It’s in the House: 
Couples’ faith & stronger marriages

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Presentation Objectives

1. To identify the dynamic faith process in couples
2. Identify the impact of increased stress & conflict on Christian couples
3. Learn an assessment approach for the interactional spiritual health of couples
4. Possible applications for pastoral care with premarital/marital Christian couples
Presentation Outline

✓ Presentation and context of study
✓ Overview of relevant research
✓ Study frameworks
✓ Findings of the study
  ▪ Marital Triad, Sacred, Faith
  ▪ Impact of stress & conflict on relational faith
✓ Assessment approach for the interactional spiritual health of couples
✓ Applications for pastoral care

Presentation & Context of Study

This study originated from my interest in broadening the research and literature in regards to African Americans.

As a result, the sample of participants is comprised of members of the African American diaspora, i.e. one or more may be an immigrant, but is of African descent and living in this country within the broader African American community.
Presentation & Context of Study

Though the data obtained is from members of this population, I have noticed certain themes that I believe may be generalizable (*qualitative research*) to other groups.

That is the information presented.

overview of relevant research
Benefits of religious belief

Research consistently reveals positive relationship between religion, & physical and mental health, such as:

• **Lower depression** (Koenig & Larson, 2001)
• **Greater use of positive coping styles** (Bjorck & Thurman, 2007)
• **Reduces the impact of negative events** (Jang & Johnson, 2003; Park, 2005)
• **Facilitates well-being & life satisfaction** (Emmons, 2005; Roccas, 2005)
• **May protect against discrimination** (Bierman, 2006; Jang & Johnson, 2004)

Conceptualizing the Sacred in Relational Spirituality

The term ‘sacred’ is used with fair amount of frequency but is still vaguely defined.

Prior research has defined ‘sacred’ this way:

“a person, object, principle, or concept that transcends the self [and can include] a divine being, divine object...‘set apart’ as holy and beyond the ordinary.” (Sandage & Shultz, 2007)

I define ‘sacred’ as:

Individual action, partnered interaction and other experiences that the participants identify between themselves and in relation to God, that they consider to be worth deep respect; having a ‘**Lord in all & over all**’ quality.
Christian couples (*generally*)

- Greater satisfaction & devotion was found among married couples who considered their marriage to be sacred, than among those who did not consider their marriage sacred though it was important *(Mahoney et al., 1999, as cited by Pargament, et al., 2005)*

- Marital health and satisfaction is linked to a couple’s understanding of, connection to, God *(Butler & Harper, 1994)*

African American Couples

- More religious

- Despite the decline in African American marriages, marriage is valued *(Fincham, Ayaji & Beach, 2011)*

- African Americans report poorer marriage quality *(Fincham. Ayaji & Beach, 2011; Kelly & Floyd, 2006)*
African American Couples

• Stresses of societal roles for African Americans erodes their marriages; such as being disproportionate recipients of unemployment & stress related diseases. (Pinderhughes, 2002)

“Dissonance for each spouse occurs from living in the larger society where men are supposed to have more power, but the power is denied because of race. Men and women become more vulnerable to channeling their frustration from this dissonance into marital conflict.” (p276)

My Study

Explores the religious and spiritual practices of African American couples as these practices affect stress and relational discord (RD). The experience explored was how these spouses and their partners use their faith together to address relational discord.

• Strengths-based approach to investigating the intersection of IPV & Faith
Participant couples had healthy relationships, not violent or facing separation or divorce, which was an intentional aspect of the study design.

**Aim**: to better understand the faith components that supported their marital relationships and helped them to thrive.

A strengths-based approach explores what is working well and how it is leveraged for the benefit of the marriage.

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‘Dynamic Faith’ – another way of referring to dyadic, interactional, or relational manifestation of faith.

‘Dynamic’ – something that changes as the system changes; the way that the actions of 1 person effect another, systemically.

‘Dyadic’ – the interaction of the two partners in a couple-system.
Study explored: Marital Triad

Conceptual framework of study: Marital Triad

- Couples incorporate God into their relationship.
- God-triangulated becomes a third partner and family member

(Butler & Harper, 1994; Griffith, 1986)

findings: Marital Triad, sacred, faith
Marital Triad

Importance of the Marital Triad (Christian marriages)
• There seems to be a marital math → 1+1 = 3
  Dyad + Faith/God = Triad

  Biblical cord of 3 strands (Eccl 4:12)

• God is triangulated almost automatically in their interactions to regulate the health of the relationship, because of their Christian beliefs

Sacred pervasively present

Their interactions connected them to, and enhanced their awareness of, what was sacred in their relationship:

• Couple’s play

• Assessment of problems

• Resolution of discord

• Spoken and unspoken interaction
Faith is (a) liberally applied

Couples used faith in every part of relationship maintenance; this manifested
- Actively—i.e. prayer
- Receptive-Thought—i.e. understanding God as greater than circumstances, preexisting need

Findings: Faith is (b) vital in life

- All partners expressed the importance of faith in their lives:

“I don’t know how I could BE, if you will, without having that faith as a foundation.” Sena

