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How Do Religious Women Cope with Marital Conflict and Hardship? Article 2

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Abstract: Frequent and unresolved conflict is a significant relationship risk factor for divorce, but it has also been shown that religion strengthens marriages, specifically in ways that give direction and motivation for couples in resolving marital conflict or other marital hardships. Thus, a study of how successful religious couples resolve conflict is pertinent in helping us better understand how to strengthen marriages and families. Our qualitative study of 113 highly religious women of diverse faiths and races found that women's perceived relationship or connection with God reportedly impacted conflict resolution and coping with marital hardship. Results suggest greater reconciliation and unity with the women's husbands through couple and relational processes, but more often through personal and psychological processes. We found that religious involvement led women to resources that strengthened their marriage. Resources discussed include (a) prayer, (b) scripture study, and (c) involvement in a faith community. This paper is the second in a two-part series.

Keywords: religion; spirituality; marriage; women; marital conflict; marital hardship

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1. Introduction

The research in this study highlights the experiences of women from a variety of religious backgrounds in order to tell their stories and allow their voices to be heard [1]. More specifically, this study will explore how religion, specifically a perceived relationship with or connection to God, reportedly influences how women of faith cope with marital conflict and hardship, deepening our understanding of the nexus of religion and family life [2,3] The present study is valuable because it is one of the few large qualitative studies to collect and analyze interview data from women of several different religious, racial backgrounds, and nations of origin. The objective is to explore the multi-faceted religious experiences of diverse women of faith. This article is the second in a two-part series.

1.1. Religiosity

Religion directly impacts the lives of most people on Earth since "approximately 85% of the world is religious in some way" [4]. In the United States, about 64% of the population identify as Christian, 30% identify as religiously unaffiliated, and other religious groups combined (including Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists) make up about 6% of the population [5]. For many, religious involvement influences the way they perceive and engage with the world around them by affecting their family life, relationships, and communities. While several research studies demonstrate that religious involvement can both help and harm families [6], there is a body of empirical literature that indicates that commitment to religious beliefs and practices is generally linked with positive and salutary outcomes for marital relationships when involvement is shared by wife and husband [6–9]. Furthermore, social science theory posits that women experience things differently than men, making it important that we examine the experiences of both women and men [10,11].

The Handbook of Religion and Health defines religion as "a multidimensional construct that includes beliefs, behaviors, rituals, and ceremonies that may be held or practiced

in public or private settings" [12] (p. 45). While religion is a complex multi-dimensional phenomenon, religiosity is a psychological construct that is frequently measured with an array of self-reported scales. At certain times in this paper, we are talking about the global construct of religion. However, we will more often use the term religiosity in connection with empirical studies that utilize that specific concept.

1.2. Religious Rituals and Practices

Marks [13] found that practice and ritual are often at the center of religious involvement for families. Further, shared familial religious rituals and practices have been linked to positive marital outcomes [14]. Marks and Dollahite [15] identified reported benefits of shared religious ritual, including: "relaxation, or the ability to take a break from daily life and 'breathe'; structure and 'rhythm' to life; better physical, mental, and/or spiritual health and quality of life; improved (direct and indirect) parent-child communication; stronger marriage relationships; a sense of comfort/meaning; and a personal relationship and connection with God" (p. 200). Religious rituals can also reportedly help create sacred places and times in homes and families and can even help family members become more relational by switching from a "me" to "we" mentality [15] (p. 199).

1.3. Prayer

While examining the impact of religious rituals and practices on family relationships, Marks and Dollahite [15] found that for many families, perhaps no practice "compares with family prayer in terms of reported prevalence or importance" (p. 196). Prayer is a common form of worship and can occur on an individual level or in other group settings [8].

