

How Religiosity Helps Couples Prevent, Resolve, and Overcome Marital Conflict*

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Abstract: This study reports on in-depth interviews with 57 highly religious, middle-aged married couples representing the major Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) residing in New England and Northern California. The study uses grounded theory methods to create themes and a model describing the ways that religiosity influences marital conflict. Couples reported that religiosity affects the conflict in their marriage at three phases of the conflict process: (a) problem prevention, (b) conflict resolution, and (c) relationship reconciliation. Practitioners may assist religious couples that are struggling with marital conflict by encouraging them to look to religious beliefs and practices.

Key Words: conflict, marriage, prevention, reconciliation, religiosity, resolution.

Conflict between people in meaningful human relationships, such as marriage, is inevitable (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). Scholars have suggested that “religion offers couples theologically grounded guidelines for methods to handle marital conflict when it erupts” (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003, p. 223).

Indeed, research findings have generally concluded that there is a strong, positive relationship between religiosity and reduced marital conflict (e.g., Curtis & Ellison, 2002). The purpose of this study was to discover the “hows and whys” of this relationship (Dollahite & Marks, 2005).

Hackney and Sanders (2003) noted that there exist several definitions of religiosity. For the purposes of this study, we define religiosity as a person’s spiritual beliefs, religious practices, and involvement with a faith community. Examples of spiritual beliefs include belief in the eternal nature of marriage; examples of religious practices include prayer and study of scripture. Aspects of religious involvement include attendance at religious meetings, participation in other faith community activities, or making financial contributions to a faith community.

The two research questions that directed this study were (a) Do highly religious couples perceive that their religious beliefs and practices influence conflict in their marriage? and (b) To what extent and, specifically, how does religiosity affect marital conflict?

Background and Significance

The existing literature on marital conflict is enormous; yet, only a few studies have specifically measured the impact of religion on marital conflict (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994; Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Dudley & Kosinski, 1990). In addition, extant research has tended to be limited in scope because it typically provides only a “distal” (i.e., more superficial) measure of religiosity and conflict (Mahoney et al., 1999) yielding limited insight regarding aspects involved in the process of the relationship between religiosity and marital conflict. Qualitative data, focusing specifically on religious couples, are needed to elucidate specific ways that religiosity may help couples effectively manage marital conflict.

Thomas and Cornwall (1990) remarked that research examining religious practices and their specific

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effects in relationship systems was needed. More specifically, Curtis and Ellison (2002) noted that the possible role of religious factors in shaping long-range trajectories of marital conflict, quality, and disruption remains woefully understudied. Also, little research on religion has discussed how and why religiosity impacts marriage and family relations (Dollahite & Marks, 2005).

Religiosity and Marital Conflict

Religion can be a source of significant marital conflict if couples are not united in religious matters. Curtis and Ellison (2002) found that disparities in religious attendance patterns were consistently linked with more frequent marital disagreements. Call and Heaton (1997) reported that the risk of marital dissolution was nearly three times greater when the wife regularly attended religious services but the husband never attended. Ellison, Bartkowski, and Anderson (1999) found that religious dissimilarity was associated with a heightened risk of domestic violence. In general, some data have indicated a connection between certain expressions of religiosity and undesirable outcomes, including authoritarianism, abuse, and tolerance for abuse (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). These findings are important because they demonstrate that religion can be a source of discord in marriage, particularly in the absence of religious congruence.

Conversely, religion may be a resource to resolve marital conflict. Unified religious participation in couples was associated with greater conflict resolution (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990). Brody et al. (1994) also found similar results for rural African American couples. This association may be partly because of spousal similarities promoted by religious homogeneity, which are conducive to a more stable and satisfying marriage (Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). Scanzoni and Arnett (1987) found that through public and private religious activities, partners often cultivated a sense of purpose and values centered on loving and caring. Perhaps, religious participation enhances those relational qualities that reduce marital conflict.