(speaker emphasis)

[pseudonym used]
Faith is (c) collaboratively used

Manifestations:

• Bible as mutual reference guide – roadmap
• Holy Spirit – promotes agreement
• God becomes third partner (Marital Triad) in the relationship. Role includes:
  ➢ Intervening with one on behalf of other
  ➢ Speaking directly to Pray-er providing wisdom
  ➢ Strengthened connections – ‘cord of three strands’
    (Eccl 4:12)

impact of stress & conflict on Christian couples (relational-faith)
Impact of stress & conflict

The couples erect and maintain boundaries designed:
– to exclude negative influences and
– to protect their relationship

Adversity caused the couples to reinforce their bond
I think it’s the disappointments in life that help to bring you together as a couple. It’s those hard times; those challenges, and they’re there for a reason. Sena

Impact of stress & conflict

“The couples bond in a process that is more than just physical, and to some extent, defies mundane definition, “because we didn’t create it” (Jose).” (Dyer, 2010)

Can also be poignant:
My memory is starting to go, so she’s my remembrance. She remembers everything. She is a very good support network for me. … Most of all she—I think of her as a fellow Christian walking in the same path. Dave
Racial-ethnic Stress

• 4 couples said race/ethnicity didn’t affect marital stress while one partner in each of remaining 4 couples acknowledged race/ethnic stress

• Role of faith *(found by research)*
  – Teaches forgiveness and resistance to oppression
  – Provides resilience, strength & coping
  – Source of community and couple unity (social support)

Racial-ethnic Stress

• Majority of the individual participants denied experience of racial-ethnic stress

• Racial-ethnic stress indicator showed:
  – All participants scored moderate to high on cultural stress
  – Only 4 of 16 scored low on individual stress

• Racial-ethnic stress may be compartmentalized; resulting in better individual mental health, ultimately better relational health.
Racial-ethnic Stress: Comments

Some special comments about racial-ethnic stress:

• While the details of this type of stress are identified here for African Americans, research evidence exists to support generalizing the understanding that membership to any minority group carries a certain level of stress.

• Moreover, I hold the Womanist perspective of the ‘intersectionality of oppression,’ wherein people belonging to more than one oppressed group experience a multiplying effect of their stressors. For example, being Latino and Female in the USA carries a greater degree of stress than being Latino and Male in the USA, and a much greater stress level than being White and Male in the USA.

Conflict & silence

• Use of silence increased
  ▪ Shutting down
  ▪ Separate corners

• Silence was a regular part of the couples’ dyadic process
  Purpose of silence appeared to be a strategy used to reduce tensions, not to extend tensions
Faith is (c) collaboratively used!

Manifestations:

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  *(Eccl 4:12)*

assessment approach
interactional spiritual health of couples
Assessment elements

A. Examine whether the partners have individual and paired faith activities (bible study, prayer): Are the activities applied both to the relationship & to each partner?

B. Is the quality of ‘LORD in all & over all’ present:
   1. In all parts of the relationship?
   2. During peaceful & stress-filled times?

Assessment elements

C. Examine the quality of the partner interactions. Is there:
   1. Collaboration between the partners
   2. Mutually responsive interaction, i.e. mutual concern
   3. Bonding activities between the partners, i.e. play
Assessment elements

D. Listen to the ways they talk about God in their lives and relationship even when describing a fight and its aftermath.

Is the commitment to their faith and its processes (how it works) predominantly unchanged during stressed times?

E. Marital Triad is normal. Is the Marital Triad present and functioning?

Red Flag: Depression & Marital conflict

Marital discord model of depression
(Gottlib & Beach, 1995 as described by Osterhout et al, 2011)

- Marital discord, decreases various adaptive behaviors and increases in negative behaviors,
- Leads to subsequent depression,
- Which then manifests further maladaptive interpersonal behaviors & ultimately,
- Further marital discord.
Applications

A. Use what you learn from your assessment inquiries:
   1. to shape the work you believe will be most helpful for the couples (i.e. skills training)
   2. to decide if counseling referral may also help

B. Create a standard interview process of 1-2 separate partner meetings. This facilitates safe disclosure if there are concerns by either partner. Be careful about sharing disclosures.
Applications

C. Any skills training, i.e. strategies for conflict resolution, should include
   1. Homework
   2. Review
   3. Accountability for practicing skills till they are used automatically by partners

Research has found that skill enhancement training to address conflict, may increase:
   - Relationship health
   - Forgiveness
   - Interactional coping

(Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson & Bradbury, 2013)

Applications

D. Teach & discuss:
   a) Positive appropriate uses of Silence & Separation \(\rightarrow\)
      i.e. as a de-escalation strategy
   b) Helpful reconciliation strategies

It is important to disciple couples to help them learn how to appropriately apply the tenets of their faith to support a healthy relationship and navigate rough spots, i.e. couples fellowship bible study
It’s in the house

The elements needed to strengthen relationships exist in the faith held by both partners in a non-violent relationship.

They may simply need your help to learn how to use them intentionally to strengthen their marriages.

Thank you

Questions

Comments
References


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