Ladd and Spilka [16] described and divided prayer into three different categories or types. First, inward prayer (self-examining); second, upward prayer (giving thanks to God and/or obligatory); and third, outward prayer (for or on behalf of others). Another type of prayer, praying together as a couple, has a host of reported positive benefits as well [8]. For example, participating in outward prayer together is linked to positive relational outcomes such as commitment [17], forgiveness [18], satisfaction with sacrifice [19], and general relationship satisfaction [20]. Praying together as a couple is also correlated with increased trust and unity in the relationship [19]. Additionally, praying together can help couples cope with marital hardship by helping them resolve conflict [21] and mitigate stress in marriage [22].

1.4. Scripture Study

Studying scripture has been linked to benefits, including mental health, by reportedly providing comfort, guidance, and strength during times of stress [23]. Studying scriptural texts, such as the Bible, reportedly helped participants come to understand God's character better and build a stronger sense of connection or relationship with God [23]. Marks and Dollahite [15] found that scripture study was a meaningful religious practice for many of the diverse families they interviewed. Participants in their study demonstrated that scripture study in the home involved more than just reading a sacred text; rather, it was a relational activity. Specifically, "It is a time for motivation, discussion, learning, and worship; but perhaps above all, it is a time for hearing the sacred word together" (pp. 193–194).

1.5. Participation in a Faith Community

While participation in religious institutions is on the decline in the United States [24], there are many documented benefits correlated with being an active part of a religious community [14]. One of the benefits of having a faith community is the social support of other members of the congregation [25]. Involvement in a religious community is correlated with higher marital quality, marital stability, and marital satisfaction [14], as well as lower cancer rates, greater physical health, and increased longevity [12]. Religious communities also tend to provide economic and social support benefits for society through community outreach work [25,26].

1.6. Religion in Family Life

Research suggests that varying aspects of religious involvement directly impact marriage [8,27]. There is evidence that when spouses worship and attend church together, this has a positive impact on marital quality and stability and decreases the couple's chance of divorce [7,8]. A study performed by the Harvard Institution for Quantitative Social Science found that shared regular church attendance decreases the chances of divorce later in life by up to 50% [28]. However, if couples are of different faiths, if there is a disparity in church attendance, or if one partner is significantly more committed to religious involvement than the other, it can increase the odds of dissolution of the relationship [29]. Shared religious beliefs and practices in marriage not only help avoid dissolution but they correlate with other relational benefits as well, such as decreased divorce rates and higher levels of mental and physical wellbeing [2,30,31].

Religious involvement also impacts parenting. For example, religious beliefs have been linked with an increase in father-child involvement [32,33]. In their book Religion and Families, Marks and Dollahite explain,

> Wilcox (1998) linked religiosity predominantly with high-warmth parenting, while aspects of colder, authoritarian fathering were negatively correlated with religiosity. In another study, Wilcox (1999) found that Evangelical Christian fathers were more "traditional" (e.g., in expectations of obedience by children) but were also relatively highly involved fathers and were found to be "more expressive than most fathers" (p. 236). So, on the whole, many fathers seem to be striving to live out religious beliefs that promote kindness, warmth, and support in their fathering efforts in ways consistent with the idealized, gentle, and highly involved "new father" [30] (p. 123).

1.7. Women and Religiosity

On average, women tend to report higher levels of religiosity than men [34,35]. It is clear from the research that religious involvement impacts women's lives in significant ways. For example, Smith and colleagues [36] found that utilizing religious beliefs during hardship helped some women maintain family cohesion in a more "understanding, sympathetic, and gentle [way]" (p. 33). A recent qualitative study by Green and Chuang [37] involved interviews with 20 Jamaican adult women and examined how religious involvement impacted their lives and the roles they held, including spouse, mother, and employee. Participants mentioned that religious involvement led them to avoid using profanity around their children, to work to help their children develop their own spiritual beliefs, and to teach their sons how to treat women well. Participants also mentioned how religious involvement helped them in their own upbringing by influencing how they dealt with complex issues such as sexuality, as well as influences like peer pressure and adversity [37]. Although such studies are rare, it is reasonable to assume that religiosity is a similarly multi-faceted influence for many women [34].

