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I Say a Little Prayer for You *Do Prayers Matter in Marriage and Family Life?*

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Introduction

Religion has influenced human behaviour throughout history, and it is estimated that somewhere between 68.08 and 88.74 per cent of the current world population (4.54–5.92 billion people) profess some religious faith (List of religious populations, 2010). The three largest religions are Christianity (33% or 2.1 billion), Islam (21% or 1.5 billion) and Hinduism (14% or 900 million).¹ Although scientists ‘have generally kept their distance from religion and spirituality’ (Hill and Pargament, 2003, p. 65), a small literature is emerging on religion and the family. However, most studies (79% of marital studies and 76% of parenting studies over the last decade: see Mahoney, 2010) use one or two items to measure religious variables (e.g. affiliation, attendance, self-rated importance). Although these studies generally show that religiosity is related to several positive outcomes in family relationships, they yield 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 $r = 0.125$ (Mahoney *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, such studies are subject to multiple interpretations. For example, they may simply reflect selection effects, the operation of third variables such as social support and so on, and provide little information about which specific, modifiable aspects of religious behaviour and spirituality are associated with positive outcomes. The need to identify specific religious behaviours that influence family outcomes is apparent.

¹ If agnostics, atheists, secular humanists and people who indicate no religious preference are considered together as a group, they comprise about 16 per cent of the world’s population, or around 1.1 billion people.

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The Practice of Prayer

Central to most religions is the practice of prayer, and many individuals use prayer spontaneously to cope with their problems (McCaffrey *et al.*, 2004). But because prayer 'has been largely marginalised by social scientists who study religion' (Dein and Littlewood, 2008, p. 39), virtually nothing is known about prayer and close relationships. This chapter describes a research programme on prayer and close relationships, explores the implications of such work, and, in doing so, attempts to fill this gap.² First, however, it is important to briefly analyse the construct of prayer.

Prayer conceptualised

Prayer has many potential referents. William James (1902, p. 464), a founding father of modern psychology, defined prayer as 'every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognised as divine ...'. And it has further been argued that 'if prayer is regarded as every kind of communication with the power recognised (by the pray-er) as divine, then, arguably, all individuals pray to some degree' (Breslin and Lewis, 2008, p. 10). Many types of prayer exist. For example, Poloma and Gallup's (1991) taxonomy identifies ritual prayer, petitionary prayer, colloquial prayer and meditative prayer. Given such distinctions, researchers need to be clear when describing the effects of prayer because the impact of ritual or meditative prayer could be quite different from that of petitionary or colloquial prayer.

Types of prayer

<i>Ritual prayer.</i>	Prayer recited through reading a text or from memory.
<i>Petitionary prayer.</i>	Prayer which includes requests to meet specific material or other needs.
<i>Colloquial prayer.</i>	Prayer which uses everyday conversational language to communicate with divine, ultimate power.
<i>Meditative prayer.</i>	Prayer which involves being in the presence of the divine and thinking about the divine.

In the research discussed in this chapter, the focus is on colloquial, petitionary prayer, a form of prayer that invokes the deity's help in response to specific needs, using the individual's own language rather than a set or memorised prayer. Attention is focused on this form of prayer because it may be used in 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.

² The research programme on which this chapter is based was conducted in the USA by the author and a number of colleagues.

Research programme

Descriptive data show that 63 per cent of people frequently ask for help from God³ for family difficulties (Abbott *et al.*, 1990), and that 73 per cent of spouses have prayed during marital conflict (Butler *et al.*, 2002). Finally, in qualitative research, couples report that prayer alleviated tension and facilitated open communication during conflict situations (Lambert and Dollahite, 2006).

Theoretical perspective

How might prayer influence couple conflict? Fincham and Beach (1999) offer a goal theory analysis of couple conflict in which they argue that when a conflict of interest arises the usual goal of cooperating with the partner is replaced by an emergent goal in which the task is to 'win' or, at least, not lose, setting the stage for an adversarial interaction. Building on this analysis, Beach *et al.* (2008a) argue that prayer for the partner's wellbeing (asking God to do good things for the partner, envelop the partner in God's love and so on) when utilised in this context could provide a specific mechanism that allows cooperative goals to regain their dominance, replacing revenge-oriented or competition-oriented ones. Moreover, regular (private) prayer for the partner's wellbeing, even in the absence of an active conflict, is hypothesised to prime a range of motives, setting the stage for other positive relationship outcomes. For instance, 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. In addition to being self-reinforcing, such prayer is likely to be supported by the spiritual community and thereby also be maintained by natural reinforcers.

