

Meaning making across three dimensions of religious experience: a qualitative exploration

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Abstract

The current study focused on the complex connections between meaning making, spirituality, and religious experiences. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted in a sample of 184 racially diverse and highly religious families (N=445 individual participants). A three-dimensional, conceptual model of religion by Dollahite and Marks (2009) provided the framework for the

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findings. The following three themes are presented: (1) Meaning Making and Spiritual Beliefs: "Faith is the only thing that satisfies that hunger"; (2) Meaning Making and Religious Practices: "We fit our life into our religion, not our religion into our life"; and (3) Meaning Making and Faith Community: "Our church family is just like family." In connection with each theme, several supporting examples from the data are offered to convey the voices and meaning making processes of the participants with authenticity. The data presented and themes identified are used to offer a framework for more culturally competent and, where appropriate or requested, more religious-accommodative therapy designed to aid clients in finding meaning in their daily lives.

La réflexion sur le sens de la vie selon trois dimensions de l'expérience religieuse: une recherche exploratoire qualitative

Résumé

L'étude présentée ici s'est centrée sur les liens complexes entre la réflexion sur le sens de la vie, la spiritualité et les expériences religieuses. Des entrevues qualitatives en profondeur ont été faites après d'un échantillon de 184 familles très religieuses et d'origines ethniques diverses ($N=445$ participants individuels). Les conclusions sont présentées dans le cadre du modèle conceptuel à trois dimensions de Dollahite et Marks (2009). Trois thèmes sont présentés de la façon suivante : (1) La réflexion sur le sens de la vie et les croyances spirituelles : « La foi est la seule chose qui satisfasse cette soif »; (2) La réflexion sur le sens de la vie et les pratiques religieuses : « Nous ajustons notre vie à notre religion, pas la religion à notre vie »; (3) La réflexion sur le sens de la vie et la communauté de foi : « Notre famille Église est simplement comme la famille. » Chacun de ces thèmes est appuyé par plusieurs exemples extraits du matériel recueilli, pour rapporter fidèlement les formulations et les processus de réflexion sur le sens de la vie des personnes participantes. Les données présentées et les thèmes retenus peuvent servir de cadre à une démarche thérapeutique plus fouillée au niveau culturel et, quand cela convient ou que c'est demandé, plus accommodante au niveau religieux en vue d'aider les clients à trouver du sens à partir de leur vie quotidienne.



Literature Review

Spirituality is defined as a search for the sacred that involves perceptions of God and other facets of life that hold divine character and significance (Mahoney, 2010). Psychology of religion researchers have shown increased interest in "meaning-making, defined as changing situational meaning (appraisals of the traumatic experience) and global meaning (world views, personality, and coping styles) in order to reduce the discrepancy between global and situational meaning" (Park & Blumberg, 2002, p. 597). Park (2005b) later added that meaning making involves viewing an occurrence in a changed way and rethinking and amending an individual's beliefs and goals in order to reacquire consistency. In this light, meaning making is an automatic or unconscious process humans employ to diminish the discrepancy between the real world that confronts us and the meaningful world we seek (Park, 2010).

For many individuals, their meaning making efforts overlap significantly with personal, marital, and family-based religious experiences (Dollahite & Marks, 2009). The objective of this paper is to present qualitative accounts and representations that capture and convey rich examples of spirituality and meaning making across three dimensions of religious experience: *beliefs*, *practices*, and *faith community*.

Religion

Research has shown that there is a strong relationship between religiosity and well-being, including physical and mental health and longevity (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Marks, 2005; Pargament, 1997). Wink and Dillon (2008) in a longitudinal study of subjects in their late adulthood found that there was a positive relationship between religiousness and well-being in terms of relationships and personal development. The belief of God that is in control of life has been correlated with greater life satisfaction and positive attitude toward life (Krause, 2007, 2009). Additionally, religious beliefs influence individuals' ideology and perceptions of marriage (Denton, 2004), and the perception that God is involved in a couple's marriage reportedly relates to higher marital satisfaction and marital commitment in recent qualitative work (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Religion influences family behaviors through shaping ideology about family life (Pearce & Thornton, 2007). Faith is a very important dimension to understand family beliefs, actions, and expectations particularly in families who are moderately to highly religious (Garland, 2002).

Religion can play a significant role in child development. Several studies of religion and adolescents found that religiosity positively cor-

related to adolescents' mental health outcomes including self-esteem, lower distress, and lower rate of suicide and substance use (Koenig et al., 2001; Mosher & Handal, 1997). Smith and Denton (2005) concluded that "religion itself can and often does operate as [an] influence in youth's lives" (p. 240). Overall, religion usually plays a very important role in individual, marital, and family's positive development.

