficult one to address at the level of research design, and this may account for the lack of studies on this topic. Nonetheless, at a conceptual level it is quite possible that the spiritual beliefs and practices related to family life that are encouraged and reinforced by faith communities have unique effects on the family relationships of its members, effects that go beyond family-strengthening activities of secular organizations, and it would be useful to better understand such effects.

In summary, Mahoney (2010) offers an interesting construct, relational spirituality, and identifies potential mechanisms through which it may operate at various stages of family life. Her goal in doing so was, in part, to develop a framework for summarizing the literature on religion in families and to identify questions for future research. It succeeds in achieving both

goals, leaving the ongoing task of providing greater specificity and detail for each of the pathways to flesh out testable theoretical propositions. The same can probably be said about the goal theory framework outlined next. Accordingly, after the presentation of the goal theory framework we offer a three-pronged, specific model consistent with Mahoney's (2010) general framework.

Goal Theory Framework Applied to the Role of Religion and Spirituality in Marriage

One possible mechanism linking spiritual and religious behavior to couple outcomes involves motivational processes. As suggested by Mahoney (2010), spiritual and religious activity has an impact on an individual's goals (see also Volume 1 section "Why People are Religious and Spiritual"). Choice of goals and thereby the intention and willingness to engage in particular behaviors could result in behavioral changes with the potential to support or undermine the relationship. For example, Dudley and Kosinski (1990) have suggested that spiritual activities may help couples to more often "think of the needs of others, be more loving and forgiving, treat each other with respect, and resolve conflict" (p. 82). If correct, this suggests that there may be multiple motivational processes that potentially connect spiritual and religious activities to relationship outcomes (See also the theoretical chapters in volume 1 by McCullough, Granqvist, Tsang, Saroglou).

Emergent goals. Fincham and Beach (1999) note that motivational processes of the sort that may be influenced by prayer, or other religious and spiritual activities, may change the course of relationship conflict as well as enhance recovery from negative interactions that have already occurred. Specifically, they hypothesize that when couples perceive a conflict of interest, they may switch from the cooperative goals they typically profess to a set of emergent goals that are highly adversarial in nature. Spouses locked in conflict may find themselves focused on

"getting their own way," or "not losing an argument." In this motivational state, knowing how to reach cooperative solutions may not produce a positive outcome. That is, while they are focused on getting their own way, partners may engage in negative behaviors toward each other even when they "know better." This dynamic was captured by Wile (1993) in his observation that "It is impossible to make I–statements when you are in the 'hating my partner, wanting revenge, feeling stung and wanting to sting back' state of mind" (p. 2). Indeed, the rapidly escalating chains of increasingly negative behavior that can result from such a state of mind have been documented as the behavioral signature of a distressed relationship (see Fincham, 2003).

Beach, Fincham, Hurt, McNair and Stanley (2008) argue that prayer for a relationship partner's well-being (Agape focused prayer that might, for example, ask God to do good things for the partner, envelope the partner in God's love and so on) when utilized in the context of a conflict of interest, could provide a specific mechanism that allows cooperative goals to regain their dominance, replacing revenge–oriented or competition–oriented ones. Likewise, privately praying for the partner's well being when a conflict occurs may also have the added advantage of providing what can be considered (the ultimate form of) "social support" and assurance of "attachment security" by reaffirming a connection to a dependable attachment figure and so decreasing the impact of negative partner behavior. The cycle by which goals may be transformed from cooperative to win/lose and back again is shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The regular (private) practice of prayer for the partner's well-being, even in absence of an active conflict, is hypothesized to chronically prime a range of motives, setting the stage for other positive relationship outcomes. Praying benevolently for the partner necessarily involves "joining" with the partner via-a-vis the deity and is thereby likely to promote a greater sense of

couple identity, closeness and relationship satisfaction. For some, praying privately in this way

may lead him or her to view the relationship as sacred or increase the salience of this view if

already held. Importantly, such prayer, in addition to being self reinforcing, is likely to be

supported by the spiritual community and in this way be sustained by natural reinforcers.

Additional mechanisms that may occur whenever a religious or spiritual activity helps

focus attention on God's love for the partner, and one's own wishes to be a vehicle of God's

love, can also operate in the context of benevolent (i.e. Agape focused) prayer for the partner.

Specifically, praying for God to bless, protect, and guide one's partner may prime awareness of

God's love for one's partner. Focusing on God's love for the partner would, in turn, be expected

to facilitate the propensity to forgive and exit from negative cycles of interaction with the partner

that might otherwise become self-maintaining. Because greater forgiveness is associated with a

variety of indicators of positive relationship functioning, including relationship satisfaction (e.g.,

Fincham & Beach, 2007), increased commitment (e.g., Tsang, McCullough & Fincham, 2006)

and effective conflict resolution (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2007; see Fincham, 2009, for

review), practicing religious or spiritual behaviors that enhance forgiveness should lead to

increased relationship satisfaction over time.