Research Design

In the absence of prior studies, this research has focused on examining the impact of prayer for a partner on the relationship. Unless otherwise stated, participants in these studies were recruited from a college population screened to identify those who prayed at least occasionally. The findings therefore pertain largely to romantic relationships in emerging adulthood and, with the exception noted below, reflect the prayer behaviour of one partner. The research began by documenting an association between prayer and relationship functioning showing that prayer predicted relationship satisfaction (both concurrently and over time) over and beyond positive and negative behaviour in the relationship, and that commitment mediated the prayer-satisfaction association (Fincham *et al.*, 2008). Although encouraging, such correlational research provides weak evidence for inferring direction of effects.

The subsequent research therefore incorporated experimental designs. Specifically, participants were randomly assigned to pray for the partner or to fulfil comparison

³ Throughout the chapter, the term 'God' is used to refer generically to a range of conceptions of the deity or higher power, or transcendent aspects of life typically associated with spirituality. The usage is intended to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

conditions such as describing the partner to a parent or meditating on the partner's positive qualities. In some studies undirected prayer ('just pray as you normally would each day for the next four weeks') was even used as a comparison condition. The research has consistently shown that petitionary prayer for the partner has a greater impact on the relationship than any of the comparison conditions. The box below presents an example of the instructions used in the studies and a sample prayer.

Study instructions

Please read the example prayer below to get an idea of the type of prayer we would like you to pray on behalf of your partner:

'Dear Lord,
Thank you for all the things that are going well in my life and in my relationship. Please continue to protect and guide my partner, providing strength and direction every day. I know you are the source of all good things. Please bring those good things to my partner and make me a blessing in my partner's life. Amen.

Now, please generate your own prayer in your own words on behalf of the well-being of your romantic partner and in the space below write a short description about what you prayed for.'

The above instructions illustrate those used when participants come to the laboratory and engage in a single prayer session. Because this approach might seem somewhat artificial, the laboratory findings are always replicated using longer-term, diary studies in which participants are asked to pray each day for a month. Participants are asked to make online reports twice a week during the month in order to ensure that they are following study instructions.

Findings

Forgiveness

One set of studies provided support for the idea, articulated earlier, that prayer increases willingness to forgive a transgression by the partner (Lambert *et al.*, 2010). This is important because in relationships such as marriage each partner will certainly be hurt by the other partner and that hurt is all the more poignant as partners make themselves particularly vulnerable in close relationships. Little wonder, then, that it has been said that a happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers. In these studies it was shown that prayer led to high levels of agape or selfless love and that this love led to greater willingness to forgive.

It could be argued that such findings may simply reflect self-report biases such as socially desirable responding, but the research indicated that prayer following a partner transgression influenced actual behaviour in response to the transgression. Participants were exposed to a transgression by one of the partners in the laboratory.

Then after praying (or engaging in a control activity) participants were given the chance to cooperate with or antagonise their partner in a computer game. Those who prayed were more cooperative than control participants who, instead of praying, had been asked to think about the nature of God.

Increasing forgiveness is all very well, but what if it is not even noticed by the partner? In such circumstances it might have a limited or even a null effect on the relationship. Therefore, another study was designed to test whether partners of participants who prayed over the course of four weeks reported the participants as more forgiving. Apparently prayer had a strong enough effect on the forgiving nature of participants for them to be perceived by their partners as more forgiving at the end of the study. But the impact of prayer is not limited to forgiveness.

Sacrificing selfish interests

Successful relationships also require partners who are willing to sacrifice selfish interests for the good of the partner and the relationship. A series of studies therefore investigated the effect of prayer on satisfaction with sacrifice in a close relationship; prayer for the partner was related to satisfaction with sacrifice both concurrently and longitudinally (Lambert *et al.*, 2011). Importantly, individuals randomly assigned to pray were more satisfied with sacrificing than those assigned to a control condition, and in a further study, experimentally manipulated prayer after a conflictual interaction increased satisfaction with sacrifice. In addition those who prayed reported fewer emergent goals and greater couple identity than control participants, and both emergent goals and couple identity mediated the relationship between prayer and sacrifice. In a final study, objective observers rated those who were randomly assigned to pray for the partner over a four-week period as being more satisfied with sacrifice than those who daily engaged in positive thoughts about their partner.