In connection with the more specific concerns of mental health (and the related issue of meaning making), Koenig, McCullough, and Larson published *The Handbook of Religion and Health*, a landmark volume that included systematic analyses of more than 1,200 studies and 400 reviews. In connection with mental health issues that are of primary concern to counsellors and clergy, Koenig et al. (2001) summarily reported that 15 of 16 (93.8%) studies reported a statistically significant association between greater religious involvement and a greater sense of purpose/meaning in life. While these findings still hold, work during the past decade has emphasized the need for more nuance and precision in the study of religion (Mahoney, 2010). In related quantitative research, indicators of religion and spirituality frequently are placed in models as single-item measures (Hill & Pargament, 2008). Indeed, a recent decade review indicated that about 77% of quantitative research articles used only one or two indicators to represent religious involvement (Mahoney, 2010). These reductionistic measures of religion in many studies have contributed to a body of knowledge regarding religion and spirituality that has some breadth but very little depth—leaving the field correlation rich but explanation poor (Marks & Dollahite, 2011).

To improve the depth and precision of scholarship in this area, Dollahite and Marks (2009) presented a conceptualization of religion comprised of the following three dimensions defined as:

Beliefs (personal, internal beliefs, framing, meanings, and perspectives; often including a sense of relationship with God); (b) *Practices* (outward, observable expressions of faith such as prayer, scripture study, rituals, traditions, or less overtly sacred practice or abstinence that is religiously grounded); and (c) *Faith Community* (support, involvement, and relationships grounded in one's congregation or religious group) (p. 378).

These three dimensions of religion provide related contexts for the discussion of meaning making.

Meaning Making

As we turn from an overview of the literature on religion to the literature on meaning making, we note that religion seems to help many as

they strive to find meaning in life (Steger & Frazier, 2005). Religion is regarded as a potential source of strength and meaning—and, for many, religion shapes the value and goals of an individual's life (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). A recent study of 150 adults (from different socioeconomic backgrounds and different faith affiliations) by Mahoney and colleagues (2005) addressed both religion and meaning making. The central findings included the following: (1) most of the participants regarded their "strivings" as involving God or having sacred aspects to some extent; (2) the sanctification of their personal strivings was related to the investment of their time and energy in the pursuit of personal life goals; and (3) sanctification was related to personal joy, happiness, health, and a *sense of meaning*. Indeed, meaning making is an important way that individuals pursue "the sacred," and in a transactional manner religion also shapes individuals' ideology, life styles, well-being, and sense of meaning in life.

In light of contemporary psychological research examined from an existentialist view, meaning matters. Issues such as life and death, suffering, and purpose of life significantly impact a person's wellbeing and will to overcome trials and suffering (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Recent empirical research has connected meaning making with adjustment to trying times. In a study with 83 elderly adults, Park (2006) found a connection between appraised meanings and some, but not all, constructive and detrimental aspects of adjustment to stress. Further this study found that appraised meanings mediate the connection between religiousness and adjustment. More religious individuals and those who engaged in more religious coping viewed stressors as a challenge and learned something constructive from the stressful incident (Park, 2006). The connection between religion and appraisal was further explored by Park (2005a) in a study of 169 bereaved university students. Religion may act as a meaning making system to enable a grieving person to frame his or her loss, search for nonthreatening explanations and build personal growth. Park's work has focused not only on religion, but also on appraisal and meaning making. The objective of the present paper is to explore the connection between religion and meaning making, with a specific interest in uncovering why and how religious experience influences meaning making.

Method

Sample

The purposive sample for the project consisted of a total of 184 marriage-based (including both intact and remarried) families with chil-

dren. The total *N* for the qualitative interviews was 445 (184 mothers, 184 fathers, and 77 adolescents⁵). Most participants were referred by clergy based on their perceived high levels of faith involvement and family commitment. In a few instances, snowball sampling was used to build the sub-samples of difficult to access populations (Daly, 2007), but even when snowball or participant referrals were requested, no more than one referred family from any given participant family was interviewed.

The denominational breakdown was as follows: 111 Christian families (Catholic, Mainstream Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Orthodox, and New Christian Religious Traditions), 31 Jewish families (Hasidic, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed Traditions), 22 Mormon (also called Latter-day Saint or LDS) families, and 20 Muslim families. The sample included families residing in all eight major regions of the United States (see Silk & Walsh, 2006). With respect to racial origin, 32 families were of African descent, 17 Asian, 15 Native American, 13 Latino, 11 Middle Eastern, four East Indian, and one Pacific Islander—with the remaining 91 families being of European decent. Thus, 50.5% (93) of the 184 families represented an ethnic or racial minority. Following IRB approval and informed consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted based on a 20+ question schedule that addressed family life, religion, stress and coping, and other issues.