A study by Curtis and Ellison (2002) revealed that men's religious attendance had a modest inverse association with the frequency of marital arguments. In addition to religious attendance, couple prayer has been found to decrease negativity, contempt, and hostility, as well as emotional reactivity toward one's partner (Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002). Finally, other studies (e.g., Holeman, 2003) have shown the role

of religious beliefs in helping couples forgive each other following conflict.

Although these studies demonstrated an empirical relationship between religiosity and marital conflict, they did not attempt to investigate how or why this relationship exists and left many questions unanswered. One recent qualitative study (Marsh & Dallos, 2001) partially addressed the issue of how religion may help couples deal effectively with marital conflict. They found that religious practices such as prayer helped Catholic couples to manage their anger during marital conflict. Although this study adds a new dimension to what is known about religion and anger management, qualitative research that exclusively focuses on marital conflict—and samples individuals from a broad range of religious backgrounds—is needed to elucidate possible explanations for the relationship between religiosity and marital conflict.

In addition to examining how religiosity might influence aspects of marital conflict, we were also interested in the connection between religiosity and phases of marital conflict. Several researchers have described conflict as dynamic and occurring in phases. For example, Christensen and Pasch (1993) described phases of conflict as ranging broadly from the initial conflict in interests to a return to normalcy. Other researchers have focused more narrowly in their construct of conflict phases in terms of anger escalation (Retzinger, 1997) or forgiveness (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000). Our approach was more fluid in that we defined conflict processes as emergent and did not define particular phases a priori. Rather, consistent with a grounded theory approach, conflict dynamics were defined by the participants, and thematic interpretation was the basis of any delineated conflict phases. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the influence of religiosity relative to marital conflict processes among couples who share a religious faith. Qualitative methods were utilized in order to gather thick description regarding the various facets of religiosity and the impact of religious beliefs, practices, and involvement on couples' conflict trajectories.

Methods

Participants

Participants were interviewed by the second author in New England (2002) and in Northern California

(2004). Consistent with Boss' (1980) proposition that much can be learned by using a sample at the extreme of the variable of interest, we sought a purposive sample (Berg, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) of highly religious families. The goal was to recruit participants that were united in their involvement in a faith community, regardless of denomination. Participants were obtained through referrals and recommendations from 38 leaders of Christian, Jewish, and Islamic communities for members of their congregation they considered especially involved. Additionally, our criteria for sampling also involved the desire to reach a sufficient number of participants to achieve "conceptual saturation"; that is, after a certain number of interviews, additional couples are mainly repeating what others have reported (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

The sample consisted of 57 married heterosexual couples representing each of the three major monotheistic or Abrahamic faiths (i.e., Christianity, Judaism, Islam). Mean ages of the husbands and wives were 48 and 45, respectively. Of the 57 couples, 48 were Caucasian and 9 (16%) were ethnic minorities (2 African American, 4 Caucasian/Hispanic, 2 East Indian, and 1 Malaysian/Caucasian). The sample was well educated with a mean educational level of 17 years for husbands and 16 years for wives. Couples had been married for an average of 21 years. On average, participants attended religious services once a week and contributed about 7% of their income to their faith communities and other religious causes.

Couples represented the following faith groups: (a) 6 Catholic, (b) 12 Jewish, (c) 4 Muslim, (d) 12 New Christian Traditions (Christian Science, Jehovah's Witness, Latter-day Saint, Seventh-day Adventist, Friends), (e) 12 Mainline Protestant (Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Methodist), (f) 8 Evangelical Protestant (Baptist, Charismatic Episcopal, Orthodox Presbyterian, Missionary Alliance, Pentecostal), and (g) 3 Orthodox Christian (2 Greek Orthodox, 1 Orthodox Church in America—formerly Russian Orthodox).

