

## PRAYER AND MARITAL INTERVENTION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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*Properly understood and applied, it [prayer] is the most potent instrument of action.*

—Mahatma Gandhi

Discomfort with the integration of spiritual activities into marital interventions may be a response by practitioners to the weakness of available conceptual frameworks. We offer a framework that allows for integration of prayer into marital interventions (educational or therapeutic), and argue that *when culturally appropriate*, prayer can serve multiple functions in interventions that are consistent with tradi-

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tional goals of skill-based approaches. Several specific ways in which prayer can be either an alternative or an addition to existing intervention strategies are outlined. The potential negative effects of prayer for couples and the dangers of integrating prayer into programs are also discussed. We conclude that effective skill-based family intervention and prevention with some traditionally underserved groups may require increased attention to integration of spiritual practices that are common in those groups.

Given the large number of Americans who adhere to some form of religious faith, considerable potential exists for practitioners to incorporate spirituality into their therapeutic work (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, 2002; Mahoney & Tarakeshwar, 2005; Matthews, McCullough, Larson, et al., 2001). In some cases, incorporation of a spiritual element may be essential for effective dissemination of prevention messages (e.g. Hurt, Franklin, Beach, Murry, Brody, McNair, et al., 2006). For example, in preventive interventions with African-American families in the Southeast, failure to address the role of spiritual processes in marital and family relationships may limit access for otherwise appropriate participants in marital enrichment programs. There is also growing evidence linking religiosity to positive family outcomes in African-American (e.g. Brodsky, 2000; Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1994; 1996), other communities, (Mahoney et al., 2001), and to health outcomes and mental health outcomes generally (Larson & Larson, 2003; Marks et al., 2005). Further, recent empirical and conceptual developments in the marital area (see Fincham, Stanley, Beach, 2007) provide an expanded set of conceptual tools that may aid in the integration of prayer into family and marital interventions. These considerations led us to examine prayer as part of an effort to make our prevention materials culturally sensitive and to facilitate transformative processes in marriage (Fincham, Stanley et al., 2007).

#### CAN PSYCHOLOGISTS ENDORSE PRAYER?

Like many others in the marriage and family area, as well as those in clinical psychology, we had to confront ambivalence about incorporating spiritual material into our interventions. Recent survey research suggests a deep level of discomfort among therapists with the idea of integrating specific spiritual practices into family therapy, de-

spite widespread acceptance of the importance of spiritual context and the importance of spirituality. Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, (2002) report interest among marital and family therapists in learning more about ways to integrate spirituality with assessment and intervention (54% of respondents indicated agreement), widespread endorsement of the need for supervision and training in spiritual issues (60% agreed), and a widespread belief that spirituality is relevant to clinical practice (72%). However, there was great hesitancy to incorporate specific spiritual practices into therapy. Only 17% agreed that it was appropriate to pray with a client, a spiritual practice that is now routinely included in our materials for African-American couples and that we argue in the current paper is under utilized.

Like most therapists (95% in Carlson, et al., 2002) we are comfortable thinking of ourselves as spiritual beings, and comfortable with the possibility that there is a connection between spiritual health and mental health. At the same time, like most therapists (86%), spirituality was not emphasized in our training and we had few models of appropriate ways to integrate specific spiritual practices with other activities. As a consequence, incorporation of a specific spiritual activity, like prayer, into intervention seemed foreign and potentially risky, even when it was being requested, indeed being demanded by our target community, and even when we were working in partnership with a variety of churches in the community to deliver the service. Based on the Carlson et al. (2002) study, we suspect that we are not alone in wishing there was a framework for understanding from a psychological perspective the various ways in which specific spiritual activities like prayer could be understood and appropriately integrated with other therapy or family enhancement activities in culturally appropriate contexts.

Accordingly, in the current manuscript we utilize our experiences in modifying the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP: Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2001; Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999) to make it more culturally appropriate for a southern, African-American population. We have developed a general framework for thinking about the ways that specific spiritual practices may fit with family and marital intervention approaches and that links prayer with a variety of basic psychological processes. Although our examples focus on prayer, we believe the framework

should be viewed as general in its application and should not exclude other forms of spiritual activity. Likewise, we do not mean to imply that the framework should only apply to minority groups or religious minorities, or that it should only apply to structured prevention programs like PREP. We hope that the framework offers a guide for integrating culturally appropriate spiritual activities for a broad range of empirically supported intervention formats (See Halford, Markman, Kling, & Stanley, 2003; Jakubowski, Milne, Brunner, & Miller, 2004).

The potential utility of tapping into spiritual behavior in the context of marital and family interventions is supported by a growing body of research on spiritual forms of coping and their capacity to enhance adjustment and well-being (e.g., Ellison, 1995; Griffith, Mahey, & Young, 1986), reduce depression (e.g., Williams, Larson, Buckler, Heckman, & Pyle, 1991), and respond to serious family difficulties (Mahoney et al., 2001) or serious physical and mental health problems (Larson & Larson, 2003). Recent reviews (Townsend, Kladder, Ayele, & Mulligan, 2002; but cf. Sloan, 2006) have concluded that some spiritual activities appear to be associated with lowered blood pressure, enhanced immune system functioning, reduced depression, and decreased mortality rates. Likewise, reviews of the literature on emotional and physical health suggest that spiritual coping is often helpful (Matthews, et al., 2001) and that failure to address spiritual issues can sometimes foster conflicts that hinder treatment (Larson & Larson, 2003). As a consequence, there is a growing empirical foundation for the widespread intuition among therapists that attention to spiritual factors could enhance the practice of marital and family therapy.

