

## **SPIRITUAL BEHAVIORS AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF PRAYER**

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Three studies examine the role of spirituality, specifically prayer for the partner, in the development of young adult relationships. In Study 1 ( $N = 302$ ) we examine longitudinal relationships to establish ordering over time; prayer for the partner predicted later relationship satisfaction but not vice versa. In Study 2 ( $N = 191$ ) we examine whether it is prayer for the partner or simply prayer in general that accounts for effects on satisfaction. We also establish that prayer for the partner accounts for unique variance in satisfaction beyond that contributed by positive and negative dyadic behavior. Finally, in Study 3 ( $N = 360$ ) we examine three plausible mediators of the impact of prayer for the partner on young adult relationships and find that increased commitment mediates the effect of prayer for the partner on relationship satisfaction. Results are interpreted as consistent with the view that prayer for the partner influences commitment by priming a longer-term perspective, a key developmental task in young adult relationships. Potential negative impacts of prayer and the need for experimental investigation are also discussed.

Survey research reveals that around 90% of Americans pray at least occasionally (McCullough & Larson, 1999) and many people use prayer spontaneously to cope with their problems (Barnes et al., 2004; McCaffrey et al., 2004). Given the obvious similarity of prayer

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to other behaviors and cognitive processes of interest to social and clinical psychologists, it is surprising that it has attracted so little empirical attention to date, and that so little is known about its empirical correlates. There is some evidence that spiritual involvement or activity may have positive effects. For example, a recent review of clinical trials that examine the effects of western religious activity and spirituality on health concluded that religious activities benefit blood pressure, immune function, depression, and mortality (Townsend, Lkadder, Ayele, & Mulligan, 2002, but see Sloan, 2006 for cautionary notes). Although Parke (2001) notes that research on religion "is rarely represented in the scientific journals devoted to family issues" (p. 555), there is some evidence that religiosity is similarly related to several positive relationship outcomes. Specifically, greater involvement in religious activities is related to higher levels of marital satisfaction (Mahoney et al., 1999) and marital stability with three longitudinal studies indicating that religiousness predicts lower risk of divorce and divorce proneness, and not vice versa (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995; Clydesdale, 1997; Fergusson, Horwood, Shannon, 1984).

Despite such tantalizing evidence, little is known about what specific aspects of religious behavior and spirituality are associated with relationship satisfaction or about the mechanisms whereby religiosity might influence relationships. Prayer is a form of spiritual activity common to all the "Abrahamic" traditions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and has strong parallels in other religious traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Shinto). In light of its central role in so many religious traditions, prayer is a spiritual activity worthy of empirical investigation in relationships. Dudley and Kosinski (1990) have suggested that spiritual activities like prayer 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). Conversely, prayer may sometimes function more negatively if it serves to sustain ruminative thought or to support other problematic processes. This suggests there may be multiple pathways through natural psychological processes connecting the practice of prayer to relationship satisfaction.

## PRAYER IN THE CONTEXT OF CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

Despite its prevalence (McCullough & Larson, 1999) and professed influence in people's lives (Barnes et. al., 2004; McCaffrey et al., 2004), prayer has generally not been examined specifically or systematically in research on religiosity and relationships. As a consequence, the influence of prayer on relationship outcomes remains unknown. We briefly consider why prayer may be important.

### PRAYER AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

As suggested by Dudley and Kosinski (1990), prayer could exert an effect on relationship outcomes through a number of different mechanisms. One possible mechanism involves motivational processes. Specifically, prayer may impact intentions and willingness to engage in particular behaviors that can either support or undermine relationship functioning. Fincham and Beach (1999) argue that these motivational processes are particularly consequential in the context of negative relationship transactions. They hypothesize that during destructive interactions couples commonly switch from the cooperative goals they profess and believe most of the time, to emergent goals that are adversarial in nature. For example, rather than focus on generating a solution to the problem at hand, partners locked in conflict may find themselves focused on getting their way—or at least focused on not losing the argument to the other partner. As a result, even couples who know how to reach cooperative solutions may not avail themselves of that knowledge. In this context of emergent goals couples engage in negative behaviors even when they “know better.” Wile (1993) captures this well in colloquial terms when he notes 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).

Prayer is relevant to the above analysis in two ways. First, when implemented in the context of conflict, prayer could function as a time out during which the partner can self-soothe and during which cooperative goals can regain their dominance, replacing revenge-oriented or competition-oriented motives. Indeed, there is some empirical evidence to suggest that prayer invokes an experience of relationship with God that is related to diffused hostile emotions, decreased emotional reactivity, increased couple empathy, in-

creased self-change focus, and encouragement for couple responsibility for reconciliation and problem solving (Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002). Second, prayer could prime cooperative goals allowing those who engage in prayer to decrease the likelihood of experiencing the destructive interactions likely to erode their relationship satisfaction. That is, prayer may decrease the frequency or intensity of negative relationship behaviors and the reciprocation of negative partner behaviors.

Alternatively, prayer might be linked to relationship satisfaction through its influence on positive behaviors and feelings. For example, prayer for the partner might increase overall positive feelings or prompt positive relationship behavior. As suggested by Dudley and Kosinski (1990), prayer for the partner might prime partners to think about each other in more loving or compassionate terms and so treat each other with greater respect and sensitivity. Or, prayer for the partner might prime key relationship variables, such as commitment, which have the potential to influence the long-term trajectory of relationships (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007).