Methodology

To achieve desired depth of information, "intensive interviewing" (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) was employed to encourage couples to discuss various aspects of the linkage between religiosity and marriage. Interviews typically lasted 1 hr. Couples were asked 15 questions, including one direct question about religiosity and conflict ("All couples have some

conflict. Are there ways that your religious beliefs or practices *help avoid or reduce marital conflict?*"). However, couples also discussed marital conflict in response to other questions. Proposed questions were reviewed by faculty and students for face validity and then pilot tested with three couples; minor revisions were made on the basis of this feedback. In addition to questions which were asked of all couples, follow-up questions were asked if clarification was needed. Leading questions were carefully avoided (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, all participant names were replaced with pseudonyms.

All couple interviews were conducted with both spouses present. We consider it sound practice for qualitative research on marital *interaction* to interview couples together as this allows the cocreation of meaning. We also concur with Babbie (2004) that interviewing people together "frequently brings out aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and would not have emerged from interviews with individuals" (p. 303). Also, Seymour, Dix, and Eardley (1995) stated that joint interviewing reveals different kinds of knowledge held by each person and produces more complete data as interviewees fill one another's gaps and memory lapses.

We recognize that many scholars advocate interviewing spouses separately to encourage greater honesty and to be sensitive to issues of gender and power (cf. Seymour et al., 1995). We concur that this is often the preferred approach; however, for this study, we chose to interview couples together for the following reasons: (a) to allow spouses to discuss their relationship—including conflicts—together and thus be able to remind and correct each other and complement each other's perspectives and (b) to be sensitive to diverse cultural and religious beliefs and practices regarding women being alone with male interviewers (as was the case for Muslim and some Orthodox Jewish couples).

Nonetheless, a limitation of this approach was that some wives or husbands may have been less than fully open about their experiences or feelings because of issues around power and gender. In an attempt to address this concern, the interviewer encouraged both wives and husbands to respond to each question and to also comment on or add to each other's response. As a result, interviews included much interchange, correcting, challenging, and adding to spouse's comments. Interestingly, wives corrected or added to comments made by their spouse more often than did husbands.

Analysis

Audio taped interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy. A modified grounded theory approach was used in the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Use of grounded theory helps to construct theory anchored in the data, not in the preconceived views of the researcher. Following open coding to discover major themes in the data and axial coding to collapse themes into fewer, broader categories, a conceptual model was developed to reflect the relationship between major themes.

According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), the first phase of grounded theory is open coding when conceptual labels are given to preliminary groupings of similar occurrences. In the second phase of axial coding, efforts were made to reconstruct or deconstruct existing links between categories and subcategories. The original list of recurring themes was narrowed through (a) eliminating less prevalent or less salient themes and (b) combining closely related themes to reduce them to a more manageable number. The interviews were then revisited by the authors to make certain that they contained sufficient data to support each theme; as a result, some themes were removed. Then, attempts were made to “falsify emergent findings,” which involved searching for “negative instances” (Gilgun, 2005) in an attempt to prove initial conclusions false and determine whether or not they hold up under scrutiny. That is, once themes and initial concepts were developed, a conscious effort was made to find different or additional themes and thus disprove or falsify the initial findings. This is one way that qualitative scholars attempt to bring greater validity to their findings (Gilgun).

Results

Several patterns emerged which cast light on how these highly religious couples perceived the connection between their religion and the conflict in their marriages. Analysis indicated that religious beliefs and practices helped couples (a) prevent problems in the relationship, (b) resolve conflict, and (c) work toward relational reconciliation. The couples indicated that their religious faith and participation aided them during these three phases of conflict. Our specific framework of three distinct phases of conflict emerged from the data rather than from prior theoretical assumptions.

Qualitative scholars (LaRossa, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) have suggested identifying a “core concept” that captures the essence of the study. Strauss and Corbin explained a core concept as being an abstract phrase or conceptual idea “under which all other categories can be subsumed” (p. 146). The core concept of the present study was that *religiosity acted as a safe container for marital conflict in which conflict is prevented, resolved, and overcome*. The term “safe container” was chosen because it denotes a secure environment in which religious beliefs and practices can prevent and mediate the effects of marital conflict. Each phase of this core concept will be discussed separately; then, a conceptual model linking major themes and illustrating this core concept will be presented.