Protecting against risk factors

Clearly, prayer can facilitate positive relationship outcomes, but can it protect against risk factors for relationships? A critical risk factor for relationship dissolution is cheating or infidelity. In countries in the developed world significant numbers of spouses are unfaithful (around 2–4% each year: Allen *et al.*, 2005), with figures being even higher in some regions in the developing world (e.g. sub-Saharan Africa). Extramarital affairs are the leading cause of divorce across 160 cultures (Betzig, 1989) and among college students in committed relationships rates of cheating are even higher (up to 65%: Allen and Baucom, 2006). In a more recent set of studies it was demonstrated that, relative to those using undirected prayer and positive thought conditions, those assigned to the colloquial, petitionary prayer for the partner condition showed decreased extra-dyadic behaviour over the course of the study (Fincham *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, ‘sanctification of the relationship’, or the process by which secular aspects of life (in this case their relationship) become perceived as having spiritual significance and character, was shown to mediate the relationship between prayer and infidelity. Again, in one of the studies in this series, it was shown 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,

those who had prayed together for four weeks were rated as more committed to the relationship, which helps explain why there was less cheating during this period even when baseline rates of cheating are taken into account.

Praying with a partner

A common saying in the Christian faith community is, 'The couple that prays together stays together.' The veracity of this statement is by no means self-evident; prayer is a motivated behaviour and wherever there are human motives, there can be good and bad ones. For example, joint prayer could be used to demean or manipulate a partner. A series of studies was therefore implemented to examine the impact of joint prayer or praying with a partner (Lambert *et al.*, in press). In an initial study, frequency of self-reported joint prayer predicted ratings of trust made by observers of a five-minute couple interaction. A four-week intervention study showed that those assigned to engage in joint prayer rather than a daily positive interaction condition showed increased trust of the partner by the end of the study. Two data sets were consistent with the view that an increased sense of couple unity mediated the association between prayer and trust.

The demonstration that joint prayer can increase trust in relationships does not, *ipso facto*, mean that it should invariably be used to do so. There are probably many routes to increasing trust in relationships and some may turn out to be far more powerful than joint prayer. Such considerations have implications for practice and for social policy.

Implications for Practice and Social Policy

What implications do the findings described have for practice and social policy? Each of the topics is addressed in turn below.

Practice

Although efficacious interventions have been developed for couples, a major problem in this literature concerns the maintenance of gains over time following the intervention. Because prayer comes easily to people of faith, is self-reinforcing and is reinforced by the faith community, it has the potential to address this problem. This consideration led to the development of a *primary prevention* programme, to test this hypothesis.

Primary prevention

Primary prevention refers to interventions designed to circumvent the development of relationship dysfunction. They may target the general population (universal prevention) or those at risk (selective prevention). Typically, they take the form of psycho-education where benefits outweigh the minimal costs and risks for everyone. In contrast, secondary prevention refers to interventions for those who have begun to experience a problem, and they attempt to halt its progress.

A randomised clinical trial was conducted to determine whether adding prayer to an established prevention programme with well-documented efficacy improved maintenance of intervention gains. A prayer-focused version (PFP) of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) was developed that included all the basic components of PREP as well as a strong focus on private, intercessory prayer for the partner. 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 instructed not to focus on non-constructive themes, including retribution or ‘praying for God to change my mate’.

The intervention was targeted at African-Americans as they are markedly more religious than the general population of the USA on a variety of measures (e.g. 76% report praying at least daily or more often: Pew Charitable Trust, 2009), leading several authors to call for greater attention to spirituality in marital enhancement programmes aimed at African-American couples (Ooms and Wilson, 2004; Wolfinger and Wilcox, 2008). Because the vast majority of African-Americans self-identify as ‘Protestant’ (78%; Pew Charitable Trust, 2009), prayers were used that were reflective of African-American Protestant traditions. However, the programme was offered in a non-sectarian manner and a few Muslim couples also participated. The full report can be found in Beach *et al.* (2011).

A sample of 393 African-American married couples were randomly assigned to: (a) a culturally sensitive version of PREP that included consideration of the effects of discrimination on couple relationships; (b) the same programme with an additional focus on prayer (PFP condition); or (c) an information-only control group in which couples received a self-help version of PREP. Assessments were conducted before the intervention, immediately after it was completed, and 6 months and 12 months later. There was no reliable change as a function of time in the self-help control group. Considering the two intervention groups, in the present context it suffices to note that even though wives began at similar starting points they showed differing outcome patterns over time depending on the intervention. In particular, there was significantly greater change from pre- to post-test in the PFP condition than in the traditional PREP condition, indicating a more rapid initial change process in PFP that resulted in marginally better outcomes even at 12-month follow-up. Because husbands showed equal improvement across the two intervention conditions, this study yielded only partial support for the hypothesis that prayer would improve maintenance of intervention gains over time. Nevertheless, it points to one way in which prayer might be relevant to practitioners working with couples.