Family psychologists have tended to hold more accepting and open attitudes toward traditional spiritual practices than have practitioners in other branches of psychology (Weaver, Samford, Morgan, Larson, Koenig, & Flannelly, 2002), perhaps reflecting openness to documented spiritual influences in the family area as a whole. Empirical work in family psychology has also linked spiritual activity directly to marital and family outcomes (e.g., Mahoney et al., 2001). The effects of spirituality in family contexts, however, are often modest and reciprocal in nature (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995), providing little guidance for family therapists interested in enhancing their interventions (Holden, 2001). As a result, the potential

pitfalls of integrating spirituality into marital interventions may be more obvious than the potential payoffs of focusing on particular spiritual activities. However, some forms of spiritual activity are sufficiently widespread to warrant increased attention.

#### WHY PRAYER?

A spiritual activity that appears to be omnipresent in religious life is prayer. Prayer is a spiritual activity common to all the “Abrahamic” traditions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and one that has strong parallels in other religious traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Shinto). Because of our work in a large project within the African-American community, we have paid increasing attention to the fact that prayer also has deep roots in African-American history. In particular, we have seen the merits of incorporating strategies based on prayer into marital interventions when it is culturally appropriate to do so. The specific work we have done has raised our awareness of wider applications of prayer.

Over 90% of Americans pray at least occasionally (McCullough & Larson, 1999) and many find it to be a powerful spiritual experience. Highlighting its acceptability to a broad cross-section of the population, prayer occurs spontaneously in response to health problems, with between one-third and one-half of adults in the U.S. reporting that they prayed about a health problem during the past 12 months (Barnes, Powell-Griner, McFann, & Nahin, 2004; McCaffrey & Eisenberg, 2004). Of particular interest to therapists is that individuals’ use of prayer increases as they come to perceive their problems as more severe and intractable (Ellison & Taylor, 1996; Hill, Hawkins, Raposo, & Carr, 1995), suggesting that prayer is likely to be used in situations where solutions are not immediately obvious, a circumstance common during marital disagreements. At the same time, prayer may represent one of the mechanisms linking religious involvement and positive health outcomes (Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, & Davis, 2005). In addition, because pastoral counselors see more couples than do all other kinds of helping professionals combined (Veroff, Kulka & Douvan, 1981), and tend to do so within the context of religious organizations that promote prayer (e.g., Stanley, Amato, Johnson, & Markman, 2006), it seems appropriate to consider prayer in the context of marital intervention. Fi-

nally, because there are advantages to having functionally equivalent approaches to intervention that may be substituted for one another, it is useful to identify potential ways of utilizing prayer that may be functionally equivalent to existing marital techniques.

## OVERVIEW

In the next section of this paper, we discuss the ways in which prayer may serve as an alternative for some of the strategies used in skill-based marital interventions *for spouses who already engage in prayer*. Because of their importance in skill-based interventions, we focus on the widely used strategy of “time out” and associated emotion regulation strategies, highlighting several components important to their efficacy and indicating how prayer could be utilized to serve a similar function. In the third section, we discuss ways in which prayer can be coupled with skills training (see Fincham, Stanley et al., 2007). In the fourth section we discuss ways in which adding prayer added to traditional skill-based approaches, where appropriate, may increase efficacy by overcoming motivational barriers to successful outcomes. This theme is consistent with a growing trend in our field to grapple with constructs and processes that are more positive and potentially transformative (Fincham, Stanley et al., 2007). In the final section, we offer some important cautionary notes about integrating spirituality into professional practice. The article concludes with a brief summary of its major points.

## PRAYER AS AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD OF MARITAL INTERVENTION

The availability of alternative approaches to marital intervention is useful because they can provide needed flexibility in working with couples and facilitate responsiveness to unique situations or special needs. 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. To exemplify the potential role of prayer as a spiritual activity that can be used to deliver a marital intervention, in Table 1 we outline several ways in which prayer can be linked to particular strategies and aims of marital skills training. Objectives of relationship skills training are listed in the left column and the

TABLE 1. Relationship Skills and Corresponding Prayer Objectives

<b>Skill Training Objective</b>	<b>Prayer-Based Alternative</b>
1. Regain perspective	1. Meditative prayer: reflection on divine love and its extension to partners and their relationship
2. Break negative thought cycle	2. Prayer that interrupts grievance rehearsal by focusing on love, compassion, and understanding
3. Promote relaxation	3. Prayer for self-soothing and self-healing
4. Dialogue with a supportive other	4. Colloquial prayer: "Talking with God"

functionally equivalent prayer-based alternatives are listed in the right column. In each case, the purpose of the comparison is not to argue that the prayer-based alternative is superior but to suggest that it may provide an alternative delivery strategy for reaching certain audiences and so may merit empirical scrutiny.

As shown in Table 1, plausible prayer-based alternatives are available that meet many of the key objectives of emotion regulation as taught in marital skill training. Among couples who are accustomed to praying, prayer is a common response to stressful circumstances (McCullough & Larsen, 1999), and so it can be encouraged and cultivated as an effective response to difficulties. As an alternative to therapist directed time-out from conflict or an anger management approach, individual meditative or colloquial prayer may offer several benefits. First, it may be used to help individuals regain a sense of perspective. Second, it can help partners shift their focus to constructive concern for the relationship. Third, it can augment or serve as a substitute for relaxation strategies. Fourth, it can give partners a readily available way to "take a break" from interacting with each other. We discuss each prayer-based alternative in turn.