Because women play such vital roles in creating and sustaining healthy marriages, families, and societies, it is important to identify and harness resources that most benefit women. We are especially interested in how and why religiosity impacts how women cope with marital conflict and hardship—an understudied phenomenon of importance.

1.8. Religiosity and Coping with Marital Conflict and Hardship

Religiosity and familial conflict resolution have been studied increasingly over the past two decades, and correlations and connections have emerged [6,38]. Lambert and Dollahite [38] found that religious involvement can impact conflict during three aspects of conflict, including (1) problem prevention, (2) conflict resolution, and (3) relationship reconciliation. In connection with marital conflict, Mahoney [39] theorized that associations between religiosity and relationships may be influenced by core premises, including: (1) religious involvement offers values and ideals for marriage and family life; (2) religious beliefs have the potential to influence conflict resolution positive or negatively; and

(3) "... religion offers people theologically grounded systems of meaning that can shape family conflict in unique ways" (p. 690). Further, research suggests that couples with shared faith involvement tend to have happier and longer-lasting relationships [30].

Why do religious couples tend to have happier and more lasting relationships? One multifaceted answer may be found in Dollahite et al. [40], who found that transcendent religious experiences helped participants during times of adversity by providing relational meaning, increasing relational depth, healing relational hurt, and encouraging relational action. Additionally, religiosity generally has positive associations with relational virtues such as sacrifice, commitment, empathy, forgiveness, and marital unity [22]. These attributes may strengthen marriage and assist couples as they face the challenges and conflicts inherent in family life.

These findings are pertinent as frequent and unresolved marital conflicts have been found to be significant relationship risk factors leading to divorce [41]. Thus, a study of how and why successful religious couples resolve conflict is of interest. In summary, previous research has shown that religious involvement, especially shared religious involvement and practice, relates to marriage in several (generally salutary) ways, but there is still much work needed to understand the nexus of women, religiosity, and marriage.

1.9. Theory Suggests Women's Experiences with Marital Conflict Differ from Men's

Previous studies have shown differences between how women and men engage in marital conflict [10,42,43]. Ball and colleagues [10] assert that women often hold a more subordinate position than husbands when it comes to conflict in marriage, and some women expressed frustration at not having more of a say in problem-solving discussions. The study further concluded that both men and women generally agree that men have the "final say" in marital conflict. Bernard [42] found that women and men also vary in what they bring to a situation of conflict in the marriage. Specifically, women tend to be the ones who bring up the issues, while men largely determine the outcome of the situation [42]. Additional research has shown that men score significantly higher in "competition" levels in the workplace than women [43], and many men may bring elements of this competitive spirit into their marital relationships. Such findings highlight the importance of understanding the impact of gender-linked roles in marital conflict.

Additionally, there is often a great deal of concern over the issue of patriarchy in religious marriages. In a previous companion article from the same research project, we stated,

> A strong feminist critique of religion in recent decades that continues in contemporary social science is that religion (including the Abrahamic traditions featured in the AFF sample) often perpetuates traditional gender roles and patriarchy [44]. While this claim has many verifiable features, book-length studies on women in Orthodox Judaism have revealed that a narrative that "religion is sexist, patriarchal, and harmful to women" lacks both nuance and contextualization [45,46]. Like the Orthodox Jewish women in Davidman and Kaufman's book-length studies, the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian women in our American Families of Faith sample sometimes critique, sometimes condone, but reveal an acute awareness of their complex religious systems of belief, practice, and community. The racially, religiously, and regionally diverse women we interviewed varied quite widely in their perspectives on gender's interaction with their religion. Even so, the experiences and insights they offered were not simple or monolithic. Indeed, one reason that the in-depth, first-hand reports of these diverse women are so valuable is that they allow us to avoid what the Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has called the "danger of a single story" [47] (p. 3).

