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Exploring Transformational Processes and Meaning in LDS Marriages

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For decades, research has shown that religion is correlated with several important aspects of marriage. However, most studies have looked only at distal aspects of a couple’s religion, such as church attendance or religious salience, and are therefore hard pressed to explain precisely how religion and marriage correlate. This qualitative study examines the connection Mormon (LDS) couples perceive between their religious faith and their marriage and family relationships. For this study we used a subset of a national sample of 445 individuals from across the United States who were interviewed over several years; this subset consisted of 48 individuals (24 couples) living in seven different states (25% of whom are ethnic minorities) that we interviewed. The interviews specifically sought to understand how these couples connected their faith to five transformational constructs: commitment, sacrifice, coping, conflict resolution, and forgiveness. Each couple shared specific beliefs and practices that impacted their approach to these constructs. Analysis was then made identifying patterns and parallels.

KEYWORDS commitment, conflict, coping with stress, intrinsic religiosity, marriage, Mormon families, qualitative research, religion
INTRODUCTION

Shifting Foci in Marital Research

For years research on marriage and family has largely focused on the construct of conflict resolution. Fincham, Stanley, and Beach (2007) published a groundbreaking article as part of a mini-symposium in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, recommending a change in focus to what they termed transformational processes in marriage, specifically constructs such as commitment, coping, forgiveness, and sacrifice. According to Fincham and colleagues, some couples use these processes to transform challenges and potentially negative situations in their relationship into opportunities for growth. As a result, such couples “emerge more mutually trusting of each other than they were before (i.e., with a substantially enhanced view of the relationship)” (Fincham et al., 2007, p. 287). They argued that although constructs relating to conflict are important, a successful marriage is more than a marriage with little conflict. Couples must also build meaningful connections that bind the marriage together in a way that absence of conflict may not. In response to this article, Karney (2007) recommended instead of a total shift to transformational processes, research on transformational constructs simply be added to continued research relating to conflict.

Fincham and Beach (2010) continued their call for more research on transformational processes in the *Journal of Family Theory and Review*. Continuing the theme that a successful marriage is more than a marriage with little conflict, they called for a study of those constructs that lead to “relationship flourishing” (Fincham & Beach, 2010, p. 4). In response to this article, Caughlin and Huston (2010) pointed out that others have already started researching similar constructs, such as Reis and Aron (2008); Fehr, Sprecher, and Underwood (2009); and Acevedo and Aron (2009). They were also of the opinion that further research is needed on both constructs related to transformational processes (or relationship flourishing, as Fincham and Beach have also referred to it) as well as on conflict-related constructs.

Religion, Marriage, and Transformational Processes

Religion continues to be significant in many America marriages. Ninety-five percent of married couples in America report a religious affiliation (Mahoney et al., 1999). Around 60% report that religion is important to very important to them (McCullough et al., 2000). Over half of American married couples say they attend religious services at least monthly (Heaton & Pratt, 1990). Several studies have begun to address the connection between different transformational processes that have been shown to increase relationship flourishing and religion (Carroll, Linford, Holman, & Busby, 2000; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank,
This and other research demonstrates a strong correlation between faith and family life. However, there is less research on the underlying issues indicating how more religious couples may differ in some ways from less religious or nonreligious couples in their marital relationships.

Fine-Tuning Research on Religion in Marriage

**DISTAL APPROACHES TO STUDYING RELIGION AND MARRIAGE**

Mahoney (2010) and Mahoney et al. (1999) found that many past studies of religion and marriage relied on single-item distal measures such as church attendance or salience of religion to assess religious influence in marriage. Representative studies include such findings as religiosity is associated with marital satisfaction (Anthony, 1993; Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; Robinson, 1994), marital stability (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Wilson & Music, 1996), and couple coping (Pargament & Park, 1995). Although most findings are positive, some studies produce mixed or negative findings—or at least a lack of positive correlations (e.g., Pargament et al., 1998; Sullivan, 2001). Mahoney et al. (2003) made the case that focusing on the distal aspects of marriage and the family only allows researchers to make generalizations regarding where these two important aspects of life come together. They recommended taking a more nuanced approach that looks at the underlying processes that lead to these different outcomes. Several studies have begun to fill the void on these different aspects of religion and marriage (Allgood, Harris, Skogrand & Lee, 2009; Dollahite & Lambert, 2007; Dollahite & Marks, 2005; Goodman & Dollahite, 2006; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006, 2008; Mahoney et al. 2003; Marks, 2005; Walker, Wuensch, Aziz, & Cope, 2008).

**Research Questions**

This study seeks to follow the recommendations for further research made by the scholars mentioned previously. It investigates the role of religious faith in the marriages of 24 couples who are highly involved members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also referred to as LDS or Mormon). Specifically, this study is an attempt to understand how LDS couples in strong, enduring marriages connect their faith to the constructs of commitment, sacrifice, coping, conflict resolution, and forgiveness in their marriages. These constructs were all discussed, and recommendations for further study were made in the landmark article by Fincham et al. (2007). They are by no means the only transformational constructs that apply to the study of religion and family. However, each construct represents an important process in marriage and are factors with which to begin the study of transformational processes in religious couples.
The primary “transformational” constructs (i.e., commitment, sacrifice, coping, conflict resolution, and forgiveness) listed above are often interconnected with each other. A brief introduction to each construct will assist in understanding the subsequent analyses.

**Commitment.** Marital commitment generally refers to a person’s determination to remain in a marital relationship. Many researchers have tried to break commitment into its component parts. Most theories divide commitment into internal or external constructs (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). However conceptualized, most researchers agree that commitment is a crucial component of stable marriage relationships. Religion and religious constructs have been shown to both add to a person’s internal motivation to stay in a marriage and increase external influences to stay in the relationship.

