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Marital Satisfaction of Couples in Heterosexual Relationships Where There Are Differences in Spirituality

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MARITAL SATISFACTION OF COUPLES IN HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS
WHERE THERE ARE DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUALITY

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by

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This dissertation, by Collins Ifeanyichukwu Anaeche, has
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ABSTRACT

MARITAL SATISFACTION OF COUPLES IN HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS
WHERE THERE ARE DIFFERENCES IN SPIRITUALITY

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As the dynamics of the United States' social landscape shifts in relation to the diversity of culture, ethnicity, values, and traditions, and as religion and spirituality have become highly diverse and fluid, diversity in spirituality has received limited attention in the field of marriage and family therapy. Utilizing an interpretative phenomenological analysis, this qualitative investigation explores common meanings and experiences of emotional intimacy of couples in heterosexual relationships where there are differences in spirituality. Overall, the results of this investigation demonstrate that in situations where heterosexual couples who display differences in spirituality attentively attuned to their individual and relational needs, their emotional intimacy satisfaction was enhanced; in situations where couples' attentiveness to their spirituality and religious differences was undermined, their individual needs suffered, and their emotional intimacy was impeded. Furthermore, this study shows that it is not so much the differences in the contents of spiritual beliefs between spouses in married relationships that determine the direction of their emotional intimacy satisfaction but their shared or divergent values on spirituality. Clinical implications for therapists are provided alongside study limitations and recommendations for future research. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA, http://aura.antioch.edu/ and OhioLINK ETD Center, https://etd.ohiolink.edu

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my late grandmother, Maryrose O. Anaeche. Grandma, though you did not live to see me become the first in the Anaeche family to obtain a doctorate degree, I trust you are celebrating the milestone with me and the family from heaven. Continue to rest in the eternal peace with God and keep watch over us. Your undying love continues to inspire us, and I will forever love you and cherish my memory of you.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Over the past decades, dynamics of the social landscape around the globe have increasingly

changed in relation to diversity in culture, ethnicity, values, and traditions (Passalacqua &

Cervantes, 2008). More specifically, the social context of religion and spirituality has become

highly diverse and fluid, especially in the United States (U.S.) (Ellison & McFarland 2013).

Religion has been defined as "an organized, institutionalized belief system, set of practices, and

faith community," and "spirituality refers to a dimension of human experience involving

personal transcendent beliefs and practices, within or outside religion, through family and

cultural heritage, and in connection with nature and humanity" (Walsh, 2009, p. 5). The winds of

social change have contributed to the growing variability in marital relationship experiences and

family formation within cultural subgroups, regions, and nations around the world (Furstenberg,

2014). These continuing changes have also provided contexts for individuals from different

groups, including spiritual and religious backgrounds, to enter marital relationships at a higher

rate (Fincham & Beach, 2010). According to the Pew Research Center (PRC) (2015), interfaith

marriage—a marital union between individuals from different religious groups—has been on the

rise. The PRC (2015) reveals that 28% of American adults who are married or living with a

partner have a spouse or partner with a religion different than their own. The PRC (2015) also

shows that nearly 40% of married American adults who wedded since 2010 have a spouse who

identifies with a different religious group, compared to 19% for those who were married before

1960.

Corresponding to the social changes occurring globally and nationally in the U.S., diversity

issues have received increased attention in the field of marriage and family therapy training and

practice in the recent years (Seedall et al., 2014). There is a general consensus among researchers

and practitioners that for clinicians to adequately address the diverse global needs, beliefs, and circumstances of their clients they first need to take into account the social and cultural contexts that often shape clients' psychological and relational experiences (Nassar-McMillan et al., 2013). However, diversity in spirituality as an aspect of this systemic context has received limited attention in the field of marriage and family therapy when compared to the growing focus given to other aspects of diversity in clinical training (Williams-Reade et al., 2018). Much of the focus on studying aspects of spirituality in recent years has been on studying the links between religiosity and marital outcomes (Olson et al., 2016), mental well-being, and emotional well-being (Koenig et al., 2001). However, little to no research exists that deeply explores the emotional intimacy—"a feeling of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationship" (Sternberg, 1997, p. 315)—experience of marital satisfaction, which can be defined as the subjective attitude and affective experience in the evaluation of one's relationship (Gale, 2008), of couples in heterosexual relationships where there are differences in spirituality. In order to address these gaps, the purpose of the present study is to gain a deep understanding of emotional intimacy of couples in heterosexual marriages where there are differences in spirituality. The research outcomes may be used to provide specific clinical recommendations and interventions for working in clinical settings with married heterosexual couples who have differences in their spirituality.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Throughout history, the pursuit of spirituality has been an essential and integral part of human life at both the individual and societal levels (Lou, 2015). Spirituality is a powerful dimension of human experience that involves transcendent beliefs and practices which foster meaning, well-being, and connectedness (Walsh, 2009). In addition to spirituality, marital satisfaction—the overall individual evaluation of the degree of happiness or fulfillment of a spouse in marital relationship (Clements et al. 1997; Fowers & Olson, 1993)—is an important aspect of social life. Satisfaction within a marital relationship is influenced by different aspects and circumstances of the spouses' lives including religion, spirituality, and other socio-cultural contexts (Tavakol et al., 2017). Emotional intimacy is a critical aspect of marital satisfaction since it informs the degree to which spouses express affection, mutual support (Collins et al., 2009), mutual accessibility, naturalness, non-possessiveness, and commitment to the relationship (Holt et al., 2009).