#### REGAINING PERSPECTIVE

A key problem for a couple engaged in a dispute over a perceived conflict of interest is the loss of a long-term perspective on the relationship and their long-term goals (see Fincham & Beach, 1999). Instead, the couple may shift attention toward short-term concerns, such as winning the current argument (e.g., on what to watch on TV: the ball game or the soap opera). Used as a response to conflicted in-

teractions with the partner, prayer that requests positive outcomes for the partner and the relationship directs individuals to affirm the core values that are most likely to support long-term investment in the marriage: love, compassion, and understanding. Such prayer encourages individuals to think about the depth of the connection they have to each other, leading them to affirm the relationship's value. Used in this way, prayers can be constructed to remind individuals of their commitment to each other and so remind them that their marriage is worth protecting and sustaining.

Prayers can also be constructed to help broaden a spouse's perspective by encouraging consideration of the partner's viewpoint. In the context of the immediate goal of winning an argument, spouses are apt to become immersed in their own concerns and to focus on refuting the partner's position. This focus can render partners unwilling or unable to view the issue from the other's perspective and encourage them to view the outcome of the dispute in "all-or-none" terms. In contrast, a prayer that is constructed to request help in assuming a partner-oriented perspective in combination with meditation on God's<sup>1</sup> love for the other, could motivate increased effort to apply attention and listening skills when the couple returns to their discussion. Such an effect would be consistent with cognitive tendencies to bring current behavior into conformity with the intention of past behavior (the decision to pray for the partner or the relationship, constructively, in this case) (e.g., Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002). Consequently, prayer can be used to efficiently achieve one of the primary goals of the "time out."

#### BREAKING NEGATIVE THOUGHT CYCLES

Marital conflict commonly produces persistent negative thoughts and behavior, leading to the potential for much of "time out" to be spent rehearsing one side of the argument, preparing more pointed retorts, and refining a list of grievances. This response works against the purpose of taking a "time out;" accordingly, most "time out" procedures have some explicit or implicit mechanism de-

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1. Throughout the paper we use the term "God" to refer generically to a range of conceptions of the deity, higher power, or transcendent aspects of life typically associated with spirituality. We intend the usage to be inclusive rather than exclusive.

signed to reduce the extent to which couples spend the break period engaged in a persistent cycle of negative thought (e.g., do something that you enjoy). When culturally appropriate, prayer is well suited as an alternative form of “time out.” In particular, prayer is compatible with strong emotion; indeed, in many cases it is elicited by strong emotion. It also is elicited in circumstances when one’s own efforts have failed, and prayers can be constructed to call forth religious imagery that is incompatible with recycling grievances and entertaining fantasies of one-upmanship. Consequently, prayer is a potential resource that can help to disrupt persistent cycles of negative cognition. In addition, prayer can promote a focus on divine love and forgiveness. As we have discussed elsewhere (Fincham, Stanley et al., 2007), to the extent that an activity primes motives related to love and forgiveness it is likely to decrease retaliation (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004) and undercut the escalation of negative behavior over time.

#### PROMOTING THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

Because spouses need a way to deal with high levels of negative arousal during major conflicts, marital programs commonly include some recommendation for engaging in activity designed to dissipate anger. Various forms of meditative prayer may be particularly useful in producing a relaxation response (e.g. Carlson, Bascasetta, & Simonton, 1988), suggesting that this is as an efficacious alternative to some non-spiritual approaches to relaxation that therapists may currently suggest. When provided as a culturally appropriate alternative method of producing relaxation, prayer may be particularly rewarding and meaningful. For example, couples may be encouraged to meditate on transcendent aspects of a higher being, contemplate being in the presence of God, or engage in quiet, meditative reading of holy texts in order to induce a quieting response that lets them recover their sense of composure.

#### DIALOGUE WITH A SUPPORTIVE OTHER

Effective implementation of “time out” becomes difficult when one or both partners feel a need to continue talking even though they recognize that, at the moment, discussion with the partner has become

unproductive. Many therapists provide suggestions for activities to inhibit pursuit of the partner at such times. Colloquial prayer offers an alternative by providing someone who can listen and provide support when others are not available. Couples can be told that if they can no longer talk to each other effectively, they might consider "taking a break to talk to a deity." This allows them to unburden themselves even as they honor their commitment to take a break from discussion with the partner.

Thus far, we have discussed prayer as an alternative activity that can be offered to couples within traditional skill-based approaches to marital intervention. We have focused primarily on identifying strategies and tactics of skills-based marital therapy and suggesting ways that prayers or prayer activity could be constructed to accomplish similar goals. Building upon this theme, we next present a framework in which the potential additive benefits of prayer can be considered. Again, it is not our intention to preclude other approaches but rather to suggest that certain aspects of prayer point to new elements we may wish to incorporate into marital interventions.

### **PRAYER AS AN ADDITION TO MARITAL INTERVENTION**

One theme that can be seen in the examples above is the potential benefit of substituting prayer for some elements of a skill-based approach to intervention when that may reduce couples' vulnerability to strong emotional responses. That is, inclusion of prayer may address the problem of the emotional-state dependence of learning (Fincham, 2003; Gottman, 1999) that has been widely noted as a limitation of current marital skills training approaches (Wile, 1993). In contrast, for couples who pray, colloquial prayer provides a behavior that they 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 behavior. Thus, prayer may be useful in dealing with important affective processes that skills-training methods do not always handle well. In particular, prayer can help couples to engage effectively in self-soothing, an element of coping with conflict that some have argued is inadequately addressed in traditional approaches to skills training (Gottman, 1999).