Several studies have linked religiosity with increased marital satisfaction and stability (Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar & Swank, 2001; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999; Thomas & Cornwall, 1990) and to commitment (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). However, as Amato (2010) points out, the theoretical and empirical work on exactly how commitment relates to marriage is underdeveloped. Past research has shown that the divorce rate among Mormons is similar to the general population. However, among Mormons who are active in their faith, especially those married in Mormon temples, the divorce rate drops dramatically (Heaton, Bahr, & Jacobson, 2005). Allgood et al. (2009) reported that Mormons were likely to have higher levels of marital commitment. According to Dollahite, Hawkins, and Parr (2012), one possible reason for this is that Mormons, like those of many other faith traditions, consider marriage to be “something more,” more than just an interpersonal relationship. They believe that the institution of marriage in and of itself is sacred and to be valued even beyond the value derived from the relationship itself.

**Sacrifice.** In their article proposing a more thorough study of transformational processes, Fincham and colleagues (2007) cited several studies showing that couple ability and willingness to sacrifice correlates with marital adjustment, satisfaction, commitment, and “relational persistence” (Stanley, Whitton, Low, Clements, & Markman, 2006; Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). Fincham et al. (2007) defined sacrifice as “behavior in which one gives up some immediate personal desire to benefit the marriage or the partner” (p. 280). They also stated that “researchers speculate that sacrifice may have a very high symbolic value with regard to commitment between partners because varying types of sacrificial behaviors, small and large, are salient in the otherwise mundane stream of experience” (p. 280).

Baumeister points out the religion has been very effective for thousands of years at helping mankind develop self-control and to delay
self-gratification. These two traits likely relate to a person's ability if not desire to sacrifice (Baumeister & Teirney, 2011). Dollahite, Layton, Bahr, Walker, and Thatcher (2009) stated that most major religions, including Mormonism, place strong emphasis on the value of sacrifice, especially in the marriage and family setting.

**Coping.** Coping refers to the process of working through difficulties. Several studies have sought to understand the link between a couple's faith and coping (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994; Dudley & Kosinski, 1990; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999, Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Most have shown a positive correlation between religiosity and a couple's ability to cope, although Sherkat and Ellison (1999) did find that religion can lead to destructive coping strategies for some religious couples. Once again, few studies have actually sought to understand how a couple's religious faith influences their coping. Few if any studies have looked specifically at how Mormon spouses cope compared with people of other faiths or the general population.

**Conflict resolution.** Fincham et al. (2007) reported several reasons conflict has received so much attention from researchers. Citing over a dozen studies, they pointed out that marital conflict is associated with depression, spouse abuse, alcohol problems, poor health, and of course marital distress and divorce. Conflict management can be seen as a subcategory of coping. As a result, many of the responses religious couples give for how they use their religious faith to cope with difficulties will likely also apply to handling conflict. Using data from the General Social Survey and the National Survey of Families and Households, Heaton et al. (2005) found little difference in how LDS couples and the general population dealt with conflict. This may be true, but it is important to note that neither survey goes much beyond distal variables to identify exactly how committed a couple is to their religion. It is possible that, as with divorce, those who are most committed to their religion may approach conflict in a different manner. Lambert and Dollahite (2006) studied various ways that religious belief and practice helps married couples prevent and resolve conflict and reconcile after conflict.

**Forgiveness.** Forgiveness is a transformational process with an obvious direct connection to conflict. In marriage it refers to a willingness and ability to pardon past mistakes by one's spouse and no longer hold past mistakes against them. Forgiveness has the power to transform an otherwise toxic situation into one that actually fosters relational growth. As Fincham et al. (2007) pointed out, “many researchers and clinicians believe that forgiveness is the cornerstone of a successful marriage, a view that is shared by spouses themselves” (p. 279). Past studies have linked a person’s religiosity and his or her willingness to forgive. Most studies have found this to be healthy for
relationships, although some studies have pointed out that being overly willing to forgive can lead to a willingness to accept abuse without seeking help (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). However, in most settings the willingness and ability to forgive is a key to a healthy marital relationship.

METHODS

To understand the connection between faith and family life from the perspective of those who are living it, intensive interviewing was chosen as the most appropriate methodology (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Most interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours. The interview questions were pretested to identify potential problems. The questions sought to understand the participants’ thinking and feelings behind their actions and how each person saw his or her faith and family life connected. Every effort was made to avoid asking leading questions that would elicit specific answers (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, many of the questions presuppose a religious orientation because our sample consisted of highly religious couples.

Sampling

Consistent with Boss’ (1980) suggestion that one of the best ways to learn about an issue is through the use of a sample that is prototypical of the variables of interest, a purposive sample was used (Berg, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). For this study not only were Mormon couples sought, but highly religious Mormon couples with happy marriages were sought. More specifically, references were sought from LDS leaders (bishops) for prototypical couples that were strong in both their faith and family life.

It is important to note that purposive samples are not generalizable. No attempt is made in this study to claim that the current sample is generalizable to all highly religious couples in general or to all LDS couples specifically. Participants in this study were preselected based on their faithfulness to their religious beliefs and their marriages. This fact precludes the data from being used as a generalizable representation of LDS church members approach to marriage in general. However, further study can be hampered without the knowledge obtained through prototypical, purposive samples. By allowing these couples to share how they connect their faith with their family life, the processes by which religious spouses connect their faith and family life as well as the meanings attached to those processes are highlighted and can be examined.

