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The Influence of Spirituality on Stressful Marriages in the Matanuska-Borough of Alaska

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Cheryl V. Puryear

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Walden University
2019

Abstract

The Influence of Spirituality on Stressful Marriages in the Matanuska-Borough of Alaska

by

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MSCP, Alaska Pacific University, 2006

BSOE, Wayland Baptist University, 1999

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Because marriage brings two individuals who may or may not come from the same background into an intimate relationship, there are times when a marriage can be stressful. Although spirituality may be useful in coping with marital stress, there are few published studies on the influence of spirituality on stress in marriages in recent years.

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of spirituality on stress in marriages. Differentiation-based spirituality, an outgrowth of Kerr and Bowen's spirituality theory, served as the theoretical framework. A phenomenological research design was used to explore whether spirituality was a factor that allowed couples to remain married during marital stress. Twelve couples took part in an idiographic sampling which focused on the individual in order to understand the full complexity of the individual's experience with stress they endured in marriage, how they coped with stress, and whether their spiritual beliefs affected their ability to remain married.

Audiotaped interviews were transcribed, coded, and then categorized into themes. The results of this study indicated that spirituality affected the marriages of participants.

Spirituality is beneficial for couples dealing with stress in their marriage. The social implications for this study are valuable for the professional, and to the clients who seek services from the professionals, positive social change can be found in new directions for future research and developing interventions for professionals working with couples. A recommendation is to develop more research about spirituality, stress, and marriage that can be used to help couples in crises during marriage counseling.

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Acknowledgments

I first want to acknowledge that God is my rock. As God has allowed me to age and remain on this beautiful planet my faith has and continues to grow day by day. I see the purpose of having a spiritual foundation as necessary in order to enjoy life which includes some turmoil and some stress.

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This study would not have been possible without the voluntary participation of the couples who answered my advertisement and the use of Senior Center.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Amid increasing diversity, changing gender roles, and varied family structures over an extended life course, family members are seeking transcendent values and practices for greater coherence in their lives (Walsh, 2006, 2010). In other words, couples are looking for the best, the ideal, and the fantastic relationship. Family members are also seeking ways to reduce the incidents of stress in their lives. Marital stress is a common occurrence among couples (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Helmeke & Bischof, 2007). Because conventional marriages brings two individuals who may or may not come from the same background into an intimate relationship, there are times when a marriage can be stressful. The stressors associated with marriage often include different parenting styles, household responsibilities, friends, irritating habits, expectations not being met, and conflicting expectations about sex and infidelity (Mahoney, 2010).

In negotiating these everyday stressors as well as during times of crisis and tragedy people turn to their loved ones and to spiritual resources for meaning, solace, and strength. Spirituality, despite its significance for individuals and institutions, has mostly been neglected by psychologists and other mental health professionals in the 21st century, however (Dierendonck & Mohan, 2006; Pargament, 2002). Some researchers agree that spirituality plays a significant role in marriages. Richards and Bergin (2005) and Dierendonck and Mohan (2006) pointed out that in marriage counselling clients' core spiritual values may be especially influential in promoting clients' coping, healing, and change. They contend that therapists should help clients access their spiritual values and resources to assist them in their efforts to heal and grow.

Although spirituality may be useful in coping with marital stress, there have been very few published studies on the influence of spirituality on stress in marriages in recent years, according to my review of the literature. I conducted this study to address this gap in the literature. I hope that research on spirituality and marital stress will increase the knowledge and understanding of the influence of spirituality in relationships for the field of psychology. Psychologists have much to offer and gain by becoming acquainted with the growing body of theory and research about spirituality and marriage (Blanch, 2007; Brelsford, 2011; Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, 2002). Using study findings, psychologists and counselors may be more equipped to work with couples who are coping with marital stress. When couples are able to work through marital stress, the effects are not only experienced by the individual but will likely be passed on to all family members (Brelsford, 2011).

I also wanted to contribute insights about the economic implications of marriage. The association between marriage and poverty may be critical when examining whether or not spirituality has an influence on couples being able to remain in marriages. White and Rogers (2004) reviewed the economic contexts in which American families lived in the 1990s and found that economic advantage is associated with marital happiness in couples with and without children. In addition, research supports that married couples have lower poverty rates and need for economic support services. Married couples in Alaska (with and without children) had the lowest poverty rate from 2006-2010 at 2.6% versus a poverty rate of 41.4% for single women with children in the state, for instance (Fried, Weller, & Shanks, 2012). In addition, married couples with or without children

were less likely to need services provided by the social welfare department and local food banks (Fried et al., 2012). Findings from this study may provide additional evidence about the economic ramifications of marriage.

In this chapter, I will provide background information on spirituality and marriage. I will also state the problem, the purpose of the study, the nature of the study, and the research question. The theoretical framework; operational definitions; and assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study will also be addressed. The chapter will conclude with a summary of key points.

Background

The advantages (e.g., community support, and hope) and disadvantages (e.g., brainwashing) to spirituality in general have been researched (Bottoms, Hernandez, & Salerno, 2011; Culliford, 2002; Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011). Pulchalski et al. (2009) and Mueller, Plevak, and Rummans (2009) both seem to agree that the search for meaning, higher power, connectedness, and value are common ground upon which spirituality operates. Spirituality is used to cope with stress in a marriage, according to researchers (Jackson & Bergeman, 2011; Jankowski & Sandage, 2011; Sandage & Crabtree, 2012). However, there is a lack of research on how spirituality affects marriage, according to my review of the literature.

The definition of marriage and the perception of what constitutes a successful marriage are undergoing change. Research on marriage and marital satisfaction has influenced perceptions of what constitutes a successful marriage (Fincham, Ajayi, & Beach, 2011; Mahoney, 2010; Perrone, Webb, Wright, Jackson, & Ksiazak, 2006). In

The United States, marriage has been defined as a legally recognized union between two people, generally a man and a woman, in which they unite sexually; cooperate economically; and may give birth to, adopt, or rear children (Strong, Devault, & Cohen, 2013). However, as of June 26, 2015, the legal definition of marriage has changed from the union between a man and a woman to include same-sex marriages (*Oberefell v. Hodges*, 2015), a definition which is recognized in all 50 states. These marriages are to be considered the same as opposite-sex marriages. Couples make the relationship official by participating in a ceremony that is usually facilitated by a government sanctioned official (in the state of Alaska, couples may be legally married by anyone) that putatively lasts until death. Some couples have a common-law marriage, which is the union of two people not formalized in the customary manner as prescribed by law, but rather live together as husband and wife. Alaska does not recognize common law marriages, no statistics were provided by the *Alaska Vital Statistics Annual Report* (2017). I used Strong et al.'s (2013) definition of marriage in this study.

Marriage differs for each couple in a multitude of ways. These differences may relate to characteristics such as the education, income, religion, and cultural background of each partner (Burdette, Haynes, & Ellison, 2012). According to the United States Census Bureau (2018) statistics from the 2018 *Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement*, the median age at first marriage in the United States has risen in recent years from 27.1 and 25.3 years in 2003 for men and women, respectively, to 29.8 and 27.8 years in 2018. As the nation's household and family structure continues to

change and median age at first marriage rises, the proportion of young adults who are married has decreased.

At the same time, the proportion of U.S. adults who have never married has increased. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2013-2017), the rate for never married White women increased from 30.8% in 1996 to 41.6% in 2009. The rate for never married White non-Hispanic women increased from 31.1% in 1996 to 41.3% in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017). Marriage rates for Black women increased from 57.7% in 1996 to 70.5% in 2009 while rates for Asian women increased from 41.5% in 1996 to 51.6% in 2009 and rates for Hispanic women rates increased from 30.5% in 1996 to 36.8% in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017). The percentage for men never married between the ages 25-29 was 59.7% in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017). The ethnic breakdown is unavailable.

The marriage rate in Alaska, the state in which the study was conducted, also decreased during this time period. According to the *Alaska Vital Statistics Annual Report* (2017) there were 5,123 marriages in 2017 in the state of Alaska. In the beginning of 2002, the marriage rate was 8.3%; it had dropped to 7.8% for the year 2011 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013-2017).

While fewer people in the United States are getting married in general, and are marrying at older ages, the average length of marriages has not shifted in a definitive direction during the past 60 years. In 2009, the average length of a first marriage was 8 years (U.S. Census Bureau 2013-2017). This number was fairly consistent between

Blacks and Whites (8.6% for Black couples and 7.8% for White couples; U.S. Census Bureau 2013-2017). This number was also consistent for second marriages.

An important factor in long marriages can be spirituality. The spiritual dimension of life is genuine and impacts individuals' lives in tangible ways. However, there is difficulty in defining spirituality. The difficulty lies in differentiating spirituality from religion, according to scholars. Religion is usually associated with living by one's one inner truth to produce positive attitudes and relationships in life whereas spirituality deals with the ultimate goal in life--the transcendent dimension that give meaning to existence, and the capacity to experience the sacred (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2003). For this research, I relied on Puchalski et al.'s (2009) definition of spirituality: "The aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred" (p. 887).

Spirituality is often perceived as being wider in scope than religion and is often defined as a personal relationship with a higher power of the transcendent that goes beyond religious or cultural boundaries (Grams, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2007). It is possible that the spiritual beliefs of married couples influence marital satisfaction. Because spirituality appears to play an important role in overall well-being and negotiating the everyday stresses of life (Esselmont & Bierman, 2014), it may influence married couples' relationships. Yet, there appears to be a lack of research on the relationship between marriage and spirituality. In reviewing research in the 10-year time frame from 2006 to 2016, I found only one article on this topic (Nelson, Kirk, Ane, &

Serres, 2011). This is despite spirituality and religion being one of the historical roots of the field of marriage and family therapy that began in the 1930s (Helmeke & Bischof, 2007). In the 1930s, during the marriage and family counseling movement and before the development of the discipline of systemic family therapy, many of the members of the movement were the clergy (Helmeke & Bischof, 2007). As professional and academic influences increased and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) grew into a mental health discipline, the role of spirituality in marriage counseling seemed to wane, and professionals made little to no mention of spirituality to their clients, according to Helmeke and Bischof (2007).

Incorporating spirituality into therapy began to increase again in the late 1980s in three distinct waves (Helmeke & Bischof, 2007). From 1990-1994, the first wave, very few articles were published about the subject of integrating spirituality into marriage counseling (Helmeke & Bischof, 2007). During the second wave, 1995-1999, more articles were written on spirituality and therapy, but literature directly addressing integration of spirituality into marriage counseling was almost nonexistent (Helmeke & Bischof, 2007). In the final wave, 2000-present, the importance of being sensitive to and incorporating a client's spirituality became established themes in marriage counseling (Richards & Bergin, 2005). Experts agree that spirituality needs to be included in therapy (Helmeke & Bischof, 2007; Lucier-Greer, Alder-Baeder, Ketring, Harcourt, & Smith, 2012), but there is no general consensus on how it should be incorporated in marriage and family counselling. A review of the available literature shows a need for research in the

area of spirituality and marriage to better understand the dynamics of marriage and how professionals can help their clients.

Problem Statement

In conducting this research study, I sought to investigate the influence of spirituality on couples living with marital stress. Spirituality can be an important aspect of a person's life (Lepherd, 2013). However, with the exception of a few case studies and survey research (Balmer et al., 2012; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Mark & Dollahite 2011; Nelson et al., 2011), the influence of spirituality on marriage satisfaction has not been well researched. The researchers were not able to show whether spirituality played a part in marital satisfaction, especially among people from different racial and cultural backgrounds. In addition, little is known about ways that family members may draw upon faith to resolve dyadic conflicts (Brelsford, 2011). Further complicating research efforts is that sometimes the terms *religiousness* and *spirituality* are used interchangeably (Walsh, 2010; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Johnstone et al., 2012). At the time of this research, I found no literature on the effects of spirituality and marital stress. This gap is important because research on marriage that does not include a focus on spirituality may omit a true understanding of how some couples are able to stay married through difficult times while others are not.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not spirituality may have an influence on couples' ability to stay married during stressful periods in the marriage. Sustaining a marriage can be difficult, yet some couples manage the stress of marriage

while others cannot. Understanding that there is both good and bad marital stress (Fincham, Ajayi, & Beach, 2011), it is possible that spirituality or the lack of spirituality in a marriage may influence both coping with marital stress and marital satisfaction. Using an interpretive research paradigm, I attempted to ascertain how people perceived spirituality in their marriage and how spirituality impacted marital health in terms of sustaining the marriage. Therefore, the aim of this study was to examine the role of spirituality in relation to marital stress and marital satisfaction and explore how spirituality affected a couple's ability to achieve and maintain a successful marriage. I examined whether spirituality affected how couples coped with certain situations such as financial stresses, marital roles, job stresses, and parenting in their marriages.

Research Questions

The research questions in this study were

- RQ1. Does spirituality play a role in some married couples being able to endure marital stress?
- RQ2. What specific processes emerge, if any, such as themes or other variables that may contribute to staying married?
- RQ3. Does spirituality play a role in the deleterious effects of the overall stress of marital quality?