Validity and rigor in qualitative research

The often-raised issue of validity and adequate rigor in qualitative research calls for brief discussion of three important standards of *credibility*, *dependability*, and *confirmability* (Denzin, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility refers to the congruency of the researcher's interpretation of participant statements and the perspective of the participant. The researcher should reflect the participant's perspectives more than his or her own biases (Gilgun, 2005). The aim of credibility is reflected in the question: "Are my interpretations faithful to what my informants are telling me?" (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992, p. 28). Strategies to

⁵ In connection with authoritative and authoritarian processes in our sample, we have previously reported that "a number of youth from more traditional faiths (Jehovah's Witnesses, Latter-day Saints, Muslims, Orthodox Jews) expressed that they felt a duty to obey their parents." However, "parents from both traditional and progressive faith communities reported that they understood the value of transactional conversation processes over a more hierarchical or preachy or parent-centered approach" (Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008, pp. 627-634).

improve credibility include persistent observation (Dienhart, 1998), peer debriefing (Schwandt, 2001), and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All three of these were utilized in the present project.

Dependability is concerned with the consistency, stability, and accuracy of an instrument over time. The fundamental issue is that changes in instrument design have a readable, coherent trail. For this study, a semi-structured question instrument was developed. Although the interviewers were not solely constrained to the questions on the interview schedule, the schedule served as a perennial structure from which to work throughout the project.

Confirmability is a call for data-based documentation of results, consistent with the ideal of objectivity. Confirmability also refers to the degree to which results can be confirmed by others (Trochim, 2001). Although some researchers disagree with the ontological and epistemological bases of the objectivist ideal (Slife & Williams, 1995), regardless of where one aligns herself/himself in the subjectivity vs. objectivity debate, all data should be traceable and confirmable to the original source. In compliance with this standard, data reported in this article are available in audio and verbatim transcription formats. This practice is consistent with the recommendation of establishing a data audit trail (Schwandt, 2001). Further, after transcription, participants were given copies of the transcripts of their own to confirm accuracy in transcription.

Coding and analysis: A team-based approach

Collecting and transcribing in-depth interview data from 445 diverse participants was a significant task. These efforts yielded roughly 5,000 double-spaced page data set which presented an increasingly daunting task of coding and analysis. Two of the authors developed a team-based approach to qualitative analysis for coding large data sets (Dollahite & Marks, 2004). This team-based approach has been effective and has yielded several recent publications (e.g., Dollahite & Marks, 2009; Marks & Dollahite, 2011; Marks, Dollahite, & Barker, 2011; Marks, Dollahite, & Baumgartner, 2010; Marks, Dollahite, & Dew, 2009). Given spatial constraints, we offer a brief overview of the team-based approach here (for additional information please contact the third author).

The first stage of team-based approach to qualitative analysis involved training a team of nine outstanding students (and later an additional team of five) to do *open coding*, consistent with the early steps of the grounded theory approach developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The nine members were divided into three teams of three members

each. Members of each team, working individually and independently, would perform open coding on corresponding interviews each week. They would meet together weekly and alternately "lead out" on a given page of an interview, indicating the concepts that s/he had open coded. Other members of the team consented with, dissented from, or supplemented the codes and concepts presented by the "leader" for that page. The responsibility to "lead out" rotated on each page. Inter-rater reliability was approximately 85 percent on these three-person teams with some variation.

As open coding progressed across interviews and time, several themes emerged from the qualitative data.⁶ Separate document files for emergent themes were developed. Qualitative data excerpts from interviews that related to each theme were copied and pasted to the respective files, but team consensus was required for an excerpt to be added. These consensus-based theme files offer pages of primary data-based support for the central themes identified by the teams (Schwandt, 2001). Three of the core concepts throughout our project were *spiritual beliefs*, *religious practices*, and *faith community*. Data were revisited to determine if participants directly and indirectly discussed "meaning making" in connection with two related questions. First, was meaning making evident in connection with all three dimensions of religious faith (*beliefs*, *practices*, and *communities*)? Second, if meaning making is evident, *why* and *how* was religion meaningful?

Findings

In general, meaning making was abundantly evident across all three dimensions of religious experience – a finding that was not surprising given the highly religious sample.

The following three themes are presented: (1) Meaning Making and Spiritual Beliefs: "Faith is the only thing that satisfies that hunger"; (2) Meaning Making and Religious Practices: "We fit our life into our religion, not our religion into our life"; and (3) Meaning Making and Faith Community: "Our church family is just like family." In connection with each theme, several supporting examples from the data are offered to convey the participants' voices on their experiences.

⁶ Our open coding efforts were intended as a foundation and precursor to drawing connections (axial coding) and relating categories to each other (selective coding) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Meaning making and spiritual beliefs: "Faith is the only thing that satisfies that hunger"

Some individuals hold spiritual and religious beliefs, but these beliefs are secondary or tertiary to the way they conduct their lives. That said, Miller and Thoresen (2003) report that religion is "the single most important influence in [life]" for "a substantial minority" (p. 25). Our sample of highly religious families reflects this latter orientation, where spiritual belief is not a peripheral concern but the *axis mundi* or center of meaning for the individual's life (Eliade, 1959). For example, a Christian father of four, summarized:

Either you believe this stuff or you don't, and if you do and if you have a faith that is meaningful and alive... then [religious faith] is the most important thing that exists. If it's not [true], it's the most important lie that exists. I am basing my life and my future and eternity on the fact that this is true.... The whole way I construct my understanding of who I am is based in my relationship to God. Really, without that I don't know who I am.... In relation to Him, *I'm His child*.