Do the data support a link between prayer and relationship satisfaction? Only a handful of qualitative studies and even fewer quantitative studies have explored prayer's potential influence on relationship satisfaction. They have done so by examining whether prayer is related to reduced negative conflict, and even more indirectly by investigating whether or not prayer may be related to enhanced relational commitment and forgiveness.

*Conflict.* Abbott, Berry, and Meredith (1990) sampled 206 married adults from 20 religious denominations in the United States and found that 63% reported frequently asking for help from Deity about difficulties in their family, and over 29% reported almost always receiving guidance and inspiration from Deity in relation to family problems. Evangelical and Pentecostal participants in Gruner's (1985) study reported a similarly high frequency of praying to handle marital problems, whereas liberal and Catholic participants did not. Among couples reporting high marital adjustment, 81% reported praying frequently (28%) or extensively (53%) as a means of addressing marital problems. Conversely, only 15% of couples reporting high marital adjustment did not pray at all to address marital problems (Gruner, 1985). Finally, Butler et al. (2002) assessed how many people actually prayed during a conflict. Among their study

participants 31% indicated almost always praying during conflict, while 42% reported that they sometimes pray during conflict.

Butler, Gardner, and Bird (1998) interviewed several couples and found that regular prayer helped couples prevent conflict in their relationships. They also found that prayer invoked a couple–God system, or partnership with God, that helped them during situations of conflict. For example, couples reported that including God in their marriage through prayer appeared to be a “softening” event that facilitated problem solving and reconciliation. Another recent qualitative study (Marsh & 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). The results of these three qualitative studies provide converging evidence to suggest that prayer helped couples manage the escalation of emotions typically experienced during conflict.

*Commitment to the Relationship.* Prior research has not directly explored how prayer is related to commitment, yet related research may provide some clues. One study found that religious couples were committed to relationship permanence because their religion encouraged them not to think about the possibility of divorce, but to work on their relationships (Lambert & Dollahite, in press). Couples also reported that including God in their relationship helped them to remain committed to each other (Lambert & Dollahite, in press). Prayer would seem to be a primary means by which couples include God in their relationship and may be an important factor in their relational commitment. In fact, Butler et al. (2002) found prayer to meaningfully contribute to a perceived relationship with God, which promoted mindfulness of, and accountability to, God. It is plausible that a sense of accountability to God facilitates commitment and so greater willingness to invest positively in one’s relationship.

Larson and Goltz (1989) found that church attendance was a major predictor of commitment to marriage, and they proposed that leaving a marital relationship may be more difficult when a couple is embedded in a religious community due to the constraints against divorce and the supports for remaining together. Their finding also suggests that extrinsic religious activity, such as church attendance

and involvement, may be related to relationship commitment, but it is unknown to what extent an intrinsic, spiritual activity such as prayer may produce similar effects. We explore this relationship in our third study.

*Willingness to Forgive.* Some studies have found that religious couples were motivated to be forgiving to others out of their own sense of prior “forgiveness” from God (Holeman, 2003; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006), and others have shown that forgiveness may be facilitated by prayer groups (Wuthnow, 2000). Fincham, Hall, and Beach (2006) note that most definitions of forgiveness include the idea of a “change whereby one becomes less motivated to think, feel, and behave negatively (e.g., retaliate, withdraw) in regard to the offender” (p. 416). A regular practice of praying for the well-being of one’s partner would likely help to reduce such relational negativity, and thus facilitate forgiveness. However the relationship between prayer and forgiveness in relationships remains unexplored and hence we examine this hypothesized link in our studies.

#### PRAYER: CAUTION AND CLARIFICATION

Regardless of how prayer may be linked to relationship satisfaction, it is important to note that not all forms of prayer may be beneficial. Indeed, it is possible, that some forms of prayer, or prayer with certain foci, might be harmful for some relationship outcomes. For example, in some instances prayer may be used to manipulate others or induce guilt. Or, prayer may focus on the partner in a manner that increases blame and vilification directed toward the other. It therefore behooves researchers to be clear about the type and focus of prayer investigated. In this study we focus on colloquial, petitionary prayer, a form of prayer that invokes God’s help in response to specific needs, using the individuals own language rather than a prepared or set prayer. Prior research on this form of prayer has focused exclusively on whether or not it can facilitate patient recovery and has been conducted primarily within the medical field (for a review see Masters, Spielmans, & Goodson, 2006). However, our interest is in petitionary prayer which focuses on petitioning God on behalf of the partner’s well being. This form of prayer is likely to be particularly powerful in relationships. The studies reported are the first to investigate directly praying for the partner in relationships.

## STUDY 1

In view of very limited evidence linking prayer and relationship satisfaction, the first task is to document a link between prayer and relationship satisfaction. Because reports of both prayer and relationship satisfaction are likely associated with socially desirable responding we control this tendency statistically in the present study. Also, as our earlier conceptual analysis linking prayer to relationships describes processes that unfold over time, we first examine whether there is a temporal relation between prayer and relationship satisfaction. Specifically, we examine whether prayer predicts later relationship satisfaction while statistically controlling for earlier satisfaction.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 302 students (253 female, 49 male) in an introductory course on families across the lifespan. Their mean age was 19.99 years ( $SD = 2.71$ ). Sixty seven percent of the sample was White, 14% were African American, 10% were Latino, and the remainder indicated mixed race, Asian or other.