The sample included 24 couples (N = 48 participants) and is relatively large for an in-depth, interview-based qualitative study. However, the desire was not to achieve a statistically generalizable number of participants but to reach a level sufficient to provide conceptual saturation. Saturation means
new sample members are largely repeating what former sample members have already said (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

Participants

The 24 couples who participated in this study came from seven different states: California, Delaware, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin. As mentioned previously, these couples were largely solicited from the leaders of their congregations based on their faithfulness to both their religious convictions and their family life. Mean ages of the husbands and wives were 47 and 44, respectively. Twenty-five percent of the couples were ethnic minorities, including African American, Pacific Islander, and Latin American. The sample was well-educated, with the mean level of education for the husbands and wives of 16 years and 15 years, respectively. Participants were married for an average of 20 years.

In many ways there are several areas of homogeneity and convergence among the sample (e.g., same religious faith, shared high levels of faith, similarly high levels of commitment to marriage and family). Even so, there are some important areas of diversity as well. The spread of ages, educational levels, and variation in years married point to a much more diverse sample. Ages ranged from 33 to 63, education ranged from GEDs to PhDs, and years married ranged from 10 to 37 years.

Analysis

In our methodological approach, we have engaged in what qualitative methodologist Jane Gilgun refers to as “blending induction and deduction” (Gilgun, 1999, p. 235). Although open, line-by-line coding was performed consistent with grounded theory analysis (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we were also sensitized to (and looking for evidence of) specific concepts (e.g., Strauss & Glaser, 1970). A brief explanation of grounded theory and analytic induction will assist in understanding how the data were analyzed and how the various constructs were operationalized in this study. A grounded theory is theory derived from data that are systematically collected and analyzed throughout the process (Tesch, 1990), which allows the data to be studied initially from a mainly atheoretical point of view. Rather than trying to make the data fit a preconceived paradigm or theory, the grounded theory approach allows the analysis to focus as much as possible on the data itself. It is understood that there is no truly objective approach because a human being is doing the analysis (Gilgun, 2001). However, grounded theory allows the analysis to be grounded in the data, not the data to be grounded in a preconceived point of view. This also means that conclusions must always be supported with sufficient data.
Analytical Tools

Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested six important tools used in the analysis process. It all begins with questions. The researcher asks questions not to generate data but to begin to understand the data. Who, what, when, where, why, and how questions help the researcher to look for connections and relationships within the data. Strauss and Corbin point to different types of questions: sensitizing questions, theoretical questions, practical or structural questions, and guided questions. Each serves a different purpose and is likely to tune the researcher into different aspects of the data. Second, they recommend word, phrase, or sentence analysis to find context and hidden or obscure meanings. Next, they recommend analysis by comparison, incident by incident, object by object, and category by category. They recommend that researchers use the “flip-flop” technique, in which concepts are turned upside down and inside out to see things through different perspectives. Then the researcher systematically compares what they find in the data with information gleaned from the literature. Finally, they recommend what they call “waving the red flag.” This entails trying to detect your own biases intruding into the analysis. One effective technique of analytic induction is to step back and try to prove false what you believe you initially found to be true. Gilgun (2001) calls this falsifying emerging findings. This allows greater confidence in the findings than can be had through a simple process of open coding alone (Gilgun, 2005).

Specifically for this study the above approach was used to find examples of commitment, sacrifice, coping, conflict, and forgiveness and how participants connected these constructs to their religious faith. One key to ensuring validity to the findings is the use of low-inference descriptions. Low-inference descriptions are direct quotes from the person being interviewed that support themes reported in the results (Gehart, Ratliff, & Lyle, 2001). This allows the reader to more effectively judge the accuracy of the analysis. It also means the researcher is really not operationalizing the key constructs—those being interviewed do so through their own descriptions of how they experience each construct. Finally, throughout the analyses counter examples were sought to provide balance and a broader understanding of the constructs being studied.

It is important to note that qualitative analysis cannot establish cause and effect relationships between constructs. Further study is always needed. Also, this study in no way seeks to establish the normative marital behavior of all Latter-day Saints. Rather, this study purposefully seeks to understand how diverse Latter-day Saints who have been happily married for a substantial period of time connect their faith with their family life. Without the knowledge gained through purposive studies such as these, it is difficult to understand the processes by which different constructs interact, which in turn hampers our ability to accurately conceptualize them for further study. The theoretical knowledge gained through purposive studies makes further understanding possible through future studies with different and perhaps better designs.
RESULTS

In this section the role of the five transformational constructs in the life of each couple is examined in connection with three concepts related to religion: beliefs, practices, and sanctification. The first two concepts of beliefs and practices are drawn from theoretical work by Dollahite and Marks (2009), who briefly define these two concepts as follows (p. 378):

> Beliefs [are] personal, internal beliefs, framing, meanings, and perspectives ... often including a sense of relationship with God; (b) Practices [are] outward, observable expressions of faith such as prayer, scripture study, rituals, traditions, or less overtly sacred practice or abstinence that is religiously grounded.

The third concept, sanctification, is based on the work of Mahoney et al. (2003), who define sanctification as “a psychological process through which aspects of life are perceived by people as having spiritual character and significance” (p. 221).

Supporting examples and statements from the primary data are presented. These examples point to how these couples find or create meaning within their relationship through their religious faith. This purposive sample is made up of highly committed Latter-day Saints in happy marriages. As a result most of the examples and experiences they share are positive in nature, even as couples acknowledge the challenges they face. As the literature review above shows, religious couples tend to differ in their approach to marriage regardless of denomination, and those differences are often seen as constructive or positive. Again, this study is simply an attempt to see how couples in one religious tradition find or create meaning within their relationship through their religious faith.

LDS theology on marriage and family life is extensive, deep, and nuanced. Given space constraints, in an effort to explain the belief system and religious practices referred to by participants, we only make brief reference to some key doctrines. For more in-depth explanations, see Dollahite (2007) and Dollahite and Marks (2012).