Spirituality in Multidimensional Systems

General Systems Theory (GST) (von Bertalanffy, 1968) is an approach that focuses on the whole of structures and organizations in order to understand and describe how structures function. According to Breulin et al. (2011), human systems are made of hierarchical subsystems that include the person, relationships, family, community, and society, whereas interaction within and among these subsystems makes the whole system greater than sum of its subsystems (Nichols, 2011). Principles of wholeness, self-regulation, homeostasis, equifinality, and feedback are applied to human systems at all levels and to the interaction between levels (Breulin et al., 2011). In order to understand the behaviors of an individual in a relationship or within a family system, considerations must be given to how the family system operates as a whole in its process

and structure (Nichols, 2011). When systems theory is applied to family relationships the result will include several propositions like: "no single person orchestrates the interactional patterns in a family, all behaviors makes sense in context, no single person can be blamed for family/relational distress, and personal characteristics are dependent on the system" (Gehart, 2018, p. 52). Family systems theories bring both theoretical and applied perspectives to an understanding of family life and relationship (Fingerman & Bermann, 2000).

Research shows evidence for "the transactional nature of family processes across multiple subsystems within the family system" (Peltz et al., p. 561). The transactional nature of family processes underscores the embedded interdependence that exists between spouses and the reciprocal link of their individual and relationship satisfaction within the system. Viewed from the GST perspective, spouses' spirituality has an interactive and compensatory role in influencing marital satisfaction (Tavakol et al., 2017). Thus, within the spouses' relational system, spirituality can influence relationship satisfaction by interacting with other aspects of the couples' relationships such as their interpersonal communication skills and pattern of conflict resolution. Consequently, in couple relationships, the practice of spiritual beliefs, such as compassion and forgiveness, can lead to the strengthening of mutual trust and respect, which in turn can increase relational satisfaction (Orathinkal & Vansteenwegen, 2006). Conversely, negative interactive effects of spirituality with other aspects of couples' relationships, such as sexual communication, can lead to relational dissatisfaction (DeMaris et al., 2010). Systemic relational orientation has been demonstrated to be a valuable approach for studying relationship quality and satisfaction in the family (Galovan et al., 2014). Thus, utilizing GST to study the emotional intimacy experience aspect of marital satisfaction of couples in heterosexual

relationships where there are differences in spirituality provides a multidimensional frame of reference that is systemic and relational.

Spirituality and Religion

Spirituality and religion are two different, yet closely related, constructs that are often used interchangeably (Hodge, 2017; Walsh, 2009). Religion has to do with the organized, institutionalized belief system and set of practices within a faith community (Walsh, 2009). Koenig et al. (2001) defined spirituality as "the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community" (p. 17).

Both spirituality and religiosity are multifaceted (Margelisch, 2018) and may have a strong influence on self-perception, personal worldview, interpretations of experience, and behavior (Cornish et al., 2014). Religion incorporates cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioral aspects (Hackney & Sanders, 2003), and spirituality is intrinsically, experientially, reflectively, meaningfully, and biographically linked to human experience and learning (Klobučar, 2016). Thus, spirituality is rooted in our biological drive to find meaning and wholeness in our lives and relationships (Newberg & Waldman, 2006). As an innate and universal human impulse, spirituality may either be nurtured or damaged by an organized religion (Furness & Gilligan, 2010). Conceptualized universally, a non-explicitly defined spirituality is not a lack of spirituality, but an indication of a different form of spirituality. Describing spirituality as a universal human experience that is rooted in our biological drive to find meaning, purpose, and transcendence in life implies that all individuals, couples, and families have spirituality.

The term *meaning in life* describes how people make sense of their lives, how they commit to pursuing purpose in life, and how they come to see their lives as significant and worthwhile (Graham et al., 2017). Meaning in life is a crucial element of spiritual and religious coping and psychological well-being which people use as a part of their meaning system to cope with life's difficulties and challenges (Dein, 2018; Krok, 2015). Thus, couples who have shared meaning in life, which spirituality and religious practice promote, would tend to adapt better to life stressors and relational challenges.

Although religion and spirituality are related to belief (Demir, 2019), it is important that scholars and practitioners focusing on the concepts of religion and spirituality are careful when making universal assumptions regarding belief systems (Zaloudek et al., 2017). Clarifying the distinction between spirituality and religion is useful for therapists in gaining a respectful and accurate understanding of clients' perspectives on these issues, especially during the assessment stage of therapy (Hodge, 2013). Zaloudek et al. (2017) warned that "without an awareness of the beliefs of individuals, communities, or cultures, professionals may make erroneous assumptions about the motivations, experiences, and behaviors of people" (p. 361). Therefore, underscoring the distinction between spirituality and religion effectively creates flexible conceptual space for exploring their differential impacts as separate entities (Hodge, 2018). Also, maintaining the distinction between religion and spirituality allows for clarity and transparency for critical analysis of the two constructs (Zaloudek et al., 2017).