### Procedure

Participants agreed to participate in an ongoing survey to earn extra credit for the class. They completed the survey twice separated by a 6-week interval. The survey included the measures described below.

### Measures

*Prayer.* Two items asked about prayer for their partner ("I pray for the well being of my romantic partner," "I pray that good things will happen for my partner"). Participants indicated the frequency on a five point scale ranging from 1 (very frequently) to 5 (never). These items correlated .88 and .92 with each other at time 1 and time 2, respectively. As a result, responses to the items were re-coded and summed to yield an index of petitionary prayer for the partner such that larger scores indicated greater prayer frequency.

*Relationship Satisfaction.* Starting with 180 items previously used to assess relationship satisfaction, Funk and Rogge (2007) conducted an Item Response Theory analysis to develop a 4-item measure of relationship satisfaction with optimized psychometric properties. Sam-

TABLE 1. Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations among Study Variables in Study 1

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. Petitionary Prayer at T1		.56**	.15*	.19**	.16**
2. Petitionary prayer at T2			.14*	.20**	ns
3. Relationship satisfaction at T1				.32**	ns
4. Relationship satisfaction at T2					.13*
5. Social Desirability					
Mean	6.92	6.59	21.47	21.07	6.74
Standard deviation	2.75	2.74	3.26	3.33	2.69

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

ple items are “How rewarding is your relationship with your partner?” (answered on a 6 point scale ranging from “not at all” to “extremely”) and “I have a warm and comfortable relationship with my partner” (answered on a 6 point scale ranging from “not at all true” to “very true”). Their measure correlates .87 with the widely used Dyadic Adjustment Scale and  $-.79$  with the Ineffective Arguing Inventory (Kurdek, 1994). Coefficient alpha in the present sample was .92 at time 1 and .90 at time 2.

*Social Desirability.* Social Desirability, defined as “the need of Ss to obtain approval by responding in a culturally appropriate and acceptable manner” (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960, p. 353) is particularly relevant to the constructs assessed in this study. We therefore included a 13-item scale adapted from the Reynolds short form of the Marlowe–Crowne Social Desirability scale (Reynolds, 1982) that has been used in prior research on college student relationships (e.g., Straus, 2004). The scale was scored so that higher scores indicated more socially desirable responding. Coefficient alpha for this scale in the present sample was .64.

## RESULTS

A cross-lagged stability model allows examination of longitudinal relations between constructs while controlling for their stability (see Table 1 for correlations among variables). Significant cross-lagged effects reflect the presence of a relationship beyond that which can be accounted for by the stability of the constructs and the magnitude of

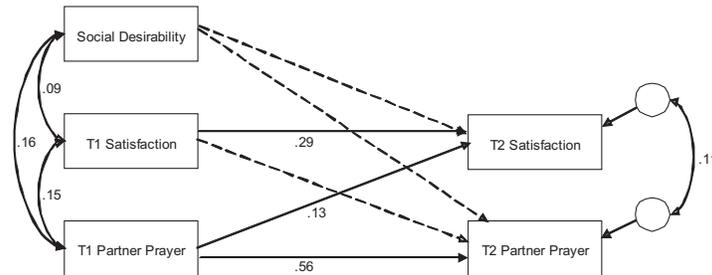


FIGURE 1. Cross lagged stability model.

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their association at Time 1. In the present study a measure of socially desirable responding at Time 1 was also included in the model (see Figure 1).

Structural equation modeling based on maximum likelihood estimation was used to obtain parameter estimates in the cross-lagged stability model. Figure 1 shows the results of the estimates obtained for this model. Because this is a fully saturated model without any degrees of freedom, it fits the data perfectly. The interest therefore is in parameter estimates rather than model fit. As anticipated, only the cross-lagged relation from earlier partner prayer to later satisfaction yielded a significant parameter estimate. As neither of the paths from social desirability was significant this variable was omitted in subsequent analyses.

To examine possible bidirectional or synchronous effects between partner prayer and satisfaction, a non-recursive model was estimated (see Figure 2). In order to identify a synchronous effects model, several conditions need to be satisfied. The present model satisfies these conditions in that earlier measures of prayer and relationship quality are presumed to be predetermined variables and thereby uncorrelated with the disturbance terms in both Time 2 equations and both cross-lagged effects are constrained to be zero. This analysis yielded results that were consistent with those obtained in the cross-lagged stability model. Again only an effect from partner prayer to relationship satisfaction was obtained.