Theoretical Framework

A framework that can contribute to understanding how spirituality may influence some married couples' ability to maintain a satisfying marriage during stressful periods is differentiation-based spirituality. Differentiation-based spirituality (Jankowski & Vaughn,

2009; Majerus & Sandage, 2010; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010) is a relational spirituality framework where spiritual experience and development is examined in terms of the capacities for (a) self-regulation (Kass & Lennox, 2005; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010) and (b) balancing intimacy and autonomy in relationships (Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). The differentiation -based spirituality framework rests on Kerr and Bowen's (1988) ideas about intra- and interpersonal differentiation. The Bowen family systems theory includes the concept that mature functioning in young adulthood results from experiences in one's family relationships characterized by emotion regulation and a balance of autonomy-support and connection (Skowron, Stanley, & Shapiro 2009). In other words, we learn as children how to cope with stresses by observing the relationships of family members. Intrapersonal differentiation is perhaps best understood in terms of the capacity for affect regulation. Interpersonal differentiation is a measure of cognitive style that is perhaps best conceptualized as the capacity to negotiate intra-dependent or inter-dependent relating. Sandage and Jankowski (2010) further theorized that differentiation -based spirituality serves as a variable by which dispositional forgiveness (e.g., the usual attitude or mood of a person or a tendency to act or think a certain way that allows an individual to forgive another person) is associated with spiritual and mental health. Sandage and Jankowski (2010) found support for the affect-regulating function within differentiation-based spirituality. They found that differentiation of self mediated the relationship between forgiveness and well-being; the latter measured by spiritual instability, mental health symptoms, and positive mood.

Nature of the Study

Qualitative research is used when a researcher seeks to understand a given research topic from the perspectives of the population studied. It is effective in obtaining specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts by observing the phenomenon (spirituality) experienced by the participants. By conducting a qualitative research, I explored the meaning of spirituality in the marriages of the participants with the goal of understanding whether or not spirituality does or does not have an influence in marriage. This study was a phenomenological research study performed by conducting interviews of 6-10 married couples who reside in the Mat-Su Borough of Alaska. . The participants consisted of married couples ages 18 years and older. Through the interview I will examine spirituality, marital stress, coping skills, and marital satisfaction in order to understand the influence of spirituality on life stressors associated with marriage and marital.

Definitions

In this section I provide definitions of key terms used in the study:

Data saturation: The point at which no new data emerges in the study (Hill, 2012).

Differentiation of self: A relational spirituality framework that is focused on spiritual experience and development in terms of the capacities for self-regulation and balancing of intimacy and autonomy in relationships (Jankowski & Sandage, 2011).

Marital satisfaction: A mental state that reflects the perceived benefits and costs of a marriage to a particular person (Baumeister, 2007).

Marital stress: Situations in which partners experience communication and problem-solving difficulties, find it difficult to work together, and have difficulty accepting each other's differences (Mead, 2002).

Marriage: The social institution in which two people commit themselves to a socially sanctioned relationship in which sexual intercourse is legitimated and there is legally recognized responsibility for any offspring as well as for each other (VandenBos, 2013).

Spirituality: For the purpose of this study, spirituality will be defined as “the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to natures, and the significant or sacred” (Puchalski et al., 2009, p. 887).

Spiritual maturity: It is a person-specific process of psycho-spiritual development that can be mentored in communities where belief systems and cultural identities are diverse. It enables individuals to deepen engagement with contemplative practices from spiritual traditions that hold personal salience, while building inclusive, respectful communities (Kass, 2014).

Assumptions, Scope and Delimitations, and Limitations of the Study

Though the research on spirituality is growing, measurement of the construct presents a formidable problem (Kapuscinski & Masters, 2010), in that spirituality research faces challenges because of its subject matter. Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are critical components of a viable research proposal (Simon, 2011). The challenge with an assumption is that assumptions are not testable, assumptions are

statements about observations and experiences related to a study that are taken for granted or are assumed to be true, limitations are equally challenging in that limitations become more obvious at the conclusion of the study

Assumptions

The assumption is that the participants are legally married because no proof of marriage will be required. I am assuming the participants are responding honestly to the interview question. I am also assuming that the participants are residents of the Mat-Su Valley. Despite the fact that people are waiting longer to get married, I am assuming that the act of people getting married will not stop. In Qualitative research reality is subjective as seen by participants in the study (Simon, 2011), the key concern being to understand the influence if any of spirituality during stress in marriages from the participants perspective.

Delimitations

Delimitations are characteristics that limit the scope and define boundaries of my study such as my choice of objectives, the research question, variables of interest, theoretical perspective that I chose, and the population that I will use in my research. The aim of this study is to examine the role of spirituality in relation to marital stress and marital satisfaction in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough. The goal is to explore how spirituality affects a couple's ability to achieve and maintain a successful marriage. For this study I recruited married couples who were 18 years old and older. There are no restrictions for ethnicity or race. Another delimitation to this study is that, due to the large number of potential participants in the study population, the population involved in the

current study will include only individuals located in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough of Alaska.

Limitations

Limitations are potential weaknesses in a study (Simon, 2011). There are a number of limitations to trustworthiness in this study, the limitations of this study relate to generalizability and value of the findings given the research topic of marriage and spirituality and the location of the research. Due to the location of the research, it will be difficult to make generalizations about the study outside of Matanuska-Susitna Borough, therefore the findings from this study may not be valid for larger cities. There is also recognition according to Aukst-Maretic and Margetic (2005) that there are differences between religion and spirituality and that either can be practiced without the necessary involvement of the other. Operationally, the distinction between religious practices and spirituality is often blurred. Although this was not a study about spirituality alone, there was a concern that couples who did not consider themselves spiritual would not respond to the recruitment advertisement. It was taken into consideration that recruiting married couples who consider themselves spiritual would exclude married couples who were not spiritual, clarification was provided during the initial interview. One limitation to this study was time because a study conducted over a certain interval of time is a snapshot dependent on conditions occurring during that time (e.g., couple may be actively going through a stressful period or may be going through a honeymoon period). Another limitation of this study was about the participants' honesty about the stress in their marriage and how it was handled. Some couples may have minimized past crises in their

marriage out of concern for re-creating a new crises, or given the time passed may not recall the incident. Participants not recognizing that there is marital stress, because the stress is the norm is another limitation of concern. Still another limitation to this study was that the results of the study could be subject to other interpretations. Finally the researcher's presence might have biased responses. Given that participants answered the ad because of interest in the research topic, responses from the participants may have come from a desire to influence the outcome of the study.

Significance of the Study

The majority of published recommendations regarding spirituality and marriage consist of whether to explore client spirituality in therapy and how to conduct such explorations (Keeling, Doblin-MacNab, Ford, & Perkins, 2010). The goal of this study will be to provide information that might be useful for professionals working with couples. It is hoped that the data to be collected in this study will increase the knowledge of the role of spirituality in coping with marital stress and marital satisfaction. If there are relationships between spirituality, marital stress, and marital satisfaction, spiritually-based interventions could be developed and tested. Examining the role of spirituality may provide new information and lead to interventions that could aid professionals working with couples who are dealing with marital strife. The social implications for this study can be valuable not only for the professional, it is valuable to the clients that seek services from the professionals. Using this information in mainstream psychology versus psychology specialties such as marriage counseling or spiritual counseling may

contribute to reduced rates of domestic violence and child abuse and a decrease in the number of divorces.

Summary

This chapter provided a general overview of spirituality and marriages. The variables that will be explored are marital stress, spirituality, and marital satisfaction and or sustainability. More specifically, I examined how couples cope with the past or current stresses of marriage and how some couples can remain married while others cannot. A literature review led to the realization that few studies have been conducted to examine the effect of spirituality on individuals in stressful marriages. The variables – spirituality, marital stress, and marital satisfaction will be the focus of this study.

The purpose of the study was to explore the relationships between spirituality, marital stress, and marital satisfaction among married couples. More specifically this study explored how and in what ways spirituality impacts daily life in respect of marital stress and satisfaction. The information gathered in this research assisted in developing data about the research question: “Does spirituality play a role in some married couples being able to cope with marital stress?”

This was a qualitative study in which interviews were conducted to gather and analyze data that will be used to determine whether or not spirituality plays a role in couples ability to remain married amidst marital stresses.

In chapter 2, the pertinent theoretical and empirical literature on marriage, marital stress, and spirituality is reviewed. Other variables to be reviewed include the influence of age, ethnicity, income, gender, religious affiliation (if any), and length of marriage.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Little is known about ways that family members may draw upon faith to resolve dyadic conflicts (Brelsford, 2011). Further complicating research efforts is that sometimes the terms *religiousness* and *spirituality* are used interchangeably (Walsh, 2010; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Johnstone et al., 2012). The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not spirituality may have an influence on couples' ability to stay married during stressful periods in the marriage. At the time of this research, I found no literature on the effects of spirituality and marital stress. The chapter begins with an overview of my literature search strategy and theoretical framework. I discuss theories of marriage and marital stress and provide an in-depth explanation of differentiation-based spirituality. In the literature review that follows, I consider the theoretical and empirical uses of spirituality relating to marriage, marital stress, and spirituality. Other topics of the review include spirituality and coping with stress, spirituality and marriage, and marital satisfaction.

Literature Search Strategy

I obtained literature from local, public, and college libraries as well as the EBSCO multiple database system. I used eleven different EBSCO databases in the Walden University Library to access literature including textbooks, peer-reviewed articles, and abstracts. Databases I searched included Health and Psychosocial Instruments, Expanded Academic ASAP, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycCritiques, PsycEXTRA, PsycINFO, Sage Premier, Academic Search Complete, Education Source, and SocINDEX. Key word searches consisted of *marriage*, *marital stress*, *spirituality*,

marriage and spirituality, and *stressful marriages*. In the Google search engine, I used more specific phrases such as *using spirituality to deal with marital stress*, *using spirituality to deal with stressful marriages*, *handling stress in marriages*, and *how to handle stress in marriages* to obtain pertinent scholarly articles. I obtained additional resources by reviewing references identified in original sources. Search criteria primarily consisted of literature on (a) marital stress and spirituality, (b) marital stress, (c) marital stress in marriage, (d) marriage and spirituality, (e) theories of spirituality, and (f) marriage that had been published in the past 10 years.

Theoretical Framework

Social and behavioral scientists have shown recurrent interest in the connection between spirituality and marital outcomes (Ellison, Henderson, Glenn, & Harkrider, 2011). Willoughby, Hall, and Luczak (2013) proposed that one's beliefs regarding marriage are multidimensional and that each dimension includes a unique and different focus on marriage. They expanded on the ideas proposed in marital horizon theory (Carroll et al., 2007), generalizing and broadening the model so that it may be used as a broad framework to organize how individuals view the marital formation process regardless of marital status or age. The foundation for Willoughby et al.'s conceptual framework of marital paradigms, which is depicted in Figure 1, is that one's marital paradigm is composed of beliefs regarding both getting and being married.

Marriage Paradigm

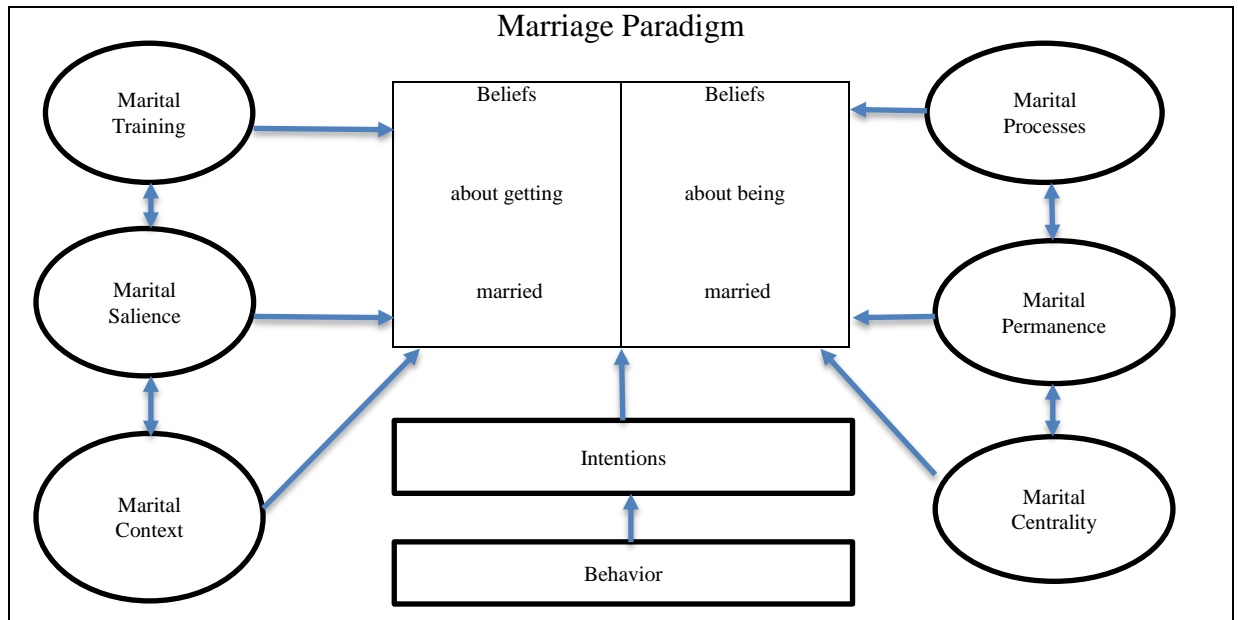


Figure 1. Marriage paradigm. Republished from “Marital Paradigm: A Conceptual Framework for Marital Attitudes, Values, and Beliefs,” by B. J. Willoughby, S. S. Hall, and H. P. Luczak, 2013, *Journal of Family Issues*, published online 2013 by SAGE Publications. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix E).