Phase I: Problem Prevention

Couples reported that the influence of religion helped them (a) cultivate a sacred vision and purpose and (b) enhance relational virtues.

Theme 1: Shared sacred vision and purpose. One of the best forms of conflict prevention for couples in the study was having a shared sacred vision and purpose. Shared vision helped to reduce marital conflict by decreasing stress levels in the marriage and unifying marital partners. Debby, a Baptist social worker shared:

I think that the more shared perspective on life that you have, the less inherent conflicts are to begin with. So, I think having a shared faith is important in that sense, in both the big picture, and hopefully, the smaller picture. But, I think for me, somehow, my faith affects how I view conflict.

Sharing religious activities together also seemed to reduce stress levels in marriage. Kari, a Missionary Alliance schoolteacher, explained it this way:

When you're both praying to the same God, He's giving you the same answers. When you're both reading the Bible that has the same answers for your marriage and life, and you're constantly being fed with these ideas and believing them. And, you're trying to follow those ideals. I think you have less stress because of feeling . . . that you're doing something that you really believe

in, and you think it's the right thing and it's good for your family. . . . And, it makes you do a lot of things together, that maybe you wouldn't normally be doing. Shared vision, that's good.

As Kari mentioned, seeking spiritual guidance through scripture and finding the same answers together helped reduce marital stress. Not only did having a shared religious background decrease the amount of stress in relationships but it also brought about relational unity by preparing couples to deal more effectively with inevitable conflict.

Theme 2: Relational virtues. Aside from unifying couples by providing a shared vision, religiosity seemed to help prevent marital conflict by fostering what we call relational virtues. Several of the couples were inspired by their religious beliefs and commitments to develop qualities that improved their relationship and reduced marital conflict. Selflessness and unconditional love were especially emphasized. Andy, a Missionary Alliance computer technician said, "I really feel the Lord's done a lot of work in certain areas of my life to make me more acceptable to Kari."

Selflessness was one of the most frequently mentioned relational virtues kindled by religious participation. Alisia, a Catholic Latino biologist, explained:

The principle, also, that we learned from God's message is not to be selfish. Be humble. And, caring for the other and giving. And, one of the messages that I remember they instilled was "the other." It's not much about your needs, but what is it you can do for others.

In addition to helping couples to become more selfless, religious belief and commitment also engendered the attribute of unconditional love crucial for conflict prevention. Todd, a Baptist educator, said:

God loves us unconditionally; and we love each other unconditionally within the human sphere So, I guess in that sense it's the example that Christ has shown us, and that's our model.

Todd's comment revealed that he believes that unconditional love was a divine attribute that he was consciously striving to develop; for him, it was a model for interacting with his spouse.

Phase II: Conflict Resolution

The term "conflict resolution," for the purposes of this study, was defined as what couples did to try to restore harmony to their relationship during active conflict. The three most common religious beliefs and practices that helped couples resolve marital conflict were (a) scriptural teachings, (b) attendance at religious services, and (c) prayer.

Theme 3: Scriptural teachings. Study participants frequently discussed scriptural teachings as something that helped them resolve conflict. Several couples mentioned that in time of conflict, they turned to scripture. Scripture also contained helpful examples of relating to others.

After naming some of the Muslim holy books (e.g., Qur'an, Hadith), Ibrahim, an Indian Muslim technical director, said, "We look at these three sources of information and try to seek guidance from these sources if we have any conflict." As couples turned to sacred texts, they often found specific teachings that helped them to work through disharmony in their marriage. Kari, a Missionary Alliance schoolteacher, explained:

If you pray, ask God for help and go read your Bible and it will tell you something totally different than you were thinking, like we need to be gentle and kind, think about others and not fight back. And seeing him work things out that sometimes seem like they're disastrous, but really they're for good later on.

Kari's comment makes it clear that scriptural teachings had a powerful influence on her and added to her capacity to mend family relationships.