Similarly, we would expect an impact of certain religious and spiritual practices, and

particularly prayer, on gratitude. Specifically, prayer that highlights God's blessings and asks for

them to continue may prime a response of gratitude for God's beneficence. Supporting this

expectation, several studies have found a relationship between religiosity and gratitude (e.g.,

Adler & Fagley, 2005), and most religions promote gratitude (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000),

including the practice of thanking God in prayer. Indeed, in a prototype study of prayer

(Lambert, Graham, & Fincham, in press), participants were asked to list the characteristics or

attributes that come to mind when they thought of prayer. Of 219 attributes "thanking" was the second most frequently mentioned feature, next only to "God." Accordingly, we might anticipate that gratitude would be a likely component of naturally occurring prayers. Because gratitude has been linked to greater prosocial behavior and social bonds (Emmons & Shelton, 2002; McCullough & Tsang, 2004), as well as lower levels of psychopathology (e.g. posttraumatic stress disorder; Masingale et al., 2001), there is a foundation for viewing this as an effect with substantial potential to influence family relationships in a positive manner. Thus prayer may prime spouses to experience increased gratitude for their partner's positive characteristics as well as for their relationship.

Religious and spiritual activity, such as prayer, may also directly foster some goals or decrease the attractiveness of other goals. Intentions, representing conscious goal states, directly influence behavioral choices, and are themselves influenced by beliefs about what significant others would think of one's behavior (see Gibbons, Gerrard, & Lane, 2003). Because spiritual activities often may highlight the mandates of a particularly important significant other (God), they have the potential to bring behavioral intentions under pressure to conform to the belief that if God loves my partner then I should also be loving toward him or her. If so, there could be downstream effects on my behavior toward my partner across a range of settings. For example, praying benevolently for my mate could strongly decrease behaviors likely to negatively affect the relationship, such as infidelity and substance abuse (see Fincham, Lambert & Beach, 2010). To the extent that various spiritual and religious activities make salient the view of important others, this increased salience should influence subsequent behavioral intentions. Similarly, constructive motivations may be enhanced by spiritual and religious activity that primes "implemental intentions" (i.e., plans or means of achieving desired goals), thereby influencing

future behavior (Golwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996). As a result, there is considerable potential for spiritual and religious activity to influence motivation, intentions, and implemental intentions, enhancing relationship promoting intentions as well as the probability of following through on those intentions.

A final factor potentially linking religious and spiritual behavior to positive relationship outcomes is the extent to which they promote a positive relational context and view of the partner, reinforce general pro marriage attitudes and commitment to marriage, and foster the sense of the couple as "we" as opposed to two individuals. Several studies have shown a positive effect of religious involvement on relationship quality for married couples (e.g., Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008), potentially reflecting both the direct effects of increased social support of norms and values of marriage and relationship enhancing behaviors (e.g., partner forgiveness), as well as indirect effects such as fostering increased individual psychological well-being and temperance (Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). To the extent that pro-marriage attitudes fostered by various forms of religious engagement and activity generate trust between partners, they should also encourage greater spousal investment in the marriage (Edin & Kefalas, 2005).

What particular spiritual and religious activities are most promising from the standpoint of intervention? Mahoney's (2010) framework suggests that it may be important to examine specific behaviors at each of three general levels (dyadic, community, and individual). The foregoing brief overview makes it clear that, at all three levels, there could be many forms of religious and spiritual activity with the potential to influence relevant mechanisms as well as longer-term marital outcomes of interest. Although many religious and spiritual activities may have an impact on relationship outcomes, empirical research is more likely to advance from specific hypotheses (even when wrong). Accordingly, we offer three specific sets of behavior

that seem potentially within reach of preventive intervention (i.e., may be malleable) and also seem to have a good empirical foundation for positing effects on relationship functioning. Accordingly, in the spirit of hypothesis generation, we offer a model that highlights these three sets of behavior (see figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

First, we suggest that colloquial, intercessory prayer in which partners pray to God for their partner's well-being is a malleable spiritual activity of particular potential importance for the marital dyad. This activity involves individuals relying on a felt connection to God to pray for their partner with or without their partner's awareness and has been the focus of much of our own recent research. When this behavior occurs on a purely private basis, it represents an individual level of activity although, as illustrated above, it may have major implications for dyadic functioning. Some spouses, however, may overtly pray together for one another, a dyadic spiritual activity. Second, a focus on meditative prayer regarding one's own connection to the divine and study of scripture that encourages the self to engage in unselfish love and forgiveness may prove to have an impact of relationship functioning. Meditative prayer would appear to have potential to increase distress tolerance and positive mental health outcomes as well as enhance positive self-control, resulting indirectly in positive relationship outcomes. Scripture addressing unselfish love would also seem to have potential to influence goals and behavior through a variety of relationship mechanisms. Finally, at the level of the religious community, we suggest that joint religious activities may be of particular interest and worthy of future investigation. We have found that, among the groups studied to date, frequency of religious attendance by husbands tends to be lower than that for wives; to the extent that wives are attending services without their husbands, or their spouses attend different services, increased

joint attendance may offer some potential relationship benefits. Of course, decreasing rates of religious homogamy in couples in the US, may pose obstacles to joint attendance at religious services for some couples.