Similarly, a Latter-day Saint, mother of six, stated:

The [most important spiritual] belief I have [as an individual and as a parent is] that we are literal spirit children of our Father in Heaven and that He knows each one of us.... He knows what our challenges are, He knows what our strengths are, and He loves us unconditionally.... Knowing that we have a Heavenly Father who cares even more about us than we care about our own children is a real strength. There is nothing that we will face in this life that we can't overcome with Him.

This woman's husband also commented on the "profound impact" of "knowing [he is] a child of God."

Our faith teaches us who we are and it teaches us something very different from what the world teaches us and that has a profound impact on our lives, the things we choose to do, the way we choose to spend our time, the circles that we get drawn into, and the circles that we stay out of. I think that knowing [I am] a child of God and that I am not just a biological aberration ... has had a profound impact on me and on the things I have wanted to do. My faith tells me far more than world tells me about who I am.

For many of our study's participants, a belief in a "father God" was reportedly fundamental to their meaning making. Muslims, by contrast,

believe that "Allah...begets not, nor is He begotten" (The Qur'an, Surrah 112). While not necessarily viewing Allah as a father, several Muslims did report a belief in a heavenly home. When one Muslim participant and father of two was asked why he believes in God, he responded by relating this Arabic story:

A Bedouin, who believed in God was asked by a man who did not believe, "Why do you believe in God? What can you tell me? How did you get to this realization?" The Bedouin said, "When I leave my camel in the desert, it goes back to where it came from. That tells me there is a God."

Harmonizing thoughts were shared by a Latino father, who is a Catholic and a physician:

[A desire to believe in God] is innate, it's intuitive.... It's a hunger, and [a relationship with God] is what satisfies that hunger.... As you go through life and its steps, you seek fulfillment. We would say, "When we finish med school it'll be great. When I finish residency, it'll be great. When I get my own practice, it'll be great." ...But ["making it"] is not what satisfies the longing.... Faith is the only thing that satisfies that hunger and that longing that seems insatiable.

This individual's brief narrative of his life as a medical student, then resident, and (finally) prominent physician raises a less than triumphal strain for the conquest of "making it." His admission that career success "is not what satisfies the longing" resonates with what Viktor Frankl (1984) referred to as "the existential vacuum."

Several participants reported an internal battle over the appeal of money in "the world" on one hand, and their professed spiritual beliefs and priorities on the other. A Greek Orthodox family who contributed very generously to their church nevertheless revealed:

T: Money ... [is an obstacle]....Because I love it.

A: [T]hat's one of the obstacles.

T: [I admit it. I struggle with] not being too materialistic ... wanting the new car all the time. I still want a new car.... [but] do I need a new car? That's the question of the day.

Perhaps no narrative captured the tension between the existential vacuum and meaningful belief with more richness than the rich reflection of a Jewish father:

I stood there [at my son's] bar mitzvah and I couldn't stop thinking how, wherever my [late] father was, that he would be very proud.... I felt very complete on that day. And what I did for a living ... what kind of car [I] drive, what kind of house [I] live in, [that all seemed so insignificant]. [T]he only things that seem to be important are the essential things, your *family*. You know, it's funny, I [now] call it my deathbed test: *[W]hat do you think about when you're on your deathbed...* Probably [for me, it will] be that image of my son [at his bar mitzvah]. I think I'll dwell much upon [that].... [T]here are certain aspects of our existence that tie us all together, that equalize us all.

These participants' spiritual beliefs seemed to help fill the existential vacuum linked to materialism and encourage a sense of meaning. Beliefs afford several alternatives for seeing the meaning of occurrence; therefore, religiousness may shape appraised meaning (Park, 2006). Belief, however, is often a point of commencement—subsequent behaviors matter immensely. Burr, Marks, and Day (2011) reported that extant qualitative data seem to indicate that when behavior is consistent with one's beliefs, mental and physical health escalate—but when behavior is inconsistent with an individual's beliefs, there is often a detrimental impact on the individual, her/his marriage, and family. Though an individual's belief system may contribute to a search for meaning in life, it is likely that the practices she engages in (or avoids) will determine whether spiritual beliefs are a source or grief, pain, and guilt, or a beneficial foundation for meaning making.

Meaning making and religious practices: "We fit our life into our religion, not our religion into our life"

As mentioned, religious practices (e.g., prayer, scripture study) are typically manifestations of faith traditions (Dollahite & Marks, 2009; Yanez, Edmondson, Stanton, Park, Kwan, & Ganz, 2009). When asked how much time was spent involved in faith-related activities and religious practices, a Muslim mother of two responded:

Every minute of every day we devote to faith. Our religion is our way of life. We fit our life into our religion, not [our] religion into our life.