Scripture also provided positive examples of relating to others. Ed, a Seventh-day Adventist senior systems analyst, explained how scriptural examples helped him resolve conflicts with his wife.

But, the important thing is that when you have an authority, a loving God in your life who you're trying to emulate, then you can go to the Word that describes his love and his way of dealing with others. And, you can measure yourself against that. And, that generally brings us back to a common ground.

Scripture became a standard for Ed and other study participants that they "measured themselves against"

in their relationships with others. Scriptural writings provided the couples with role models to “emulate.”

Theme 4: Religious attendance. Attendance at religious services helped couples to resolve conflict by changing their focus and aided them in working through serious problems by giving them needed inner strength. By attending religious services together, couples were able to change their focus from trivial arguments to what they perceived to be most important. Once this focus was altered, the causes of disagreement were often forgotten or dismissed as petty. Stuart, a Latter-day Saint dental student, described his experience:

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. . . . And so it humbles you and it makes you realize that 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.

This example illustrates the role of attendance at religious services in drawing a couples' attention away from trivial arguments to issues perceived by them to be essential. This often resulted in a positive change in the perception of one's spouse and a realization of the insignificance of the current disagreement.

When conflicts were more serious in nature, attendance at religious services provided couples with the needed strength to address and resolve the issue. Sophie, a Presbyterian retired business owner, related what happens inside her when she attends religious services during a time of marital tension.

Literally, I feel transformed within the hour that I can actually do it. There's something that happens to me where I feel better at the end of the service where I think, okay, I think I can do this now. Although I went in there mad as heck and somehow the madness floats away and those kinds of things, those verses and those passages, stories, are reminders of how we want to be kinder and gentler.

Whether the conflict was somewhat trivial or more serious, attendance at religious services helped couples

to resolve their conflict by turning their attention to more important issues or by providing the personal strength needed to resolve the problem.

Theme 5: Couple prayer. Prayer was another means of resolving marital conflict. Several couples talked about prayer alleviating anger and facilitating open communication. Anne, an Orthodox Christian homemaker, talked about how their nightly prayer ritual had often helped them to do away with anger toward each other.

If we're mad at each other, which can go on for a couple hours, but when it's getting to be bedtime and we want to go to sleep and we want to say prayers, it's pretty hard to stand in front of the icon corner and say prayers together and keep being mad at each other. So, I actually don't really remember having gone to bed mad at each other after saying prayers.

Other couples found that prayer helped facilitate open communication between them. For example Alex, a Puerto Rican Pentecostal police officer, described how prayer opened up communication between him and his wife.

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 . . . we'll pray together . . . [and] it strengthens, or at least alleviates the problem.

For these couples, prayer decreased marital conflict by reducing their expressions of anger during arguments and improving communication.

Phase III: Relational Reconciliation

For the purposes of this study, relational reconciliation was defined as the attempts couples make to heal their relationship following resolution of active conflict. A few couples mentioned prayer as a tool they used in relational reconciliation, but primarily couples prayed to resolve conflict. Religious involvement seemed to help couples reconcile by (a) increasing their commitment to relationship permanence and (b) kindling a willingness to forgive.

Theme 6: Commitment to relationship permanence. Couples reported that their religious beliefs increased their commitment to relationship permanence. “God hates divorce” or “marriage is forever” were some of the common expressions couples made regarding commitment to relationship permanence. This commitment generated a desire within couples to reconcile with each other and work through difficult times.

Those interviewed emphasized being committed to the relationship no matter what problems might arise. Jason, a Latter-day Saint religious educator, in talking about commitment in times of conflict said:

And, so it’s a commitment to, to a way of life. It’s a commitment to, not just for the here and now, it’s a commitment to make things work and not just throw our hands up in the air and say, “Well I’m not in love with you anymore; [or] if you can’t agree with that, let’s just bag this whole thing.”

Jason’s relational commitment increased because religious belief helped him see his marriage as lasting and not just for the “here and now.” Several couples concluded that because they were committed to a permanent relationship, they were much more inclined to reconcile and heal the relationship. Elisabeth, a Lutheran homemaker, expressed such an attitude.