We suggest that each of these sets of behavior could be examined empirically to test the proposed relationships. To the extent that effects are consistent with the model, each set of behaviors could serve as a potential target for intervention to strengthen marital relationships. In each case, we suggest that increases in these behaviors should lead to short-term positive outcomes that are beneficial to the couple. Changes in these short-term outcomes should mediate the impact of behavior change on longer-term marital outcomes such as increased marital stability, healthier functioning of the relationship, enhanced functioning of family subsystems such as co-parenting, and parent-child relationships, as well as improved mental and physical health outcomes of spouses.

The deceptively simple heuristic model presented in Figure 2 implies that there are at least three, and perhaps many more, relatively simple targets for change efforts within the broad domain of spiritual and religious activities and behaviors, each with the potential to produce substantial short and long-term impacts on positive couple outcomes. These include increasing the extent to which couples 1) engage in prayer focused on requesting good outcomes for the partner (Agape focused intercessory prayer), 2) engage in joint organized religious activities (i.e. attending services together and being involved together in various other religious activities jointly), and 3) engage in personal meditative prayer and scriptural study to increase distress tolerance and acceptance in the relationship while also encouraging a broader, forgiving, longer-term perspective. Each of these targets has the advantage of being potentially additive to other

intervention approaches and each may address some of the limitations that have been noted for skill based interventions of the sort that have dominated the prevention area.

We turn now to briefly review background research as well as our own basic research on prayer and relationship outcomes. The program of research we describe provides a template for the sort of empirical work we propose for each of the areas in Figure 2. As will be clear, our initial work on prayer supports the potential for intervention to encourage religious and spiritual activity with beneficial effects on marital outcomes.

Empirical studies that address the connections between religion, spirituality and family

outcomes

In the absence of relevant, prior studies in the field of prevention, we draw on related basic research linking spirituality and religion to marital outcomes. As Mahoney (2010; Mahoney et al., 2001) provides comprehensive reviews of research on religion in families, here we only highlight findings that are particularly relevant to prevention and provide a foundation for our research on prayer.

Some scholars have concluded that "religion plays a role in maintaining positive relationships within nuclear families" (Mattis & Jagers, 2001, p. 526). Although such sweeping claims are largely true, they require qualification to be completely accurate. For example, earlier research has reliably shown that religiosity covaries with marital satisfaction but some recent studies limit this effect to a single sex showing that only husband church attendance predicts later satisfaction (e.g., Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). A dyadic approach focusing on spousal similarity and shared spiritual rituals may be more consistently associated with marital satisfaction (Myers, 2006). However, because husband religious attendance tends to be lower than wife religious attendance, even among couples who are both

members of the same church or religious group, the practical significance of individual and

dyadic approaches may be the same: Increased religious attendance by husbands may be helpful

to marital relationships because it will often result in couples benefitting from increased positive

couple activities.

Even more critical to prevention is what accounts for the religiosity-marital satisfaction

association. As our theoretical analysis suggests, reduced marital conflict, or better management

of conflict when it occurs, is one such candidate. Overall religiousness is either unrelated or

slightly inversely related to conflict (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Mahoney et al., 2001). However,

several descriptive and qualitative studies highlight the importance of prayer for dealing with

conflict and marital problems more generally. Studying over 20 denominations in the USA,

Abbott, Berry, and Meredith (1990) found that 63% of respondents reported frequently asking

for help from God for family difficulties. Butler et al. (2002) found that 31% of respondents

almost always, and 42% sometimes, prayed during marital conflict. In their qualitative study

Marsh and Dallos (2001) found that religious practices such as prayer helped couples to manage

their anger during marital conflict. Finally, couples in a recent study reported that prayer

alleviated tension and facilitated open communication during conflict situations (Lambert &

Dollahite, 2006). Such findings are consistent with a national survey showing that most

Americans (90.4% of African Americans and 66.7% of non-Hispanic Whites) say that prayer is

very important when coping with stress, a response that is higher among married than never

married respondents (Chatters, Taylor Jackson & Lincoln, 2008).

In light of the above descriptive findings and the absence of research on the impact of

prayer on relationships, the authors began a program of research on this topic. Using participants

in dating relationships, the program of research began by documenting that prayer predicted later

relationship satisfaction and not vice versa. Moreover, prayer for the partner, and not prayer in general, accounted for unique variance in satisfaction over and beyond positive and negative dyadic behavior (Fincham, Beach et al., 2008). Although promising, the correlational nature of the data limited our confidence in making causal inferences and hence we embarked on a program of research in which documented associations were followed by experimental studies. Given our earlier observations regarding prayer and forgiveness, we next established that prayer for the partner leads to reports of increased forgiveness, using as control conditions, general prayer, and engaging in positive thoughts about the partner (Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham & Beach., 2010). Consistent with our predictions we also showed that the impact of prayer for the partner on forgiveness was mediated by increased selfless concern for the partner. Because the limits of self-report are well known, we went on to show that prayer following a transgression in the laboratory, compared to a control activity, led to more co-operation in a subsequent computer game. Furthermore, in another study we tested whether partners of participants who prayed over the course of four weeks would report the participants as more forgiving. Apparently prayer has a strong enough effect on participants' forgiving behavior to be perceived by the partners (Lambert, Fincham, DeWall & Beach, 2010). But the impact of prayer is not limited to forgiveness.