For many of the participants, religion is not something one "practices"—religion embodies the determination to become what their God wants them to be. Even so, practice is a necessary and fundamental part of the process of reaching for religious ideals and finding meaning. Although Dollahite and Marks' (2009) definition of religious practices explicitly

mentions activities such as prayer, a number of participants reflected on a broader and more integral form of religious practice that has to do with living one's life according to one's belief. Religious practice defined as such has greater salience and meaning within the context of participants' lives. An African Methodist and father of three revealed:

It's not what you do in the building... because we can clap the right "Hallelujah" and say the right words and everybody sees, but when no one that's in your church sees you, how are you acting then? Hmmm? ... Are you living the ... walk of faith ... or are you living like the world's living? I can't say it any [plainer] than that... *Are you practicing what you preach?*

The importance of "practicing what you preach" or behavior-belief congruence was identified as a teaching tool in parenting by several participants (Marks, 2004). A Chinese Christian couple described their current situation as parents of a teenager:

Husband: Christians should be good examples on earth for God. [Their] marriage and family should be testimonies for God.

Wife: God is love. My son is in puberty, he is sort of strange, easily irritated, and I told [my husband] to spend more time to be with him and [show him that] we do care for him. God is love; we should care about our own family members.

Husband: We should give good testimonies on earth [through the way we live, so that we] do not make God ashamed. [We should] practice not to be angry. [We should] love others, [the] husband and wife [must] love each other ... this will be a good testimony.

A Korean Christian father further reflected on this issue of modeling beliefs in connection with his young son: "I can't really 'teach' ... we have to *show* him by what we do during our life. If we do very well for God and other people, then he will know what he has to do." Shared experiences from women and men across faiths captured this same theme—that *living out* one's professed beliefs is the "practice" that matters most as parents teach children. Further, many made both negative and positive references to past generations in relation to child-rearing. A Jewish father of two recalls that as a child and teenager, he observed and was frustrated by his parents' hypocrisy in practicing religion publicly but not privately. He continued:

But then I look at someone like my grandfather. He never changed.... Some people go to synagogue and act holy and then

go home and revert to their own lives. But ... my grandfather never put on a front for anyone, he didn't *act* spiritual in synagogue, he *was* spiritual.... When he prayed ... it went *through* everybody.... I looked at my grandfather and he was religious, I mean *very* religious. ... [T]hroughout his life he lived right to the letter of the law, custom wise, kept kosher, the whole bit. And I looked at his spirituality and his commitment with awe.... Now [in our family] we say prayers before dinner every night... that way we'll remember him for eternity."

For this participant, his grandfather's spiritual and religious devotion and seamless integration of belief and practice were poignant. The practice of prayer is sacred and meaningful to this participant, not only because of a connection with God, but also because of a connection with his grandfather and his legacy of faith.

The religious practice of prayer was often associated with meaning and influence by the participants. However, prayer served varied purposes for different participants. For a Puerto Rican Pentecostal father, prayer is a coping and crisis management tool:

[When] a crisis would come, we'd feel that we'd need to pray together, we[d] feel that there's a lack of communication between us. As a matter of fact that happened recently. So we pray together. When we feel that something's trying to divide [us] ... we'll pray together ... [and] it strengthens [us], or at least alleviates the problem.

A Korean American mother of two was dealing with the challenges of a newborn child (her second) when her husband was laid off from his job. Her preferred form of prayer was song. She explained, "When it is a difficult time, I sing for God and I feel [much] better inside." Note that this mother does not say that she sings "about" God but uses the relationship-laden phrase, "I sing *for* God." For a Christian mother, prayer is also deeply personal and relational:

I think it all comes down to our personal relationship with [God] and that has to come on an individual basis. Just like any other friendship, if you want to get know someone you need to spend time (with them). You need to focus on them, and listen to them and talk to them and let them into your heart. It's the same thing with God... God is someone who is alive and *real* and wants to be a part of our life... When you get to that point, when you realize that He cares about you as a person and that He's *real*... that is the beginning (of a different kind of life).

For a Jewish mother, the Sabbath ritual and prayers are both personal and familial. These prayers bring a sense of inner peace as well as loved connection with family members.

When we take the time out, when we light the candles Friday night, that's a time that I feel really close to (my children)... It's a chance for everyone to sit down and to breathe and to think about these things before we get to eating. ... And after we say the blessing . . . it's welcoming in the Sabbath which has a meaning of its own. And then afterwards, I always say a prayer of thanks for my children.... When we sit across the table from each other, my husband and I, and the Sabbath candles are lit, and I see the kids, there is something I get from that that is *so deep*. It's just a feeling that [all is right in the world] ... it doesn't matter what else is going on. Right in that circle ... it's awe-inspiring.

A 17-year old Jewish girl explained further:

[Shabbas] means that I don't have to worry about the usual things. The rest of the week [is a] totally different time. We have Shabbas, and that's Shabbas—[it is] different. We don't have to worry about the rest of the world. The rest of the world goes on, but we're here with our family and our religion. That's just ... it's our time.