Well, I think the one thing that we’ve decided is that marriage is forever and no one’s leaving so, you’re going to have to work this out. We’re going to have to come to some agreement because no one’s going anywhere . . . [Commitment] actually makes us do something about it instead of not dealing with it.

Kira, a Lutheran insurance broker, also expressed that her faith encouraged her “to work” and address the issues rather than avoid them: “There’s no option to be angry or bitter at each other. It forces you to work.” Thus, many of the couples in the study found that their commitment to relationship permanence, which was strengthened by their religiosity, helped them better address conflict and reconcile with their marital partner. Indeed, many of the couples stated that likely they would not have remained married without the strong commitment to marriage and the assistance in resolving conflict that religious belief and practice provided them.

Theme 7: Willingness to forgive. Religiosity fostered forgiveness through worship services, scripture, and as a reciprocation for divine forgiveness. Some couples described forgiveness as an actual part of their worship services. For example, Neil, an Orthodox Christian financial analyst, mentioned that asking one another for forgiveness before liturgy was part of his family’s Sunday routine: “We go to church in the car every Sunday. We each ask individually, each member asks every other member of the family individually for forgiveness.” Having a weekly opportunity to forgive one another appeared to reduce the marital conflict of this couple.

The couples also learned about the importance of forgiving from the scriptures. Stuart, a Latter-day Saint dental student said:

One of the basic teachings of the Savior is forgiveness so . . . if you want to be forgiven, the Bible teaches that you need to forgive other people. And, obviously we’re imperfect and we want to be forgiven, and so I think both of us bring that idea or principle into our marriage relationship, and we see that we have to be willing to forgive the other person and . . . that influences our ability to maybe forgive a little bit sooner than we normally would have because we know and believe that forgiving is a good thing, something you should do.

Finally, religious couples had an increased willingness to forgive out of gratitude for God forgiving them. Shawn, a Baptist university chaplain, explained:

Because we receive grace and forgiveness from God, we can extend that to each other. And, we also draw upon him as . . . our resource to be able to live together in a loving, gracious way.

Thus, religiosity enhanced couples’ willingness to forgive as they attended worship services, studied the scriptures, and developed a desire to forgive out of gratitude to God.

Discussion

This section presents a conceptual model and more extensive integration of the literature to demonstrate how the study’s findings relate to previous research

in the area of religion and marital conflict. Because grounded theory was utilized, we made no specific a priori hypotheses but instead presented concepts and themes we found in the data. Therefore, consistent with Matthews (2005) recommendations regarding discussion sections of studies using grounded theory, we discuss the findings in the literature that relate to or confirm the findings of this study.

Conceptual Model

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model illustrating the relationship between religious beliefs and practices and three identified phases of conflict. Couples report that religious beliefs and practices influence their marital conflict at three phases or points in time: (a) problem prevention, (b) conflict resolution, and (c) relationship reconciliation. Religious beliefs seem to influence all phases of marital conflict. In particular, couples' religious beliefs appear to influence their religious practices, which influence their shared purpose, relational virtues, commitment to permanence, and willingness to forgive. For example, participants' religious belief that they can speak to God through prayer seemed to influence their reliance on prayer as a means of resolving or overcoming marital conflict. As illustrated in Figure 1, religious beliefs and practices act as a safe container for marital conflict where it can be prevented, resolved, or overcome.

The two lines that separate prevention, resolution, and reconciliation are dotted to represent the permeable nature of these artificially imposed divisions. For example, although couples most often mentioned religious practices as being an aid in resolving conflict, a few participants talked about religious practices as helping to prevent marital conflict. This model

depicts a summation of the findings of the sample as a whole and may not apply to all faiths in the study.

In the following section, the three phases, seven themes, and connections between them, along with findings from the literature on marital conflict and religion, will be discussed.