1.10. Research Question

With some research showing that women tend to have a difficult time voicing their opinions and needs in marital conflict, or at least having their viewpoints deeply heard,

understood, and considered [10,11,42,43], it is valuable for women and men, to understand what they do control in strengthening their marital relationships.

A better understanding of how women's religious beliefs, specifically a sense of connection or relationship with God, impact how women cope with marital conflict and marital hardship would be a valuable contribution to the social sciences. There are very few studies that qualitatively explore how religious involvement specifically influences diverse women, and even fewer that examine how religiosity impacts coping with marital conflict and hardship for women. Indeed, Mahoney [2] calls for more investigation into the impacts of religious involvement on the family, including (and especially) marriage and parenting. Further, the intersection of religiosity and therapy has become an area of increased interest [3]. Research on how women's sense of connection or relationship with God impacts their marriages would offer increased understanding regarding women of faith, their marital relationships, and how religious women cope with marital conflict and hardship.

2. Materials and Methods

The present study analyzed and coded interviews taken from the American Families of Faith qualitative interview database of 261 heterosexual married couples. Highly religious couples from various races, ethnicities, regions, backgrounds, and denominations were interviewed to better understand how religious involvement impacts marriage and family life. Religious minorities (Jewish, Muslim, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint families) and ethnic/racial minorities (African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American) were purposefully oversampled to learn more about those groups. Fifty-one percent of the families were from ethnic or racial minorities. Additionally, 89% of the sample was made up of same-faith couples, with 11% being in interfaith marriages. There have been nearly 200 peer-reviewed publications from this landmark data set, but this study is one of the first to focus exclusively on women.

2.1. Data Collection

The families who were part of this national study represent significant religious breadth (over 20 total denominations), geographic scope, and racial diversity, with 51% of the participants being racial/ethnic minorities. Married participants had at least one child. The education levels of participants ranged from G.E.D to Ph.D., and they had varying socioeconomic statuses. Participants for this study were found by inviting religious gatekeepers (such as clergy, pastors, and other religious leaders) in all eight socio-religious regions of the country to recommend couples in their congregations for study participation. Because we wanted to study those who are "highly" religious, or more actively religious than most, we did not merely ask clergy for "successful" couples; we asked clergy for couples who were exemplary—the most exceptional examples of commitment to marriage, family, and faith that their congregation had to offer. About 90% of individuals referred by religious leaders were interviewed. The mean length of marriage among participants was over 20 years, and many of the couples were active in the same faith community for the majority of their marriages. Participant families reported donating on average 7% of their income to their religion and spending an average of 11 h per week on personal and home-based worship activities.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews, which consisted of about 25 questions related to the intersection of faith and family life, were conducted in person by professors and their graduate research assistants. The interviews lasted between one and four hours (M = 2 h). Interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim and uploaded into NVivo software for analysis. Please see americanfamiliesoffaith.byu.edu for a more detailed description of this study, which includes a comprehensive list of publications from this data set.

2.2. Data Selection

The present study employed NVivo 12 qualitative analysis software to identify and select the participant responses that were most relevant to our research questions: Does belief in God influence women of Faith? If so, how and why? To do this, we first used the auto code function to separate participant responses by gender, allowing us to focus the follow-up analyses on 19,685 responses from the 261 women/wives. Next, we used the text search function and the custom context function to identify 1156 references (from 238 of the 261 wives) that contained words related to marriage that would help us explore our research questions (e.g., the list of approximately 30 search terms included words such as goal, spouse, and partnership). The computer-generated references included 60 words before and after the key search terms to offer context.

Our team then open-coded the 1156 quotes related to marriage (from the women). After going through about one-quarter of the interview excerpts, several main themes began to emerge. At this point, the coders and the lead research assistant consolidated the codes based on overlap and similarities between existing codes and collaborated to identify key concepts that they observed [48]. The lead research assistant then created a detailed codebook using guidelines from Bernard and colleagues [49] that outlined what qualified participant responses should either be included or not included in the categories for the themes. The coders continued to add to and modify the codebook as they went through more interviews. This additional coding resulted in 190 specifically identified quotes about coping with marital conflict and hardship from 113 women (43% of the 261 total women interviewed).