Four types of spiritualities have been identified in the literature (Worthington & Aten, 2009). The first is religious spirituality, which involves a sense of connection with a particular God or Higher Power; the second is humanistic spirituality, which involves connection to people, groups, and attitudes of altruism, as well as feelings of love; the third is nature spirituality, which

involves closeness to nature/environment; and finally, cosmos spirituality embodies connection

to creation or the universe (Worthington et al., 2011). The distinction is based on the type of

sacred object that informs the orientations of the different spiritualities (Davis et al., 2008). It has

also been noted in the literature that spirituality and religious dimensions of human experience

echo cultural values of the social group (Passalacqua & Cervantes, 2008). Thus, spirituality and

religious practices are often shaped by cultural systems. In GST terms, the context provided by

the intersection between spirituality and religious practices through interaction with cultural

beliefs allows the collective experience of a social group to be uniquely expressed.

Religion and Spirituality in the United States

The religion and spirituality landscape in the United States has rapidly changed over the

years as communities have become more diverse with respect to culture, ethnicity, values. and

traditions (Passalacqua & Cervantes, 2008). A PRC (2015) study shows that although those who

identify with some branch of the Christian faith in the United States are still the majority, from

2007 to 2014 there was a nearly 8% decrease in the Christian faith majority, from 78.4% to

70.6% respectively, among people age 18 and older. These changes are taking place across the

religious landscape in the U.S., affecting all regions of the country and many demographic

groups (PRC, 2015). From 2007 to 2014, the percentage of Americans who are religiously

"unaffiliated" has increased from 16.1% to 22.8% (PRC, 2015), and more than 50% of those

who are unaffiliated identify as "spiritual but not religious" (PRC, 2012). It is expected that the

rapid changes in the religion and spirituality landscape in the United States will continue into the

near future. As religious and spiritual affiliations continue to change and diversify over time,

individuals may be more likely to couple with someone of a different religious/spiritual

background than themselves compared to previous years.

Religion and Spirituality in Treatment

It has been established in numerous studies that the integration of a client's spirituality and religion is part of good counseling and psychotherapy practice (Cornish et al., 2014; Kennedy et al., 2015; Koenig et al., 2001; Koenig et al., 2012; Olson et al., 2016). Integrating clients' religion and spirituality into mental and behavioral health treatment, including couple therapy, has the potential to improve clinical outcomes such as in addressing clients' intrapersonal and interpersonal struggles (Oxhandler & Pargament, 2018). Thus, religion and spirituality are considered part of systemic practice (Larner, 2017; Telfener, 2017) since they encompass important aspects of many people's lives, influence relationship systems, and promote growth and resilience (Carlson et al., 2011; Nedumaruthumchalil, 2009; Walsh, 2009). Spirituality, religious beliefs, and health are important concepts that complement each other in improving both physical and mental health of patients (Demir, 2019; Giblin, 2004). Spiritual struggles are related to poorer well-being (Oman, 2018) and spiritual suffering adds to distress associated with illness (Brémault-Phillips et al., 2015).

A significant body of literature affirms the psychological benefits of religion and spirituality (de Oliveira Maraldi, 2018; Hodge, 2000). Studies indicate that people with greater levels of spiritual well-being, religiousness, and meaning or purpose in life experience greater quality of life and fewer depressive symptoms (Braam & Koenig, 2019) whereas negative aspects of spirituality or religiousness, like existential anxiety, are related to poorer outcomes (Hooker & Bekelman, 2015). Post and Wade (2009) suggest that "the practical question for clinicians is no longer whether to address the sacred in psychotherapy with religious and spiritual clients, but rather, the questions are when and how to address the sacred" (p. 131). Some therapeutic approaches address spirituality within the framework of helping clients draw on their

relationship with a higher power to assist them in perseverance in their problem solving (Breulin et al., 2011). Spirituality and religiosity serve as an important moral compass for spiritually or religiously committed individuals (Murray et al., 2007). Also, clients' spirituality and religion can provide important background information even when the main issues of therapeutic focus are not focused on spirituality and religion (Shafranske & Sperry, 2005). Therefore, specifically assessing spirituality and religious coping—both positive and negative aspects—provides a more accurate portrayal as to how individuals utilize spirituality and religion in their lives than global assessments such as beliefs and attendance to religious activities (Dein, 2018).

Developing a sense of the complexity in understanding spirituality and religion while attending to the points of tension between the two constructs puts practitioners in a better position to assess, measure, and operationalize the diverse experience of spirituality and religion affirmed by clients (Hodge, 2018). Spirituality and/or religion can also constrain clients from thriving individual lives and relationships (Breulin et al., 2011). From this perspective, when planning interventions, attending to therapists' roles, and addressing issues of boundaries and ethics, open discussions of spirituality in therapy become crucial for therapists to identify clients' spiritual strengths and constraints (Breulin et al., 2011). In integrating clients' religion and spirituality in treatment from the GST framework, practitioners attend to personal experiences of spiritual and religious beliefs as well as the relational and socio-cultural contexts in which clients' experiences occur.