Religiosity and Conflict Prevention

Several studies have reported various ways couples prevent marital conflict (e.g., Markman, Whitton, & Kline, 2004) but have not analyzed the specific ways religiosity can help prevent conflict in marriage. The current study provides some needed explanation for this question and is supported by the results of other studies. For example, shared religious background contributes to the shared vision of the couples in this study. Rosen-Grandon, Myers, and Hattie (2004) also found that shared vision was a quality of relationships in which conflict is managed.

Another key finding relating to conflict prevention is that couples often expressed that their religious involvement has helped them to develop conflict-detering virtues. One of the main themes identified by Dudley and Kosinski (1990) about the effects of religiosity on marriage was that religious participation helped couples more often “think of the needs of others, be more loving and forgiving, treat each other with respect, and resolve conflict” (p. 82). Other researchers have also emphasized how virtues like selflessness are important to intimacy in marriage (e.g., Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995). The current study makes a unique contribution by linking relational virtues to the prevention of conflict in marriage. Future research should seek to confirm this link.

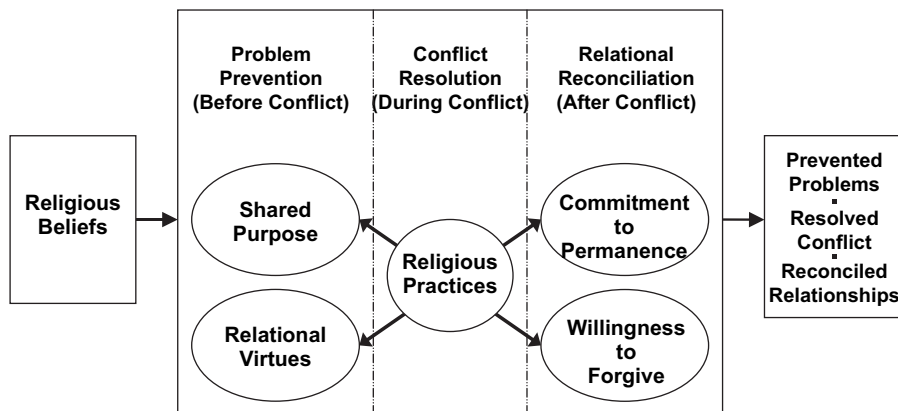


Figure 1. The Influence of Religiosity at Various Phases of Marital Conflict.

Conflict Resolution via Religious Teachings and Practices

The couples in the study utilized scriptural teachings and religious practices to resolve the conflict in their marriages. Although some studies have addressed the role of scripture as part of Christian counseling (e.g., Ripley, Worthington, & Berry, 2001), there exists a dearth of research focusing on scripture and its effect on marriage and the family. Although the current study adds to the narrow base of findings, future research should investigate not only how scripture affects marital conflict but also the role of scripture in marriage and family life for a diverse variety of religions.

The literature suggests that the most salient variables associated with marital happiness are connected to the sharing of worship activities, such as attendance at religious services. Dudley and Kosinski (1990) found that church attendance is related to an increased ability to resolve conflict. Several religious communities strongly discourage divorce, sponsor marriage enrichment programs, and offer pastoral counseling (McManus & McManus, 2003), which may partially explain why church attendance can help couples resolve conflict in marriage.

The results of the current study indicate that prayer promotes open communication in marriage. Similar to the results of this study, Butler et al. (2002) found that prayer facilitates couple empathy, increased self-change focus, and encouraged couple responsibility for reconciliation and problem solving. Also, Greenberg and Johnson (1998) found prayer to be critical to relationship softening, which facilitates conflict resolution.

Religion and Reconciliation

This study shows that commitment to permanence encourages couples to reconcile because their religion influences them not to think about the possibility of divorce but to work on their relationships. All of the couples in Holeman's (2003) study affirmed that both spouses have to be committed to the process of reconciliation to achieve renewed harmony. Therefore, the influence of religion on couples' commitment to the permanence of relationship is important for reconciliation.