Commitment

Several interview questions were asked in an attempt to ascertain what role, if any, participants’ religious beliefs played in marital commitment. One important note regarding the quotations used in this study is that the quotes were chosen based on their representative quality, meaning that, except where stated otherwise, the quotes used in this article are representative of a significant theme repeated by many of the couples. This is not an attempt to infer generalizability to other audiences but rather an attempt to make sure findings were representative of a significant portion of the current sample.
RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND COMMITMENT

Every couple interviewed spoke about the importance of their belief in the eternal nature of marriage to their marital commitment. Kim, a 34-year-old married for 12 years, spoke of the confidence this belief gives her that her marriage is secure:

Well, one of the things that Russ and I were talking about just the other day is that we know that we are gonna be married forever. Divorce is not an option; just being married until one of us dies isn't part of the plan. So, we know that neither one of us is going anywhere, you know, even if we are having a miserable day, or week, or month, if it comes to that, we are not worried that the other person is gonna take off, and we are not worried that our marriage is falling apart.

For several study participants their belief in eternal marriage meant that marital failure was not an acceptable possibility; therefore, the solution to any problem in the marriage did not include marital dissolution. Kathy, a 60-year-old married for 37 years, explained as follows:

No matter what happens, that because we believe in the eternities, and that marriage is forever, that no matter how bad, or whatever happens to us, we’re going to make it work no matter what. We like to say that the “D” word [divorce] does never come up in the house.

Other couples shared that their belief in eternal marriage encouraged more long-term thinking when decisions needed to be made. Lance, a 49-year-old married for 26 years, stated the following:

[T]he decisions you make, if you know they are going to affect your eternal future are different than the decisions you make if you knew it was just till you die . . . . If you are looking at long range instead of short range, just here on earth, the decisions you make are different.

Having a long-term focus may help couples avoid making decisions that may seem to make things easier in the short run but ultimately are detrimental to the relationship in the long run.

One last finding was that the belief in eternal marriage for some even transcended their relationship with their spouses. Understanding the central role marriage plays in LDS theology, some couples spoke of their commitment not only to their spouse but to the institution of marriage itself. This commitment to the transcendent value of marriage, even beyond their own relationship, may facilitate attitudes and actions that further strengthen their overall marital commitment. Charles, a 63-year-old married for 34 years, explained, “We are committed to the institution I think even more than
to one another.” This seems to relate to the concept of sanctification developed by Mahoney et al. (2003), namely that the very institution of marriage can be imbued with a sense of sacredness that further strengthens a couple’s commitment even beyond their own relationship.

**Religious Practices and Commitment**

Couples believed several religious practices influenced their commitment levels. The practice most often spoken about in relation to commitment was temple attendance. Unlike chapels, LDS temples are not used for Sunday worship services. They are specifically used to perform ordinances, which are ceremonies or rituals, considered most sacred by members of the church, including temple marriages (also called “sealings” because they are believed to “seal” or bind couples eternally). Though all members are encouraged to return to the temple and participate in ordinances there regularly, only members who are committed to live according to strict standards of worthiness are allowed to enter. These couples spoke of the importance of their own temple marriages to their marital commitment. Heather, a 54-year-old married for 17 years, made the connection between the temple and the eternal nature of marriage:

In our church, we’re blessed to know that we can be married in the temple and that our family will be together if we keep the commandments. We’ll be together forever. So that makes even this family life and this short time on Earth more valuable to us because we know that there’s a big eternity at stake and if we want it to work, then we better, we embrace the church and the teachings more and look forward to a great hope.

Several couples spoke also of the impact that returning to the temple together as a couple has had on their relationship. Steve, a 36-year-old married for 14 years, shared that temple worship reminds him and his spouse about their long-term goals:

Just the whole doctrine of our religion of marrying for eternity, and it puts a whole new perspective on everything. When we go and worship in a temple, you know, we are able to do the work for ourselves and for that eternal foundation. And my wife and I, we always talk about our goals for the future, you know. We are always mindful of what’s going on here and now, but we are, our eyes are always also on the horizon and things to come, preparing for things to come, whether it be the new house that we are working on now, or what’s going on next week or what’s going on years from now, we are kind of always looking at those things as well. And it does include eternity, going on from this life to the next.
Tanner, a 35-year-old married for 13 years, spoke of remembering the specific vows he and his wife made to each other when they were married and the spiritual growth that accompanies temple worship for them:

Being able to go to the temple and because of the sacred nature of some of the things that go on within the temple, discussion of specifics is a little difficult. But there are specific promises that we make between my wife and myself to our Father in Heaven. In re-devoting our lives to each other... inevitably every time we’ve gone as we sit there and contemplate all of the discussion and the gospel, there has never yet been an experience that we’ve had there that hasn’t been of a great spiritual growth.

The couples also spoke of how several other religious practices were meaningful to their marriages. Besides temple worship, the most frequently mentioned practices included attending church together, scripture study, prayer, and family home evening. Family home evening (FHE) refers to the LDS practice of dedicating one night each week to being together as a family. FHE may include such activities as gospel study, prayer, singing, story telling, family calendaring, individual parent/child interviews, games or other fun activities, and almost always treats. These practices are described in more detail later.

Sanctification and Commitment

Many couples believed that God was an active participant in their marriage and that this in turn increased their commitment to their marriages. Past research has indicated that Christian, Jewish, and Muslim couples who saw God as more actively involved with their marriages perceived more benefits coming to their marriage through their religion than did other highly religious people who saw God as less involved in their marriage (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006). Several couples in the current study spoke of their marriage in terms of a triangle, with God, their spouse, and themselves connected together through a covenant relationship. Anne, a 39-year-old married for 14 years, explained that marriage is “a three-way partnership with God being... a party to making this marriage work and to helping us through this life.” Shelley, a 35-year-old married for 15 years, shared this belief:

We feel it’s a covenant marriage, that it’s a promise between Jason and I, and the Lord. The Lord’s involved in that promise. As we promise to stay obedient to God’s laws, and to stay obedient to the laws of marriage, to stay committed to one another, to only be together with one another, that there are great blessings from God that come from that, from that union, that promise.