Marital Satisfaction

Satisfaction in couple relationships reflecta the degree to which intimacy, affection, and mutual support are shown by both partners (Collins et al., 2009). Couple relationship satisfaction is also seen as an emotional state in which a spouse is satisfied with the interactions, experiences,

and expectations about the relationship (Ward et al., 2009).

The relationship with one's spouse can be a source of support, love, health, and well-being, or it may be a source of trouble in one's life (Espen et al., 2014; Olson & Olson, 2000). In couple relationship studies, relational satisfaction is contingent not only on individual perceptions, but also on the mutual satisfaction experiences of the partners (Cropley & Reid, 2008). Thus, the personal evaluative process of the relationship and collective relational experiences of the spouses mutually influence themselves. Viewed from systems perspectives, couple relationship satisfaction is influenced by multiple contextual variables including spouses' individual experiences, interactional patterns, relational power dynamics, and family operational structure and processes. Consequently, personal evaluations of relationships and shared relational experiences are understood not in a vacuum, but in the contexts in which they occur. A properly developed healthy couple relationship works as a source of emotional and social support for each partner (Urbano-Contreras et al., 2017).

Emotional Intimacy and Marital Satisfaction

Emotional intimacy is a distinct aspect of intimacy that implies the mutual accessibility, naturalness, non-possessiveness, and commitment of the spouses to the relationship (Holt et al., 2009). It is a critical aspect of marital satisfaction that involves a perception of closeness to another that is conducive to the sharing of personal feelings, accompanied by expectations of understanding, affirmation, and demonstrations of caring (Sinclair & Dowdy, 2005). Thus, spouses' perception of emotional intimacy predicts their own relationship satisfaction and that of their partners (Yoo et al., 2014). Perlman and Fehr (1987) describe emotional intimacy as the "closeness and interdependence of partners, the extent of self-disclosure, and the warmth or affection experienced within the relationship" (p. 16); whereas Sternberg (1997) sees emotional

intimacy as "a feeling of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in loving relationship" (p. 315). Gaia (2002) describes seven verbal and nonverbal components of emotional intimacy: self-disclosure, emotional expression, support, trust, physical intimacy or touch (e.g., kisses, hugs, hand-holding, feeling 'touched' emotionally, etc.), mutuality, and closeness. Collectively, emotional intimacy is shown to be the foundation for close relationships which provides a sense of purpose and belonging (Sinclair & Dowdy, 2005).

Feelings of vulnerability often accompany emotional intimacy (Johnson, 2004). Additionally, feeling emotionally safe provides a natural context for emotional intimacy and marital satisfaction (Johnson, 2008). Hence, a lack of openness to vulnerability and emotional intimacy may negatively inhibit marital satisfaction. Fear of relational hurt and betrayal are often the major contributing factors that prevent openness to vulnerability and emotional intimacy (Johnson, 2003). Through an attachment lens (Bowlby, 1982; 1988), it is important to address "the way we deal with basic emotions, engage with others on the basis of these emotions, and continually construct a sense of self from the drama of repeated emotionally laden interactions with attachment figures" (Johnson, 2009, p. 410). According to Johnson (2003), it is important to increase marital satisfaction by fostering emotional attunement and responsiveness through privileging emotional responses and communication as well as directly addressing attachment vulnerabilities and fears.

Emotional intimacy, like other aspects of intimacy, involves a dynamic interpersonal process that occurs over time and is never completed or fully accomplished (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). Viewed as a dynamic interpersonal process, emotional intimacy is both a journey and a destination. According to Laurenceau et al. (1998), it is the outcome of "a transactional, interpersonal process in which self-disclosure and partner responsiveness are key components"

(p. 1238). Hence, although instances of relational activities and events can elicit emotional intimate experience in marital relationships, the cumulative effects of efforts combined with the degree of work over time by l;spouses to maintain emotional intimacy through positive shared activities sustains relationship quality (Walsh, et al., 2017). These interactions, in turn, influence spouses' evaluations and expectations of their relationship, which ultimately sets the stage for new emotional responses in future relationships events (Schoebi & Randall, 2015).

Research suggests that traditional gender roles in marriage have implicitly and explicitly shaped different aspects of intimacy, including emotional intimacy (Heller & Wood, 1998). The differences in socialization and psychological development of men and women warrant spouses to specialize in certain domains of intimacy, such as sexual intimacy, and leave to their partners the responsibility for doing the work in other domains of intimacy, such as emotional closeness, which is often ascribed to women in heterosexual relationships (Heller & Wood, 1998). Hence among heterosexuals, the processes of influence are often highly gendered, creating a power imbalance in who attends to whom, and who looks out for the relationship (Knudson-Martin, 2013). However, emotionally connected heterosexual couples who relinquish gendered stereotypes and place focus on their relationship have a greater experience of marital satisfaction (Reynolds & Knudson-Martin, 2015). Flexibility and openness in expression of emotional intimacy mitigates the constraints of gendered socialization and facilitates greater marital satisfaction.