As seen in Figure 1, Willoughby et al. (2013) also proposed that one’s beliefs about getting and being married can each be broken down into three subcategories. The three distinct, yet interconnected, dimensions are

- marital timing, which refers to beliefs regarding the ideal and expected timing of marriage, formal engagement, as well as the ideal length of courtship;
- marital salience, which refers to general beliefs about the importance of marriage and marrying; and
- marital context, which refers to beliefs an individual has regarding what individual, relational, and cultural context marriage should occur within,

including beliefs about mate selection and personal readiness (Willoughby et al., 2013).

Beliefs that marriage should occur with certain religious rituals or that one should have certain financial obligations paid off prior to marriage would fall under the marital context dimension. Marital context as presently described does not refer to the specific decision to marry a particular partner (i.e., “I will marry you once you’ve done this”) but instead refers to the generic and general beliefs one holds regarding what context marital transitions should occur within in most situations (Willoughby et al., 2013).

Another framework for marriage is differentiation-based spirituality.

Differentiation-based spirituality is a relational spirituality framework that explains spiritual experience and development in terms of the capacities for self-regulation and balancing of intimacy and autonomy in relationships (Jankowski & Sandage, 2011; Jankowski & Vaughn, 2009; Majerus & Sandage, 2010). This relational definition of spirituality builds upon the work of Hill and Pargament (2003) who defined both religion and spirituality as involving the “search for the sacred” (p. 65). Couples may experience problems (e.g., poor communication, arguing, sexual difficulties, infidelities, substance abuse, or domestic violence) early in their marriages, while other couples may be happy for many years before problems develop.

In the stress process perspective, chronic strains in key social roles such as marriage, parenthood, or work can cause stress, which typically manifests in the form of psychological or physical distress (Choi, H., & Marks, N. F, 2008) similar to Differentiation-based spirituality framework that explains spiritual experience and

development in terms of the capacities for self-regulation and balancing of intimacy and autonomy in relationships (Jankowski & Sandage, 2011; Jankowski & Vaughn, 2009; Majerus & Sandage, 2010). An example would be when a spouse is receiving what is perceived as excessive criticism at work over time comes home to perceived excessive criticism, that spouse will most likely lash out in a harsh manner. In reality what is happening here is that this spouse is bringing the work stress home. The expression “I was mad at the boss, so I went home and kicked the dog” explains this perspective. Another example would be spouses blaming each other for the negative actions of their children. Both examples show that stress will manifest itself in some type of distress.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Marital satisfaction is a mental state that reflects the perceived benefits and costs of a marriage to a particular person (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). According to Baumeister and Vohs (2007) factors that contribute to marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction include the perceptions of either spouses’ cognitions or thoughts about certain behaviors; the degree of social supports for each of the partners and for the relationship, whether there is physical violence in the marriage; a spouses’ personality, infidelities, starting a family, and communication as well as adult attachment styles, mate-guarding, and family background. Baumeister and Vohs (2007) also found that the performance of joint religious activities appeared to be related to marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was once believed to follow a U-shaped trajectory over time. Couples began their marriages satisfied (newlyweds), then the satisfaction waned over the years, and then returned to the newlywed level after many years together. Now it seems that marital satisfaction drops

over the first 10 years and continues to decrease sometimes slowly and other times drastically. Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Gonzaga, Ogburn, and Vander Weele (2013) found that marriages that began online, when compared with those that began through traditional venues. Hawrilenko, Gray, and Cordova (2015) examined mediators of a brief couple's intervention. Married couples (N 215) were randomized to either an intervention group or a wait-list control group and followed for 2 years. Latent change-score models were used to examine contemporaneous and time-lagged mediation. A booster intervention in the 2nd year was used for a replication study. Changes in intimate safety and acceptance were uniquely associated with contemporaneous treatment effects on relationship satisfaction in Year 1, but only acceptance was uniquely associated with contemporaneous effects in Year 2.

Marriage

Throughout history marriages have determined people's places in the economic and political hierarchy of society. Marriage served political, social, and economic functions while the individual needs and desires, the spouse, and children conceived were secondary considerations. In fact, in the Bible (Genesis 2:20-22 New International Version) Eve was created as a helpmate for Adam.

For the propertied classes, marriage was the main way of consolidating wealth, transferring property, laying claim to political power, even concluding peace treaties. When upper-class men and women married, dowry, bride wealth, or tribute changed hands, making the match a major economic investment by the parents and other kin of the couple. Even middle-class families had a huge economic stake in who married whom.

Until the late 18th century, Brooks (2011) pointed out that marriage was the main means of transferring property, occupational status, personal contacts, money, tools, livestock and women across generations and kin groups. For most women, finding a husband was the most important investment they could make in their economic future.

For all socioeconomic groups, marriage was the most important marker of adulthood and respectability. For all of these reasons, love was considered a very poor reason to get married. It was desirable for love, or at least affection, to develop after marriage, and many parents allowed their children to veto a match with a partner who repelled them. However, love was not the main thing that people took into account in deciding when and whom to marry. In recent times many of the social and cultural influences still remains. Marriage is still a status symbol, a highly regarded marker of a successful personal life, one's wealth, education, and career is still considered when deciding who to marry. However, Willoughby et al., (2013) pointed out in most cases love is now included in the list of reasons to get married. Other reasons people marry is be financially secure, to raise children with a specific person believed to be a good parent, to alleviate family pressure and to avoid being alone or lonely. Aside from this couples on average consider their marriage to have spiritual meaning (Mahoney, et al., 1999). Marital unions differ in a multitude of ways including the characteristics, such as education, earnings, religion, and cultural background of each partner (Burdette et al., 2012).

Marriage is a natural arena in which to study the interpersonal aspects of marital stress because marriage is such a powerful interpersonal environment. In order for

theoretical and clinical developments that can assist couples in dealing with marital stress to occur, the basic relationship between the psychological and spiritual dimensions of life must be articulated. Such an articulation will have two primary considerations: (1) whether psychological and spiritual dimensions are to be viewed as similar or different and (2) whether the psychological or the spiritual dimension has primacy (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). In other words, what is the order of these two dimensions? Does one dimension dominate the other? Although the connection between spirituality and marital satisfaction has been recognized in Eastern ideologies (such as Buddhism) and western ideologies (e.g., Christianity, Judaism) for many centuries, there are other components and mechanisms that should be examined when understanding marital satisfaction such as cognition, physiology, interaction patterns, social supports, and violence. Each spouse's cognition is important to maintaining the marriage. In other words, how one spouse thinks about certain behaviors of his or her partner plays a role in whether the spouse chooses to remain in the marriage. There is also a well established relationship between being married and maintaining physical well being (Schudlich, Papp, & Cummings, 2011). Equally important are the interactions between spouses. Is one spouse too critical or demanding? Does one spouse evade confrontation or having serious conversations? Another component associated with happy marriages is social support. Undeniably people who supports their spouses seem to have happier marriages, and people who are happily married stay married (Campbell, Wright, & Flores, 2012). Physical and emotional violence is closely linked to marital satisfaction. Individuals involved in abusive relationships are more likely to be dissatisfied with their marriage

than are individuals not involved in abusive relationships (Choi & Marks, 2008). Physical and emotional violence usually ends in the dissolution of the marriage.

Marital Stress

All marriages are aimed at happiness in one way or another (Campbell et al., 2012; Khurshid, Hashmi, & Hassan, 2007). Some expectations are realistic while others are unrealistic. Stress is a concept that has received increased attention in marital research during the last decade, with the results of the research being that stress plays an important role in understanding the quality and stability of close relationships and is a threat to marital satisfaction and longevity (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). According to Khurshid et al. (2007) there are six areas of marital adjustment: religion, social life, mutual friends, in laws, money and sex. Another psychologist, Margolin (1980) defined ten areas of marital adjustment: values, couple growth, communication, conflict resolution, affection, roles, cooperation, sex, money and parenthood. However, Khurshid et al. (2007) identified social activities and recreation, training and disciplining of children, religion, relationships with in-laws, financial matters, sexual relationship, communication, mutual trust and companionship as the areas of marital adjustment.

Marital stress is defined as situations in which partners experience communication and problem-solving difficulties, find it difficult to work together, and have difficulty accepting each other's differences (Mead, 2002). Stress in marriage is a normal everyday occurrence, and when stressful life events happen in marriage, both spouses will react to those stressors, and their moods may change. However when the stress (e.g., a bad day at work, sick children, purchasing a high priced item) is no longer a part of the relationship,

spouses return to their normal moods and behaviors and life goes on. Stress association can be stronger when people are undergoing stress due to recent life events such as death, job, or financial problems (Smith, McCullough & Poll, 2003). This relationship was also moderated by the types of religiousness measured in the study, with extrinsic religious orientation and negative religious coping (e.g., avoiding difficulties through religious activities, blaming God or a higher being for difficulties) associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms (Smith et al., 2003). In order to truly connect spirituality to marital stress, a clear definition for marital stress is needed. The current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed. (DSM-5); American Psychiatric Association, (2013) does not have a diagnosis for stress. However, relational problems related to a mental disorder or general medical condition (V61.9) and relational problems not otherwise specified (V61.81) are defined.

Mead (2002) agreed with Jacobson and Christensen (1996)'s definition of marital stress as situations in which partners experience communication and problem solving difficulties, find it difficult to work together and have difficulty accepting each other's differences. In other words, stress can be defined as a response to environmental pressures or demands. Other symptoms of marital stress include the following: depressed mood (such as feelings of sadness or emptiness); reduced interest in activities that used to be enjoyed; sleep disturbances (either not being able to sleep well or sleeping too much); loss of energy or a significant reduction in energy level; difficulty concentrating, holding a conversation, paying attention, or making decisions that used to be made fairly easily; and suicidal thoughts or intentions. Marital stress is influenced by both biological and

environmental factors (Khurshid et al., 2007) given that stress is simply the body and mind's response to a demand, the biological aspects of stress can include chemical imbalance, neurological disorders, mental health disorders, and physical problems.

Spirituality

Sorajjakool, Aja, Chilson, Ramirez-Johnson and Earll (2008) conducted a qualitative study that explored the role of spirituality on depressed persons. Many of the participants in their study expressed that marital stress made them feel spiritually disconnected. When examining the process by which marital relationships are perceived as having divine character or sacred significance (Ellison et al., 2011) spirituality may reduce vulnerability to marital stress through various psychosocial mechanisms such as appraisal of life events (Smith et.al., 2003; Burdette et al., 2011). There is evidence offering reason to suspect that individuals with a spiritual foundation are likely to experience health benefits that range from soul and cultural influences; to God or a higher being's existence; to Biblically focused cognitive disputation (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Sandage & Crabtree, 2012; Sperry & Shafranske, 2005; Sorajjakool et al., 2008) and happier marriages. Researchers (McAuley et.al, 2006; White, Wojcicki & McAuley, 2009; Gurrentz, 2017) have suggested that religion and faith can help to promote good health and fight disease by offering additional supports, such as religious outreach groups and improving coping skills through prayer and a philosophy that all things have purpose. Konopack and McAuley (2012) researched efficacy-mediated effects of spirituality and physical activity on the quality of life. They suggested that spirituality's influence on quality of life operates largely through mental health status, and physical activity's

influence on quality of life is chiefly through physical health status. Konopack and McAuley (2012) also suggest that physical activity and spirituality are complementary determinants of quality of life, with their strongest influences on physical and mental health status.