Because prayer also can be intrinsically rewarding, especially

when it helps couples to reflect upon and affirm the deeper meanings that have sustained their ongoing investment in the relationship, the change in perspective that results from prayer may also be experienced positively and so be reinforced by natural contingencies. Furthermore, prayer may have structural advantages for some individuals as a reminder to engage in constructive marital behavior because it is imbedded in their community context and therefore seems “natural” to them. This structural advantage may be particularly useful in sustaining the practice many years after the initial training session is past.

However, to fully appreciate the potential for prayer to be “additive” rather than merely “an alternative” to existing marital intervention and prevention programs, it is useful to briefly describe the way that spouses engaged in conflict find themselves drawn to emergent goals (e.g., getting their way, showing up the other). Accordingly, we first elaborate the idea of “emergent goals” (see Figure 1). We then illustrate the potential utility of prayer in overcoming competitive or destructive emergent goals and addressing motivational change. It is by efficiently addressing motivational change that prayer may be additive to skills-focused interventions.

Figure 1 portrays how shifting attention toward short-term concerns during conflict, such as winning the argument, may subvert successful conflict resolution. In the model presented in Figure 1, two elements are highlighted as essential for successful marital intervention. First, couples must be given a way to deal with the emergent goals that can undermine their positive intentions. For example, during an argument one partner may begin to focus on defeating or punishing the other partner. These emergent goals can develop quickly during stressful, emotionally charged couple interactions and potentially derail skills-based interventions. Second, however, couples must also be empowered to do the constructive things they intend to do. This can be accomplished by the information couples receive in the skills training components of an intervention combined with supervised practice. In this manner, skills training provides the “how” of relationship enhancement. Together, these two components create both a constructive target for couple interaction and a sense of efficacy about reaching that target.

The heuristic model presented in Figure 1 suggests that, in addi-

tion to imparting skills, marital interventions must empower spouses to minimize the effect of emergent goals on marital interactions. Specifically, the upper half of the model presents the hypothesis that skills must be accompanied by an intention to use them if they are to have the desired effect on successful problem resolution. The lower half of the model highlights the way negative emergent goals that arise during a discussion preclude effective problem solving. For the couple to reorient themselves to constructive interaction, they must have effective ways to deal with emergent goals and the momentarily attractive alternatives they suggest. To the extent that prayer can accomplish this goal, it has the potential to be one way to complement currently available techniques and respond to current critiques of skill-based marital therapy and marital enhancement.

Utilizing the general framework presented in Figure 1, we discuss four reasons that prayer may be “additive” to existing techniques—all related to motivational processes and the ability to effectively handle emergent goals. First, by highlighting the view of an important “other,” prayer engages psychological processes known to have a powerful influence on intentions. Second, by highlighting peer attitudes, prayer may influence the perceived acceptability of various forms of action. Third, if prayer can produce a shift in the broader associative network connected to marriage and marital skills, it can indirectly influence behavior and the attractiveness of different options. Fourth, prayer can tap into a powerful set of motives that might not otherwise be brought to bear on enhancement of marital interaction. It should be noted that in each case, the hypotheses put forward are empirically testable and suggest the need for empirical study of mechanisms of action. We now elaborate on each.

#### HIGHLIGHTING THE VIEW OF AN IMPORTANT “OTHER”

Although it may seem too obvious to merit mention, prayer highlights the view of a particularly important significant other: the deity one worships. Accordingly, based on research related to intentional behavior (e.g., Ajzen, 1988), meditating on a higher being’s love or praying to be a vehicle of a deity’s love may change the relative attractiveness of destructive strategies as compared to more skillful or compassionate behavior toward the partner. As a consequence, contemplation of divine love for the partner could inspire spouses to act

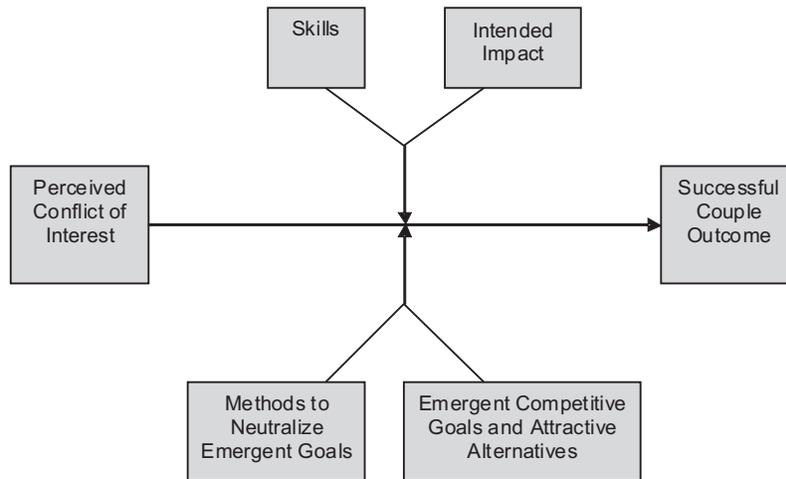


FIGURE 1. Skills interact with intended impact to produce successful conflict resolution. Methods to neutralize emergent goals interact with emergent competitive goals to prevent breakdown of successful conflict resolution.

benevolently rather than destructively toward each other. Even those who were not inspired to act benevolently might be reminded to be more accountable for negative behavior. Thus, prayer becomes an effective means of engaging and energizing a complex set of interrelated reparative processes that include neutralization of destructive emergent goals, rendering harmful marital behavior unattractive and re-engaging constructive intentions to solve problems. Considered in this way, prayer emerges as a potentially efficient intervention for engaging and energizing a complex set of interrelated reparative processes by highlighting their consistency with the perceived opinion of an important other like a deity.