Other Factors Linked to Marital Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction

Marital satisfaction is a multidimensional concept that is affected by several factors including demographic specifications, personality attributes, attachment style, relationship, communication and intimacy, couples' families, forgiveness and sacrifice, religion, emotional

intelligence, personal health, and sexual relations (Tavakol et al., 2017) that are related to relationship stability and survival (Bradbury & Karney, 2004). As couples progress in their relationships, their satisfaction becomes continuously fluid and modified by evolving contextual factors, such as transitioning into parenthood. Hence, greater rates of relationship satisfaction exist among couples without children, and mothers tend to have lower satisfaction when compared to fathers (Urbano-Contreras et al., 2018). The lower relationship satisfaction noticed among mothers is largely because mothers broadly face more challenges and are more likely to spend more time with the child than fathers, who tend to feel out of place when a child is born (Urbano-Contreras et al., 2018). Conversely, further meta-analysis on gender differences in marital satisfaction suggests that there are no significant gender differences in marital satisfaction among couples in the general population; however, slightly lower marital satisfaction has been reported among women in clinical population compared to men in clinical population (Jackson et al., 2014). These findings indicate that gender differences in marital satisfaction among couples in clinical population can be attributed to sample selection bias since dissatisfied wives are more likely than dissatisfied husbands to seek therapy (Doss et al., 2003). Additionally, a separate multilevel analysis study on parental relationship satisfaction in families of children with autism spectrum disorder equally indicates that mothers and fathers had similar levels of relationship satisfaction (Langley et al., 2017). Collectively, the differences in marital satisfaction levels between fathers and mothers indicated in some studies (e.g., Urbano-Contreras et al., 2018) require nuanced interpretation to avoid furthering gendered stereotypes and marginalization which characterize the larger socio-cultural discourse that often subjugates one gender over another (Knudson-Martin, 2013).

Furthermore, the patterns of change in marital satisfaction show that marital satisfaction is highest during the premarital and early years of marriage, then decreases over time, although couples who stay together often still report being happily married (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Increase in spouses' responsibilities over time within their family system changes relational dynamics which invariably affects marital satisfaction. Hence, marital relationship education is proven to help in the maintenance of relationship satisfaction (Halford & Bodenmann, 2013).

In assessing couple relationship satisfaction, communication, empathy, trust, and negotiation are critical aspects (Eckstein & Cohen, 1998). Thus, patterns of communication and emotional and sexual intimacy play important roles in couple relationship satisfaction (Yoo et al., 2014). Levels of sexual and nonsexual communication among couples affect the link between marital and sexual satisfaction (Mark & Jozkowski, 2013). The intimate behavior experiences and responses of spouses to each other in couple relationship affect both their individual and collective relationship satisfaction (Finkbeiner et al., 2013). Therefore, intervening around patterns of communication together with dialogue on emotional and sexual intimacy can help couples become more satisfied within their relationships (Yoo et al., 2014). Also, feeling excited about the couple relationship is the greatest predictive factor of marital relationship satisfaction (Urbano-Contreras et al., 2018).

Studies illustrate that initial couple satisfaction is directly predicted by the individual attachment insecurities which are usually manifested through anxious and avoidance behaviors of the partners in the relationship (Naud et al., 2013), and self-acceptance and emotional stability are contributing factors to couple relationship satisfaction (Gambrel et al., 2016). High self-esteem has a positive effect on individual partners' happiness and satisfaction with their relationship (Salmela-Aro et al., 2016). As such, high self-esteem and emotional stability

provides good disposition for individuals to enter a healthy couple relationship, which often leads to relational satisfaction experience. Associations exist between love styles, how partners cope with stress, and relationship satisfaction (Vedes et al., 2016). It has also been found that a significant relationship exists between roles and affective responsiveness as family-of-origin factors and marital satisfaction of wives and their husbands in heterosexual relationships (Botha et al., 2009).

Research equally indicates that perceptions of a spouse's positive affectivity and personal positive affectivity are related to relationship satisfaction, suggesting that optimism, coping skills, and personal expansion are important resources for marriage through their association with each partner's affectivity (Gordon & Baucom, 2009). Further research suggests that relationship satisfaction of both women and men appears to depend much on how the partners view their respective spouses' personality types and not on how they view themselves individually (Altmann et al., 2013). The assumption is that the process of projection activates a "specific component of a stereotype, which then becomes accessible and affects interpersonal evaluations" (Govorun et al., 2006, p. 971). From this perspective, individuals in intimate couple relationships would tend to project their relationship satisfaction experience onto their perception of their partner's personality type, meaning that satisfied people would tend to see their partner as having a healthy personality and vice versa (Altmann et al., 2013).