In another set of studies we also documented that prayer for the partner leads to greater gratitude (Lambert et al., 2009). This is important for all the reasons mentioned earlier. A fifth series of studies, demonstrated that prayer influences satisfaction with sacrificing for the relationship. In one of these studies we videotaped participants after a month-long prayer intervention. They were asked to, "Please describe something you have given up, or would be willing to give up, for your partner or for your relationship." Responses were coded by a group

of five trained research assistants, blind to study hypotheses and the condition to which the participant was assigned. Observer responses showed that those randomly assigned to the prayer condition were rated as more satisfied with sacrifice than those who had daily recalled positive partner characteristics but had not been asked to pray (Lambert, Fincham & Stanley, 2010). Clearly such findings show that prayer has a number of effects on relationship processes, but does it also protect against risk factors?

A critical risk factor for relationships is infidelity as extramarital affairs are the leading cause of divorce across 160 cultures. In a recent set of studies we were able to show that prayer for the partner also decreased infidelity. Moreover, relationship sanctification mediated this effect. Again, in one of the studies in this series, we were able to show that those who were randomly assigned to pray were rated differently by trained research assistant coders, blind to study hypotheses and the condition to which the participant was assigned. Specifically they were rated as more committed to the relationship which helps explain why there was less cheating during this period when taking into account baseline rates of cheating (Fincham, Lambert & Beach,2010). This replicates a finding in our initial correlational studies where we found that commitment mediated the association between prayer and relationship satisfaction. Finally, in view of the association between casual sex and alcohol, we also investigated the role of prayer in alcohol use. After establishing that an association exists between prayer frequency and alcohol use we conducted two experimental studies both of which showed that daily prayer for four weeks decreased amount of alcohol use by about half (Lambert, Fincham, Marks & Stillman, 2010). Interestingly both partner directed prayer and general prayer decreased alcohol use.

Although numerous other relationship outcomes and the mechanisms whereby prayer influences them remain to be identified, the foregoing is sufficient to illustrate the potential

power of specific spiritual behaviors as candidates for inclusion in prevention and enhancement programs. Before turning to evidence relating to their efficacy we briefly clarify our approach to prevention.

A closer look at prevention and the foundations of our approach to it

The approach that we offer is informed by an integrated prevention and treatment perspective that focuses on enhancing strengths as well reducing problems for people at risk. We explicitly acknowledge the importance of context and the value of attending to cultural and structural factors that maintain risk behavior or support strengths. For example, as noted above, facilitating forgiveness may be easier for someone embedded in a social network that encourages forgiveness. A comprehensive marital enrichment/preventive/treatment model therefore needs to encompass change in participation in a broader community as well as dyadic activities and potentially relevant individual behavior.

A second premise is that programs should be developed with the goal of moving them into the community, consulting with local stakeholders, and evaluating community-based intervention efforts. In the present context, this is particularly important because many potential beneficiaries of marital enrichment/prevention are likely to be reached through natural community groups (e.g. religious organizations). Third, persons who might benefit from marital programs may not have the financial resources to obtain professional help or be located in areas served by mental health care providers. This problem is particularly acute in low-income and disadvantaged areas. Therefore, interventions should be designed to reach people in a variety of settings (including rural and geographically isolated settings) and be culturally viable for use in these settings. Thus, at a minimum, the intervention should involve familiar terminology and easy access that fits naturally in the community.

Finally, we operate from the premise that any attempt to provide enrichment/prevention/treatment services should represent best practice in terms of what is currently known scientifically about processes leading to lasting, healthy relationships. A corollary is that any intervention must lend itself to evaluation for without evaluation no program can be assumed to be effective. The notion that "something is better than nothing" is simply misguided, no matter how well intentioned and, as Bergin (1963) reminds us, anything that has the potential to help also has the potential to harm.

Levels of preventive interventions. In the literature on prevention distinctions are drawn among levels of intervention. Researchers distinguish among *universal* preventive measures, considered desirable for everyone in the population, *selective* preventive measures, considered desirable for subgroups of the population at higher than average risk, and *indicated* preventive measures desirable for individuals who are known to be at high risk (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). In universal prevention, benefits outweigh the minimal costs and risks for everyone. In contrast, indicated interventions are not minimal in cost (e.g., time, effort). This reflects the fact that recipients of an indicated prevention may be experiencing some (sub-clinical) level of distress.

In offering intervention to African-American couples in the Southeast, we found that a range of couples chose to participate. Some were motivated by a desire to affirm their commitment to each other whereas others appeared to be motivated by a recently experienced transgression or problem in the relationship. As such, the data set we now turn to reflects all three levels of prevention but it does not apply to couple counseling for marital dysfunction (sometimes characterized as secondary prevention).

Initial Efficacy Evidence: Program for Strong African American Marriages (ProSAAM)

To examine the potential of adding spirituality to skills training, we examined a prayer focused version (PFP) of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), a widely used prevention program for couples. PFP is offered to groups and includes all the basic components of PREP as well as a strong focus on private, intercessory prayer for the partner. Because the vast majority of African Americans self-identify as "Protestant" (78%; Pew, 2009), we utilized prayers reflective of African American Protestant traditions in our examples. The full report can be found in Beach et al. (2010).