Puchalski et al. (2009) wrote that spirituality affects health care outcomes including quality of life which is in line with the growing body of research that indicated that spirituality is an intricate part of one's mental health (Koenig, 2007; Lambert, Fincham, LaVallee, and Brantley, 2012; Schudlich et al., 2011). Acknowledging that individuals may be spiritual not religious, religious not spiritual, or religious and spiritual the very nature of spirituality cannot be captured within the parameters of wide generalizations, nor is it statistically quantifiable in the ways that traditional scientific methods might desire it to be (Bosch, 2009). Three major approaches to spiritual and or religious coping styles with adversity are: self-directing, deferring, and collaborative. The collaborative style reflects the joint responsibility for problem solving by God or a higher being and the individual, while the deferring style implies placing all responsibility for problem solving on God or a higher being while passively waiting to receive solutions. The self-directing approach emphasizes the individual's personal responsibility and active role in problem solving and excludes God or a higher being from the process. Yangarber-Hicks (2004) studied the relationship between religious and or spiritual coping styles and recovery from mental illness and argued that participants who felt they had a collaborative relationship with God or a higher being were more actively involved in their recovery than participants with a passive relationship with God or a higher being. Faith is a

method individuals rely on to gain control in their lives, which gives credence to that belief that having a healthy spiritual foundation would benefit individuals who are depressed as a result of a stressful marriage. Hill and Pargament (2003) argued that when viewed on a spiritual level, many aspects of life could be perceived as sacred in significance and character including both physical and psychological aspects. On the other hand, Koenig (2005) conducted a review of empirical research into the relationship between spirituality and emotional health. He concluded that spirituality has a positive effect on coping and buffers people against stress by providing a positive worldview. The literature examines the positive effects of spirituality on marriages. However, this raises the question about what happens when spirituality or religion goes awry in family dynamics. Given that to be a spiritual person you have God (or higher power)-given family values and processes, events that go against these assumptions may trigger individual and relationship distress. Divorce, domestic violence, marital infidelity, child physical and sexual abuse are situations that can shake one's spirituality or religious belief.

The relationship of spirituality begins with the spiritual self. The spiritual self is a part of the human trilogy consisting of the mind (which channels expressions of the soul), body, and spirit or spiritual self (Ardell & Langdon, 1989). Considering the interactive mind, soul, body, and spirit paradigm, others (Esselmont & Bierman, 2014; Lambert, et. al, 2012; Jackson & Bergeman, 2011) have suggested that the spiritual self prompts the biological self to exercise positive beliefs in the mind to such a strong degree that the positive beliefs influence: (a) the soul, changing behavior, emotions, or expressions; (b) the body, changing physical conditions; and (c) the spirit, changing personal faith, beliefs, and values. The spiritual self has power to break free from emotional and mental

tendencies. Murray and Zenter (1989) said: “In every human being there seems to be a spiritual dimension, a quality that goes beyond religious affiliation, that strives for inspiration, reverence, awe, meaning and purpose, even in those who do not believe in God” (p. 259). These ways of understanding human experience point positively towards a new paradigm and promote the concept of a non-material or spiritual dimension to life (Culliford, 2002). It was also suggested that professionals in the field of psychology need more training in understanding the process of how spirituality affects or influences human behavior with God or a higher being or a higher power allowing them to assist clients in proceeding through spiritual growth and development (Smith et al., 2003). This may explain why some couples are able to maintain marriage through crises. A considerable body of literature over the past three decades consistently documents the relevance of client spirituality to well-being (Crook-Lyon, O’Grady, Smith, Jensen, Golightly, & Potkar, 2012; Krumrei, Mahoney & Pargament, 2009, 2011; Jankowski & Sandage, 2011; Cupit, 2007; Gau, 2011).

In marriages, individuals experience negative life events, and when they do, they will sometimes turn to their religion or their sense of spirituality to cope with the marital stress that ensues from such stressful events.

Spirituality and Coping With Stress

Pargament (1997) suggested that the particular forms of spiritual coping that are chosen by individuals to deal with major life stressors are determined by what is available to them. In 2012, Ano and Pargament hypothesized that people may be predisposed to spiritual struggles during stress due to religious factors such as God image, attachment to

God, church history, and religious history. Personal factors such as personality characteristics or general disposition toward one's own environment; social factors such as social support networks and interpersonal relationships; and situational factors such as marriages, jobs, or community where they reside were also considered when examining the predisposition to spiritual struggles. Mahoney et al. (1999) assessed two spiritual areas that were believed to be connected to couples experiences or views of their marriage: (1) Joint religious activities which refer to how often couples engage in spiritual activities together. The activities included praying together, talking about how to live Godly, attending church etc., and (2) sanctification of marriage which refers to perceptions of the marriage having spiritual character and significance. In this area Mahoney et al. (1999) examined whether couples viewed their marriage as having sacred qualities or whether they experienced their marriage as a manifestation of God.

Ano and Vasconvelles (2005) and Jankowski and Sandage (2012) found that adaptive spiritual coping facilitated positive judgment whereas spiritual struggle exacerbated distress. Spiritual coping is difficult to define because spiritual coping is often viewed as emotion focused. There is a connection between certain expressions of undesirable outcomes including authoritarianism, abuse, and tolerance for abuse with religiosity and marital conflict (Mark & Dollahite, 2011). Undeniably there are certain spiritual or religious activities that can have a negative effect on those experiencing marital stress. For example, highly religious individuals may report high levels of global marital satisfaction because of greater devotion to marriage but experience fewer personal rewards and benefits from the relationship. Couples with a strong religious or

spiritual orientation toward marriage may tolerate high rates of marital conflict or dysfunctional communication strategies because of beliefs about the sacredness of the bond (Mahoney et al. 1999). Marital resilience is the successful coping of married couples under adversity that enables them to continue in their marriage with warmth, support, and cohesion. According to Black and Lobo (2008) prominent factors of resilient couples are having a positive outlook (e.g. sense of humor, self-confidence and optimism); spirituality; flexibility which pertains to having stable family roles with situational and developmental adjustments; communication, and support networks such as individual, familial and community resources.

Spirituality and Marriage

The way in which spirituality shapes marriage has received sporadic consideration by social scientists throughout the 20th century. Spirituality and religion are powerful dimensions of human experience involving transcendent beliefs and practices that foster meaning, well-being and connectedness often within an organized system that includes shared institutionalization, moral values, practices, involvement in a faith community and for many, belief in God or a higher being or a higher power (Balmer, et.al., 2012). However, recently some attention has been given to spirituality and marriage (Beach, Hurt, Fincham, Franklin, McNair and Stanly, 2011; Carlson, et al., 2002; Grams et al., 2007). Wedding terms such as “holy matrimony,” “sacred union,” and “gathering in the presence of God or a higher being” reflect the empirical finding that couples on average consider their marriage to have spiritual meaning (Mahoney et al., 1999). Mahoney et al. (1999) pointed out that those attributing sacred qualities to marriage may

draw their partner's attention toward other positive elements of their relationship and may thereby heighten the spouse's general evaluation of the marriage as well as facilitate collaboration and benevolent attributions that decrease conflictual interactions. Also, couples that believe that God or a higher power is manifest in marriage may be more likely to use adaptive communication methods (e.g., reasoning, listening, accepting blame) and avoid maladaptive strategies (e.g., verbal aggression, stonewalling), because they want to behave in a manner that God or the higher being would presumably condone (Ellison et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 1999). There is very little current empirical research on the role of spirituality and marital stress in the field of psychology. The majority of the publications in the marriage and family therapy (MFT) literature on spirituality are conceptual articles and books that articulate the importance of integrating spirituality into clinical practice and training (Grams et al., 2007).

Summary

This literature review consisted of literature discussing marital stress, marital stress and spirituality; marital stress in marriage, marriage, marriage and spirituality, theories of spirituality, and marriage. In all the studies reviewed, there seems to be an implied consensus that spirituality is an intricate part of each individual's being and plays a role in all aspects of life (Baumeister, 2007; Carroll et al., 2007; Ellison et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 1999; Balmer et al., 2012).

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine whether spirituality had an influence on the way couples coped with stresses in marriage and whether spirituality influenced couples' abilities to remain married. I chose to conduct a qualitative study so that participants could explain in detail how spirituality, if at all had affected their marriage. The following sections of this chapter relate to the details of the research design and methodology utilized in this study. In this chapter I present (a) a detailed review of the research design and the method used in examining the research question, (b) a description the study population and the eligibility criteria, (c) the recruitment process, (d) informed consent, (e) interview questions, and (f) the data analysis plan. The chapter begins with a discussion about the design of the study, which was phenomenological, and my rationale for choosing it.

Research Design and Rationale

I posed three research questions in order to examine whether spirituality has an influence on couples' ability to stay married during stressful periods in the marriage. The research questions were, as follows:

- RQ1. Does spirituality play a role in some married couples being able to endure marital stress?
- RQ2. What specific processes emerge, if any, such as themes or other variables that may contribute to staying married?
- RQ3. Does spirituality play a role in the deleterious effects of the overall stress of marital quality?

The study was a general qualitative one using in-depth interviews. Qualitative research is characterized as interpretative because it focuses on the meaning of human affairs as seen from different views (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research is also experiential; that is, it is both empirical and field oriented, and it is both situational and personalistic (Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell (2014), there are several designs associated with qualitative research. In an ethnographic study, the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time by collecting information through observation. According to Creswell, researchers using grounded theory attempt to derive a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants in the study. Phenomenological researchers seek to identify the “essence” of a phenomenon, as described by participants in the study (Creswell, 2014). I opted to use a phenomenological design. I did so because I wanted to explore the essence of the subjective experience of spirituality in marriage, more specifically how the influence of spirituality affected couples’ ability to remain and maintain a healthy marriage given the stresses of marriage.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research the researcher is considered an instrument of data collection (Creswell, 2014). This means that data are mediated through a human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines. Thus, the role of the researcher is to ensure that the data collected and analyzed are free from bias and personal opinion and that the study is conducted ethically.

Therefore, in conducting qualitative research, the researcher must be mindful of and keep in check personal opinions, beliefs, and biases that could affect the research design. In undertaking a qualitative study, the researcher must be aware of personal biases and address those biases as well as assumptions, any expectations, and experiences in order to qualify his or her ability to conduct the research (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) called these biases “philosophical assumptions” (p. 4). In other words, the researcher must make decisions on the development of the research questions and how the data will be collected, analyzed, and interpreted and not allow personal biases to influence the interpretation of the data.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

I conducted this study in the Mat-Su Borough of Alaska. The Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Borough is comprised of 31 county subdivisions and had a population of 101,095 in 2015 (DataUSA: Matanuska-Susitna Borough). The estimated population according to Alaska Department of Labor (2018) was 105,743, with 52% males and 48% females (Alaska Department of Labor, 2018). The median age in 2013 for the Mat-Su Borough was 34.3 years versus 35.3 years for the state of Alaska. As of the 2013 statistics according to Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics. (2017), the Mat-Su Borough was predominantly White (White alone, 84.5%; two or more races, 6.6%; American Indian alone and Alaska Native alone, 6.0%; Hispanic or Latino, 4.5%; Asian alone, 1.3%; Black or African American alone, 1.3%; and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, 0.3%). According to state statistics few Mat-Su residents are foreign born (3.4%).

The median household income in the Mat-Su Borough in 2013 was \$71,037. In 2012, of the population who were 15 years and older in City of Palmer, 31.2% were never married, 45.9% were currently married, 2.7% were separated from their spouse, 4.3% were widowed, and 15.9% were divorced. The recorded percentage of residents affiliated with a religious congregation in 2012 was 27.74% (Catholic 9.2%, LDS 9.2%, Southern Baptist 12.3%, Lutheran Church 3.1%, Evangelical Lutheran Church 3.1%, Assemblies of God 6.2%, Seventh-Day Adventist Church 4.6%, Presbyterian Church 3.1% and Non-Charismatic Churches Independent 1.5%) according to the Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics. (2017). The marriage and religious statistics for the Mat-Su Borough overall are unavailable; however, the 31 cities in the borough each have their own statistics. Marriage rates in the state vary by age, race and/or ethnicity, and gender. There were 5,478 total marriages performed in Alaska, 87 were same sex marriages, the median age was 29 years old (Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics, 2017), the number of marriages specific to the Matanuska-Susitna Borough was not specified.

Hill (2012) indicated that although the sample size for qualitative research can range from 3 to 97, 12 to 15 participants provide a sample size sufficient to see some consistency in results across participants. Phenomenological researchers use sampling which is idiographic, focusing on the individual in order to understand the full complexity of the individual's experience (Rudestam & Newton, 2007). The aim of collecting data in a phenomenological research is to provide evidence of the experience being investigated (Hill, 2012). I interviewed couples until I reached the level of

saturation needed. Data saturation is the point at which no new data emerges in the study (Hill, 2012). A total of 12 couples were interviewed in the final study.

Instrumentation

A qualitative design using in-depth interviews for data collection was used for this study. The focus of this study was on how and if spirituality affects couples dealing with stress in their marriage. I wanted to learn how spirituality affects marriages or if whether spirituality affects couple ability to maintain marriage during stressful periods.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

To recruit participants, I placed an advertisement in the local newspaper seeking married couples between the ages of 18 and 65 who have been married for at least 5 years to participate in an interview (see Appendix A). Prospective participants were screened with three specific questions to determine whether they were eligible to participate in the study. The questions were (a) are you currently married, (b) how long have you been married, and (c) how old are you. A criterion sampling was used; in other words participants were chosen who closely matched the criteria of the study.