Research demonstrates that spouses who feel validated and equitably treated by their partners experience more relationship satisfaction, greater relationship stability, higher frequency of affectionate touching from their spouses, and more sexual satisfaction than those who do not feel validated and equitably treated by their spouses (Matthews & Clark III, 1982). This means that positive relational experiences with one's spouse expressed through affirmation and fair

treatment affects satisfaction in the couple relationship. There are indications in the literature that relationship personality and conflict resolution are substantial contributing factors to relationship satisfaction level of couples in their first 5 years of marriage and beyond (Schneewind & Gerhard, 2002). In heterosexual couples, marital satisfaction is a strong predictor of overall life satisfaction in both women and men as well as an important factor in their physical, mental, and occupational health (Proulx et al., 2007). Using an actor partner interdependence model, David and Stafford (2013) examined couples' joint religious communication and forgiveness as predictors of marital satisfaction. The results indicate that a personal relationship with God is important to marital quality and religious communication between partners (David & Stafford, 2013). David and Stafford (2013) found that one's own forgiveness and forgiveness of the spouse are both positively linked to marital quality, whereas one's tendency not to forgive and one's spouse's tendency not to forgive are both detrimental to marital quality. In addition, the study reveals that joint religious communication is more strongly associated with marital satisfaction among mixed-faith couples than same-faith couples (David & Stafford, 2013).

Couple relationship dissatisfaction is often associated with emotional disconnection (Johnson, 2008) as higher levels of emotional awareness, including emotions of anger and resentment, are associated with decreased relationship satisfaction for women but not for men (Croyle & Waltz, 2002). The quality of couple relationships is closely related to the mental and physical well-being of the individuals in the relationship (Lebow et al., 2012), and low marital satisfaction can lead to divorce (Dew & Wilcox, 2011). The experience of falling out of love in a romantic relationship is identified with themes of loss of trust, intimacy, not feeling loved, emotional pain, negative sense of self, and progressive deterioration of the relationship (Sailor, 2013).

Religiosity and Spirituality vis-à-vis Marital Satisfaction

Most religious and spiritual beliefs affirm social connectedness and relational responsibility towards others. Thus, religion and spirituality provide a rich context for social interaction and a meaningful social identity (Merino, 2014). Also, the drive to find meaning, purpose, and transcendence in life—which religion and spirituality promote—provides a natural platform for individuals in couple relationships to make connections. Additionally, spirituality and religious orientation influence marital stability and quality through moral guidance and social, emotional, and spiritual support (Robinson, 1994). Research suggests that the collective sense of meaning in life, which is often shaped by spirituality, enhances social connectedness and influences related life outcomes, such as social engagement, marriage, and separation (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2016). Thus, the experience of individuals in couple relationships sharing meaningful spiritual practices, such as holiday rituals, enhance spouses' relationships (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001), and the frequency of shared attendance of meaningful religious and spiritual activities also has a positive impact on marital quality (Myers, 2006) and stability (Call & Heaton, 1997). Consequently, when spouses share positive experiences which impact their personal well-being, their individual evaluations of their relationship experiences equally become positively influenced. Individual experiences, relational responses, and the dynamics within a given system as a whole mutually influence how the system operates (von Bertalanffy, 1968); thus, GST may be key in understanding the process and structure underlining the movement on the relationship between spirituality and religious practices and marital satisfaction.

Having shared spirituality and religious practices within couple relationships does not guarantee marital satisfaction. Thus, marital satisfaction is realized to the extent that shared

spirituality and religious practices are an integral part of the relationship and positively influencing communication, conflict-resolution, decision making, sexuality, and other qualities of the relationship (Giblin, 1997). Since spiritual compatibility or incompatibility can be a source of strength or a stumbling block for a couple (Larson & Olson, 2004), there are couples who have divergent spiritual views and still experience a meaningful marriage with high marital satisfaction. This means that it is not enough to know that one or both members of a couple system are spiritual; their consensus and their differences on spiritual issues must be assessed (Larson & Olson, 2004). Underscoring the shared and divergent spiritual views of individuals in couple relationships helps practitioners in assisting spouses to explore the spiritual dimensions of their marital interactions (Giblin, 1997).

The Present Study

Given the increasing diversity of married couples in the past few decades, the purpose of the present study is to gain a deep understanding of emotional intimacy of couples in heterosexual marriages where there are differences in spirituality. Additionally, since spirituality is closely tied to the experience of religious and non-religious beliefs (Demir, 2019; Hodge, 2017; Walsh, 2009), the present study defines differences in spirituality as a divergence in couple spirituality as informed by self-identifications or affiliations grounded in particular religious or non-religious traditions. Within this framework, four spiritual identifications or affiliations emerge: a) Christian spirituality; b) non-Christian spirituality; c) other faith-based spirituality; and d) non-explicit spirituality. More specifically, Christian spirituality is defined as a way of life that is informed by a relationship with God through Jesus Christ and grounded in personal experience of Christian beliefs, traditions, or practices (e.g., Catholic spirituality) (Howard, 2008). Non-Christian spirituality encompasses ways of life that are not founded in Christian beliefs,

traditions, or practices but are grounded in lived personal experiences in references to God, transcendent beings, or higher powers (e.g., Jewish spirituality). Other faith-based spirituality refers to various self-identified spiritualities, practices, and beliefs that are not connected to religious groups and traditions, which form integral parts of their adherents' lives (e.g., Native American spirituality, eco-spirituality, spiritual cosmos, etc.). Non-explicit spirituality includes the beliefs of those whose spiritual values are not a salient influential factor in their lives (e.g., Atheist). Thus, in the present study, a difference in spirituality is described as marrying outside of one's own spiritual affiliation.