#### HIGHLIGHTING PEER ATTITUDES

For individuals who are involved in a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious community, prayer also has the potential structural advantage of gaining peer approval. Because the perceived views of the peer group influence the attractiveness of various options, and engaging in prayer is socially sanctioned and appropriate

in such groups, participants may find they that have a stronger intention to engage in prayer than to engage in most of the alternatives that can be provided in marital interventions. For example, to religious individuals, praying may be more culturally acceptable as a means of self-soothing than are monitoring and challenging one's thoughts or other emotion regulation activities. In turn, prayer can create a strong supportive environment for initiating constructive interaction even when a couple's emotional resources have been taxed, for example, by a destructive argument. As a consequence, prayer can provide a pathway back to the use of the skills discussed in the marital intervention.

#### PRODUCING A SHIFT IN ASSOCIATIVE NETWORKS

The content of a prayer may be relevant to its effects on relationship functioning, and, if so, not all prayer-related activity will have the same effects on a relationship. It may be that special care is needed in the selection of prayer activities as some prayers may have the potential to be destructive (see section, *Important Cautionary Notes*). As mentioned previously, however, prayer that focuses on divine love and the desire to be a vehicle of that love, or that asks for good things for one's partner, is likely to be particularly effective in promoting constructive intentions and neutralizing emergent goals. Thus, prayer used as a component of marital skills training or an adjunct to training may have the greatest positive impact if it is focused on themes likely to prime intentions and patterns of behavior conducive to productive interaction and incompatible with destructive behavior.

Not all behavior, however, is controlled by well-formed intentions (Gibbons, Gerrard, Blanton, & Russell, 2003). Rather, some behavior reflects patterns of positive and negative associations that form a "willingness" to behave in a certain way should the opportunity arise even though no clear intention to enact the behavior has been formed. Prayer has the potential to influence "willingness" by shifting a range of positive and negative associations. For example, highlighting the connection between constructive, accepting, and loving behavior toward one's spouse and closeness to one's deity potentially reinforces an associative network that could, in turn, enhance willingness to behave constructively when the need arises. For ex-

ample, juxtaposition of a deity's eternal love and faithfulness with the concept of marriage and family as earthly reflections of that love should result in increased positive valence for a range of marital behaviors that reflect love, commitment, faithfulness, and caring. Prayer can also highlight the disjunction between one's spiritual beliefs and destructive behavior toward one's partner. Prayer's effect on the probability of engagement in positive or negative behavior should be particularly pronounced during couples' repair efforts because in this context willingness to engage in constructive behavior and unwillingness to continue destructive behavior should most powerfully predict subsequent couple interaction quality.

#### TAPPING NEW SOURCES OF MOTIVATION

Finally, colloquial or meditative prayer can highlight the importance of one's partner to a deity and one's own willingness to serve a deity. Viewed within a goal-theoretic framework (Fincham & Beach, 1999), this activity should produce two immediate outcomes of considerable psychological importance. First, it should create a longer time perspective, a factor that has been shown to prompt cooperation and investment in the relationship (Stanley, 2005; Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007). Second, prayer may be used to prime "implemental intentions," or plans for achieving a desired goal that guide future behavior (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996; Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trötschel, 2001). For example, a spouse could pray for help in "showing love" and include in the request assistance in identifying opportunities for loving behavior and acting on them as they arise. Thus, colloquial prayer for the partner could influence both the formation of behavioral intentions and the probability of setting the implemental intentions that lead them to be carried out. In addition, colloquial prayer for the partner prior to discussion of a difficult topic provides a useful self-monitoring function. Inability to engage in colloquial prayer focused on requesting good things for the partner can serve as a useful indicator that one should postpone the discussion to work on one's own motives and spiritual state first. In this way, prayer can also help identify when partners may not be ready to have an important discussion.

A related conceptualization is that prayer may impact attachment

processes related to marriage (e.g., Mikulincer & Goodman, 2006). If so, prayer might be viewed as responding to attachment needs (i.e., the need to be secure in a relationship) thereby quieting protest behavior at the same time that it potentially primes caretaking motives for the partner. In this view, motives related to forgiveness and sacrifice may be seen as cognitive representations that can be primed and organized by priming caretaking motives (Howe, 2007). That is, by focusing on a deity's desire to care for one's partner it may be possible to prime caretaking motives directed toward the partner. Again, prayer may be seen as a potentially useful vehicle for influencing motivational processes relevant to couple interaction.

In sum, when prayer focuses on affirmation of core values such as love, compassion, and understanding, is practiced regularly, and is used in the immediate context or aftermath of relationship conflict, it may have the power to neutralize emergent goals that place partners in adversarial roles. In particular, prayer of this type may foster a desire for positive outcomes for the partner and promote cooperation. Regular colloquial prayer should allow partners to build a strong foundation for relationship repair efforts by making particular patterns of prayer more automatic and more likely to emerge at times of strong emotion. Accordingly, there are good reasons to hypothesize that the addition of prayer to existing skill-based approaches to marital intervention could render skill-based programs stronger and better able to exert a lasting effect.