Participants in PFP were given examples of prayers and encouraged to generate their own prayers for the well-being of their partner. In addition to DVD footage about communication, problem solving, and couples' activities, participants were also given a conceptual framework for the use of colloquial, intercessory prayer for their partner and given specific encouragement to pray for good things to happen to their partners. All prayers were introduced as being in keeping with the higher order goal of "helping you to be a vehicle of God's love in your relationship." In addition, participants were encouraged to pray on their partner's behalf regarding their partner's needs and aspirations (Beach et al., 2008a) and not to focus on non-constructive themes, including retribution or "praying for God to change my mate." Discussion of prayer occurred throughout the program and prayer was used to introduce and conclude all segments of the PREP instructional materials.

There were two comparison conditions: an information only control group and a standard PREP comparison condition (CS PREP). Couples in the control group were provided the book, "12 Hours To A Great Marriage" (Markman et al., 2004) at the conclusion of their baseline assessment. All couples were assigned to condition on the basis of a block

randomization schedule. Data were collected prior to the start of the intervention, again following completion of the program, at 6-month follow-up, and at 12- month follow-up.

There was a main effect showing improved marital outcomes over time. In addition, the anticipated group by time interaction was also significant, reflecting significantly greater change, for the intervention groups than the control group. There was no change overall for those in the information only control condition, but a comparable level of overall change for those couples assigned to the two treatment conditions. These findings are shown in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Because there was no reliable change as a function of time in the control group, we removed them to examine sex differences in response to the two active treatments, yielding a significant three-way interaction of sex, condition, and time. To explicate the three-way interaction, we compared response to CS-PREP and PFP separately for husbands and wives. For husbands, there was a significant main effect of time only, indicating an equivalent positive response to intervention for both active intervention conditions. However, for wives, in addition to the significant main effect of time, there was also a significant interaction of group with time. Specifically, wives began at similar starting points but showed differing outcome patterns over time depending on the intervention. In particular, there was significantly greater change from baseline to post-test in PFP than in CS-PREP for wives, indicating a more rapid initial change process in PFP that resulted in marginally better outcome even at 12 month follow-up.

In sum, a program that included prayer was as efficacious for husbands as a program focused only on traditional PREP material. For wives, the addition of prayer appeared to result in a more efficacious program, particularly in terms of its immediate effects from baseline to post-test. In addition, both interventions were more efficacious than the control condition.

Participants indicated a high level of satisfaction with both formats and with the inclusion of a focus on spirituality and prayer. Although the mechanism of action is not known, it is possible that the enhanced response of wives to the PFP condition reflects a better fit to their needs, given that they were, on average, more involved in church activities than were husbands. Given initial evidence for enhanced efficacy, the question arises as to whether there is potential for dissemination of the program.

Dissemination

Religiously and spiritually infused interventions have two great advantages. First, they may provide some advantages with regard to efficacy for some groups of people (e.g. the highly religious) or in some targeted areas (e.g. forgiveness). Second, they have the potential to enhance dissemination of effective marital enhancement and intervention. In our work with ProSAAM we found that dissemination was a particularly important issue in working with African American couples, who often are skeptical of the benefits to be derived from mental health services; and therefore, unlikely to seek out or advocate for such services in their communities (Brody, Flor, & Stoneman, 1996; Murry & Brody, 2004). As a result, establishing trust and making the program culturally relevant was essential to effective program delivery. We suspect that similar issues may be common in many groups with strong religious commitments (see Maton in Volume 2; Plante in Volume 2).

We discovered early on from focus groups with community members drawn from the communities we hoped to serve that success was more likely if we worked through churches and with the blessing of local pastors. As one focus group member said, "You've got to work with the churches. The churches are key. That's where it all begins for most married people …., ya' know, in the church. That's where we not only begin our marriages, but it's where we come to

learn more about how to stay married and be husbands and wives."Another group member noted, "You're going to need someone to endorse the program because marriages are so personal . . . Bottom line, it's a real incentive to us if the pastor endorses it." The focus groups gave us a strong and consistent message that we should have community pastors evaluate the program and endorse it from the pulpit before we offered it to congregation members. When using spiritual and religious components to strengthen marital enrichment/prevention/treatment, it will be useful and perhaps essential to have strong partnerships with local religious groups.

As a consequence of our focus group experiences, we developed a packet of materials designed to introduce ProSAAM to pastors and pulpit associates. We used the packets to connect with local churches and congregations (Hurt et al., 2008). One successful means of introducing ourselves to the community was to hold a reception for area pastors that we called An Evening of P.R.A.I.S.E.—prayer, recruitment, advertisement, information, sponsorship, and endorsement, the six ways in which we asked pastors to support ProSAAM. The reception featured a catered meal and a presentation that introduced church officials and their spouses to ProSAAM. After the presentation, we answered questions, took suggestions for ways to improve the program, and met with each church official individually to discuss the formation of partnerships with them and their congregations. The reception's success was grounded in the fact that it was culturally appropriate for our context, it gave us the opportunity to make clear to the clergy that we valued their input and desired their feedback, and it allowed us to tell pastors how important they were in the broad scheme of the program. The pastors, many of whom knew each another, appreciated the opportunity to socialize while learning about an exciting program that used prayer and skills to enhance marriages. After establishing partnerships with clergy, program staff were often invited and sometimes requested to attend church meetings, Bible studies, worship services, and

other church events to meet, network with, and inform congregations about ProSAAM and recruit couples into the program.