2.3. Sample

The participants in this study come from all eight socioreligious regions of the United States [50]. The participants identify with a variety of religious traditions, including Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Couples who were strong in their faith were intentionally selected for this research project, providing a better examination and understanding of the family processes, experiences, and outcomes of highly religious women.

2.4. Subsample

Given our focus on the experiences of wives of faith, a subsample of only the women was used for our study. Using a team-based approach [48], the 1156 women's quotes related to marriage were coded. "Conflict resolution and coping with hardship" emerged as a recurring theme, surfacing 190 times in a total of 113 interviews. In these 190 references to "conflict resolution and coping with hardship," the sub-sample had a similar composition to the main sample, with Asian and Evangelical Christian wives being slightly overrepresented and Jewish wives being slightly underrepresented.

2.5. Analysis

For the current study, our team (conducted axial coding of the 190 excerpts associated with the core theme of "conflict resolution and coping with hardship" data from women of faith. We used guidelines from Bernard and colleagues [49] to track axial-code quotes with the help of the codebook while also testing for inter-rater reliability (calculated at 0.90 for the themes present in this article). Finally, we systematically examined the identified quotes in the themes using the codebook and identified sub-themes. These thematic data offer insights into our central questions: Does belief in God influence how women of faith cope with marital conflict and marital hardship? If so, how and why?

3. Results

One remarkable element of this study is that the emergence of the theme, "belief in God influences how women of faith cope with marital conflict resolution and hardship," was a spontaneous theme. In other words, participants were not asked directly or indirectly about how their beliefs influenced coping with marital conflict and hardship. Despite no

direct "prompts", the theme still emerged 190 times (and in about 43% of the interviews). While a direct query would have yielded more data (and a higher volume of relevant data), the salience of the issue is perhaps more evident given that almost half of the female participants addressed the focal issue of this study without being asked to do so. Phrased differently, there was no "leading the witness" involved, perhaps contributing additional validity to the reports.

In addition to our overarching theme, "belief in God influences how women of faith cope with marital conflict resolution and hardship", we identified three core themes: (1) God is at the center of marriage, (2) internal manifestations of a connection with God, and (3) belief in God leads to external resources that strengthen marriage. This paper will focus on the third and final main finding, "belief in God leads to external resources that strengthen marriage", and its three sub-themes: (a) prayer, (b) scripture study, and (c) participation in a faith community.

3.1. Belief in God Leads to External Resources That Strengthen Marriage

A personal relationship or sense of connection with God was not only reported via internal manifestations [47] but also displayed itself in external manifestations. A sense of connection or personal relationship with God reportedly led women to act in ways to align with God, which aided in coping with marital conflict and hardship. Repeatedly mentioned actions and sub-themes included (a) prayer, (b) studying and applying scripture, and (c) participating in a faith community.

Gwendolyn, an African American Christian, described what she called "the big three":

> If you are doing the big three, prayer, being in the word, and fellowshipping with those of like faith then it. . . helps you, and you can encourage other people [when] they do see that you're still happy [in your marriage] after umpteen years.

The following sub-themes depict these "big three" in greater detail.

3.1.1. Sub-Theme A: Prayer

Prayer is central to most religions and was a theme that recurred as we coded for the Women of Faith project. Anne, a Catholic, said,

> My faith has had its ups and downs. [During] the lowest downs where I've really been kind of far from God, I haven't been a very good wife, and I haven't been a very good mother. And when I've come back to God and been closer and been more faithful and more active in my own personal prayer life, then. . . I've been better, a nicer person and a better wife and a better mother. So, they just, they're totally hand in hand. I can't really separate [prayer and my family relationships].