The above quantitative findings do not preclude the existence of dramatic change for some participants in the PFP condition, including men. For example, one male participant reported the following:

At the time we were in the programme, we were separated and facing divorce. Hesitantly, we started with little hope of any reconciliation. We followed through with what they asked and attended all of the sessions ... I started to use the prayer cards and begin to evaluate myself and where our marriage went wrong. I can now report that we are *not* getting a divorce but we are planning to renew our vows. Prayer definitely works even if the other partner isn’t praying for the marriage.

In a similar vein, a female participant stated:

We specifically pray about matters that affect our marriage ... What I find is that when I sense a disagreement brewing, I ask for guidance upfront rather than afterwards. That is the measure of my growth in using prayer in my marriage.

Couple counselling

Is there a place for prayer in counselling individual couples? A survey of marriage and family therapists showed that 72 per cent believe spirituality is relevant to clinical practice yet only 17 per cent agree that it was appropriate to pray with a client (Carlson *et al.*, 2002). Frameworks for integrating spirituality into clinical practice are rare, and hence Beach *et al.* (2008a) offered an analysis of the role prayer might play in couple therapy.

These authors argued that 'prayer-based alternatives are available that meet many of the key objectives of emotion regulation as taught in marital skill training' (Beach *et al.*, 2008a, p. 647). They went on to illustrate how colloquial prayer might even offer some advantages over therapist-directed time out from conflict or similar anger management techniques. Their arguments are summarised in Table 24.1, which shows how a prayer-based intervention achieves the same goals as some skills-based interventions. In addition, colloquial prayer provides a behaviour that partners are likely to remember to execute when experiencing strong emotions, and one that can help them return to a state of mind in which using relationship skills seems more attractive than destructive behaviour. Thus, prayer may be useful in dealing with important affective processes that skills-training methods do not always handle well. The availability of such alternative approaches to marital intervention is useful because they can provide needed flexibility in working with couples. For example, it may be useful to have an approach to couple intervention that will resonate more with those who are highly spiritual in their approach to life, as these clients prefer therapy that in some way includes their belief system and they view clinicians who integrate religion into therapy more optimistically, and as more competent than clinicians who do not (Aten and Hernández, 2004).

Beach *et al.* (2008a) also argue that prayer can be used as an addition to traditional skills-based couple interventions. This is important because couples who learn relevant

Table 24.1 Skills-based procedure and goals and corresponding prayer-based alternative

<i>Skills-based training procedure</i>	<i>Prayer-based alternative</i>
<i>Time out</i>	<i>Prayer for partner</i>
Regain perspective.	Focus on divine love and its extension to partner and relationship brings new perspective.
Break negative thought cycle.	Focusing on love, compassion and understanding interrupts grievance rehearsal.
Promote relaxation.	Prayer is self-soothing and self-healing.
<i>Social support</i>	<i>Talking with God</i>
Engage in dialogue with supportive other.	Colloquial prayer is available 24/7 and for believers is the ultimate form of social support.

skills often do not use them when a conflict of interest arises and emergent goals dominate. These authors argue that prayer highlights the view of an important 'other' and thereby engages motivational processes that increase the ability to handle emergent goals effectively. Specifically, prayer engages 'a complex set of interrelated reparative processes by highlighting their consistency with the perceived opinion of an important other like a deity' (p. 653). Because of this, it is concluded that adding prayer to traditional interventions increases their efficacy and makes them better able to exert a lasting effect.

Finally, the Beach *et al.* (2008a) analysis notes that prayer may have transformative potential. Transformative processes have received little attention in family relationships. Fincham *et al.* (2007) therefore outlined such processes, emphasising the importance of non-linear dynamic systems for understanding relationships. It has been argued that prayer influences the fundamental components of non-linear systems (control and influence processes) and thus has the potential to bring about qualitatively different (transformative) behaviour in relationships.