The interviews were conducted at the conveniently located facility. In cases where participants resided in the rural areas of the Mat-Su Borough, I made arrangements with the participants to conduct their interviews in an alternate location. Upon agreeing to participate in this research, each couple read and signed the informed consent form. At the outset of the interview, the couples completed a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D). Last, couples responded to the interview questions (see Appendix E). Only couples who were legally married were eligible to participate in the research. Being

spiritual was not a requirement to participate in this study; the reason was that I sought to understand the degree of influence of spirituality on stress in marriages or whether or not spirituality has any influence at all. To maintain anonymity, I identified participants by number only. Furthermore, participants were afforded the rights to privacy, the choice to participate or not to participate, and the right to change their mind about participation and withdraw from the interview at any time during the event.

Data Analysis Plan

To analyze the data, I followed the NVivo 11 software process. The first step in data analysis after the interviews was to transcribe each interview conducted. Using NVivo I entered all interviews and started the coding process. After transcribing all of the interviews I printed them out line by line. I coded the information received by the couples. I looked for themes of types of stress, how stress was handled, whether couples were spiritual or not, and how (if any) spirituality played a role in the marriages, in order to be aware of when I met saturation. The questions were intended to gather information about marriage, childhood, and how participants have evolved through their marriages. I tried to remain unbiased in each interview in order to not influence responses by using active and reflective listening.

Printed raw data will be stored in a locked briefcase maintained by the researcher. Access to the raw data is limited to the researcher and Walden University. Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected and firewalled computer server. Raw data will be available for retrieval by request to the researcher. Raw and electronic data will be destroyed after 5 years.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Creswell (2014) put forward that in phenomenological research the researcher identified the essence of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study. Qualitative research emphasizes exploring individual experiences, describing phenomenon, and developing theory. A major challenge for researchers is striving for the highest possible quality when conducting and reporting research. In order to establish trustworthiness the researcher must show credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Noble and Smith (2015) suggested that in Qualitative research the aim is to design and incorporate methodological strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of the finding. Prior to each interview I reminded myself that any biases and expectations that I had could affect the participants responses, this helped me maintain a neutral and natural attitude and to bracket my biases and expectations. My own past experiences pertaining to this study was disclosed and bracketed in order to identify possible bias. Bracketing is a term used for the process of becoming aware of predispositions and assumptions on the part of the researcher, which was put aside as much as possible to avoid any influence this may have had on the research. Meticulous record keeping demonstrates a clear decision trail that ensures interpretations of data are consistent and transparent. All interviews were audio recorded, the recordings were re-played and immediately transcribed. Each time that an interview was transcribed a comparison was made with the previous interviews to seek out similarities and differences across accounts to ensure different perspectives are represented. To enhance

the trustworthiness of this study I adhered to the steps of creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility refers to the truth of the data or the participant views and the interpretation and representation of them by the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2012). Cope (2015) posits that a qualitative research is considered credible if the descriptions of human experience are immediately recognized by individuals that share the same experience. Understanding this definition, in a qualitative research context, correspondence with reality is replaced by correspondence of the perspectives of the participants with the description of their perspectives by the researcher (Bitsch, 2005). To ensure credibility I maintained persistent observation by making sure that I identified the characteristics of the situation for the research questions and I conducted extensive interviews. I also monitored myself to ensure that my focus had not changed during the interviews. Bitsch (2005) explained progressive subjectivity by asking the researcher to ponder the following questions: Has the researcher's conceptions changed during the process or did they mainly find what was already expected? Are the findings joint constructions of the researcher and the participant? As I gathered the information through the interviews, I was accepting of the responses. I did not attempt to change the participants' minds about their views. Other means to establish credibility are member checks, reflective commentary, and triangulation.

Transferability refers to the degree to which research results can be applied to a context apart from where they are gained or with other respondents (Bitsch, 2005). Transferability in research may be found using rich, thick description to convey the

finding. This may transport readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences. Creswell (2014) pointed out that the results of a qualitative study must be understood within the context of the particular characteristics of the geographical area in which the fieldwork was carried out and in order to assess the extent to which findings may be true of people in other settings.

Dependability can be established when the researcher allows another person to look at the process of the study to explore and access its accuracy. Interviews are one type of communicative event used in research. Performance in narrative or storytelling is tied to two interdependent dimensions, tellability and tellership. Tellability speaks to whether or not the participants are being truthful or not, and tellership speaks to how the person is relating their answers. For this research I looked at the interactions between the couples, I wanted to get a feel of the real relationship. There were several different scenarios that played out with the couples. For example, did both the husband and the wife actively participate in the interview or was one spouse speaking for both. The couple that was not accepted into the research was a good example, the husband responded to the advertisement, however when I called to set the appointment the wife was obviously distraught about it.

Confirmability refers to the integrity of qualitative research is based upon the data themselves and the research process. Quality assurance of the research process depends on its elaborate documentation. The audit trail should allow data to be tracked to their sources. The logic used to integrate interpretations into a coherent research narrative should also be visible.

Ethical Procedures

Psychologists are required to adhere to the American Psychological Association's (APA) Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (APA, 2002) when making decisions about our research practice. Understanding that our existing ethical code is a necessary, though not sufficient, resource for ethical practice in qualitative research and that psychologists require an approach to qualitative ethics that differentiates them from other qualitative researchers. Understanding that an awareness of ethical challenges is a necessary first step in qualitative research (Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi and Cheraghi, 2014), I reviewed the ethical test that is required for research and the Ethical Principles of Psychologist and Code of Conduct (2002).

In conducting the study, I strictly adhered to the following APA codes: (a) 4.01 Maintaining Confidentiality, (b) 8.02 Informed Consent to Research, and (c) 8.03 Informed Consent for Recording Voices and Images in Research. Code 4.01 Maintaining Confidentiality is, as follows:

Psychologists have a primary obligation and take reasonable precautions to protect confidential information obtained through or stored in any medium, recognizing that the extent and limits of confidentiality may be regulated by law or established by institutional rules or professional or scientific relationship. (APA, p.7, 4.01).

The majority of the interviews were conducted in a private room in the conveniently located facility for the participants. I conducted two interviews were conducted in private

homes; for these interviews the interview was conducted at a time when children were not home to ensure confidentiality and distractions. One interview was conducted in a private conference room of a local restaurant. Confidentiality in all interviews was maintained during the interview process.

Informed consents were explained and signed prior to the interview.

Informed consent to research (a) When obtaining informed consent as required in Standard 3.10, Informed Consent, psychologists inform participants about (1) the purpose of the research, expected duration, and procedures; (2) their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun; (3) the foreseeable consequences of declining or withdrawing; (4) reasonably foreseeable factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate such as potential risks, discomfort, or adverse effects; (5) any prospective research benefits; (6) limits of confidentiality; (7) incentives for participation; and (8) whom to contact for questions about the research and research participants' rights. They provide opportunity for the prospective participants to ask questions and receive answers. (APA, p.10, 8.02).

8.03 informed consent for recording Voices and images in research

Psychologists obtain informed consent from research participants prior to recording their voices or images for data collection unless (1) the research consists solely of naturalistic observations in public places,

and it is not anticipated that the recording will be used in a manner that could cause personal identification or harm, or (2) the research design includes deception, and consent for the use of the recording is obtained during debriefing. (APA, p.10, 8.03).

Summary

In this chapter I discussed the research methodology, from the rationale of the design of the study, to the process of participant sampling, data collection procedures, and data analysis procedures. I further covered my role as the researcher and discussed steps to ensure trustworthiness and scientific rigor. The evolving data was based on participants' verbalized discussions during the interviews. The findings of themes that emerged from the collected data about the influence of spirituality on stressful marriages in the Matanuska-Borough of Alaska are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not spirituality may have an influence on couples' ability to stay married during stressful periods in the marriage. I posed three research questions in order to understand spirituality in marriages. The research questions were RQ1: Does spirituality play a role in some married couples being able to endure marital stress? RQ2: What specific processes emerge, if any, such as themes or other variables that may contribute to staying married? and RQ3: Does spirituality play a role in the deleterious effects of the overall stress of marital quality? Differentiation-based spirituality was the theoretical spirituality framework used to determine the variables. According to the differentiation-based spirituality theory, (a) self-regulation and (b) balancing intimacy and autonomy in relationships affects couples' ability to achieve and maintain healthy marriages (Jankowski & Sandage, 2012). The other theory from which I drew was Kerr and Bowen's (1988) theory about intra- and interpersonal differentiation, which includes the view that mature functioning in young adulthood results from experiences in one's family relationships characterized by emotion regulation and a balance of autonomy-support and connection. In other words, children learn how to cope with stresses by observing the relationships of family members. The ability to connect and communicate with another person seems to be correlated with positive well-being in the couples interviewed.

Differentiation can be understood as both a process and as a personality characteristic. The process of differentiating from one's family of origin entails the emergence of oneself from a multigenerational family system characterized by various

levels of emotional attachments and projections of anxiety. Jenkins, Buboltz, Schwartz, and Johnson (2005) and Exline and Hill (2012) observed positive associations and significant predictors between humility and forgiveness and also found that humility accounted for unique variance when predicting forgiveness in a model that included spiritual transcendence and impression management. Exline and Hill (2012) found in support of the spirituality-forgiveness hypothesis, spiritual experiences correlated positively with attitude toward forgiveness and the likelihood of forgiveness. Johnstone et al. (2012) also researched the aspects of spirituality, using the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality which has subscales of coping and forgiveness. Johnstone et al. determined that spirituality had an influence on mental and physical health.

The chapter is organized as follows. In the first section, the settings are explained. In the second section the demographic characteristics of the samples are presented and compared to similar populations. The third section will provide an explanation of data collection. In the fourth section, the data analyses for each research question is provided. In the fifth section I will provide the results of the research by addressing each research question, and in the sixth section I will discuss the, evidence of trustworthiness. Finally, there will be a summary of the overall findings and a brief preview of the next chapter.

Setting

The primary setting for the interviews was a conference room at the Palmer Senior Center. The room was medium sized with a wall-to-wall T-desk, computer, telephone, and three chairs. The entrance door had a window that looked into the hall.

The lighting was dim, and there were no paintings in the office. During the interview I sat facing the door and the couples sat directly across from me to ensure that the interviewees were not distracted by other activities and events occurring in the facility. The room was soundproof.

Another approved setting was a local restaurant that had a conference room. I conducted two interviews in this setting. The conference room was located at the back of the restaurant with doors to separate the conference room from the restaurant. There was a coffee bar located in the conference room that was accessible to the participants. The interview was conducted in the far back of the conference room at a square dining table. I sat facing the front of the room and the interviewees sat directly across from me.

I conducted two interviews at participants' homes, due to their inability to come into town. One interview was conducted at 1 PM when the home was quiet and the child was at school. Present in the home at the time of the interview were the couple and myself. The other interview was conducted at 6 PM when the children were away at a neighbor's home. Present at the interview were the couple and myself.

Demographics

The demographic data for the participants are provided in Table 1. To maintain confidentiality the names of the couples are not used. The couples ranged in age from 29 years to 64 years of age. The majority of the participants were Caucasian ($n = 12$, 45.8%). There were eight African American (29.2%), one Korean (4.2%), one biracial (African American/Caucasian 4.2%), and one Armenian participants (4.2%).

Table 1

Characteristics of the Sample

ID	Age	Race	Years married	Work status	Education	Spiritual	# Times married	Children at home
1	45	Caucasian	20.5	Employed for wages	Some college	Yes	1	2
1	51	African American	20.5	Employed for wages	College	Yes	1	2
2	51	African American	31	Retired military	College graduate	Yes	2	1
2	50	African American	31	Homemaker	Some college	Yes	1	1
3	42	Caucasian	7	Business owner	High school graduate	Yes	2	3
3	45	Caucasian	7	Business owner, employed for wages	College graduate	No	2	3
4	53	Caucasian	31	Retired military, employed for wages	College graduate	Yes	1	4
4	53	Caucasian	31	Homemaker	High school graduate	Yes	1	4
5	62	Caucasian	34	Self employed	High school dropout	Yes	1	4
5	58	Caucasian	34	Self employed	High school graduate	Yes	1	5
6	64	Caucasian	10	Retired	College graduate	Yes	2	3
6	53	Korean	10	Self employed	College graduate	Yes	2	3

(table continues)

ID	Age	Race	Years married	Work status	Education	Spiritual	# Times married	Children at home
7	56	Caucasian	17	Self employed	Post graduate degree	No	1	1
7	63	Caucasian	17	Retired, self employed	High school graduate	No	2	1
8	40	African American	20	Work for wages	High school graduate	No	1	0
8	38	Caucasian	20	Work for wages	college	Yes	1	0
9	29	Caucasian	8	Work for wages	High school graduate	Yes	1	2
9	31	Caucasian	8	Work for wages	High School graduate	Yes	1	2
10	37	African American	14	Work for wages	Some college	Yes	1	2
10	37	African American	14	Work for wages	High school graduate	Yes	1	2
11	41	African American/Caucasian	21	Homemaker	High school graduate	Yes	1	0
11	48	African American	21	Self employed	High school graduate	Yes	1	0
12	62	African American	15	Unemployed	Some college	Yes	2	0
12	61	Armenian	15	Work for wages	High school graduate	Yes	2	0

Data Collection

I anticipated that data collection would take 1 month; however, unforeseen circumstances occurred, and the process took almost two months to complete. The participants were recruited through a newspaper advertisement. People interested in participating in the study were prescreened to determine if they met eligibility criteria for participation. The criteria were that participants had to be (a) married and married for at least 5 years, (b) between the ages of 18 and 65, and (d) residing in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

Nineteen couples responded to the recruitment advertisement. Two couples were ineligible due to age, one couple was ineligible due to legal residence, and one couple became ineligible because the spouse moved to another state and was no longer available; two couples were accepted for the research but failed to show up for the interview. One couple was disqualified. This couple was disqualified prior to meeting for the interview. Upon recognizing the stress, I asked the couple if this interview would be stressful and one spouse responded yes. I validated the person's feelings of stress and thanked the couple for their interest in the research. The telephone number to the local crises hotline for state of Alaska was provided; however, the spouse declined to call the hotline, I learned later. I made contact with this couple after the research was completed and learned that the spouse was stressed about being interviewed regardless of the topic. The final sample size was 12 couples.