### **PRAYER AS A TRANSFORMATIVE STRATEGY**

In addition to its utility as an alternative to existing marital therapy techniques or its potential to add to marital skills training by addressing and challenging emergent motivational processes in marriage, prayer may also be viewed as having transformative potential. Transformative processes have received relatively little empirical attention in marital research and therapy, making claims about marital transformation difficult to evaluate. This lack of attention, however, appears to be changing (see Fincham, Stanley et al., 2007); therefore, we discuss briefly prayer's potential to be conceptualized as a transformative activity. Although the constructs used in our discussion of marital transformation are somewhat abstract, they are not entirely new to social and clinical areas and the transformative po-

tential of prayer may represent its most potent potential contribution. At the same time, it is not our intent to argue that only prayer or only spiritual activities have the potential to be transformative in couple relationships. Rather, prayer may help illuminate transformative processes in marriage and suggest additional approaches in the future.

To place our discussion of prayer as a transformative activity in context, we briefly introduce terminology from the emerging literature on non-linear dynamic systems. Several authors have addressed such processes as they relate to marital or dyadic interaction. Gottman, Murray, Swanson, Tyson, & Swanson (2002a) & Gottman, Swanson, & Swanson (2002b) noted that processes unfolding over many iterations can produce surprising discontinuities or "jumps" in behavior within an interconnected, dyadic system. In systems with feedback loops, such as marriage, discontinuities can take the system from one state to a qualitatively different state, resulting in a fundamental transition in the functioning of the system as a whole (e.g., Novak & Vallacher, 1998).

The work by Gottman (2002a, b) and that by Novak and Vallacher (1998) may be viewed as elaborating general system theory (von Bertalanffy, 1968); they create a more precise descriptive framework that is better able to support the creation of specific mathematical models of dyadic relationships. Building on the framework these authors provide, Fincham, Stanley et al. (2007) reviewed evidence that the self-regulatory domains involved in forgiveness, commitment, sacrifice, and accommodation have the potential to influence iterative marital processes unfolding over time through non-linear dynamics. In keeping with the broader literature on non-linear dynamics, these authors distinguished between "influence processes" and "control processes." Influence processes were conceptualized as dyadic; those factors that change the extent to which one partner's behavior prompts a particular (i.e., negative) response by the other. As such, influence processes are most familiar to marital researchers in the context of negative reciprocity. That is, a shift in the degree of negative reciprocity in the relationship might be characterized as a change in a fundamental influence process in the dyadic relationship. Such processes may be studied best by examining moment to moment influence in observed interaction behavior (e.g., Howe, Dagne, & Brown, 2005). "Control processes," on the other hand,

were conceptualized as intra-individual; those factors that change the extent to which one's own prior negative thoughts or behavior facilitates more of the same as one's train of thought or behavior unfolds over time (Millar & Tesser, 1986). As such, control processes may be intuitively appreciated as factors that regulate rumination or degree of behavioral inertia. Although influence and control processes in dyadic interaction differ in their focus, both have an important role to play in regulating an unfolding set of interactions within a dyad over time, and so both are relevant to the discussion of transformative processes.

Using the foregoing description, prayer can be said to be transformative to the extent that it alters control processes, influence processes, or both to a sufficient degree that a dyadic system finds a new stable level and transitions out of its prior equilibrium (see Figure 2). For example, given data indicating that forgiveness may influence control processes in marriage (e.g., Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; 2007), one might hypothesize that meditation on divine forgiveness and the injunction to forgive others would help regulate or help reset this important control processes in marriage. If so, prayer that reinforces a propensity toward forgiveness, which in turn produces a reduction in the likelihood of ruminating about the partner's transgression, would result in positive and transformative change for the individual in relation to their partner. In other words, if forgiveness increased as a function of regular prayer, facilitating forgiveness of the partner and decreasing reciprocated negativity, the couple should be better able to exit cycles of negative interaction that might otherwise become self-maintaining. By changing the value of the influence parameter of forgiveness, prayer would alter a key variable that controls not just one discrete outcome but a series of linked events unfolding over time in an iterative process.

Likewise, perspective taking may be a key marital influence process (e.g., Long, 1990). If prayer could be shown to alter this influence process by enhancing perspective taking and empathy for the partner, it would suggest that prayer could have important long-term influence on marital outcomes. For example, if a particular type of prayer activity were shown to reset and produce lasting change in perspective taking which, in turn, predicted change in negative reciprocity that would also be initial evidence of potential for transformative change. In each case outlined above, such change

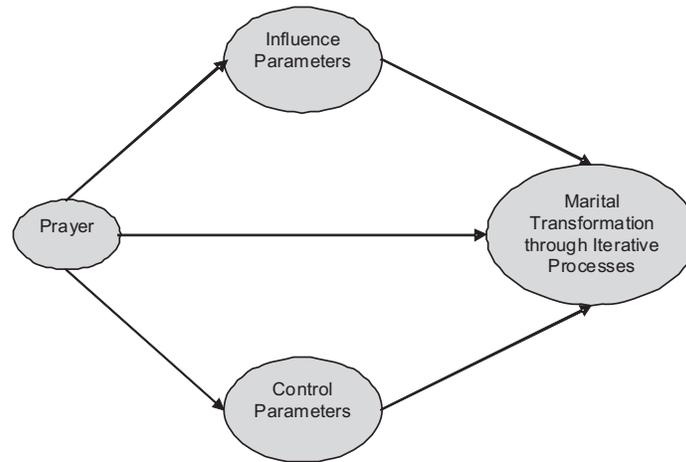


FIGURE 2. Prayer exerts a transformative influence through its impact on influence and control processes in marriage.

would allow tests of key theoretical conjectures about the nature of change in marriage and our potential to produce transformative change for the dyad over time.