The knowledge gained from this study is used to provide specific clinical recommendations and interventions for working in clinical settings with married couples in heterosexual relationships where differences exist in their spirituality. In order to meet these goals, this study addresses the overarching research question: What is the emotional intimacy experience of couples in heterosexual marriages where there are differences in spirituality?

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative research study utilized an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2012) as its primary approach to understand and describe the common meaning and experiences of the emotional intimacy aspect of marital satisfaction of couples in heterosexual relationships where there are differences in spirituality. Phenomenological philosophers (e.g., Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Jean Jacques Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Charles Aymard Sartre) (Vagle, 2018) have demonstrated that "the complex understanding of experience invokes a lived process, unfurling of perspectives and meanings which are unique to the person's embodied and situated relationship to the world" (Smith et al., 2012, p. 21). Understanding the lived experiences of the participants marks phenomenology as a philosophy as well as a method of inquiry (Creswell, 2009). The procedure of phenomenological research involves studying a small number of participants through extensive and prolonged engagement to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

A qualitative research method was chosen for this study because it assists in developing a complex picture of the issue under study by reporting multiple perspectives and identifying the many factors involved in the situation and the larger picture that emerges (Creswell, 2013). The qualitative method of data collection and analysis allows for an in-depth study of a unique and individual experience of a small sample (Barker et al., 2016). The phenomenological strategy was utilized given that its "analysis proceeds from the central assumption that there is an *essence* to an experience that is shared with others who have also had that experience" (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 18). The phenomenological strategy was fitting for this study because the goal

was to produce a deep, clear, and accurate understanding of the lived experiences of participants and of the meanings found in or assigned to those experiences (Dahl & Boss, 2005).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

IPA, a qualitative research approach that examines how people make sense of their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2012), was utilized to gain a deep understanding of the emotional intimacy experience aspects of marital satisfaction of couples in heterosexual relationships where there are differences in spirituality. In IPA research, it is assumed that people's narratives of their experience are "'always-already' immersed in a linguistic, relational, cultural and physical world" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 102). IPA researchers are especially interested in what happens when the everyday flow of lived experience takes on a specific significance, which often occurs when something important happens in peoples' lives (Smith et al., 2012). An IPA approach was particularly fitting for this study given its special psychological interest in how people make sense of their experience (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). IPA assists researchers through the use of detailed, reflective, and first-person accounts of data collected directly from research participants to understand their relatedness to the world and the meanings they make of their experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012).

Finally, an IPA approach is characterized by a set of common processes and principles involving moving from the particular to the shared, from the descriptive to the interpretative, and a commitment to the understanding of the participants' perspective as well as a psychological focus on personal meaning-making in particular contexts (Reid et al., 2005). In this study, I used the IPA procedural steps, mostly drawn from Smith et al. (2012), as follows:

1. Reading of the entire transcripts to gain a general feeling and understanding of each participant's shared experience;

2. Close line by line analysis of the experiential claims, concerns, and understandings of each participant;

3. Identifying emergent patterns or themes within the experiential material while emphasizing both convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance, moving from single cases to multiple cases;

4. Developing structure and frame, or gestalt, which illustrate the relationships between themes

5. Organizing material in a format which allow for analyzed data to be traced through the process, from initial comments on the transcript through initial clustering and thematic development into the final structure of themes;

6. Using supervision and collaboration, which helped in testing and developing the coherence and plausibility of the interpretation;

7. Developing a full narrative evidenced by a detailed commentary on data extracts, which takes the reader through interpretation theme-by-theme using some form of visual guide like a simple structure, diagram, or table; and

8. Reflecting on my own perceptions, conceptions, and processes (Smith et al. 2012, p. 79-80).

Thus, the data analysis process entails data reduction, which involves bringing the collected data into manageable chunks, as well as data interpretation, where I brought meaning and insight to the words and acts of the participants in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Furthermore, some of the significant direct quotes obtained during interviews were included in the write up. To protect the privacy and confidential information of the participants, pseudonyms were used instead of real names.

Sampling Procedure and Recruitment

Once approval was obtained from the Antioch University New England Institutional

Review Board (IRB) to carry out the research project, I began the sampling procedure and

recruitment process. The criterion sampling procedure (Rudestam & Newton, 2015) was used to

recruit participants given that it allowed me to select participants who have experienced or are

experiencing the phenomenon that is being explored. I sent out research recruiting materials to

different churches and private and community organizations, as well as educational institutions

to invite participants. Permission to recruit participants was obtained from the appropriate

leaders of local communities, educational institutions, churches, and religious organizations

before recruitment materials were distributed. I also utilized a snowball recruitment strategy

where qualified participants were asked to invite others that they knew who met the criteria to

join in the research (Creswell, 2013). The participants who met the criteria for the research—

which included being in heterosexual marriages where there are differences in spirituality and

living together for at least five years post legal marriage—were invited to participate.