Several scholars have raised important objections to the Beach *et al.* (2008a) analysis (see Marks, 2008; Sullivan and Karney, 2008, Worthington, 2008). First, objections were raised on the grounds that it will lead counsellors into the role of having to judge religious texts, which when applied to the clients' relationship may not be in their best interests.⁴ It is argued that this places the therapist in an untenable dual role as both religious official and therapist. In response, Beach *et al.* (2008b) argue that the role of the therapist is not to dispute (or ignore) religious texts but to help the couple find and highlight God's love in the context of the text, remembering always that the focus is on enhancing the relationship and the wellbeing of the partners. Second, Worthington (2008) asks whether therapists can propose prayer to couples in ways that couples find acceptable. Beach *et al.* (2008b) agree that doing so requires skill and that, for example, simply doing so on the grounds of possible psychological benefits will probably backfire. A third, more telling concern, also raised by this author, is that 'prayer may not be long or strong enough to be therapeutic' (p. 688). Here Beach *et al.* (2008b) acknowledge 'that the type of prayers we recommend may not be maintained over time, and to the extent that offering prayer for the partner falters or disappears after the end of therapy, our expectation for continuing therapeutic gains could also suffer' (p. 707).

The conceptual challenges offered are not exhausted by the above examples. However, their status remains unknown since definitive tests of the hypotheses outlined by Beach *et al.* (2008a) remain to be done. Although the fate of the Beach *et al.* (2008a) analysis remains unclear, what is clear is that spirituality has been largely overlooked in couple therapy, possibly because there is some evidence that spiritual and religious diversity is not considered as important as other kinds of diversity (Schulte *et al.*, 2002). Not surprisingly, most clinical psychologists say discussion of spiritual/religious issues in psychology programmes is rare or nonexistent (Brawer *et al.*, 2002).

⁴ In raising this objection, Sullivan and Karney (2008) cite as examples 'If you (husbands) experience rebellion from the women, you shall first talk to them, then desert them in bed, then you may beat them' (Qu'rān 4: 34), and 'Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church' (Ephesians 5: 22–23).

Notwithstanding the objections noted earlier, religiously and spiritually infused interventions have important 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 may facilitate maintenance of intervention gains. Third, they have the potential to enhance dissemination of effective marital enhancement and intervention. The research found that dissemination was a particularly important issue in working with African-American couples, who are often sceptical of the benefits to be derived from mental health services and therefore unlikely to seek out or advocate such services in their communities (Murry and Brody, 2004). As a result, establishing trust and making the programme culturally relevant was essential to effective programme delivery. Similar issues may be common in many groups with strong religious commitments. Such considerations may undermine any implications of this work for social policy, a topic that is now addressed.

Social policy

To the extent that the work outlined in this chapter has any implications for social policy, they concern relationship education. At its simplest, relationship education is the provision of information designed to help couples and individuals experience successful, stable romantic relationships. The goal is to impart knowledge, teach skills, and help participants develop appropriate expectations and attitudes regarding romantic relationships. The most effective interventions, arguably, focus on dynamic (relatively changeable) versus static risk and protective factors (see Ragan *et al.*, 2009). Until quite recently, most relationship education occurred in religious contexts,⁵ thereby excluding those who do not profess a religious faith or who are uncomfortable in such settings.

In the USA, government policy and the emergence of a formal ‘marriage movement’ have led to an unprecedented emphasis on relationship education in the service of promoting healthy marriages (Amato, 2007). However, this development is not limited to the USA, since government attempts to promote couple relationship education can be found in Australia, Japan, Norway and the UK (Huang, 2005; Ooms, 2005; Thuen and Loerum, 2005; van Acker, 2003). Although these countries exhibit less rhetoric on promoting marriage *per se*, they share the same goal (to promote healthy, committed couple relationships), particularly as the strongest context for child rearing. Importantly, these policy initiatives have received funding, which has had an impact not only on their dissemination but also on marital research (see Fincham and Beach, 2010). For example, in 2005, the US government made available \$150 million annually for promoting healthy marriage and fatherhood, with money funding various opportunities to develop knowledge ranging from demonstration projects to large-scale randomised trials in community settings.

As is evidenced in Chapters 4, 5 and 16 in this volume, justifying such policy initiatives offers recognition of the fact that marital problems and divorce have an adverse

⁵ Here it has taken the form of marriage education and has been offered almost exclusively to couples. The precursor of modern programmes was Pre-Cana pre-marital counselling, now required of couples wishing to marry within the Catholic Church (Ooms, 2005).

impact not only on spouses, but also on their children (see Amato, 2010, Proulx *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, stable happy relationships are associated with a low likelihood of needing government support (Thomas and Sawhill, 2005), and persons in such relationships use health services considerably less than their distressed counterparts (resulting in about 25% lower costs; Prigerson *et al.*, 2000). As a result, strengthening marriage is viewed as an appropriate social policy goal (Amato, 2007).