In light of the two findings reported, we examined further the relations among the variables by testing a simple recursive model that al-

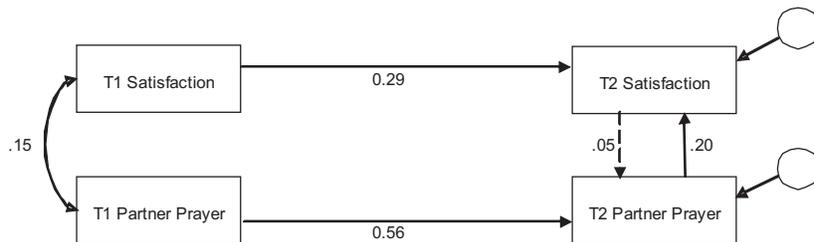


FIGURE 2. Non-recursive model

- - - indicates path was not significant

lowed examination of the extent to which cross-lagged effects reflect primarily shorter-term concurrent effects and the extent to which they reflect processes that unfold over longer time periods. Specifically we tested a model with a path from Time 2 prayer to Time 2 satisfaction while controlling for earlier partner prayer (see Figure 3). When a previously significant cross-lagged effect is reduced or eliminated in this simple recursive model, it suggests that the effect is mediated through current level of the predictor variable. Conversely, when cross-lagged effects remain significant, this suggests a longer causal time frame. It can be seen that the previously significant longitudinal relation between prayer and later satisfaction is no longer significant suggesting that the longitudinal relation between earlier prayer and later satisfaction is mediated by later prayer. This suggests that the effect of prayer on relationship satisfaction may unfold rather quickly (i.e., a shorter period than the six week time frame used in the current investigation).

## DISCUSSION

Study 1 provides evidence that prayer for one's partner is related to later relationship satisfaction. Cross-lagged analyses did not provide support for the hypothesis that relationship satisfaction leads to a greater frequency of prayer for the partner. In addition, the association between prayer for the partner and relationship satisfaction was not accounted for by socially desirable responding.

The presence of a nontrivial direction of effect from prayer for the

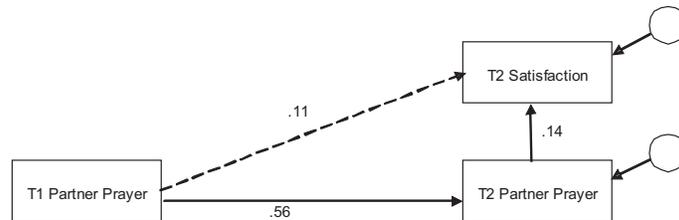


FIGURE 3. Simple recursive model.

- - - indicates path was not significant

partner to later satisfaction raises the question of why such an association exists and sets the stage for examining potential mediators of this relationship. Plausible mediators of the effect include prayer decreasing negative aspects of the relationship such as conflict, increasing positive aspects of the relationship such as commitment, and increasing capacity to recover from negative events through increased forgiveness. Because the time frame for the effect of prayer on relationship satisfaction among dating couples appears to be relatively short, it is appropriate to investigate potential mediators using cross-sectional designs.

Study 2 examines whether prayer is related to several potential mediators laying the ground work for an examination of mediating processes in Study 3. However before addressing mediation it is necessary to consider whether the effect of prayer is attributable to an overall, higher level of general prayer, as might be expected on the basis of mood induction or personality style effects, or whether it is attributable more specifically to prayer focused on benefiting the partner. Because the likely mediators would be different, it is important to determine whether prayer for the partner has an association with relationship satisfaction that is independent of greater frequency of prayer in general. Finally, it is useful to examine whether prayer continues to account for unique variance in relationship satisfaction after accounting for the effect of other positive and negative

relationship behaviors or whether it is reflective of the same general dynamic that leads to other manifestations of positive and negative relationship behavior. Study 2 addresses these issues in a new sample.

## STUDY 2

This study examined two hypotheses. The first hypothesis is that prayer offered for the well-being of one's partner or loved one will be related to forgiveness of the partner, positive relationship behavior and willingness to sacrifice for the relationship. The second hypothesis is that petitionary or intercessory prayer for the partner will predict relationship satisfaction over and beyond known correlates of satisfaction such as positive and negative relationship behavior, willingness to sacrifice and forgiveness.

## METHOD

### Participants

The study sample included 191 psychology undergraduates (149 female) who indicated that they were currently involved in a romantic relationship. All participants received partial course credit for participating in the study. Seventy three percent of the participants were White, 10% percent were Black, 4% percent were Asian, and 13% reported other races, multiple races, or did not indicate race. Sixteen percent reported Hispanic ethnicity, while the remainder reported non-Hispanic ethnicity or did not report ethnicity. Mean age was approximately 21 years old. Eight participants failed to provide information on one or more of the variables investigated leaving a total sample of 183 participants.

### Procedure

Participants met in classrooms with the understanding that they would be involved in survey research. After giving informed consent, the experimenter requested that participants respond to the survey items as truthfully as possible. The experimenter then administered a small packet of questionnaires that included the measures described as well as some additional measures unrelated to the current investigation.

### Measures

*Prayer.* Frequency of prayer was assessed using prayer items adapted from those used in a study assessing the similarity of religious practice nationally (King & Hunt, 1975). Respondents answered items that indicated the regularity with which they prayed (e.g., "I pray daily"). Because of the focus on the role of prayer for the partner relative to prayer in general, the 14 respondents who indicated that they never prayed at all were excluded from the analyses. The two items from Study 1 that asked about prayer for the partner were again included. These two items correlated .81 with each other and so responses to them were summed to yield an index of petitionary prayer for the partner such that larger scores indicated greater prayer frequency.