After determining that respondents eligibility, the interviews were scheduled. The interviews were conducted at (a) Mat-Su Family Restaurant, (b) local Senior Center, or

(c) at participants' homes providing confidentiality was maintained and there were no distractions to the interview. At the time of the interview participants were asked to complete the demographics questionnaire and sign the consent form and the interview was conducted. All interviews were audio-taped using an ASF enriched sound cassette recorder/player or smartphone, which was later transcribed. During the interview process I took notes and audio recorded the event in order to maintain accuracy in my analysis. The research tool that I used was NVivo 10. NVivo is designed for qualitative research, it has purpose-built tools for classifying, sorting and arranging information and allowed me to manage and organize data, identify themes, glean insight and develop conclusion. I looked for similar responses as well as different responses to each of the research questions. The research questions were

RQ1. Does spirituality play a role in some married couples being able to endure marital stress?

RQ2. What specific processes emerge, if any, such as themes or other variables that may contribute to staying married?

RQ3. Does spirituality play a role in the deleterious effects of the overall stress of marital quality?

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I followed the NVivo 10 software process. The first step in data analysis after the interviews was to transcribe each interview conducted. Using NVivo I entered all interviews and started the coding process. After transcribing all of the interviews I printed them out and line by line. I coded the information received by the

couples. I looked for themes of types of stress, how stress was handled, whether couples were spiritual or not, and how (if any) spirituality played a role in the marriages, in order to be aware of when I met saturation. The questions were intended to gather information about marriage, childhood, and how participants have evolved through their marriages. I tried to remain unbiased in each interview in order to not influence responses by using active and reflective listening.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility (internal validity) in this study was achieved through the period of the research (approximately 8 weeks) when I interviewed the participants as they volunteered to participate in the research. Of the nineteen couples who volunteered, 12 couples met criteria for this research. Member checking is essential in qualitative research for establishing credibility. Each couple was informed that there were six questions and upon request were given the questions prior to the start of the interview on the day of the interview. Each couple was asked the same interview questions. Saturation was met when no new themes appeared.

Transferability (external validity) in this study was established through the participants described experiences in their marriage. Transferability simply says that the likelihood that this study's finding could be replicated in a new, specific setting. The probability that married couples experience the same stressors, and have the same or similar beliefs about marriage are high especially couples who are married for a long time. The couples interviewed were of a myriad of ages, ethnicity, and education level as

well as employment areas, also the number of children in the home ranged from zero to five. All couples resided in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough.

Dependability (reliability) relates to how the research is carried out. The procedure by which the results are produced must be explicit and repeatable whenever possible. Dependability was achieved by audio recording each interview. I then replayed each interview and transcribed it. The information was then uploaded into the NVivo software. I did this to check my own interpretations of the interviews and determine themes.

Confirmability (objectivity) was established by ensuring that I had sufficient time to reflect throughout the data collection and analysis process. After each interview, I immediately transcribed the audio recordings. After transcribing I went back and reread the transcripts several times to recall the actual interviews which included the environment, the couples body language, and the level of engagement of both of the spouses. This was my attempt to discern the credibility of the couple's responses. I further engaged in an objective (as much as possible) and critical overview and reflection of my own perspective and reactions. During each interview, a sense of mutual respect of understanding without judgement was an important part in creating a pleasant and open interview.

Results

The aim of this study was to explore the influence of spirituality in marital stress. In this study I explored whether spirituality had an influence on couple's ability to have marital satisfaction during stressful periods and in what ways couples used spirituality to

cope with the stress. Twelve married couples were interviewed for this study, Hill (2012) suggested that this the researcher continue to conduct interviews until saturation was met; this occurred after the 12th interview. The study showed that spirituality does have an influence on stressful marriages. Having the spiritual foundation and guidelines were helpful for some spouses when they are dealing with stress on their jobs or with their family. Even the couples that reported not being spiritual talked of the golden rule and respecting and accepting their spouses which lines up with a spiritual foundation. The described stressors in marriage were children, relatives, jobs, health, and finances. I identified five themes as stressors in marriage: children (Theme 1), relatives (Theme 2), jobs (Theme 3), health crises (Theme 4), and finances (Theme 5).

Stressors in Marriage

Children. Couples with children at home reported that children were the number one stressor in their marriage, and this was due partly to their spouse's individual upbringing. Couples who were raised with both parents also shared that they struggled with parenting styles given how they perceived their parents' parenting styles were. One wife (couple 2) shared that she felt "her mother was overbearing and controlled the father," and when she and her husband started their family she left the decisions and discipline to her husband. This caused "additional stress on the marriage because my husband was overwhelmed and my children did not respect me." Another wife (couple 10) talked about the changes in society and "not being able to discipline children the way we were disciplined." She believed that the decline in being able to properly parent children had caused difficulty in raising their children. In other words, she felt that since

children have been told that parents cannot spank them, children are not disciplined.

Another couple (couple 4) who home-schooled their children shared that as the children got older and started to socialize with other children concerning behaviors started to show that caused stress in the marriage because the children started to pit the parents against each other. Another wife (couple 5) shared that even though raising 5 boys was stressful, “raising her kids and grandkids also relieved stress.” Older participants (couples 2, 4, 8, 11, and 12) shared that stress with children is ongoing even into adulthood because children started experiencing their own stresses and reached out to the parents

Relatives. One wife (couple 1) shared that her husband’s family did not like her, “they threw a birthday party for me and invited the ex-girlfriend,” and “would give the ex-girlfriend my home number.” Another wife (couple 4) shared that her husband’s family treated her poorly when they first got married. Her husband was in the military and was away from home often, and his parents lived with them. She said: “The stress was so bad that I got physically sick.” When a relationship with a family member is not healthy — meaning it is emotionally, physically, or financially abusive and causes suffering- the victim has every right to stop interacting with that person. Some people choose to cut off a family member not because of abuse but because of conflict, betrayal, or unhealthy behaviors. Another couple (couple 5) reported that “dealing with our parents aging and have failing health causes stress.” Both of their parents are in their 90s and live separately but in the same town. This couple in an effort keep their parents active, arrange a family luncheon each week that includes the grandchildren and great

grandchildren. This couple also ensures that both parents are visited daily by several different relatives and have escorts to their medical appointments.

Jobs. Having a job can cause a lot of stress in marriages when they require long hours or frequent travels. Physical stress of work influences health and mental stress at work can be transferred to families. One husband (couple 1) shared that when his wife “is having a hard day at work and calls me, I listen. That’s all I need to do is let her vent, I’ll make comments sometimes or suggestions but mostly I let her vent and she does the same for me.” Another husband (couple 11) shared that: “I work long hours sometimes and I think this puts stress on my wife although she never says anything. My work takes away from time I want to spend with her.”

Health. Health issues were also noted in this study. Older couples experienced health issues that affected their employment and insurance and this led to financial stress in the marriage. One couple (couple 12) shared that after an injury at work the husband lost his job, and was in a wheelchair for a year. When he lost his job he lost his insurance and his wife was left with the financial burden because he was unable to work. Other couples (1, 4, and 7) mentioned that when the children were younger and got sick it caused financial stress when one or both parents had to miss work in order to care for the child. Couple 5’s wife reported she “went to food” and gained a huge amount of weight, which caused health problems. She has since lost the weight after finding exercise as her outlet for stress.

Finances. Couple 12 lost their home due to the husband’s inability to physically work. All participants shared they had financial difficulty when they first got married.

Some were raising children early in their marriage and others were young and not established in their jobs yet. One husband (couple 5) shared: “I think some of the stressors that I go through in our marriage are dealing with the financial part. It’s one of the biggest things, I want to make sure that my wife and my daughter have what they need and, a lot of times I have to put my needs on the back burner.” One wife (couple 8) shared: “Well we’re in business together, that’s one stress.”

Coping Mechanisms

Couples reported (a) communication, (b) respect, (c) acceptance, (d) commitment, (e) love and (f) spirituality as how they were able to cope with stress and maintain a happy and healthy marriage. These were the key themes related to coping mechanisms.

Communication. A good marriage thrives on the open exchange of emotion, desires, and beliefs. In fact, communication is one of the most important aspects of a satisfying marriage (Krull, 2016). Most marriages go through rough times, which can change the way spouses communicate with each other. Many couples develop bad habits and create destructive patterns when things aren’t going well (Krull, 2016). In this research there was a consensus that communication is important in marriages, and lack of communication has the potential to destroy marriages. One wife (couple 1) who was Russian reported that culture played a role in their communication style. The wife shared that she yelled when she was stressed: “I yell out, I call him and unload on him and he handles it.” However, her husband stated: “I don’t let stress get to me, I handle it quickly before it gets out of hand.” Another wife (couple 2) shared she was more of a talker and she loves to talk issues out, whereas the husband shared that he is opposite: “sometimes it

takes longer than others because we are human, and stubborn sometimes, but at a point we just come together to pray, realizing that this is something bigger than what we can handle on our own.” The same couple shared that “We talk about everything.” Another husband (couple 6) stated: “I talk about it. When I am stressed I talk to [wife] about It.” and his wife added “We talk about everything, the kids, work, when I am not feeling well.” According to Bellows (2016) communication is definitely the mortar that holds a relationship together. If communication breaks down the relationship will crumble. When spouses no longer communicate, a marriage does not flourish. It is no longer a marriage (Bellows, 2016).

Respect and acceptance. Respect is another important aspect of coping with stress. If there is a disagreement, spouses who respect each other and accept a difference of opinion and desire to accomplish a task are more likely to maintain the marital harmony. Gottman (1999, 2015) found that frequent fighting is not a sign of a bad marriage (unless it becomes physical), because all couples argue. Couples who respect and accept each other’s views or quirks have the advantage of maintaining the marriage. Spiritual spouses use prayer as a means of dealing with stress, Bellows (2016) stated that respect allowed a person to accept another person’s point of view whole-heartedly. It’s important for a person to let his or her partner know that his or her respect and value for him or her supersedes the specific issue that is being discussed. The participants all shared that they respected each other for their similarities and differences alike. One wife (couple 3) shared that: “I am spiritual, my husband is not,” and her husband shared that: “I believe my first marriage sucked out all the spirituality that I had from my childhood.

My wife and I switched roles. I am more serious and she is happy go lucky. She is more supportive and nurturing and it has worked for us.” Despite the difference in spiritual beliefs, respect and acceptance allowed this couple to remain married, and cope with the stress of parenting and marriage. Another wife (couple 4) who did not work said that she would call her husband and vent throughout the day, the husband shared that because he knows and loves his wife he just listens and validates her frustration.

Commitment. One important factor in a successful marriage is commitment and this can be manifested in different ways. Couples can be committed to stay married because of religious beliefs, for their children, or for financial reasons. Social norms can compel them to stay in their marriage, or couples can be concerned about how a divorce would be judged by others. On the other hand, personally committed couples see their relationship and their emotional bond as the most important thing in their lives and stay married because they want to, not out of necessity or a sense of responsibility. One wife (couple 3) shared that “I came from a bad marriage, there was no commitment, and I brought my baggage and dumped it on him.” Several couples (3, 6, 7, & 12) reported that in the second marriage they understood the importance of commitment in their marriage. One husband (couple 12) shared that in his first marriage: “I was younger, in my 20s and just wanted to have fun hanging out with my boys, going to the club, and other things. I was not committed.” Military couples (couples 2 & 4) reported they were committed to marriage, and often the wives took the total responsibility of parenting because spouses were often way from home for long periods of time. What helped military couples endure and persevere through multiple stressors of military life is not

well understood (Baptist & Nelson Goff (2012).