While a Muslim father described evening prayer in a similar manner:

We have five prayers a day [in Islam]... and once a day I get the kids to pray with me, in the evening time.... This is the central activity for our daily life. We start our day in the morning with a prayer, we pray all during the day, and there's one in the evening time.... [At prayer time, we say to] the kids, "Let's quit the TV, and pray." ... [So at] the end of the day I have my kids around me and [I] thank God that they are healthy and safe.

The above examples from the participants reflect meanings of the religious practice of prayer from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim perspectives. Prayer is salient to these participants in numerous ways and contexts, including: crisis management, personal coping, marital conflict resolution, personal time with God, the unifying of family, and the faith-based offering of thanks and gratitude. In-depth investigation is necessary to better understand the diversity of connections between meaning making, spirituality, and religious experience (Marks & Dollahite, 2011). Further, in spite of the variability of purposes, expressions, and styles of

prayer, the religious practice of praying is deeply meaningful at personal, marital, and familial levels for these participants.

Meaning making and faith community: "Our church family is just like family"

Participant narratives reveal that meaning is not simply an internal process involving beliefs and personal practice but can evolve in relation to one's religious community or place of worship. An African American father, who became involved in his faith community during his late-thirties, shared a literal "in-the-church" example:

One Sunday I [finally] went to church with my wife.... I went to the service and the preacher man was preaching the word of God and I felt as though he was talking to me. Not that he was, but I felt that it was for me ... and the word engulfed me so much that I knew ... that that was [the beginning of] my [new] life. [Shedding tears] You have to forgive me, I get emotional when I talk about the Lord because He's all that to me.... It changed my life right then and there....my life hasn't been the same since.... I'm glad it happened because before this I was walking down a dark and endless road that wasn't going to end on a good note.

A similar narrative was shared by a Chinese Christian father whose family struggled after immigrating to the United States from China. This individual, who converted after immigrating, reflected:

There are lots of sisters and brothers and pastors that helped us during this period of time. It was difficult to rely on ourselves. We received help from elder sisters and brothers who provided us [with] suggestions. We are changing gradually. We began to change after the Lord went into our family. It is really God who saved our family, our faith is very important. There is a song "God is Love," [our church family has shown us that].

This participant's descriptive language of "sisters and brothers" from his faith community resonated with both the language and the tone of narratives of several participants who similarly benefitted from or were blessed by their religious community, particularly during times of challenge, crisis, and loss. In the same vein, a Christian mother, explained:

My church family is very important to me because they're like family, *they're like real family*. ... It's amazing, because whenever I have a different problem or something else happens, it's a dif-

ferent person or someone else that helps out or takes a special interest. And when I was going through a really, really, really bad financial time, I never ever had to wait for anything, because someone was always there helping out...

A Latter-day Saint father of eight shared a related narrative:

I remember the time [in the 1970s] our washing machine gave out, we had three kids in [cloth] diapers and I didn't [even] have money to have the thing fixed, and I certainly didn't have money for a new one. [M]y wife came home from running the errands...and there was a washing machine sitting on the porch with a hundred dollar bill in the envelope taped to the lid, [and] boxes [of laundry detergent] from church. We don't know [exactly who] it came from ... [but] we probably would have found out had we done the detective work. But my assessment of that was that there are some miracles that are so sacred that to check to see whose fingerprints on the lock to the windows of Heaven is sacrilege.

A Christian mother in economic straits shared the following:

[When it looked bad for us], another church member stood right behind me and said...he would be there to help us out if our house ever [was at risk].... I knew that he would take care of us and nothing would happen as far as our home. [I felt] like God put [me] in the place to [have someone] take care of me!

In addition to material support, individuals related the importance of the emotional and psychological support they received from their faith communities. The African American couple explains:

Husband: Our church family always encourages us.... A few months ago, when we had the [car] accident, [they] sent food, tons of food, prayed for me, [sent] cards. And although you're going through this [trial], you realize that God has sent somebody to help comfort you. Although He comforts you, he also sends [more] people to physically comfort you through that time.

Wife: [Our] church family is oftentimes just like family. So, even if you're going through something and you're not even being specific with them about what it is, then they'll pray for you and it gives you a source of comfort.

Like this couple another African American woman talked about how her church supported her family through the death of her mother:

What helped me get through [my mother's death] was my church family and my natural family. My church family is important because they're there for you, and anything, you know, any problem that you go to them with, somebody is there with encouraging words, with encouraging acts and deeds, just being doers of the Word.

"Church family" relationships are not valued solely as coping resources. Participants mentioned that their faith communities are also available to help members celebrate births and weddings—to share the joy and meaning of these events. In short, like family ties of blood, these relationships involve the experiences of cherishing the best *and* coping with the worst that life has to offer. A mother, reflecting on struggles she witnessed her siblings go through in their lives, said:

You know, people tend to isolate themselves from the rest of the family [when they are in a state of depression], which is stressful for the rest of the family [meaning both "church family" and biological family]. I think one of the worst things that they do is, *they give up on faith....* [My brother] stopped going to church, probably stopped praying. The worst thing that people could do is stop going to church, lose contact with their faith, not staying in contact with those people that would normally be a support mechanism for them, and then [instead, turning to] things like drugs and alcohol and violence.