*Behavior.* Respondents were also asked to report on negative and positive relationship behaviors (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). The negative items represent behaviors known to correlate with relationship satisfaction and comprised four items (e.g., "Little arguments escalate into ugly fights with accusations, criticisms, name calling, or bringing up past hurts," "My partner criticizes or belittles my opinions, feelings, or desires"). Coefficient alpha in the present sample was .75. Positive relationship behavior was assessed with two items that correlated .46 with each other ("My partner and I have a lot of fun together" and "My partner and I regularly have great conversations where we just talk as good friends"). Summary indices were formed such that higher scores indicated more negative and more positive behavior, respectively.

*Forgiveness.* As is the case in most forgiveness research (see Fincham et al., 2006), the present study operationalized forgiveness in terms of the relative absence of unforgiveness. Forgiveness was therefore assessed with two items, one of which asked about withdrawal following a transgression ("If I am treated unfairly by my partner, I give him/her the cold shoulder") and one that asked about retaliation ("When my partner hurts me, I do something to get back at him/her"). These items correlated .55 and were summed so that higher scores indicated greater forgiveness.

*Willingness to Sacrifice.* This construct was assessed by using two items recommended by Stanley, Whitton, Sadberry, Clements, & Markman, (2006). The items were "When the pressure is really on and I have to choose, I'd rather do something that makes me happy

TABLE 2. Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations Among Study Variables in Study 2

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Petitionary Prayer		.16*	ns	.21**	.18*	.20**
2. Positive behavior			-.34**	ns	.18*	.63**
3. Negative behavior				ns	-.52**	-.45**
4. Sacrifice					.32**	ns
5. Forgiveness						.29**
6. Relationship satisfaction						
Mean	7.15	8.75	10.02	6.47	6.60	19.32
Standard deviation	2.31	1.53	3.40	1.63	2.0	4.03

\* $p < .05$  ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

than something that makes my partner happy” and “I am someone who finds satisfaction in putting aside my interests for the sake of my relationship with my partner.” These items correlated .30 with each other and were summed so that higher numbers indicated a greater willingness to sacrifice.

*Relationship Satisfaction.* Again the Funk and Rogge (2007) measure used in Study 1 served as an assessment of relationship satisfaction. Coefficient alpha in the present sample was .92.

## RESULTS

Pearson product moment correlations were computed to examine the first hypothesis. Table 2 shows the correlations among the study variables. The first hypothesis, that prayer would be related to other relationship behaviors, was supported in that petitionary prayer for the partner was positively related to positive relationship behavior, willingness to sacrifice for the partner, and to forgiving the partner.

To examine the second hypothesis, that prayer for the partner will predict relationship satisfaction over and beyond known correlates of satisfaction, we computed a regression equation in which relationship satisfaction served as the dependent variable with prayer, positive relationship behavior, negative relationship behavior, willing-

1. As petitionary prayer was related to frequency of prayer this regression was recomputed with prayer frequency as an additional predictor variable. Petitionary prayer remained a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction. Moreover, when prayer frequency was substituted for petitionary prayer in the original regression equation, it was not a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction.

ness to sacrifice and forgiveness as predictor variables. This equation accounted for 47% of the variance in relationship satisfaction,  $R = .69$ ,  $F(5,163) = 30.07$ ,  $p < .001$ . As hypothesized, prayer predicted variance in relationship satisfaction over and beyond the other variables in the equation,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $t = 2.03$ ,  $p < .05$ .<sup>1</sup> The only other variables to account for unique variance in relationship satisfaction were positive relationship behavior,  $\beta = .51$ ,  $t = 8.38$ ,  $p < .001$ , and negative relationship behavior,  $\beta = -.27$ ,  $t = -3.77$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## DISCUSSION

Study 2 provides evidence to suggest that praying for the partner in romantic relationships may be helpful for understanding satisfaction in these relationships beyond prayer in general, and beyond the effect of other positive and negative relationship behavior. As anticipated, petitionary prayer for the partner did not merely serve as a proxy variable for known correlates of relationship satisfaction. Instead it accounted for variance over and beyond that which could be attributed to documented correlates of satisfaction such as relationship behavior and forgiveness.

The documentation of an association between prayer and relationship satisfaction, however, raises the question of why such an association exists. As noted earlier, there are data linking prayer to improved regulation of relationship conflict (e.g., Butler et al., 2002; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006) and hence one might expect that reduction in conflict behavior mediates this association. Our index of negative relationship behavior did not focus on conflict per se and hence we examine this hypothesis in greater detail in Study 3.

The everyday aphorism, "The couple that prays together stays together," suggests an alternative account for the prayer-satisfaction association. Both petitionary prayer and relationship satisfaction may be related to joint prayer activity by the couple, and it may be the rewarding, pleasant aspects of joint prayer that account for effects on relationship satisfaction. We therefore examine these relationships in Study 3. If evidence is found for the hypothesized associations this would point to joint prayer, a couple activity, rather than intercessory prayer for the partner, an individual activity, as the key behavior accounting for the prayer-satisfaction association. Study 3 examines this hypothesis.