Although commitment to permanence is important to beginning the process of reconciliation, the willingness to forgive one another is vital to relational

healing. Consistent with the findings in this study, Holeman (2003) found that religious couples are motivated to be forgiving to others out of gratitude to God. The current study not only confirms the findings of other studies that have examined religion's effect on relational reconciliation but also provides added depth and explanation as to how and why this association exists. In general, religious beliefs and practices seem to function as a safe container in which marital conflict is prevented, resolved, and overcome.

Limitations

The sample in this study was intentionally limited to highly religious couples of the Abrahamic faiths and may not be applicable to other religions or to people of less religiosity. Those interviewed had been married for an average of 21 years; research indicates that, on average, conflicted marriages tend to improve over time, though many of the most conflictual marriages end. Thus, it may be that length of marriage, as much or more than religiosity, impacted the level of marital conflict in the sampled. In addition, study participants were primarily middle income, highly educated Caucasians; therefore, further research is needed to explore how religiosity affects the marital conflict of lower income couples or those of other ethnicities, or those of both.

Implications for Practitioners

A good resource for ideas on integrating religiosity in helping couples and families resolve conflict is Carlson and Erickson's (2002) edited volume on spirituality and family therapy. Given our respect for the great diversity of perspectives and practices held by people of different faiths, we are hesitant to advise religious leaders how to help couples in their faith communities to address marital conflict. Given the diversity of training, settings, and issues, we are also reluctant to offer suggestions to educators and counselors about working with couples on religious issues. However, with those caveats, we offer some general ideas that may be of some value for practitioners working with religious couples.

General implications. The results of the current study confirm and extend other research suggesting that religious beliefs, commitments, practices, and communities are important resources for conflict prevention and resolution for couples and for practitioners

working with them. Educators and clinicians should encourage religious couples to draw on their religious beliefs to assist them to prevent, address, and reconcile marital conflict. Practitioners who help couples look to their religious leaders, texts, practices, and communities have a much greater chance of assisting couples in finding lasting preventions and solutions to marital conflict.

Problem prevention. Religious belief and practice helped couples prevent conflict by assisting them in developing a shared sacred vision and purpose, which in turn reduced marital conflict by decreasing stress levels in marriage and unifying couples. Practitioners can work to help couples create and sustain a shared vision that, ideally, has its roots in a set of transcendent spiritual and religious ideas and ideals that can motivate and inspire the couple toward relational unity. Practitioners can help couples explore what aspects of their religious beliefs might help them prevent marital contention. Conflict is also prevented through the religious emphasis on the development of relational virtues such as selflessness and unconditional love. Given the importance of relational virtues found in this study, practitioners should help couples develop those virtues that are most likely to prevent conflict in their relationship. The groundbreaking work of Fowers (2000) on marital virtues is recommended.

Conflict resolution. Religious practices aid in conflict resolution primarily through scriptural teachings, attendance at religious services, and couple prayer. Couples reported that when they turn to scripture in time of conflict, they often find helpful examples concerning interacting with others. Attendance at religious services helps couples to resolve conflict by changing their focus and giving them needed inner strength to work through serious problems. Couples reported that prayer alleviates anger and makes open communication possible. Practitioners can help couples consider specific ways that religious practices (e.g., prayer, attendance) and religious texts (e.g., scripture, writings of religious leaders) might assist them with marital conflict (see Marks, 2004).

Relational reconciliation. Couples state that relational reconciliation was facilitated by a commitment to relationship permanence and willingness to forgive. Many couples reported that because they are committed to a permanent relationship, they are much more inclined to reconcile and heal their relationship. They also reported that religiosity helps them develop forgiving attitudes through worship services, scripture, and gratitude for divine forgiveness. On the basis of

both the results of the current study and on the burgeoning literature on the power and importance of forgiveness, one of the most important things that practitioners can do to help couples is creatively draw on the couple's religious context to make personal and relational forgiveness a meaningful and growing part of their marriage. In sum, practitioners should encourage religious couples to draw on their religion as a resource for preventing conflict, resolving conflict, and forgiving one another after marital conflict.

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