One consequence of direct contact with pastors was their excitement about the program and their pledges to support the program. They told us that strong churches *begin with* strong families and that they had seen the negative impact on the church and on church-families of weak or broken marital bonds. As a consequence, they were strongly motivated to strengthen marriage within the African American community and were enthusiastic about the role of prayer in building better marriages. We also found that the pastors of many smaller churches were eager to offer a marriage ministry for their congregation and welcomed ProSAAM as an effective step toward their goals. This suggests that there is considerable potential for religious organizations to work as full partners with prevention scientists, and this collaboration can result in more effective dissemination when religious and spiritual activities with direct marital relevance are not separated from other marital enhancement activities such as communication skills training.

Generalizing to other groups and regions. Our experience is consistent with research by Stanley et al (2004), in that religious organizations appear to be excellent partners for preventive intervention programs because: (1) they can provide access to couples; (2) they have a structure and approach that is consistent with educational models; (3) they provide deep connections with communities, particularly hard to reach underserved populations and minorities; and (4) they are strongly supportive of programs to strengthen healthy marriages. Their experiences suggest that religious leaders can play a potent role in many communities across the USA. However, it is important to be aware that religious organizations may offer secular prevention programs and that secular organizations may offer programs with a spiritual component.

Potential challenges to utilizing spiritual and religious behavior to enhance relationship outcomes. Before utilizing primary interventions that focus on change in spiritual and religious behavior, it is important to ask whether spiritually or religiously infused marital enrichment models can have an effect on well established patterns of spiritual or religious behavior – and whether such changes would be tolerated by participants. The evidence we reviewed above suggests that the answer to this questions is yes. With regard to prayer, we found that prior to their participation in the program many of the participants prayed regularly, and prayed for their spouse, but did not systematically pray for good things to happen for their spouse. The couples particularly valued the direction and focus provided by the program with regard to their prayers for their spouse. As a consequence, they reported praying somewhat differently for the partners after the program than before it. The key appears to be that they did not experience this shift in their prayer activity as a change in their spiritual or religious behavior or as a change in any fundamental religious or spiritual commitments. Rather, it was experienced as a natural extension of their own preexisting commitments and religious sentiments. That is, the program was not experienced as suggesting change in their spiritual or religious behavior – it was viewed as empowering participants to fulfill their own religious and spiritual goals and objectives more effectively.

Is it ethical for prevention scientists to pick scripture and provide sample prayers for participants? A potential challenge to implementing spiritually or religiously infused marital enrichment is the assumption that the melding of religious and spiritual activities with other marital enrichment activities can be accomplished without violating couples' religious self-determination or overstepping the appropriate boundaries of prevention science (see Yarhouse in Volume 2). This represents both an ethical as well as a practical challenge. In addition to

providing sample prayers that emphasize God's love (see Appendix A), we often supplemented

the suggested prayers with particular verses of scripture to resonate with key aspects of the

prayer. Often these were Agape-related verses (i.e. those reflecting selfless love) such as "Love

is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not

self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs." (1st Corinthians 13:4-5). But

the suggested scripture also included many other verses dealing with relationships, such as those

encouraging perseverance, kindness, and the value of marriage. One may wonder if this

approach rests on a theologically sound foundation and whether it has the potential to create

greater polarization in some contexts. In our view, meditation on sacred texts (part of the third

pathway in figure 2) should be tailored in an idiographic manner to support the objectives of the

intervention and to fit the beliefs of the couple. That is, the program designer's role is not to

decide what beliefs, or scripture, or activities to accept and what to ignore, it is to help the couple

identify resources that are already in their repertoire that may be helpful as they move forward

together in the development of a more fulfilling marital relationship. Specifically, we suggest

that program designers stay focused on enhancing marital relationships and not try to introduce

new beliefs or make religious choices for the couple. In our own work, it has been the construct

of Agape that has proven most useful and versatile in facilitating marital interactions. This is the

"content" that we emphasize and that often guides our choice of scripture. In the sample prayers

we give to couples, the focus is on living an "Agape" filled life with one's partner. The purpose

of inviting the deity into one's relationship is to promote "Agape" and be a vehicle of "Agape."

The use of scripture is often similarly motivated by the search for inspiration related to Agape.

However, we have concluded that it is more important for prevention scientists working with

religious clients to be "knowledgeable," "respectful," and "sensitive" than it is for them to be

"expert." That is, to the extent that the prevention scientist is merely offering a template that the couple may find useful as they incorporate their own religious resources into strengthening their relationship, we hope that many potential problems with religiously and spiritually infused prevention approaches may be side-stepped.