Another important example of the potential for transformative change is in the area of commitment to the relationship. The long and rich history of research on commitment in close relationships (e.g., Adams & Jones, 1997; Amato, 2007; Levinger, 1979; Rusbult, 1980) suggests that commitment level may have an impact on both control and influence processes. At the same time, one might hypothesize that certain prayer activities such as meditation on a deity's faithfulness or prayerful requests to be a vehicle of a deity's love, might change level of commitment to the relationship. Likewise, the practice of prayer may also be a powerful means of encouraging spouses to sacrifice their own desires for the sake of the relationship and to accommodate aspects of the relationship that cannot be readily changed, both of which are linked to greater marital quality (Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999), again providing a potential link between prayer and an important control and influence process.

To concretize the way in which integration of certain prayer activi-

ties could have transformative effects on relationship functioning, it is possible to combine the examples above. One might hypothesize, for example, that forgiveness, commitment, and sacrifice could be increased as a function of particular types of prayer activity. Such facilitation of chronic motivational structures through prayer might impact both within person processes such as rumination about a partner's behavior and attributions for the behavior, as well as between person processes such as reciprocated negativity. To the extent that the changes were synergistic, the couple should be better able to exit cycles of negative interaction that might otherwise become self-maintaining, thereby decreasing their risk for marital discord and increasing their ability to respond adaptively to external challenges such as life stress. Because the outcome of the previous cycle becomes the starting point for each subsequent iteration, change in the value of a key influence or control parameter can alter substantially the long-term course of dyadic interaction. As each of the key influence and control parameters may shape many iterations, their cumulative impact can be much more substantial than their impact on any given interaction cycle would suggest. It is this potential to "compound" over time that gives something that may seem relatively modest the potential to transform.

In this hypothetical example, by changing the value of influence and control parameters, prayer would alter variables that control not just one discrete outcome but a series of linked events unfolding over time in an iterative process. Because the outcome of the previous cycle becomes the starting point for each subsequent iteration, change in the value of a key influence or control parameter could alter substantially the long-term course of dyadic interaction. Because each of the key influence and control parameters may shape many iterations, cumulative impact can be more substantial, and hence transformative, even when the impact on any given interaction cycle is small or negligible. It is this potential to "compound" over time, along with the potential for threshold effects, that gives modest changes in some areas the potential to produce relative sudden and large shifts in outcomes. Thus, integration of prayer into marital interventions may provide a means of studying and better understanding important marital processes, with the attendant potential to enhance substantially marital outcomes in the longer term.

### IMPORTANT CAUTIONARY NOTES

Lest it appear otherwise, we wish to state explicitly that prayer may also have the potential to harm relationships. Of course, this is likely true for any strategy employed to help couples; for example, partners who learn how to communicate more skillfully may also, at times, use that training to pass judgment on the behavior of each other as unacceptable rather than work together to communicate better. With prayer, some misuses are likely to be more harmful than beneficial. Praying for the personal strength to endure the partner's transgressions (or worse, asking for divine retribution) could potentially focus an individual's attention on the shortcomings of his/her partner in light of one's own superiority, supporting rather than undermining a ruminative processes. By the logic outlined above, this could result in additive or transformative change for the dyad in a negative direction. 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 and so seem unlikely to lead to positive relationship outcomes. These concerns, at a minimum, point to the likely need for an instructional component in interventions that involve prayer, as well as examples of helpful prayers. They also illustrate the potential to strengthen the positive impact of naturally occurring prayer in response to marital difficulties by attending to the psychological processes initiated by prayer. Since spiritually minded individuals are very likely to pray, these concerns support directing attention to prayer when clients have an active prayer life and caution against the assumption that prayer will be inert with regard to other therapeutic efforts.

Another potential area of concern that deserves attention in the application of prayer is the issue of gender equality. One spouse's support of the life goals of the other spouse is associated with greater marital satisfaction (Brunstein, Dangelmayer & Schultheiss, 1996). Also, Amato, Booth, Johnson, and Rogers (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 prayer activity were to decrease support

for partner life goals, or decrease perceived equality or decision making equality, these could potentially diminish or reverse the beneficial effects of prayer activity on other key aspects of marital interaction.

For some, consideration of prayer may evoke the aphorism, “the couple that prays together, stays together.” We believe that consideration of prayer, or any other spiritual activity, in marital interventions requires far more careful consideration and sensitivity than that shown in this aphorism. For example, on the negative side, it is easy to imagine joint couple prayer (together, out loud) being used by one partner as a tool to manipulate the other. Conversely, when both partners are already comfortable with prayer, joint couple prayer might be a natural extension of individual prayer and allow for even greater benefits. Concerns such as these are reminders of the potential danger of oversimplifying the link between prayer and positive couple outcomes. In addition, this concern highlights a danger that has been acknowledged throughout the paper but which we make explicit and emphasize below.