Love. In terms of psychology Hatfield, Bensman, and Rapson (2012) posited that compassionate love is characterized by mutual respect, attachment, affection, and trust. Compassionate love usually develops out of feelings of mutual understanding and shared respect for one another. Passionate love is characterized by intense emotions, sexual attraction, anxiety, and affection. All of the couples interviewed professed compassionate love for their partners. One husband (couple 1) reported “I knew when I met her that we would be married forever.” His wife shared: “We knew that when we got married there was not an option to not be married.” Another husband (couple 2) shared: “When we first get married, we are in a honeymoon stage, and that doesn’t last long and then you have to work to keep the marriage. Anyone can find a girlfriend or boyfriend, but keeping that person is hard.” Couple 4 reported that respect and acceptance kept them in love. Another husband (couple 2) reported: “My parents preached that to all of the kids when they decided to get married. If you get married that is it, unless it was something that was supposed to happen, marriage is for life.” Couple 2 wife reported: “I believe in marriage. I think when you are seeking to be married, you should be dating toward marriage. I believe that is what dating is, that your seeking to find who you are supposed to be married to, I believe also that you get married ‘til death do you part.” Another husband (couple 12) shared that “my first Marriage was not founded on loved, when I was younger I did not understand what love was, it was more a physical attraction. As I got older I realized it was more than that.”

Spirituality. All of the couples reported that they were raised in a religious

family, and they were made to attend church services, which was a major influence on their spiritual beliefs as adults. Several couples shared that they come from very “dysfunctional families” that professed to be Christians and when they were adults they rejected religion altogether. Other couples shared that having that foundation prepared them for marriage. Couples 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 10, 11, and 12 reported having a spiritual foundation on which they relied heavily. Couples 3 and 8 had one spouse who had a spiritual foundation, and couple 7 had no spiritual foundation. The spiritual couples interviewed came from different religions which included Bahí’í, Baptist, Protestant, Catholic, and Russian Orthodox, and equated spirituality to knowing the Bible and believing in God or a higher power. All spiritual couples reported that they realized that stressful times or times of crises were the times that they needed to come together in prayer. One husband (couple 4) shared: “Some of the problems we have had, I think without spirituality we would have handled things differently and brought other problems in as a result. We hold the Lord to his promises, so that is the whole foundation of our marriage.” One wife (couple 5) shared: “First of all because I am a Christian, I believe that I have things already set up for how I am supposed to deal with it.” She also reported she relied “on her faith, and prayed a lot” when she and her husband had disagreements. Several couples (1, 2, & 4) reported that they included their children when saying their prayers at night, and sometimes the children lead the prayer. Other couples (1, 2, 4, & 5) reported they read the Bible with their children. Several couples (1, 2, & 8) shared that the love of God has been their true strength in their marriages. One couple (4) shared that: “we know the Bible, and we know where to go to find answers and peace about

things that happen, whether it is the children or something going on at work.”

Summary

In this study I explored the influence of spirituality on stressful marriages. The participants were residents of the Matanuska-Susitna Borough in the state of Alaska. The participants were married for at least 5 years and were between the ages of 18 and 65. 12 couples accepted to participate in this study, all participants presented as open and honest in their responses, and were willing to share difficult times in their marriages.

I discussed the setting for the study, the demographics of the participants, and how data was collected, transcribed, coded, and categorized. Several central themes that emerged from couples interviewed pertaining to how they were able to deal with stress and maintain a happy and healthy marriage were: (a) communication, (b) respect, (c) acceptance, (d) commitment, and (e) love. All of the couples that were interviewed reported that their views on their current marriage had not changed since they first got married. The couples all shared that marriage takes work. Couples on their second marriage shared that with their first marriages they were not mature enough and married spouses that were not mature either. The majority of the couples interviewed stated that they talked to their partners about everything from stress on the jobs, children, finance, family and friends. When one spouse may have said or done something that the other spouse did not like or took offense to, and/or they were unable to talk due to high emotions, they would walk away, however, most couples shared that they never let the disagreement go on for days. Three couples (2, 5, & 6) talked about daily stress in the job and acknowledged that at times they brought the frustrations home. The majority of the

couples stated that spirituality had a major influence on their marriages. Even the participants who reported not to be spiritual stated that it had an influence on their marriage. Partners of a spouse who were spiritual shared that they respected and accepted their spouse's choices. Chapter 5 provides an interpretation of the findings in the context of the conceptual framework. The findings will be compared with what has previously been found in similar research that was discussed in Chapter 2, Limitations of the study will be reviewed, and finally, I will describe options for further research and the potential impact of this study for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The aim of this study was to examine the role of spirituality in relation to marital stress and marital satisfaction. I examined whether spirituality affected how couples coped with certain situations that caused stress in marriages. Spirituality is an important element in the lives of many individuals. However, with the exception of a few case studies and survey research (Balmer et al., 2012; Keeling et al., 2010; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Nelson et al. 2011), the influence of spirituality on marriage satisfaction has not been adequately researched. Although research on spirituality in the field of psychology is growing, there is a gap in the literature on the effects of spirituality and marital stress, according to my review of the literature. Findings from this study indicated that spirituality plays a significant role in marriages. Many of the participants indicated that without having a spiritual foundation their marriages would not have endured stress. One couple acknowledged that the lack of spiritual foundation in a previous marriage resulted in divorce. The research found that having a spiritual foundation affects couples' ability to remain in marriages during stress periods.

Interpretation of the Findings

The central themes for stressors in marriage that emerged from this study were (a) children, (b) relatives, (c) jobs, (d) health, (e) spirituality, and (f) finances. Couples who were interviewed reported similar stressors in marriage. Depending on the ages and stage of marriage the participating couples rated the stressors differently. For example, younger couples shared that parenting and relatives were the most substantial stressors. Some husbands stated that jobs were the most significant stressor because of the responsibility

of providing for their families, while other husbands attributed job stress to being away from their families for long periods of time. Older couples reported that, although parenting was difficult when they were younger, health and finances were great stressors in their lives currently. The themes that emerged for how couples coped with the stressors were (a) communication, (b) respect, (c) acceptance, (d) commitment, and (e) love. However, the participating couples varied in the primary way that they coped with stress.

Communication is one of the most important aspects of a satisfying marriage. According to Krull (2018), a good marriage thrives on the open change of emotion, desires and beliefs. Many people say “We do not communicate anymore”. Couples interviewed reported unanimously that communication was key to their marriage. Differentiation-based spirituality is the relational spirituality framework that elucidates spiritual experience and development in terms of the capacities of self-regulation and balancing of intimacy and autonomy in relationships (Majerus & Sandage, 2010; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). Understanding that some married couples may experience episodes of poor communication, the ability and willingness to work through these difficult situation rests on individual insight and mental state that reflects the perceived benefits and costs of a marriage to spouses (Khurshid et.al., 2007). Khurshid et al. (2007) reported that among working and nonworking married women with marital adjustment, stress and depression with poor communication is an issue that can destroy a marriage. All of the participants reported they talked often and about everything that concerned the family and work. Some couples admitted that when they were in the heat of an argument, they

both agreed that they would not talk when they were angry but rather walk away and take a few hours to calm down. Then, they would return and discuss the topic again.

In their research on communication in marriage, Mahoney, Pargament, and Hernandez (2013) surveyed 218 couples about their day-to-day verbal and nonverbal interactions. They identified communication factors that included common interests, congruence/openness, conflict resolution, shared goals, and value (Mahoney et al., 2013). Several couples' interviewed shared that communication guides marriages. Couples who are able to express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction build trust and loyalty. Couples who are able to achieve and maintain loyalty and trust are better prepared to achieve stronger partnerships and can become healthier parents.

Respect is equally important in marriages. The couples interviewed reported that they respected their spouse's choices, religious choices, goals, and careers. Carroll et al. (2007) contended that various aspects of an individual's expectations, beliefs, and values regarding marriage reflect an underlying marital belief that the individual holds. While Hall (Willoughby, B. J., Hall, S. S. and Luczak. H. P., 2013) largely focused on beliefs about marriage as an institution and a future relationship option, Carroll et al. focused more on how premarital individuals situate marriage into larger life course goals and trajectories. They generalized and broadened the model so that it may be used as a broad framework to organize how individuals view the marital formation process regardless of marital status or age. They defined and discussed three distinct, yet interconnected dimensions, (a) the relative importance of marriage (b) the desired timing of marriage in

the life course and (c) the criteria for marriage readiness or the types of preparation one believes are needed before being ready to get married.

Carroll et al. (2007) explained that marital timing refers to beliefs regarding the ideal and expected timing of marriage--in other words. Marital salience, according to Carroll et al., refers to general beliefs about the importance of marriage and marrying. However, Willoughby (Willoughby, B. J., Hall, S. S. and Luczak. H. P., (2013) added that other life goals such as education and employment should be included in the definition of marital salience. Also pertaining to respect, Baumeister (2007) has suggested that beliefs about getting married and being married, which included respect, contributed to marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

The third theme noted was acceptance. Couples in the study reported that they accepted their spouses despite shortcomings. Hawrilenko et al. (2015) found in their study that acceptance accounted for longitudinal change in relationship satisfaction over the first year of the study, and indirectly prevented deterioration of relationship satisfaction in the treatment group by examining acceptance and intimacy in couples. Thus one must look back to how each individual was reared and understand that the pattern or quality of attachment in parent-infant relationships will influence the quality of later adult partnerships. In each interview, spouses mentioned their parents and learning from the relationships of their parents. For instance, couples who were raised in healthy strict families reported that they were strict with their children. Couples who were raised by overly strict parents tended to be more lenient with their children, they said. Couples who grew up in spiritual families looked for spiritual partners, and spiritual individuals

who did not have spiritual partners dealt with stress because of the differences of their beliefs or faith.

The fourth theme was commitment. As mentioned, all couples professed commitment to their current spouses. I need to define commitment before I continue with this section. According to Burgoyne, Reibstein, Edmunds, and Routh (2010) commitment in marriage means that the couple is promising or agreeing to love and/or support each other in life (, 2010). Also I must acknowledge that each couple may have their own definition of commitment; some couples go into marriage thinking that divorce is an option if things do not work out. Other couples enter into marriage believing that the commitment is lifelong and cannot be broken. Negative emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness limit couples ability to cope effectively with stress. In other words, these emotions influence one's ability to commit. Couple 1 shared the action of their in-laws were verbally, emotionally, and legally stressful. This couple also shared that the stress and pushback from the in-laws actually made them stronger. Another couple, Couple 4, shared that because the spouse's parents looked at the marriage as doomed because the partners were from different religious denominations, their marriage was very stressful in the beginning. Having a strong spiritual foundation allowed them to become stronger as a couple, and they were able to stand up to their in-laws. Both couples have been married more than 20 years.

The fifth and final theme was love. Many individuals spend their lives craving it, searching for it, and talking about it. It is called the greatest virtue. Love is fascinating and complex. Romantic love, in particular, seems to be a beautiful mystery we find hard

to explain (Oord, 2005). In terms of psychology, Hatfield et al. (2012) posited that compassionate love is characterized by mutual respect, attachment, affection, and trust. Compassionate love usually develops out of feelings of mutual understanding and shared respect for one another. The theory of Differentiation of self, according to Kerr and Bowen (1988) is a product of a way of thinking that translates into a way of being. Participants had a difficult time defining love, husband (couple 3) shared love is beyond sex because anyone can have sex with another person. He went on to explain that love is being there for the other person when things are not going so well in the relationship. However the majority of the participants described compassionate love when asked what love entailed for them.

The first research question was: Does spirituality play a role in some married couples being able to endure marital stress? One couple (couple 7) reported “although we are not spiritual, we believe there is something greater than us. We just don’t believe there is a being [God] that sits in the sky and dictates how we should live.” The other couples shared they believed that without their spiritual foundation, their marriages would not have lasted and been successful. In the following interpretation of the findings, I will assess the themes that emerged from the interviews against previous literature and the conceptual framework discussed in chapter 2. Whether it is the mother–father–child nuclear family, a married couple with no children, a single-parent family, a stepfamily, a dual-worker family, or a cohabiting family, the family generally performs four important functions: (1) it provides a source of intimate relationships; (2) it acts as a unit of economic cooperation and consumption; (3) it may produce and socialize children; and

(4) it assigns social roles and status to individuals. Although these are the basic functions that families are “supposed” to fulfill, families do not have to fulfill them all (as in families without children), nor do they always fulfill them well as in abusive families; (Strong et al., 2013). There has been a recurrent interest in the connection between spirituality and marital outcomes (Ellison et al., 2011; Mahoney & Cano, 2014). According to Baumeister (2007), factors that contribute to marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction include the perceptions of either spouse’s cognitions or thoughts about certain behaviors; the degree of social supports for each of the partners and for the relationship, whether there is physical violence in the marriage; a spouse’s personality, infidelities, starting a family, and communication as well as adult attachment styles, mate-guarding, and family background. Baumeister (2007) also found that the performance of joint religious activities appeared to be related to marital satisfaction. Interestingly, Delaney, Miller and Bisono (2007) found that relative to the general population, American psychotherapists are far less religious with regard to affiliation, attendance, belief, and values which may be a reason for the gap in research in marital stress and spirituality. As a prelude to the discussion, it was noted that many of the couples shared that spiritual beliefs allowed them to remain married and work through stress in the marriage. Couples on their second marriages acknowledged that spirituality was not a prominent factor in their first marriage. In other words although they may have been believers they did not practice their beliefs. This finding is consistent with Baumeister’s (2007) suggestion that couples began their marriages satisfied (newlyweds), then the satisfaction waned over the years, and then returned to the newlywed level after

many years together. Kusner, Mahoney, Pargament and DeMaris (2014) researched spiritual couples from marriage to parenthood and found that spirituality represented one domain that may influence couples dealing with conflicts in marriage which gives corroboration to the self-differentiation theory and my research participants.