Other Opportunities. It is possible that providing opportunities for religiously and spiritually infused marital enhancement that includes prayer may have positive systemic consequences that go well beyond the immediate effect on the effectiveness of a particular therapeutic approach. As Marks (2008) suggests, as community-based marital intervention programs become more faith-friendly, it will be easier for pastoral counselors to work with clinicians on their more difficult or complex cases. This has the potential to enhance treatment outcomes in addition to prevention effects. It is also possible that greater couple level engagement in church activities could combat a different affliction of modern couples. As noted in a recent book detailing extensive analyses of how marriages have changed in the past 20 years, married couples are increasingly isolated and uninvolved with others, as couples (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007). These trends are associated with declining marital quality, and the only context where they found this trend not to hold was among those religiously involved.

Some Caveats. We do not mean to imply that all prayer is likely to be helpful to couples in preventing future problems or responding to ongoing issues, and we should be alert to potential conditions where prayer, or types of prayer, may have negative effects. For example, praying for the personal strength to endure the partner's transgressions seems likely to be counterproductive in some circumstances and might even increase risk in some contexts such as for spouses in abusive marriages. Similarly, asking for divine retribution for a partner's failings

could potentially focus an individual's attention on the shortcomings of his/her partner, supporting a ruminative, blaming processes. Likewise, prayer requests that focus on changing the partner or the way the partner behaves towards the self would seem to have the potential to reinforce a lack of accommodation and decrease propensity toward forgiveness, again leading to less positive relationship outcomes. These concerns, at a minimum, point to the possibility of adverse effects of prayer or other religious and spiritual activities under some circumstances.

Another potential area of concern that deserves attention in the application of prayer is the issue of gender equality in decision making. One spouse's support of the life goals of the other spouse is associated with greater marital satisfaction (Brunstein, Dangelmayer & Schultheiss, 1996). Also, Amato, et al. (2007) show that decision-making equality is one of the strongest correlates of positive marital quality—not only for wives, but also for husbands. This suggests that, at least in the U.S., equality in decision making is a feature of contemporary marriages that stabilizes or improves marital quality (Brunstein, et al., 1996). To the extent that increased prayer or other religious and spiritual activity were to decrease support for partner life goals, or decrease perceived equality or decision making equality, these could potentially diminish or undermine the beneficial effects of prayer activity on other key aspects of marital interaction. Accordingly, it is important for researchers to remain alert to both positive and negative effects of spiritual and religious activity as the field develops.

Future research agenda

In order to advance the field, several lines of basic and applied research are needed. At the basic research level, it is clear that much work is needed to understand fully the extent to which prayer for the partner impacts relationship outcomes. In addition, the identification of mechanisms of this impact is still preliminary. Thus far, data show that commitment, selfless

concern and sanctification can mediate the effect of prayer on relationships. But other potential

mechanisms mentioned earlier, such as a broader time perspective, forgiveness, and activating

the view of a particularly important significant other, have yet to be investigated. Finally, it is

worth noting that there has not been any research on the boundary conditions under which the

documented effects occur.

Deepening the current line of prayer research is, however, only a small part of the picture

as illustrated in Figure 2. For each of the other two targeted behaviors in Figure 2 one can

imagine the kind of research program begun for agape-focused prayer. First, researchers must

establish an association between the behaviors of interest (e.g., meditative prayer, study of

scripture, couple-oriented religious activities) and relationship outcomes, attempting to isolate

the key element(s) of the behavior that are important. Once established, the search for

mechanism begins and is followed by documentation of factors that might moderate the effects

or create boundary conditions for observed effects. Then the implications for intervention are

spelled out, an intervention program is developed and its efficacy tested. This becomes an

iterative process as one recycles back to the first stage informed by the intervention findings.

At the applied level, it is clear that research has barely begun. Although the findings of

the ProSAAM efficacy trial are encouraging, much work needs to be done in isolating the active

components of the program and in identifying what mediates their effects. In particular, it would

be helpful to better understand the observed sex effect. As with virtually all marital prevention

programs, much work remains to determine how to bolster effect sizes and to improve

maintenance of intervention gains. Here we believe that spiritually and religiously informed

programs have a potential edge because gains may be naturally reinforced by the individual's

ongoing spiritual and religious commitment and by the religious community within which he or she is situated.

Conclusion

We have covered a great deal of ground. In doing so, we hope to have convinced scientists of the potential value of faith informed prevention in appropriate contexts. We attempted to do so not only by offering data to illustrate the efficacy of one such intervention but by also outlining basic research that supports targeting a specific spiritual behavior, prayer. There are difficult judgment calls to be made when targeting spiritual and religious behaviors for intervention and not all scientists will be comfortable with having to deal with them. Such concerns are less evident in conducting basic research on the role such behaviors play in marital and family relationships. Given the large number of families that profess a religious faith and the central role such faith can play in their lives, it is clear that behavioral scientists cannot avoid the study of spiritual and religious behavior. To do otherwise would institutionalize the incomplete picture of marriage and families found in the professional literature and constitute a grave disservice to those we seek to help.

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Figure 1. Goal theory model illustrating role of prayer in re-establishing co-operative goals in context of conflict.