Joan, a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, shared:

> We have our couple prayer together whenever we can. I think, besides the strength you draw from those experiences, the... act of hearing your spouse pray for you is really humbling.

Lily, a Mainline Protestant, explained how she has to connect emotionally with her husband to be able to have prayer with him:

> I think that really goes hand-in-hand, and I experience when my spiritual walk is down, or I'm far from God, or when I'm not doing my daily devotions, daily prayer, daily reading of the word, [then] I just feel distant to him [husband]. It affects me, everything, emotionally. I lose patience with him. . . . It is a challenge with a small baby sometimes, just to keep up in a prayer life. It affects my relationship with my [husband] a lot, I think. You know, intimacy, everything. And I think that when I'm closer with God, again, I'm more aware of the things I say, and I'm more able to control my emotions . . . When you are feeling that God is not in control in you, it just affects my relationship with my [husband]. [This] goes back to prayer too. When I'm down in my relationship with God,

> sometimes I don't feel like praying with [my husband]. Because you feel like you're spiritually distant. So, it's almost like, it is really hard to come together in prayer when your level is down, so you have to kind of come on the same level.

Alyshia, an African American Christian, shared how her relationship with God, which is manifest through her prayers, helps her grow:

> Having a solid relationship with the Lord . . . He will tell you when you are out of line . . . the Lord will change you and say, "Look at thy selfishness" . . . and then we can see a little more clearly. Definitely, a solid relationship [with God] helps indeed.

Yui, a Chinese Christian, said:

> When we had some disagreements, we prayed together, confessed our sins before God, and learned to forgive each other.

Prayer reportedly helped these women connect with God. This prayer-based connection seemed to help them turn more positively toward their husbands. In summary, prayer reportedly strengthened their relationships with both God and their husband. As we see in the next section, time together in the scriptures reportedly strengthened the marital relationship as well.

3.1.2. Sub-Theme B: Scripture Study

Many of the women in our sample referenced reading from or adhering to scriptural teachings. Further, many reportedly believed that scriptures were frequently how they came to better know and understand God, God's will, and God's character. Moriah, a Jewish wife, said:

> So often you just . . . stop talking. You don't communicate, and so I think when we read [Torah] together, which we really try to do pretty often, it does create conversation and more understanding, and I think certainly that reduces conflict. It prevents conflict. It also helps remedy conflict once it's there.

Caprie, an African American Christian wife, said:

> I get all of my inspiration and all of my guidance from the Bible. That's how I learned how to treat others. How to treat people and how to be in my marriage with my relationship with my husband. And [that is] what puts things in priority, in order. That's where I get it from. And when I make decisions, I always say, 'I don't make decisions just based on what I think. It's coming from scripture.' It's gonna be scripture-based or it's gonna be something on that ground.

Danielle, an Evangelical Christian, shared how her spiritual study helped in her relationship with her husband:

> I believe that my relationship to my husband is directly reflective of my relationship to God. And if, as inevitably happens in marriage, things start to get shaky between us, the first thing I do is I go back to spiritual study more deeply to work on it before I do anything human.

Mercy, a Baptist wife, said,

> When two people are married, what's wrong in you really influences the other person. But for me, I find the only way that I grow very effectively is through God's touch in my life. So I study in scripture and learn more about who God is and what His heart is for [our] relationship, for His world that He's made. It helps me to be able to grow myself so that I can better... apply that into my relationships.

Like Mercy, many of the participants reported that scriptures or "the word" helped guide them in becoming better individuals, wives, and mothers. Others, like Moriah, shared how sacred texts bring them closer to their spouse as they read them together. Either

way, scripture reportedly had a positive impact on marriage for many of the women of faith in the study.

3.1.3. Sub-Theme C: Participating in a Faith Community

Faith communities were often viewed as a positive and beneficial resource for many of the women in this study. Aida, a Latina member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, shared the following about her faith community:

> I think that the most marvelous thing that could have happened in my life and to my marriage and family was to come to the Gospel. To be able to go every Sunday and renew my covenants that I made when I was baptized. That is what helped me be strong throughout the week. To be able to be tolerant and be better. [A] better mother, better spouse, better friend.