But even if one accepts the last conclusion, can social policy support the use of prayer in relationship education? There is no simple answer to this question. This is because the relationship between religion and the state varies across countries. In the USA the establishment clause of the first amendment of the United States Constitution ('Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion') has led to several Supreme Court cases involving prayer, the inclusion of religious symbols in public holiday displays and so on. In this context, use of prayer cannot be part of any government social policy as it is an inherently religious activity. In contrast, social policy regarding relationship education that included prayer should not be problematic, at least in theory, in a theocratic state like Iran (though cultural and political factors suggest such a policy is unlikely to emerge). Many countries lie somewhere between these two poles. For example, the French principle of *laïcité* that has ensured separation of church and state since 1905 was revisited by President Nicolas Sarkozy. His '*laïcité positive*' resulted in a new direction in the state-religion relation. In this new context, it is unclear whether relationship education that included prayer could be incorporated in social policy. In any event, whether the work described in this chapter could influence social policy is likely to vary depending on the nation involved.

Limitations and Cautions

It is important to note the limitations of the work described herein. Foremost among these is that the research described is limited to relatively small samples of people representing a single faith community (Christianity), in a specific region (the Southeast) of a single country (USA). In principle, the analysis provided is applicable to all three Abrahamic faiths (i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam), as well as to other religious traditions (e.g. Hinduism), even those that are less theist, or even non-theist (e.g. Buddhism, Shinto, New Age). However, such applicability needs to be demonstrated rather than merely assumed. Second, even though the results are promising, further research is needed to show that the effects documented are the result of prayer *per se* rather than a more generic other-focused activity, such as meditating on the needs of the partner.

A challenge to implementing spiritually or religiously infused relationship interventions is the need to avoid violating couples' religious self-determination and to avoid harm-doing. Not all prayer is likely to be helpful to couples in preventing future problems or responding to ongoing issues. For example, praying for the personal strength to endure the partner's transgressions is likely to be counterproductive in some circumstances and might even increase risk in contexts such as abusive relationships. Similarly, asking for divine retribution for a partner's failings could potentially focus an individual's attention on the shortcomings of the partner, supporting ruminative, blaming processes. Likewise, prayer requests that focus on

changing the partner, or the way the partner behaves towards the self, have the potential to decrease the propensity towards 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.

Spiritually informed prevention programmes and policies create several other potential dangers. Foremost among these are manipulation of family members by participants, and subversion of programmes by social institutions to ensure that they are consonant with institutional goals (e.g. proselytisation, secularisation). Another critical danger concerns blurring or even overstepping appropriate professional boundaries. Jacobson and Christensen (1996) captured this well in relation to couple counsellors when they stated:

We are not secular priests, ministers, or rabbis. Unfortunately, we cannot count on our clients to recognise that. Therefore, it is our job to make sure we do not obfuscate what is already a complicated relationship by playing the role of moral arbiter. (p. 16)

Concluding Comments

A great deal of ground has been traversed in this chapter. A programme of basic research suggests that prayer may play an important role in close relationships such as marriage, especially when such prayer focuses on the wellbeing of the partner and the deity's love of him or her. Applied research on the use of prayer in a marital intervention provides evidence in support of the view that spiritually and religiously informed programmes 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. However, there are critical judgement calls to be made when targeting spiritual and religious behaviours for intervention, and not all scientists will be comfortable with having to deal with them.

Nevertheless, our discomfort is no excuse for ignoring an important part of the lives of many couples and families. Clearly, much more work is needed if the extent to which prayer for the partner impacts on relationship outcomes is to be understood fully. In particular, the identification of the 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 mediators such as a broader time perspective, forgiveness, and activating the view of a particularly important significant other, have yet to be investigated. It is also important to identify the boundary conditions under which prayer influences relationships.

In turning to the task at hand it behoves us to be mindful of Lewin's famous observation, 'There is nothing so practical as a good theory' (Lewin, 1952, p. 169). This is particularly apposite in the present context because the ground that lies ahead is a veritable minefield. Its navigation requires a carefully delineated conceptual framework to allow a productive and ethically responsible journey. Regardless of our individual predilections regarding religion and spirituality, this is a journey that the social science community must undertake. The couples and families we serve deserve no less.

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