*Our analysis in no way provides the foundation for, or supports, the use of spiritual activities in marital interventions as a means of proselytizing clients.* Indeed, we wish to acknowledge the danger of our arguments being used to further particular ideological or religious goals. We strongly urge against any such activity because much of the logic used in the current framework depends on prayer being a pre-existing aspect of the individual or couple relationship. The intent we advance here is the potential to enhance effectiveness in work with couples through increased openness to systems of coping and meaning that are important to the couples themselves. If the latter is not the context, the former could hardly come about. Our *only* intent has been to offer an analysis of psychological and behavioral processes that we believe have the potential to help professionals respond better to the needs of those they serve.

It follows from what we have just said that our suggestions about prayer are applicable only to couples who present to us already professing a belief in the divine and who have a pre-existing prayer life. It would be inappropriate to apply what we have suggested when working with couples who are atheist, agnostic, or who profess a spiritual life, but are uninterested in prayer. Given this focus, it behooves us to consider the possibility that couples who have a commitment to spirituality and prayer may also have particular sensitiv-

ities that should influence therapist behavior. Accordingly, we discuss potential client issues in the context of potential therapist “do’s and don’t’s” below.

#### THERAPIST DO’S AND DON’T’S

It is common for psychologists to appeal to data in justifying their intervention recommendations. In general this is an appropriate persuasive technique. However, suggesting to deeply spiritual individuals that they should pray because praying will have a particular psychological or marital benefit may come across as judging rather than encouraging them, or may be seen as trivializing prayer. Specifically, because prayer is the act of focusing on ultimate concerns, suggesting prayer as a simple lever to pull to produce a result is likely to be perceived as trivializing a deeply respected practice in the life of the clients. At a minimum, it may suggest that the therapist does not understand prayer very well and is only suggesting it to manipulate the couple. It is likely to be better, therefore, for a therapist integrating prayer into a marital intervention to suggest that prayer can be a means of inviting a deity into the marital relationship. This rationale is more likely to be readily received by a wide range of couples with deep religious commitments and pose minimal obstacles for most couples who pray. Above all else, there is no substitute for knowing each particular couple and honoring their beliefs.

It is also common for authors to talk about interventions in a relatively general way, and perhaps we have been guilty of this in the current manuscript. However, in working with religiously committed couples, suggestions to pray that are presented by the therapist in vague terms or that focus on the “value of spirituality” in some general way may be received poorly. As in all other forms of psychological intervention, it is important to use the couples’ own language system as much as possible and help them utilize their own specific spiritual tradition. A wise therapist will, generally, inquire first of the couple about their beliefs and practices, and then, in that context, explore with the couple whether they are open to considering prayer as one focus of the work on their relationship. In many cases this will involve using specific religious references or specific patterns of religious language. This is an area, therefore, in which issues of cultural sensitivity and individual assessment will be of particular importance.

For some religious couples, use of prayer will also invite questions regarding miracles, religious doctrine, interpretation of religious text, or questions regarding the therapist's religious beliefs. For this reason, therapists planning to utilize prayer may need to take steps to increase their comfort with talking about particular religious topics and disclosing aspects of their own religious beliefs in a non-defensive, non-judgmental manner. When the therapist does not share the beliefs and practices of the couple, we believe it will typically be most effective for the therapist to make clear the motive to help the couple using strategies that they, themselves, consider as most likely to be effective. There is a fine line in what to share and not to share since unsolicited therapist self-disclosure may not be desirable, and could appear to represent proselytizing. Overall, however, therapist responsiveness to couple's questions may be important in maximizing the benefit of this approach to intervention. It may also be useful to maintain a good working relationship with the couple's pastor, minister, priest, rabbi, or other religious leader.

## CONCLUSIONS

For many spouses, prayer is a common, spiritual response to powerful emotions. This makes it likely that many couples will pray during times of intense emotions, such as hurt feelings or disappointment in their partners. For this reason alone, marital and family therapists ignore the influence of prayer at their peril. On the positive side, however, prayer is, therefore, accessible at times when other self-regulatory skills may seem unattractive or unavailable. Because prayer can be used to encourage a long-term perspective and interrupt destructive responses, it is potentially useful and helpful in the context of marital and family interventions as a means of dealing with the intense emotions and with the emergent, destructive goals that sometimes arise within intimate relationships. It may also be possible to use colloquial prayer to alter key dyadic processes such as forgiveness and commitment, thereby powerfully influencing marital patterns over time.

However, because prayer is complex, like most spiritual processes, it will require a sophisticated and carefully delineated conceptual framework to be optimally useful for marital therapists and providers of community-level marital and relationship education. Such a

conceptual framework has not yet been provided. The current manuscript attempts to move us towards the realization of this goal and as such may be viewed as a promissory note. Not all forms of prayer have equivalent effects (McCullough & Larson, 1999). We hypothesize that prayer content is important for this differential influence, suggesting that structured prayer interventions that are to be coupled with marital skills training should include an instructional component as well as examples of helpful prayers. Nevertheless, it seems likely that prayer can be a practical alternative for some widely used techniques, and may enhance outcomes when added to existing skill-based marital intervention programs. At a minimum, there appears to be an opportunity to generate a body of empirically based knowledge about the impact of prayer and mechanisms of effect that will allow it to be integrated with existing approaches to marital intervention. Accordingly, therapists and researchers alike may benefit from greater exploration of the use of prayer in marital interventions.

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