As noted earlier, prayer has been linked to commitment in relationships, a construct that was not assessed in Studies 1 or 2. Although the association between prayer and commitment has not been directly investigated in the literature, relevant prior findings suggest that the two should be positively associated. Study 3 also investigates this hypothesis. It is also important to study commitment because it might be another mechanism through which prayer and satisfaction are associated. Specifically, prayer creates for the person who is praying a sense of being brought into the presence of the eternal and thereby may prime a longer-term perspective. This expanded time frame could, in turn, prompt the person to view their romantic relationship differently, specifically, in a longer temporal perspective. If so, this suggests that prayer should be related to greater relationship commitment which, in turn, is known to be associated with greater relationship satisfaction (Stanley & Markman, 1992; Stanley, Lobitz & Dickson, 1999).

Finally, Study 2 showed that prayer is positively related to forgiveness. It is therefore possible that prayer increases willingness to forgive the partner which, in turn, promotes relationship satisfaction. One possible explanation for the lack of mediation in Study 2 is that the two item assessment of forgiveness that was used is too limited. We therefore use a multi item measure of forgiveness in examining the possibility that forgiveness accounts for the link between prayer and relationship satisfaction.

### STUDY 3

The initial goal of Study 3 is to replicate the association found between prayer for the partner and relationship satisfaction in Studies 1 and 2. The second goal is to investigate several variables that might advance understanding of this association. Specifically, we test a third variable explanation for the association, as the link between praying for the partner and satisfaction might simply reflect their joint association with joint or shared prayer. In addition, we examine three potential mediators of the prayer-satisfaction association, namely, conflict behavior, commitment, and forgiveness.

## METHOD

### Participants

The study sample comprised 360 undergraduates (297 female) who were currently enrolled in an introductory course on families that satisfied university wide liberal arts requirements and who indicated that they were in a dating relationship. The mean length of the relationship was 4.15 months ( $SD = 1.74$ ). Participants identified themselves as White (77%), African-American (15%), multiple races (3%), Asian (1.4%), and the remainder reported other races, or did not indicate race. Nine percent reported Latino ethnicity, while the remainder reported non-Latino ethnicity. Mean age was 20 years (range 19 to 25 years).

### Procedure

Participants had agreed to participate in an online survey to earn extra credit for the class. After giving informed consent, they completed an extensive survey which included the measures described below.

### Measures

*Prayer.* The two partner petitionary prayer items used in Study 1 were administered together with an additional item ("I like to pray for the people I love"). Cronbach's alpha for this measure was .96 in the current sample. Finally, respondents indicated the frequency of joint prayer with their partner ("My romantic partner and I pray together").

*Relationship Satisfaction.* Relationship satisfaction was assessed in the same manner as Study 1 and 2.

*Conflict Behavior.* Conflict behavior was assessed using the Communication Patterns Questionnaire—Constructive Communication Subscale (CPQ-CC; Heavey, Larson, Zumtobel, & Christensen, 1996). The CPQ-CC is a seven item subscale of the Communication Patterns Questionnaire that assesses the interaction patterns of couples during conflict. It assesses three constructive communication behaviors (mutual discussion, mutual expression, and mutual negotiation) and three destructive communication behaviors (mutual blame, mutual threat, and each partner's verbal aggression). The total score for the measure is obtained by subtracting the summed value of the destructive communication items from the sum of the constructive communication items, thus higher scores indicate more constructive communication. The CPQ-CC is highly correlated with

observed problem solving behavior ( $R = .70$ , Hahlweg, Kaiser, Christensen, Fehm-Wolfsdorf, & Groth, 2000) and has demonstrated good internal consistency for females and males,  $\alpha = .81$  and  $\alpha = .84$  respectively (Heavey et al., 1996). In the present sample  $\alpha = .82$ .

*Forgiveness.* Forgiveness was assessed using six items that respondents rated following the statement "When my partner wrongs or hurts me . . ." on a six-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Three items assessed avoidance ("I tend to give him/her the cold shoulder," "I don't want to have anything to do with her/him," "I tend to withdraw from my partner") and three items assessed retaliation ("I find a way to make her/him regret it," "I tend to do something to even the score," "I retaliate or do something to get my own back"). The six items were scored so that higher scores reflected more forgiveness. This scale showed good internal consistency,  $\alpha = .87$ .

*Commitment.* Commitment was assessed using a short form of the Dedication subscale of Stanley and Markman's (1992) commitment measure. It comprised 4 items (e.g., "My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life," "I want this relationship to stay strong no matter what rough times we may encounter"). In the current sample it showed acceptable internal consistency,  $\alpha = .77$ .

## RESULTS

The correlations among the study variables are shown in Table 3. Replicating the finding of Studies 1 and 2, petitionary prayer for the partner was reliably associated with relationship satisfaction. As expected, joint prayer was related to both petitionary prayer for the partner and relationship satisfaction supporting the possibility that it might account for the petitionary prayer-satisfaction association. To examine whether it did so, a regression equation was computed in which both prayer activities were used to predict relationship satisfaction. As expected, the overall equation was significant,  $R = .27$ ,  $F(2,357) = 13.99$ ,  $p < .001$  but only petitionary prayer accounted for unique variance in satisfaction,  $\beta = .20$ ,  $t = 3.47$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Having ruled out a third variable explanation for the phenomenon of interest, we next turned to examine potential mediators of the petitionary prayer-relationship satisfaction association. All three

TABLE 3. Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations Among Study Variables in Study 2