Mike, Shelley’s 40-year-old husband, completed her thought: “And so when you have God as the center of your marriage, [the] central figure of your marriage, it brings you closer together.” Besides a commitment to stay
together, there was a strong sense among those interviewed that God required a selfless approach to their relationship.

Sacrifice

**RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND SACRIFICE**

The couples interviewed for this study consistently stated that they believe God wants them to sacrifice and to serve. While speaking of sacrifice they often referred to scriptural examples of sacrifice as well as doctrinal lessons from church leaders on the subject. Several couples actually believed one of the reasons God ordained marriage was to encourage the attributes of sacrifice and selflessness. Shantelle, a 34-year-old married for 15 years, said that a person is almost “forced to be less selfish when you’re in a family unit.” Anne also believed that one of the purposes of marriage was to learn to be selfless: “But marriage also, I think, is a way to learn selflessness and how to cooperate and be close with another individual.”

**RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND SACRIFICE**

Some couples spoke of learning to be more selfless and to sacrifice through the regular practices their faith encouraged them to do. Michelle, a 33-year-old married for 13 years, connected her relationship with God and her regular religious activities with being less selfish: “Reading scriptures, going to church service, and just doing those things that God has asked of us [help you focus on others]. Simple things like paying tithing have helped me to realize [that I need] to let go of my selfishness.” Darla, a 42-year-old married for 20 years, believed the time and money they give to the church is a sacrifice that brings many blessings with it. Interestingly, each time she thought of a different thing they sacrifice, she immediately stated that it was “worth it” or that their family was blessed as a result.

We sacrifice, I think, a lot of time, but it is worth it, all the time. We pay a 10% tithing, and everybody does at our church. . . . Besides our tithing, we have a welfare system in our church that takes care of the poor and needy, and we’re encouraged to give to that, and [to give to] other things. But we feel that blessings come from all that. That’s why we’re willing to do it.

Tina, a 46-year-old married for 22 years, had watched her husband serve as bishop (the lay, unpaid, LDS congregational leader who typically “serves” for about 5 years; see Marks & Beal, 2008). Tina connected her husband’s service as a bishop to her family’s willingness to sacrifice:

I think that a good thing we learned from his service as a bishop, [was that] being a bishop . . . took a lot of time away from family but it also pulled our family into a lot more service opportunities. [For] the kids
themselves, his calling almost became (by extension)…their calling, because they had responsibilities that they needed to [carry out to] support Dad and his calling and the work that he did in the church. And they just stepped up to the plate and did it and helped.

However, a few of those interviewed expressed the opinion that at times a spouse sacrificed too much and that as a result the family suffered. Karen, a 37-year-old married for 16 years, shared an experience from her youth that sensitized her to this possibility:

I have many impressions of my mom just getting out of surgery, not hardly even being able to stand up, shaking from…standing there trying to get dinner for us. In the middle of a mess, this kid needs help with this homework, these two are fighting, this is going on. My dad just says, “Well, I got to go to a meeting.” You know, and my mom just standing there and tears just running and her being hurt and angry and then she kind of vented to us. “Your daddy is always gone to a meeting…” I heard it all, and so that I think at a young age I put that in my head. I won’t, I can’t be left with all this.

This example shows that even though most couples viewed their faith’s emphasis on sacrifice as a blessing to their relationship, that it was possible to take this emphasis to an unhealthy extreme to the detriment of their family relationships.

SANCTIFICATION AND SACRIFICE

Some individuals pointed to their relationship with God and his teachings as a reason they seek to be less selfish and to sacrifice more. Jim, a 44-year-old married for 19 years, explained how his priorities based on his relationship with God and his teachings changed his focus toward being more selfless:

My relationship with God and my role as a father and husband [helps me] to totally change [from a selfish focus, toward others]. My priority is to serve others in the church, to nurture my relationship with my sweetheart, to be a positive role model and spend quality as well as quantity time with my children. And to try to help other people.

Michelle, a 33-year-old married for 13 years, said her belief in and relationship with God encouraged her to sacrifice more and be more selfless:

I know that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ play a direct role in our relationships and because of [Jesus Christ’s] sacrifice that He made to come and give His life for all of us makes me feel humble. It makes me feel like I need to strive to be better to be kinder and more thoughtful to my husband and to my daughter… That’s the whole purpose of
why I’m here is to be more like our Heavenly Father and to take on those attributes and to be sacrificing and to be selfless and to be charitable and to give of our time and to give of our money, to help those around us and to help our spouses, to help our family.

Next we examine how these couples connected their religious beliefs to how they overcome hardships, both in life and in their relationships.

Coping

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND COPING

For most couples interviewed a belief in the eternal nature of marriage not only increased their commitment to their marriage, but it also provided assistance in coping with difficulties. Belief in eternal marriage seemed to minimize the day to day difficulties the couples experienced both by way of impact and number. Linda, a 51-year-old married for 31 years, explained how her commitment to their eternal marriage helped when she gave birth to a stillborn child:

Yeah, [marriage] gets a little tough. But I think as far as a commitment eternally, I think that’s helped us make it through a lot of difficult times. [Jonathan (her husband): Oh, yeah.] Commitment wise, where we had [a tough time], our fifth child was stillborn. That was difficult, that was very difficult. And if we didn’t have the commitment we have, to the eternal family, I think it would have been very hard for me.... It was a crazy time for me. But I think it was my commitment to Jonathan and our eternal commitment and our spiritual commitment to each other, that I think helped me make it through that.