Assessing Themes Against Conceptual Framework

Differentiation-based spirituality (Majerus & Sandage, 2010; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010) is a relational spirituality framework where spiritual experience and development is examined in terms of the capacities for (a) self-regulation (Jankowski & Vaughn 2009; Kass & Lennox, 2005; Kass 2014; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009; Sandage & Jankowski, 2010) and (b) balancing intimacy and autonomy in relationships (Sandage & Jankowski, 2010). This framework is based on Kerr and Bowen's (1988) ideas about intra-and interperssonal differiation. According to Bowen (1988), differentiation of self is the degree to which a person is able to balance (a) their emotional and intellectual functioning and (b) the levels of intimacy and autonomy in relationships. Pertaining to the interpersonal level, differentiation of self refers to the ability to experience intimacy with and independence from others. In this study, it was discovered and confirmed that their parents' marriages set the foundation for each person as to what a marriage should be. For example, the spouse who shared that her mother controlled the family initially relinquished her mother role for fear that her children would resent her for being too controlling. The spouse who shared that her parents had a turmultous marriage put off getting married and had several turmultous relationships prior to getting married. Differienation of self theory is correlated with numerous measures of psychological well

being. Kusner et al. (2014) found a link between self-reports of spirituality and marriage, as like Kusner et. al (2014), I observed how spouses interacted with each other when they talked of conflict.in their marriage and noticed several assumptions and limitations to this study.

Limitations of the Study

There are several assumptions and limitation to trustworthiness in this study that need to be addressed. The first assumption for this study was that the participants were legally married because no proof of marriage was required. Written into the advertisement statement was a sentence that couples were to be married and the demographic questionnaire included a question about the number of years married. As an added way to ensure that the respondents were being honest, the researcher ask the couples their date of marriage. The second assumption was that the participants were residents of the Mat-Su Valley continued to be a concern. Couples who answered the advertisement expressed a passion for researching spirituality in marriages and wanted to be a part of the research. One potential respondent was not a resident of the Matanuska Borough. Another respondent was in the middle of a divorce. Yet another couple that responded to the advertisement was visiting a relative in the Matanuska Borough. The previously mentioned respondents were not a part of the research however this gave concern to the researcher on the importance of vetting the respondents. Couples provided their mailing addresses to receive notification of completion of the study and findings as required by Walden University. The participants in this study were volunteers, rather than having been randomly selected for the study. The fact that participants answered the

advertisement might say that they wanted to show how spirituality affected their marriages rather than whether it only affected their marriages during stressful periods in their marriage. To address this limitation at the outset of the interview I ask the participants if they were spiritual, and in the interview introduction, I reiterated that I was not researching religion or denominations, but from where they pulled their strength, God, higher power, Trees, Nature, etc.

Implications

In this study I explored whether or not spirituality had an influence on couples when dealing with stress in their marriages. The goal of this study was to determine through interviewing married couples in the Matanuska-Susitna Borough whether or not spirituality influenced how couples dealt with stress in their marriages. All couples were interviewed under the same protocol. Participants discussed their stresses and how they managed the stress in their marriages. As discussed in Chapter 2, social and behavioral scientists have shown recurrent interest in the connection between spirituality and marital outcomes (Ellison, et al., 2011). Marriage is stressful by its very nature; it brings two individuals often with different backgrounds, sometimes worlds apart, together to unite and start families. Bowen's (1988) theory suggests that the degree to which a person is able to balance (a) emotional and intellectual functioning and (b) intimacy and autonomy in relationships is key to a couple's ability to remain married. Differentiation –based spirituality is a relational spirituality framework that explains spiritual experience and development in terms of the capacities of self-regulation and balancing intimacy and autonomy in relationships (Majerus & Sandage, 2010; Jankowski & Sandage, 2011).

Stress in marriage is a normal everyday occurrence, and when stressful life events happen in marriage, both spouses will react to those stressors, and their moods may change. Generally, when stress is no longer a part of the relationship, spouses return to their normal moods and behaviors and life goes on. The whole person balances health, relationships, spirituality, education, finances, and careers. These are the themes that participants talked about as stressors in their marriage. In the field of psychology, the whole person should be addressed, consideration should be given to early childhood of both spouses in order to understand each spouse's reaction to stress. Knowing the spiritual foundation of the couple can assist in marriage counseling. The results of this study indicate that spirituality does influence marriages regardless of whether the couples actively attend religious services and, also, that approaching marriages in trouble using the differentiation-based spirituality model is beneficial to assisting couples who are experiencing stress in marriage and solving the problem

Recommendations

To my knowledge, there has not been any previous research about the influence of spirituality on stressful marriages, However, findings from this study supported the results of previous research about marriage and spirituality (Carlson et al. 2002; Brelsford, 2011; Beach, et al. 2011; Bellows, 2016) and on marriage and stress (Black & Lobo, 2008; Ellison et al. 2011; Gurrentz, 2017; Krumrei et al. 2011). Further, this study showed that there can be an association between spirituality and marriages. Based on this research, spirituality is shown to affect marriages regardless of whether the couple is practicing their faith/spirituality or not. This was evidenced by one couple (couple 3) who

had one spouse who identified as spiritual and the other spouse stating no belief in God. The spouse that reported no belief in God was raised in church and shared “the first marriage sucked out all remnants of spirituality that was left from childhood.” Other couples (2, 4, 5, 7, 8 & 11) shared that spirituality had a huge influence on dealing with stress in their marriage that included praying together and attending church together. Further research is needed to gain an understanding of the powerful role of spirituality in marriage.

Most premarital couples, when they decide to marry, are happy with their relationship and expect to be happy together until “death do they part (Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Rang and Whitton, 2010). Couples, despite whether or not they considered themselves spiritual, attended religious services, or actively prayed together seemed to be influenced by a spiritual sense. Spirituality, as defined in chapter one, is “The aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred “(Puchalski et al., 2009, p.887). Couples reported that when stress and crises arose in their marriages, they pulled strength from their spiritual foundation. For example, the couple (Couple 5) who shared the overwhelming stress of their elderly parents turned to their church family for assistance (talking to others who were dealing with similar stresses), and they talked about the stresses with each other. This couple reported when they were first married they knew they were in it until death because this is how they were raised. Couples who had previous marriages reported that the lack of spiritual foundation and maturity had a lot to

do with the failures of the previous marriages. It is important to note that some spouses valued their faith but upheld traditional marital roles and priorities rather than rock the boat and challenge social expectations. Other husbands and wives prioritized the demands of faith over gender and began to share authority within marriage in new ways to meet religious needs.

Further training is needed for marriage and family therapists about the way that they identify and access client spirituality (Balmer, Van Asselt, Walker, & Kennedy, 2012). The effects of spirituality in stressful marriages should be developed and tested. The ability to achieve and maintain a healthy marriage does not rest on spirituality alone; one must also consider cognition when working with couples. When examining marriages and how spouses relate to each other perhaps exploring Kegan's (1994) constructive developmental theory may provide more insight, Kegan's suggested that there are four orders of mind and most adults are in the third order, the socialized or traditional mind. In Kegan's theory people no longer see others as simply a means to an end, they are now able to subordinate their desires to the desires of others. All of the couples interviewed reported that they accepted their spouse's beliefs regardless if they were different from their own. This was especially apparent in the older couples where one spouse was very spiritual and the other was not. Addressing spirituality could aid professionals working with couples who are coping with marital strife. Couples who have a spiritual foundation would benefit more with scriptural interventions rather than secular interventions. There are also relationships between spirituality, marital stress, and marital satisfaction however this research is not connected. In other words there is research on

marriage and stress, there is research on marriage and spirituality but there is no research on the effects of spirituality in stressful marriages. The social implications for this study are valuable not only for the professional, but also to the clients who seek services from the professionals

Summary

In this chapter, I discussed interpretation of findings, themes against the framework, assumptions and limitations, implications and recommendations. According to the differentiation-based spirituality model, self-regulation and balancing intimacy and autonomy in relationships made a difference in couples' ability to achieve and maintain healthy marriages, which included the concept that mature functioning in young adulthood results from experiences in one's family relationships characterized by emotion regulation and a balance of autonomy-support and connection. Bowen's (1998) theory that the ability to achieve and maintain healthy relationships starts in early childhood when children watch how the adults in their lives interact, show affection, and cope with disagreements in the home. The themes that emerged for how couples coped with the stressors were: (a) communication, (b) respect, (c) acceptance, (d) commitment, and (e) love which lined up with Differentiation-based spirituality framework. There are several benefits to marriage, including a greater sense of happiness, better physical health, and longer life (Burdette et al., 2012; Gillmore, Lee, Morrison, & Lindhorst, 2008). In times of crises and tragedy people turn to their loved ones and to spiritual resources for meaning, solace, and strength.

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Appendix A: Advertisement

The following text is from an advertisement placed in the Palmer, Alaska, *Frontiersman* newspaper in August 2015:

Looking for married couples 18 and 65 who have been married for at least 5 years to participate in research on stress and marriage. Participation includes being interviewed to discuss the topic.

Appendix B: Letter of Cooperation

August 6, 2015

Subject: Facility Lease Agreement

Thank you for choosing our location to complete your doctoral research in clinical psychology at Walden University. We understand that you are conducting research to examine the effects of spirituality in stressful marriages in the Mat-Su Borough area. We further understand that your subject couples (Interviewees) will come from an outside source and not recruited from within our organization's staff, clients or visitors. We understand the data collected from these outside sources will remain confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of Walden University IRB. Additionally, we must ask that you disclose to your interviewees that this is a private study conducted by you (the student) and NOT affiliated with this organization in any way.

You have our permission to rent our interview room for \$75 for this project with a rental agreement. Per our conversation, this \$75 fee assumes that you will conduct the interviews on Monday(s) during normal business hours for ten (10) couples with the expectation of one (1) hour per couple for a total of 10 hours. If your project extends over the expected ten hour the facility charge will then be charged at a comparable rate of \$10 per hour for any additional hours used. We reserve the right to withdraw from this study at any time if need be or if there is a conflict of interest present.

All interviews must be scheduled in advance to ensure privacy for your interviews and our clients.

Signed by both parties on August 6, 2015.

Appendix C: Demographics Questionnaire

NAME _____ Age _____ Sex _____ Race _____

MARITAL STATUS

Currently Married _____

Number of times you have been married _____

LENGTH OF CURRENT MARRIAGE _____

If you have previous marriages, how long did each last? _____

EMPLOYMENT STATUS

- Employed for wages
- Self-employed
- Out of work for more than 1 year
- Out of work for less than 1 year
- Homemaker
- A student
- Retired
- Unable to work

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING BEST DESCRIBES YOUR ROLE IN INDUSTRY

- Management
- Administrative staff
- Support Staff
- Student
- Trained professional
- Self-employed

Other _____

DO YOU CONSIDER YOURSELF RELIGIOUS OR SPIRITUAL? ___ Yes ___ No

HOW OFTEN DO YOU ATTEND SPIRITUAL CEREMONIES:

- More than 1-3 times a week
- Less than 1-3 times a week

WHAT IS HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION YOU COMPLETED:

- 8th grade or less
- Some High School
- Some College
- College graduate
- Post graduate work
- Post graduate degree

WHAT IS YOUR FAMILY SIZE (Including you, your spouse, and children)

DO YOU HAVE CHILDREN LIVING AT HOME? _____

Appendix D: Interview Questions

1. Please share some types of stresses that you cope with in your marriage?

Examples

2. Has your view on marriage changed since you first got married?
3. Talk about how you cope with stress in your marriage?
4. How do you cope with daily stress?
5. In what ways do you believe spirituality influences your marriage?
6. Have there been any events in your life that have influenced your spiritual beliefs?

Appendix E: Sage Publication Permission Letter

Thank you for your email. We do not grant permission verbally over the phone. Since this article is not open access you do need written permission to include it in your thesis or dissertation.

In this instance, I am pleased to report we can grant your request without a fee as part of your thesis or dissertation.

Please accept this email as permission for your request as you've detailed below. Permission is granted for the life of the edition on a non-exclusive basis, in the English language, throughout the world in all formats provided full citation is made to the original SAGE publication. Permission does not include any third-party material found within the work. Please contact us for any further usage of the material.

If you have any questions, or if we may be of further assistance, please let us know.