Emily, a Baptist wife and mother, highlighted how having a group of people to learn with offered her needed support:

> So, faith helps me because I realize that there is a different way to do [life]. And I can actually learn how to do it differently, with other people who are also learning too. Some people I know are much further along, and I can learn from them. And I find that I can actually share experiences with other people that help them. I think being in a faith community is helpful that way, because we realize that we're not alone. Sometimes I'll go to Bible study and I'll realize: 'Boy, the kinds of things that Michael and I maybe are facing or dealing with are nothing compared to what someone else might be experiencing.' Or I can learn from other people and bring it back into our marriage and say: 'Hey, this is something somebody shared with me; and what do you think?' So it's a dynamic thing. There's all these relationships that affect us and we have those relationships because we have the same faith.

Similarly, Noor, an Arab-American Muslim wife and mother, commented on how her congregation and its faith-based classes have offered her direction in her marriage:

> Basically, I need to learn more about Islam, to strengthen our marriage, even make it stronger. I think that by getting more in depth in Islam, which I'm trying to do now, I'm going to classes and everything. So, it's helping me understand a lot more; and I think that it makes me understand more my role in our marriage and how I'm supposed to act.

Faith communities can play many roles. The women in our study talked about how having a faith-based community provided them with support, direction, modeling, and a place for spiritual renewal, each of which reportedly helped strengthen their marriages and aided them as they faced the conflict and hardships that were part of family life.

Through the analysis of these in-depth interviews, we found rich and personal insight into the motives and desires of these married women of faith. Each of the themes and sub-themes that emerged reportedly influenced marriage for these women of faith.

4. Discussion

Qualitative research can help us gain a deeper view of the 'why' and 'how' questions in research [1]. We wanted to learn more about how religiosity influences coping with marital conflict and hardship for women of faith. Because there is a relative lack of research on coping with conflict and hardship in highly religious marriages and on women of faith in general, this study was primarily exploratory. The strongest overarching theme (43% of references) in the women's responses was that they felt that God helped them to cope, navigate, and overcome conflict and hardship in marriage.

God was reportedly central to the beliefs, lives, and marriages of many racially, regionally, and religiously diverse women of faith we interviewed. This sense of connection or relationship with God seemed to lead some women to change in ways that aligned

them with God and, in turn, strengthened their marriage by helping them cope with and resolve marital conflict and hardship (see Figure 1). The present article has focused on findings related to external manifestations of a relationship with God (including prayer, scripture study, and participation in a faith community) on the right side of the model, while a preceding article has focused on the internal manifestations on the left side of the model [47].