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Petitionary Prayer		.47**	.32**	.13**	.15**	.25**
2. Joint Prayer			.20**	.ns	.09*	.20**
3. Commitment				.30**	.22**	.58**
4. Forgiveness					.44**	.39**
5. Conflict behavior						.43**
6. Relationship satisfaction						
Mean	9.04	1.90	14.80	26.5	11.78	20.83
Standard deviation	1.64	1.19	3.21	6.23	9.48	3.70

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

variables identified as potential mediators met initial tests for mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986) as they were significantly related to the predictor variable (petitionary prayer) and to the outcome variable (relationship satisfaction). To test for mediation each variable was then entered into a regression equation along with petitionary prayer to predict satisfaction. Prayer remained a significant predictor of satisfaction,  $\beta = .19$ ,  $t = 4.01$ ,  $p < .001$ , with conflict behavior,  $\beta = .40$ ,  $t = 8.49$ ,  $p < .001$ , entered in the equation. Similarly, both prayer,  $\beta = .20$ ,  $t = 4.23$ ,  $p < .001$  and forgiveness,  $\beta = .36$ ,  $t = 7.58$ ,  $p < .001$  independently predicted satisfaction. Thus neither conflict behavior nor forgiveness mediated the link between prayer and satisfaction. In contrast when commitment and prayer were used to predict satisfaction, only commitment emerged as a significant predictor,  $\beta = .56$ ,  $t = 12.28$ ,  $p < .001$ . Commitment therefore fully mediated the relation between prayer and relationship satisfaction.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

In all three studies, prayer for the partner was positively correlated with greater relationship satisfaction and was associated with several other relationship processes that have been linked to satisfaction. This replicates prior research linking religiosity and spirituality to relationship satisfaction. However the present results extend prior findings in at least three ways. First, they point to the importance of a specific, intrinsic, spiritual activity rather than extrinsic religiosity. Second, they demonstrate the relevance of spiritual activity in a younger, less committed sample than has been used previously.

Third, they identify specific mediational pathways that may account for the impact of prayer on relationship satisfaction. The range of relationship variables linked to prayer suggested a variety of alternative potential explanations for the observed link between prayer and relationship satisfaction that were systematically examined.

In Study 1, we examined the temporal relationship between prayer for the partner and change in relationship satisfaction, finding that prayer preceded change in satisfaction and not the reverse. In Study 2, we examined the possibility that the association between prayer and satisfaction might be accounted for by relationship behavior (either positive or negative), sacrifice, or forgiveness of the partner. Despite finding positive links between prayer and positive behavior, sacrifice, and forgiveness, none of these variables explained the relationship between prayer and satisfaction. Instead, prayer accounted for significant unique variance in satisfaction beyond each of these variables.

The failure of forgiveness to mediate the effect of prayer on satisfaction was a particular surprise given the strong effect of forgiveness on relationship satisfaction in other contexts, particularly in the context of negative relationship behavior (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004, 2007). Accordingly, we expanded our measure of forgiveness in Study 3, but failed to change the observed relationship. Forgiveness did not mediate the effect of prayer for the partner on relationship satisfaction in young adult romantic relationships. However, it has been argued that forgiveness is not limited to the absence of unforgiveness but includes a prosocial component that was not captured in our assessment of forgiveness. It therefore remains possible that this component of forgiveness may mediate the effect of prayer on satisfaction.

We also examined the possibility that the connection between “prayer for the partner” and satisfaction might actually result from “prayer with the partner” which would change our conceptualization of the effect of prayer from an individual level effect to a couple level effect. Although the two behaviors were highly correlated, there was no evidence that couple level prayer accounted for the effect of individual level “prayer for the partner” on satisfaction.

As an alternative to forgiveness and sacrifice, two constructs that may come to mean more as relationships mature, we also examined the potential role of commitment as a mediator of the prayer–satisfaction association. As expected, prayer was related to commitment. Commitment may be important as a mediator of the effect of prayer

on satisfaction in young adult romantic relationships for several reasons. First, in this population of young couples, many of whom may not yet be thinking of themselves as being part of a long-term relationship, commitment may tap a key developmental relationship task. That is, the development of commitment may distinguish between those relationships that grow and flourish versus those that fare less well. If so, any connection between prayer and commitment might lead to greater effects on satisfaction than would a similar connection to forgiveness or sacrifice. These latter variables might prove more robustly related to satisfaction in an older or married sample.

Alternatively, commitment may be more strongly influenced by prayer because it is more directly primed, independent of the content of the prayer, than are processes like sacrifice and forgiveness. For example, increased commitment may be produced by implicit priming of related constructs (Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trötschel, 2001). Praying to an eternal and unchanging being and asking for positive things for my partner, may prime me to use a longer time frame in thinking about my relationship to my partner as well. Since a longer time perspective is a central element of commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992), this priming effect may lead to stronger feelings of commitment.

Another possible explanation for this mediation relationship is that as individuals pray to God for their partner, they may perceive God as being an important part of their relationship. Couples in the Lambert and Dollahite (in press) study reported that their religious involvement enhanced commitment in their relationship because, as they included God in their relationship as a third party, spouses felt accountable to Him as well as to each other. This helped them to find increased meaning in committing to their marriage and an enhanced rationale for "sticking with it" during difficult times, as breaking their commitment to their partner also implied breaking their commitment to God. Individual prayer for the partner, like shared religious activity, is likely to be a key mechanism by which couples include God in their relationship, explaining in part the relationship between prayer and relational commitment. Conversely, the cross-sectional nature of the data also allow the possibility for the reverse direction of effect. That is, it may be that individuals who pray, pray more for their partners as they become more committed to the relationship. This would result in higher commitment leading to

greater frequency of prayer for the partner. However, this interpretation would not explain the fact that prayer predicted changes in relationship satisfaction.