Karen spoke of how seeing their marriage relationship as eternal helped her have more patience for her own and her husband’s weaknesses:

Well one of the deepest things that has come to me as I’ve struggled with developing a relationship into a better relationship is...that they [your spouse] have eternity to develop into who you know that they could be and who you want. Nobody is going to have every quality.... If you are patient with them and kind of lead them along they may not have that one certain thing now, but maybe in thirty years they’ll have it perfectly. Then through the eternities, someday they’ll have everything that you want. Then you will be happy for eternity with all those things.

This can obviously be problematic if it encourages one or both spouses to simply “wait” for better times if no progress is being made. However, for Karen and most spouses who spoke about this issue, it actually provided not only hope for the future but motivation for the present because they realized they had to work to make their eternity what they wanted.
Besides believing in eternal marriage, one other theme that emerged repeatedly was that having a similar belief system and sharing the same values allowed couples to approach difficulties in unity. Anne stated simply, “I think it would be very hard for us to be as close as we are, and as unified as we are without our shared beliefs.” Similarly, Vickie, a 41-year old married for 19 years, spoke of the powerful influence similar beliefs have had in their marriage:

We are more united in our marriage because we both I think having the same faith and same beliefs we see things more in the same light so we work together. We have the same values and the same goals that we’re striving for in our marriage and as parents. . . . I know that’s been a big influence on our marriage.

Although several couples shared their belief that they have less problems to cope with because of their shared beliefs, every couple shared stories of hardship. However, they believed that approaching those problems with a shared set of sacred values and beliefs enabled them to better cope.

Religious Practices and Coping

Couples believed they were better able to cope as a result of prayer, scripture study, FHE, and temple worship. Prayer was the most frequently referenced religious practice. Darla shared how prayer not only helps her family through difficult times, it also helped them make life decisions:

Even right now, in my family, we fast and pray about different decisions. Like one child is trying to get through her schooling, another is trying to get into higher education, and they’re working hard at it, but we’re praying hard at it too.

Shantelle also expressed a similar sentiment regarding prayer and scripture study:

When you read your scriptures together, basically, what you’re saying is “I need help in my life. I can’t do this by myself.” And when you kneel to pray to Heavenly Father, there’s a form of humility there and you’re opening up a door saying, “Any help we can get. We know that we need to improve, that we can be better.” So it just kind of adds that dimension.

She and her husband also spoke of the peace that came from attending the temple:

And so when you go in there, at least for me, it makes me feel more calm and I relax about the cares that I have in the world, including relationship
issues. And it humbles me and makes me a little more open, I guess, to resolving issues or figuring things out together and stuff like that.

Kent, a 40-year old married for 16 years, believed FHE was an important part of helping his family stay organized and live more happily. He believed when they did not meet together weekly, the family had more difficulties to work through. He said the following:

Family home [evening] is very important. We’ve noticed that when we don’t do that, there’s been a few times in our marriage where that slips a little bit and you can tell. A few more problems going on, things aren’t as happy as they were.

These were not the only practices the couples mentioned but were the most frequently discussed. Darla also mentioned how attending church and speaking with church leaders is another resource to help a couple cope:

In our church, we talk about ways to improve your marriage all the time. There’s usually an article once a month in our church magazine, and the leaders of our church talk about it all the time. If you read it, and take notes, and talk about it with each other, there are ways that you can improve. You can talk to your church leaders if you have a problem come up, and problems do come up.

SANCTIFICATION AND COPING

Several couples spoke of God’s direct role in helping them work through challenges. A few spoke of God as a resource they turn to though they did not give specific examples. Michelle simply stated, “I know that Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ play a direct role in our relationships.” Similarly, Bonnie, a 55-year-old married for 22 years, expressed her confidence that God is always there to help her:

He’s a presence in our lives and just a guiding strength that’s…always there if we need Him and even when we don’t need Him. I just feel that that’s a comfort. It’s a comforting thing in my home to have.

Other couples spoke of receiving specific guidance and help from God. Shelley spoke of God answering prayers and guiding their decision-making processes:

We feel really as if it’s a triangle: my husband, myself, and God—because all our decisions are made through prayer, through receiving…a confirmation or a good feeling inside that what we’re doing for our family, or what we’re doing as a couple, or what we’re doing for work [is what we
should do]... [With] the big decisions, we [believe] that God is giving us those good feelings, or bad feelings, to help direct us to where we need to be.

Anne and Tyler shared how they believed the Holy Spirit not only gives them guidance but also strength to overcome adversity as they took time to do things they believed would invite that spirit:

*Anne:* I find that I can get very tired and cranky, but when I take time to say a prayer, or to think about spiritual things, or to go to a meeting, I think that influence of the Holy Ghost, or the Spirit, then calms me and helps me to be patient in situations where maybe I normally wouldn't be able to. It sort of, it adds to, or augments my sort of...

*Tyler:* Gives you new strength.

*Anne:* It helps give you additional patience and strength and love that maybe you wouldn't have been able to muster if you hadn't had that spiritual uplift or experience.

Although most couples spoke of God directly helping them to cope with the difficult circumstances of life, Thomas, a 50-year-old married for 27 years, offered a different perspective:

I can't say that I called upon God to help me out of each of these circumstances, because I didn't. I didn't think I needed to. I thought that this was just part of life, and that it'll come through, and it'll work out, and all things will work out together for the best. God knows who I am and what I'm doing, and He knows what my needs are, and we pray to Him for help, and... He'll help me out in the end. So I guess what my faith gives me is a hope, a confidence that things will work out... I think it's important to point out that we accept the Lord's will, but we also accept the fact that He expects us to do the utmost we can to deal with [our challenges]. That's why we went to doctor after doctor and finally the Mayo clinic... We didn't feel like, oh well, destiny has put us in this situation therefore I'm not going to do anything about it. No, we feel like the Lord expects us to do the best we can with what knowledge and wisdom we have.