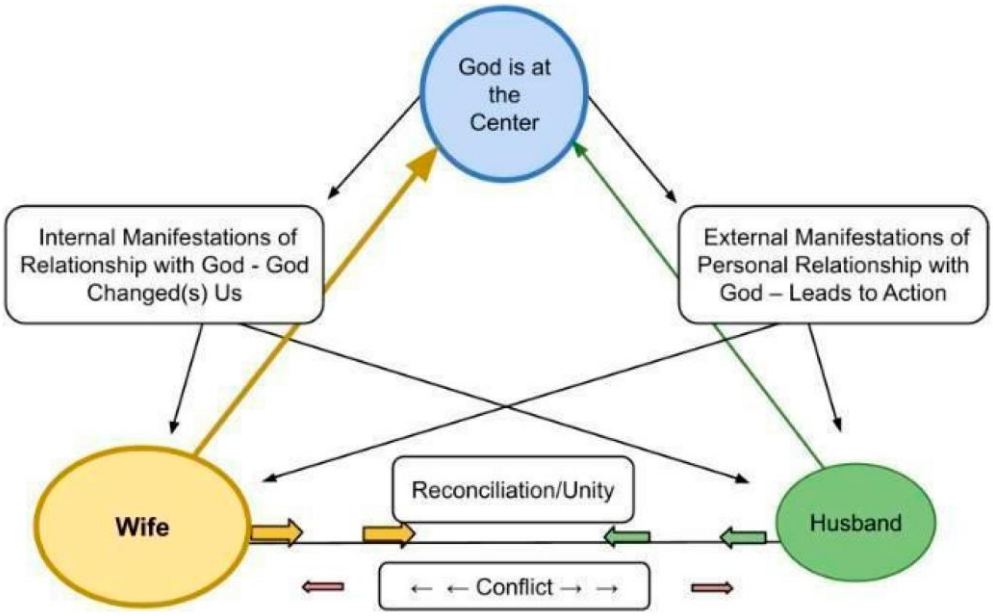


Figure 1. Conceptual Model.

This conceptual model is based on grounded theory and attempts to explain how women's sense of connection to or relationship with God impacts their marriage. The model is influenced by the divine triangle [51] and highlights a woman's experience with her connection to, or sense of relationship with, God and her husband. The model depicts how conflict draws couples further apart from each other. Conversely, reconciliation and maintaining unity in marriage bring them together. We suggest that outcomes of both internal manifestations and external manifestations of a relationship with or connection to God impact wife and husband, as well as their shared marriage.

4.1. Implications

The findings from this study highlight ways that a perceived belief in or relationship with God has helped women from varying SES, religious, racial, and educational backgrounds successfully cope with marital conflict and hardship in their marriages. Because frequent and unresolved conflict in marriage typically increases divorce [41], educators and therapists in family life education and family therapy should be aware of how religiosity impacts coping with conflict and hardship in some marriages. If a perceived relationship with or connection to God does impact how women cope with conflict and hardship in marriage, then greater efforts should be made to study and understand this phenomenon.

4.2. Limitations and Future Directions

This study was conducted with participants who were categorized as "highly religious" and who were in long-term, strong marriages. As such, although the sample was national in scope, this study is not nationally representative, nor is it generalizable to the general population.

As one reviewer noted, the area of social science theory specifically addressing religiosity and women is poor and more mid-range theory is needed. Future research could delve further into the relationship between religious faith and marital coping, including quantitative methods to validate the findings from this qualitative study.

Because of the impact women, marriage, and religion have on society, further research should continue to examine how religiosity, including a perceived relationship with or connection to God, impacts marriage for women. A greater understanding of how religiosity influences marriage will help researchers, educators, and clinicians make more informed decisions, thereby offering more culturally sensitive, informed, and effective assistance to religious women and their families.

5. Conclusions

One aim and purpose of the American Families of Faith Project has been to highlight successful practices in strong marriages and families. The specific practices presented in these articles, which help to facilitate harmony and stability in marriages, offer valuable information and tools for family life educators, clinicians, clergy and pastoral counselors.

The overarching findings of this study suggest that a relationship or sense of connection with God often leads women of faith to engage in certain religious practices such as prayer, studying scripture, and participating in a faith community. These three practices reportedly benefit many religious women as they navigate coping with marital conflict and hardship. Having a relationship or sense of connection with God reportedly gave participants an outlet or a sense of control in their marriage when other factors seemed to be outside of their control. Despite partners' decisions, women could choose to turn to God individually for help and strength. The capacity to turn to God allowed the women to cope with marital conflict and marital hardship in meaningful ways. These findings indicate that, even in times of conflict and elevated chaos, many women of faith maintain a sense of control in their relationship with God, which in turn brings them comfort and relief during difficult times. Several women in this study also reported choosing to turn with their spouse to God as an additional conflict resolution tool and relationship enhancement ritual.

We acknowledge the exploratory nature of this study and call for future research on how religious involvement impacts coping with marital conflict and hardship for women. Knowledge of this topic is imperative for furthering research and education about families.

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