While assimilation is the process of rebuilding preexisting beliefs when trauma-relevant information is harmonious with those beliefs, accommodation is the process of building new world views when the supposed world is modified to "accommodate" and account for the trauma-related information (Payne, Joseph, & Tudway, 2007). The impending psychological results are (a) assimilation, (b) positive accommodation, or (c) negative accommodation (Payne et al., 2007). We have posited, like Annie, that authentic religious experience seems to "move those involved toward the divine and the transcendent—and, perhaps, away from the crippling effects of anomie, meaninglessness, and existential vacuum that have concerned several giants of social science over the past century" (Marks, Dollahite, & Barker, 2011, p. 200). Research shows that belongingness is an elemental component of finding meaning in life (Stillman & Baumeister, 2009). While faith community involvement is not a panacea, empirical data link such involvement with greater longevity, mental health, physical health, and social support (Hummer, Rogers, Nam, & Ellison, 1999; Koenig et al., 2001).

Although the receipt of support is a benefit of faith communities, participants also highlighted the meaning received through their giving to others. One Latter-day Saint father of six had spent hundreds of hours in voluntary counseling with members of his faith community during the previous five years. Instead of talking about the related sacrifices, however, he mentioned two meaningful "blessings" he felt he had received during this service:

[First:] I think when we work with people, it helps us to keep our own struggles in a better perspective and they don't become a burden, just a part of life. We see so many other people, and we're just glad we're not in their shoes.

[Second:] I personally believe that people are at their happiest when they're serving others, no matter who they are.... I've asked [lots of] people, "What's been the most rewarding thing you've ever done?" Very seldom do they [say], It was the day I completed my degree or this, that, or the other. It nearly always focuses on doing things for people. Really, that's what service in the church ... is based on. Doing things for other people, [going] outside yourself.

A Jewish mother of two similarly expressed:

[I]t's a real comfort to feel like you've provided a meal for someone or given money for good cause or you have put on a service that people have enjoyed or you've helped the kids to learn something. You walk away from that feeling a sense of accomplishment and that all is right with your little part of the world, that you did your piece. It may be stressful while it's going on but in the end ... the majority of the time you walk away feeling comforted.

A Korean Christian mother actually complained that she was not able to serve as much as she would like in her new congregation.

I had two Bible studies a week and every Friday I served my group dinner in my home. ... We did a lot together. ... I was very happy there. They needed me and I needed them.... Here I [am not] needed by anybody. They are always busy with their jobs. I don't have the friends, I don't have the Bible study, I don't have anybody to serve.... I am here alone.... They were like my family, like my sisters and brothers and father. I miss them.

This woman's apparent longing to engage in service to others reflects Taylor's (1992) idea that service to one's community and God is of criti-

cal importance to the development of a meaningful sense of self. Frankl (1984) further argued that each individual is responsible for creating their own meaning in life.

In summary, meaning is found through spiritual beliefs, religious practices, and faith community. For these participants "faith satisfies the hunger" for meaning and life purpose.

Study Limitations

This study, in spite of its large sample representing all eight major regions of the U.S., is not generalizable. The purposive, non-probability sampling techniques used served the purpose of deep exploration as opposed to generalizability (Daly, 2007). As a result, this study cannot make definitive clinical implications but instead provides findings that typically concur with, but add depth to, current theoretical and empirical research on clinical applications to the dimensions of religion. Notably, the sample did not include families who reported severance of their relationships with God or grievous failure of faith communities or who were antagonistic towards religion. An additional limitation was that the marriage/remarriage-based sample did not include currently single, separated, or divorced parents—so more research is needed on these populations (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004).

Implications for Counselling

Current research shows that religion-accommodative treatment is likely to be more effective than traditional treatment in working with highly religious clients with a preference of treatment consistent with their spiritual and religious viewpoints (Prochaska & Norcross, 2010). Research shows that 95% of wedded couples and parents in the US report a religious affiliation (Duba & Watts, 2009; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). The law of 95 states that the finding that nearly 95% of Americans surveyed claimed a belief in God justifies the need for scientific research on religion (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). For individuals who value and seek to integrate their religious beliefs, practices, and communities into a life of meaning, a culturally competent counsellor's sensitivity and awareness of these influences can facilitate mutual understanding and effective treatment. The research available to practitioners, however, often does not include best practices for clients who do not hold spiritual or religious beliefs and so this concern remains to be empirically explored (D'Andrea & Sprenger, 2007).

Implications relating to spiritual beliefs

Faith resources should be implemented only with appropriate care and only when requested by the client. Marks (2004) indicates that one method of initiating a discussion that may reveal relevant or helpful information may be for the therapist to assess at the point of intake whether religious/spiritual beliefs are salient factors in the life of the client.