Although slightly different from the approach the other couples spoke of, Thomas’ approach may be a more widespread approach in the general LDS population than it was in this sample. Thomas took a much more independent approach, but as he makes clear in his statements he did not mean he did not pray and ask for help. It would also not be safe to assume that the other couples do not believe they have to do all they can do themselves also. It may be important to realize that each couple likely fits somewhere along a continuum of how much they depend on God to help them through their challenges.
Conflict Resolution

RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Once again, belief in eternal marriage was an oft-repeated theme. Kim spoke of how their commitment to their marriage helped them overcome conflicts:

Obviously, all couples have conflict in their marriage, and that's part of the package, you cannot expect to have a marriage free of conflict, or any relationship free of conflict, but the commitment we had for each other, and believing that we had an eternal marriage if we abided by the contracts we've made, I think helped a great deal in overcoming any conflict that we had.

Heather explained that looking at life with an eternal perspective made most issues couples have contention over seem trivial:

I think knowing that we are going to be together forever, that we've been sealed as a family, that we are bound forever. We have that bond. It's like fighting here seems trivial when you think about it. It's just like who cares? When someone has a problem, you're more willing to help them because you know you're going to spend eternity with that person and you're going to love them whether or not you like it sometimes. And most of the times you do, but it just makes it easy for the hard times to get through it, I think.

Shantelle spoke of another LDS belief that might minimize conflict in a marriage:

In our religion, we believe that contention is of the devil so that means we have to try not to have contention in our home. And when we do have contention, then the Spirit of God is not there. And so we want to get rid of that bad spirit right away and have our home be a home that has the Spirit [of God] in it.

Once again, having similar sacred beliefs and values seemed to minimize conflict for several of these couples. This shared system of sacred beliefs has been referred to in previous qualitative research on marriage as being “equally yoked” (Marks et al., 2008). Anne shared the thought that having similar beliefs with their spouse meant that when there was conflict, it was often limited to less central or profound issues:

We believe very much the same things. And so the other things are then not deep-seated conflicts, they're just more superficial things that I think as we get along further in our marriage, we see that they're not really all that important.
Vickie expressed the same belief when it came to her relationship with her husband:

Because of our religious beliefs... with both of us being on the same track in wanting those same goals and desires helps us to see things more in the same light and to want to work together to reach those. I can honestly say we haven't had a lot of... major conflicts.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Shantelle shared a very specific example of how attending church and renewing her religious covenants helped her deal more effectively with conflict:

Here’s an example that I think ties it all together. Maybe before church on Sunday morning things are kind of hectic around here and we’re not feeling that great towards each other and there’s a little tiff or something. And then you get to church and you’re kind of calmed down and then they start to pass the sacrament around, which is something we do every week in church. The sacrament [is] a symbol of what Christ did for us; that he died for us and that because he died for us, we can be forgiven of our sins. I know there have been several times where [when] we take the sacrament, it will humble us. It’s not because of a sermon, but it’s because of this individual thing and [you] humble yourself and you think, “How can I be upset with Teresa when the Savior sacrificed his life for us?” And so it humbles you and it makes you realize that [the] little thing that we were arguing about at home isn’t that important in the whole scheme of things. It’s more important to forgive and to move on and have a strong relationship.

Kent tied together three religious practices—church attendance, scripture study, and prayer—as a way of helping with marital conflict:

Going to church every week and reading your scriptures every day and praying every day and trying to be better in the way that the church teaches [are all] automatic [resources] in helping with conflict. [Doing those things], I mean, it just refines you... It teaches you to try to take care of [marital disagreements] in a kind and a giving way.

Several couples spoke of the belief that they should not go to bed angry. Mike and Shelley combined this sentiment with couple prayer:

Mike: We have companionship prayer every night. And that’s pretty good. We’ve made a little promise to each other when we were first married is that we would never go to bed angry with one another or unresolved, and we’ve knelt at the bedside till ...

Shelley: For hours sometimes.
Mike: Sometimes until 1:00 in the morning, when we'd knelt there at 10:30. We wanted to make sure that we had good feelings about one another and the things that we'd been discussing so that we could come to the Lord in a good manner.

Sanctification and Conflict Resolution

Shantelle also spoke of answers to prayer as a means of working through conflict. However, she emphasized God intervening in her thoughts to help her deal more effectively with the conflict:

So for example, I might go to him in prayer and say, “I am so frustrated with Roger because he keeps doing this” or something that’s hurting me or caused me heartache or something. And then I feel him telling me, “Well you know, you did this.” And so I’m like, “Okay fine.” And it helps me to stop and see my side of it [my part in the problem].

The issue of overcoming conflict in a marriage is naturally related to a couple’s ability to forgive each other, which is the next issue we briefly explore.

Forgiveness

Religious Beliefs and Forgiveness

Jesse, a 37-year-old married for 15 years, shared how the biblical doctrine of the importance of forgiving others has helped his marriage:

One of the basic teachings of the Savior is forgiveness. So, first of all, if you want to be forgiven, the Bible teaches that you need to forgive other people…and we see that we have to be willing to forgive the other person and so I think that influences our ability to maybe forgive a little bit sooner than we normally would have because we know and we believe that forgiving is a good thing, something you should do.