The potential benefits of commitment for relationship satisfaction are well known (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002) and at a minimum, greater felt commitment is likely to lead to greater felt security in the relationship. Accordingly, it is not entirely surprising that commitment was found to mediate fully the effect of prayer for the partner on relationship satisfaction.

Of course, it will be important to replicate this effect at other key points in the life cycle of romantic relationships. It may be that as couples become more stable, or as commitment levels asymptote following marriage, the importance of commitment as a mediator of the effect of prayer on relationship satisfaction may decrease as other potential mediators increase in importance.

Notwithstanding these positive findings, the present series of studies needs to be viewed in the light of several limitations. First and foremost, all the data are correlational and even though they include a temporal component they are at best consistent with, but do not directly support, causal inference. However, they do suggest that experimental investigation of the impact of prayer on relationship satisfaction may prove fruitful. Second, the attempt to rule out joint prayer as an explanation for the prayer satisfaction association is not as strong as it might be as it utilized a single item measure. Future work is needed to ensure that our finding does not reflect a measurement failure. Finally, the nature of our samples limits the extent to which these findings can be generalized. In this regard the predominately female sample bears mention, especially in view of sex differences in commitment and sacrifice (see Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2002). There is thus the need to examine whether the results generalize to samples where men are equally represented, to older couples and to couples in later stages of their relationship.

Although the findings of the current study indicate several ways by which prayer appears to benefit relationships, future research should also explore how intrinsic religious activities such as prayer may be harmful to relationships. Prior research has established such negative links primarily with extrinsic religious activities such as church attendance. For example, Curtis and Ellison (2002) found that

disparities between partners in religious attendance patterns are consistently linked with more frequent marital disagreements. Likewise, Call and Heaton (1997) reported that the risk of marital dissolution is nearly three times greater when the wife regularly attends religious services and the husband never attends. These findings suggest that future research should focus on disparity in religiosity as a relationship context that may influence the impact of religious behavior such as prayer. For instance, in the context of disparity in religiosity, petitionary prayer for the partner might focus attention on the perceived religious weaknesses or shortcomings of the partner, which could have negative consequences for that couple's relationship.

In addition, prayer that creates a persistent focus on partner faults may decrease rather than increase felt satisfaction. For example, prayer requests that focus on changing the partner or the way the partner behaves towards the self may be unlikely to lead to positive relationship outcomes. Also, if partners are highly coercive with each other, joint couple prayer could be used by one partner as a tool to manipulate or coerce the other, accentuating rather than ameliorating problematic relationship dynamics. In a similar vein, in the context of physical abuse, prayer may decrease willingness to leave the relationship. Finally, negative effects of prayer may be more readily discernable in the context of relationship dissolution rather than relationship formation. So, examination of the effects of prayer in the context of couples considering separation or divorce may be a more appropriate context for the identification of potential negative effects. These and other possible negative outcomes of intrinsic religious activities ought to be examined in future studies.

In summary, the current series of studies is the first to document the influence of spiritual activities, such as prayer, on relationship development among young adults. Importantly, it was spiritual activities focused on the partner that were consequential, not simply prayer in general. Among young adults, prayer for the partner may accelerate the development of commitment, leading to relatively greater gains in relationship satisfaction among those who incorporate their partners into their private spiritual activities. Shared prayer with the partner was not required to observe the effect and prayer accounted for variance in satisfaction over and beyond that attributable to positive and negative relationship behavior. If, as we

hypothesize, the observed effect of prayer for the partner on relationship satisfaction results from priming effects, this should be observable in the context of experimental investigations.

Theoretically, the current series of studies suggest that spiritual activities may deserve greater attention in models of relationship development. For many young adults, spiritual activities such as prayer are common and, as the current series of studies suggest, may be consequential. Understanding the mechanisms by which such activities exert their effect offers new potential avenues for strengthening relationships and potentially for better predicting the longitudinal course of relationship development. At an applied level it is relevant to investigate prayer for the partner as a potential intervention for those distressed couples who engage in prayer (see Beach, Fincham, Hurt, McNair, & Stanley, in press). The importance of such applied research is emphasized by its potential to help further refine our theoretical understanding of prayer in relationships.

Such research has the potential to raise interesting challenges for psychologists. Shafranske (2001, p. 327) notes that when psychologists are asked what action they would take in response to the hypothetical situation in which "a spiritual intervention such as prayer were scientifically demonstrated to improve patient progress, only 55% would perform the intervention, and 41.2% would refer the patient to a member of clergy." In a similar vein, if asked by a patient to pray for him/her, 55% of psychologists said they would do so as compared to 90% of physicians (Shafranske, 2001). It appears that research on prayer may challenge our comfort level as professionals and perhaps challenge us in ways that other aspects of spirituality do not, but to continue to ignore this omnipresent human activity is difficult to justify.

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