Counsellors can address a client's longing for meaning (often divine meaning) through the exploration of their belief systems including a review of the forces that serve as stumbling blocks in their relationships with God and others and what vision the client has of God (Curry, 2009). These concepts may be equally applicable to those newly exposed to faith as to individuals and couples with a long-standing integrated faith. In the current study some participants experienced the development of faith (e.g., religious conversion) during adulthood as they attempted to find additional meaning in life.

Due to the reality that many Americans report religion as "the single most important influence in life," failure of the therapist to mention religion may be considered not solely an omission, but may be looked upon as a rejection, which may in turn devalue and discourage the client from assessing personal beliefs and chosen practices (Marks, 2008). However counselors have to assess their competence for and comfort in the delivery of religious/spiritual interventions. For example, research suggests that counselors, whose religious beliefs differ from those of their clients should make referrals when requested by clients to clergy or other counsellors competent and willing to serve in fulfilling the clients' spiritual needs (Remley & Herlihy, 2010). Therapists must clarify their views, their level of comfort in satisfying the expectations of highly religious clients, and their ability to make referrals (Duba & Watts, 2009).

Implications related to religious practices

Participants in the current study reported finding meaning in striving to be what God wants them to be. In particular, some participants strived for belief-behavior congruence in the domain of religion/spirituality. Cognitive-behavioral approaches may help to address incongruities between belief and behaviour (e.g., valuing patience, but exhibiting a "short fuse"). Marks (2008) suggested specific practices such as prayer can be used with interested clients to prevent them from turning to a malignant or destructive coping behavior such as abuse, drinking, gambling, violence, and other harmful conduct that are self-destructive or

counter to individual's beliefs. Internal struggles may result from the tensions people experience between the virtues they espouse, their feelings, and their actual behavior (Hill & Pargament, 2008). Research is needed to establish best practices in targeting congruence, including establishing a dialogue on biblical teachings, which discourages maladaptive behaviors that may contribute to problems (Duba & Watts, 2009).

Further, practices such as a prayer may serve as effective tools in treatment if these practices are applied in ways that seem beneficial for softening the hearts of couples, facilitating conflict resolution, and reducing and preventing problems (Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002). Current research shows that a therapist who is comfortable with the use of prayer during therapy should do so only by request of the client, when self-worth and boundaries on behalf of the client are strong, and when prayer will enhance treatment goals (Remley & Herlihy, 2010).

Implications related to faith community

Another vital part of the counselling process may involve identifying available resources, including a client's faith community, when appropriate, that could help to build psychological health and well-being. In fact, behavioural models suggest that environmental influences (such as community) are crucial factors underlying the learning process (Erk, 2008). Integrating a client's faith community into treatment does not necessarily require the building of new behavior, but rather the re-shaping of existing behavior (Sullivan & Karney, 2008). Counsellors however need to be sensitive to the potential negative as well as positive influences of faith community. For example, couples may find meaning and appreciation in the assistance received from their faith communities under certain circumstances while at other times, couples may feel deep hurt and frustration when their communities do not meet their expectations (Marks & Dollahite, 2001). Social exclusion (from a faith community) may also intimidate individuals at such a fundamental level that it could damage the person's perception of a meaningful existence (Stillman & Baumeister, 2009).

Such risks, research indicates that commitment to one's faith community can be a rewarding experience when used therapeutically for clients interested in such involvement. Frankl (1984) emphasized the significance of helping others in an individual's ability to gain a deeper level of personal meaning. Yet, the giving to others needs to be balanced with self-care. Burr et al. (2011) reported that sacrificing with moderate amounts of self-neglect is directly correlated to family benefits but that excessive self-neglect is associated with poor mental and physical health. Marks (2005) similarly cautions against excessive volunteer

time that separates spouses. Therefore, counsellors may need to address the levels of church-related involvement made and the impact on the family. In summary, additional research is needed to provide best practices for the counselor to remain sensitive to the clients' needs in processing religious and spiritual issues while remaining aware of his or her own biases and limitations (Rose, Westefeld, & Ansley, 2008).

Conclusion

While previous research has indicated a connection between meaning-making and adjustment to stressful experiences, the present study has allowed a deeper understanding of religion-based sources of meaning. Participants found, created, and maintained meaning through their experiences across the three dimensions of spiritual beliefs, religious practices, and faith community involvement. Such results concur with Park's (2005b) assessment that "the relationship between religion and meaning is intimate and complex" (p. 295). First, spiritual beliefs may bring purpose to life not only through personal victories but also through suffering and challenges. Second, religious/spiritual practices that are grounded in and motivated by sacred beliefs may impact the individual's ultimate search for meaning by reducing the discrepancy between global and situational meaning. Third, faith communities that serve as "families" may have a profoundly meaningful influence through ensuring that individuals and families have human connection and support, during both the strains and successes of life. A rich community context that promotes reciprocity in the giving and receiving of support brings meaning to both the benefactor and beneficiary. Nietzsche remarked that "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*" (cf. Frankl, 1984, p.97). For many participants in this study, religious and spiritual beliefs, practices, and faith communities provided several poignant "whys."

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