Figure 2. A model to test specific effects of spiritual and religious behavior on marital outcome

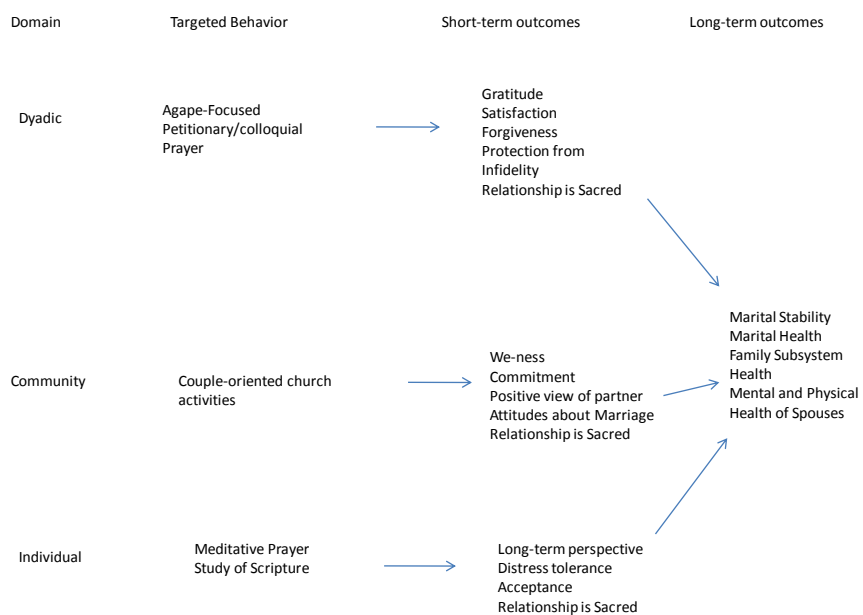| Domain	Targeted Behavior	Short-term outcomes	Long-term outcomes
Dyadic	Agape-Focused Petitionary/colloquial Prayer	Gratitude Satisfaction Forgiveness Protection from Infidelity Relationship is Sacred	Marital Stability Marital Health Family Subsystem Health Mental and Physical Health of Spouses
Community	Couple-oriented church activities	We-ness Commitment Positive view of partner Attitudes about Marriage Relationship is Sacred	
Individual	Meditative Prayer Study of Scripture	Long-term perspective Distress tolerance Acceptance Relationship is Sacred	

Figure 3: Outcome at Baseline, Post-intervention, 6- month and 12 month Follow-up

Averaged Across Husbands and Wives for PFP, CS PREP, and Control group
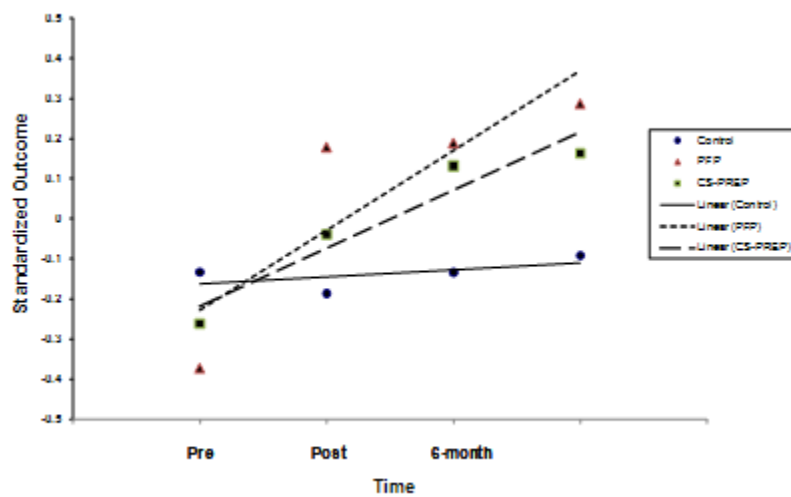
APPENDIX A

Dear Lord,

I come to you because you love us. I know you care deeply about the two of us and our relationship to each other. I look to you for a perspective that can let us see with new eyes and hear with new ears. I understand that if we see each other from your perspective we will make better choices and cement our relationship to a foundation that will not be shaken. I know that you are the rightful ruler of life and I pledge to treat my wife/husband with love in accordance with your will and your example.

When opportunities arise for me to express my love for [Spouse's name] I will be ready to make that opportunity a reality, not a missed chance. I will set my intentions so that I identify ahead of time the different ways I can be the vehicle of your love. I will practice your deep acceptance and perfect it in my actions toward my partner. I will engage in prayer for [Spouse's name] on a regular basis and will ask for good things for [Spouse's name] . I will also ask for the strength, patience, forgiveness, and love I need to be a good partnerr—now and in the long run.

We know we are not perfect. Our flaws are often all too painfully clear. Help us forgive and be forgiven. I know there is no power greater than the power of repentance followed by forgiveness. I will seek your strength as a shield against temptations large and small. I ask you to protect and watch over the trust in our relationship so that it can grow as we work to support and sustain each other.

When difficult times come, please help me listen and be supportive.. With your help I can be delivered from impulses that might lead us to harm. Help us reach out and touch each other in love—never in anger.

I know it is in your power to make each of us a source of your love. I know that you can help us show love more fully than we have before.

Let our marriage be a testament to your love and power to transform the world. Forever. Amen