Religious Practices, Sanctification, and Forgiveness

Shantelle combined her own attempts to be faithful to such things as scripture study and prayer and its impact on her relationship with God and on her ability to be more forgiving:

I’ve noticed that the closer I feel to my Heavenly Father, the more forgiving I am. And also the closer I feel to my Heavenly Father, and usually I feel closer when I’m reading my scriptures and saying my prayers. [Then I am] working on that relationship with Him…and through that relationship I receive inspiration from Heavenly Father to know what I need to be working on.
DISCUSSION

A large body of research has indicated that religiosity is generally associated with positive marital satisfaction, marital stability, marital commitment, a willingness to sacrifice, positive couple coping, and less overall conflict. Studies have also shown that in some circumstances religion can also correlate with less positive outcomes, like destructive coping techniques and less stability. However, most studies have looked only at the distal aspects of a couple’s religious life, such as church attendance or religious salience, and therefore have been hard pressed to explain the reasons behind the findings. By allowing highly religious couples to share the connection between their faith and their family life in their own words, we begin to get a clearer picture of the possible processes which connect their faith to their family life.

This study adds to the existing body of knowledge on marriage by taking a closer look at the meanings and processes with which one group of highly religious couples see their faith impacting their family life. Specifically, this study focuses on beliefs and practices by which a couple’s faith is seen by them to impact their relationship. This may allow researchers to begin to see the processes that may contribute to the different outcomes often seen between religious and less religious couples. Once again, because of the nature of qualitative research, no definitive conclusions can be reached without further research. However, as can be seen through the words of these couples, they strongly believe their faith influences their family life, and they have strongly held opinions as to how it does.

Sacred Meaning in Marriage

For these LDS couples several religious beliefs and practices were influential to their commitment levels, their willingness to sacrifice, their ability to cope, and how they work through conflict. One belief that seemed to permeate the entire spectrum of constructs was a central belief in the lifelong and even eternal nature of marriage and family. Because these couples believe marriage is meant to be eternal, they believed they are more committed, more willing to sacrifice, and are more capable of coping with difficulties and conflict. In some ways contemporary culture suggests what should keep a couple together is a feeling that each individual is getting what they want at the moment. In this context a belief that marriage should endure forever can help provide staying power needed to overcome hardships and discover new vistas of intimacy. Though the belief that marriage is meant to last eternally is not shared by all religions, most major religious traditions teach that marriage is meant to last, at minimum, “until death do you part.” This belief that God desires marriage to last a lifetime may have meaning and provide motivation for other religious couples to increase their commitment to their marriages.
These couples also believed that because they shared so many sacred beliefs and values, they faced fewer conflicts and were more unified in how they coped with difficulties. Individual differences in marriage are inevitable; however, research has shown that when couples have a “shared family vision,” when both husband and wife agree on certain core issues, it can lead to relationships that are more able to overcome the less important differences that exist in every marriage (Marks et al. 2008; Marks, Dollahite, & Baumgartner, 2010). This shared vision may also help couples find a sense of unity and purpose that not only helps them weather the hard times better than couples who do not share as many core beliefs, but it may also help them find more fulfillment and purpose in their day to day lives. These couples seemed to believe this was true.

Ritual as Sacred Process

The processes that transformed individuals and relationships typically involved shared commitment to and joint participation in sacred rituals. These rituals included attending church, reading scripture, prayer, FHE, and serving in the temple. Couples discussed a variety of ways these sacred rituals benefited their marital relationships by changing attitudes, softening hearts, engendering commitment, providing relational insight, and encouraging selflessness. For example, one sacred process couples mentioned was “renewing” their marital covenants through serving together in the temple. This is consistent with previous research on the salutary influence of LDS religious ritual on marriage and family life (Loser, Hill, Klein, & Dollahite, 2009; Loser, Klein, Hill, & Dollahite, 2008).

Understanding these issues can have implications for everything from mate selection to marital preparation and even in presenting a model on which future generations can build to achieve more meaningful and longer lasting marriages themselves. This leads to the question of how married couples who do not have shared core beliefs—even though they may both be highly religious—bring their religious faith to bear on their relationships. Does the fact that they are both people of faith still bring similar benefits, or do separate worldviews lead to less commitment or greater challenges dealing with difficulties? One final question to ask is whether couples with a shared secular vision receive the same benefits as couples with a shared religious or spiritual vision.

These couples believed several religious practices helped them in all these constructs, including temple attendance, prayer, scripture study, and church attendance. Several studies have shown that when it comes to various marital outcomes such as commitment and satisfaction, private religious behavior is a better indicator than is public religious behavior. It would be interesting to see whether the benefits of these and other religious behaviors are universally experienced or if there are unique outcomes based on different
faith groups or different demographics. Although many of the religious practices shared by these couples are central in most major faith traditions, does each faith group derive the same benefits? It would also be helpful to see if certain religious practices lead to greater benefits than others.

Faith, Hope, and Clarity

It may be said that religious belief and practice provides couples with faith, hope, and clarity. These couples had faith that God was willing and able to help them stay committed to the marriage, resolve problems, and forgive each other. Couples had hope that their marriage would last forever, and this hope motivated them to overlook minor conflicts, work on the relationship, and make sacrifices to make the marriage work. Couples expressed a sense of clarity about the purposes of marriage, what sacred processes could help them secure God’s assistance in the marriage, and the priority of marriage relative to other aspects of life.

Finally, for each construct most couples expressed a belief that God was directly assisting them and that their relationship was richer and stronger as a result. Though there have been theoretical studies that have pointed to this finding before, it would be beneficial to see if there was a way to actually measure the influence this belief has on couples’ behaviors. This point is salient for each of the constructs studied. Several studies have pointed to a distinct disconnect some couples have between religious beliefs and marital practices, especially regarding gender and power (Ellison & Bartkowski, 2002; Gallagher & Smith, 1999). Even so, the couples in this study stated a clear connection between their beliefs and their practices. However, further research is needed to see how strong this connection is and what costs or benefits result from the connection. It would also be helpful to better understand what leads a couple to actually practice or not practice what they say they believe. This study provides a window through which we can begin to understand some of the ways that highly religious couples, in this case LDS couples, connect their faith with their marriage.

NOTE

1. All study participants’ names have been changed to pseudonyms.

REFERENCES