Prior to conducting interviews, I provided the participants with information about the

purpose of the research as well as obtained signed written informed consent from them (see

Appendix III). Opportunity was provided for the participants to ask questions and seek

clarifications on the research project as part of the initial process. Each married dyad received a

$25 Stop & Shop gift card as compensation for their time. They also benefited from the

opportunity to share their individual and relational experiences. Having their voices heard helped

provide specific clinical recommendations and interventions for working with individuals in

heterosexual marital relationships where differences exist in their spirituality. The participants'

right to participate or withdraw from the research project at any time in the process was explained to them.

I recruited five couples in heterosexual marital relationships where there were differences in spirituality to participate in the study. All the participants were couples in a legal heterosexual marital relationship who have lived together for at least five years post marriage and still practice their different spiritualities. In addition, all participants were 18 years or older and possess stable cognitive ability to remember and share their spiritual and marital satisfaction experiences. Requiring participants to possess stable cognitive ability was necessitated since the study relied on the participants' ability to share their past and present experiences. The Prospective and Retrospective Memory Questionnaire – Retrospective Subscale measures (PRMQ-RS) (Smith et al., 2000; see Appendix II) was used to assess the cognitive ability of the participants. The PRMQ-RS uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Never*, 5 = *Very Often*) to provide a self-report measure of retrospective memory slips in everyday life (Crawford et al., 2003). The PRMQ measure has been demonstrated to have acceptable reliability and factorial, predictive, and concurrent validity (Piauilino et al., 2010).

Data Collection Methods

The data collection methods included face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. In regard to saturation of data (Saumure & Given, 2008), once I began to notice the same patterns repetitively and sensed that little information would be gained from further data collection, I tested the themes, typologies, and patterns to search for negative explanations or instances of the patterns (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Recognizing saturation of data was a signal that no new information would be obtained once all the various data collection processes of interviewing, observation, and documentation were exhausted (Vagle, 2018). I

utilized triangulation processes through using multiple means of collecting data by face-to-face,

semi-structured, in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Thus, collecting data

through different sources assisted me to collaborate, elaborate, and illuminate the research

information that was obtained (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Interviews

Upon obtaining written and signed informed consent from the participants, their basic

demographic information was obtained through a questionnaire (see Appendix IV). The

information obtained through the demographic questionnaire provided contexts and description

of the participants in the research. The interview questions were drawn from the reviewed

literature on couple relationship satisfaction associated with religious and spirituality experiences

(see Appendix V).

The interviews were conducted in my office, and participants were interviewed together

as a couple unit with interviews lasting between 90 and 120 minutes. Although general interview

questions were created in advance, I had the flexibility to pursue the topic at a greater depth

through probing questions. Asking further probing questions allowed for more specific and

detailed explanation to emerge about the participants' experience of the studied phenomenon

(Creswell, 2009). During the interview, the participants were invited to share specific

information regarding their experiences of the differences between their spirituality and that of

their spouses as well as their emotional intimacy experiences with their spouse. The participants

were also invited to share copies of cards, letters, poems, songs, drawings, journals, or other

documentation relating to their spirituality differences with their spouses and their emotional

experiences with their spouse.

The interviews were videotaped, and the videotape recordings were kept in a secure,

double-locked safe before and after the data was transcribed. The unlabeled recordings were kept

until the results were written into a report. Although there were no major risks involved in the

research, I pointed out for the participants that discussing their emotional experiences within

their marriage and their differences in spirituality with their spouse could potentially trigger past

painful experiences. After the data was transcribed and written in report form, I used my student

Antioch University email account to send a copy of that section to the participants in a password-

protected attachment. I manually shared the password for the attachment containing the written

report with the participants, and they used the password to open the attachment. Sending the

interview data transcription to the participants provided them the opportunity to give me

feedback regarding its consistency with the experiences that they shared during the interview

(Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Measures

The Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships Inventory – Emotional Intimacy

subscale measures (PAIR-EI) (Schaefer & Olson, 1981) was used to assess emotional intimacy

in romantic relationships. The 6-item Emotional Intimacy subscale shaped and guided interview

questions that explore emotional intimacy experiences of marital satisfaction. Empirically tested,

the Emotional Intimacy subscale is a valid, reliable, and appropriate tool for measuring

emotional intimacy experience in couple relationships (Mitchell et al., 2008). Furthermore, the

Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help – Short Form measures (ATSPPH-

SF) (Fischer & Farina, 1995) equally informed interview questions that explored attitudes

towards receiving professional help in psychotherapy. The ATSPPH-SF is a ten-item scale that

measure attitude towards accessing mental health services. The psychometric features of the

ATSPPH-SF version match with the original version and correlate 0.87 with full scale scores

derived from the original form (Fischer & Farina 1995). Studies on the ATSPPH-SF have demonstrated adequate reliability and validity (Elhai et al., 2008). Lastly, the Faith, Importance, Community, and Address measure (FICA) (Puchalski & Romer, 2000) informed interview questions used to explore participants' spiritual experience. The FICA is comprised of four basic questions that evaluate and address how clients see the importance of faith and community in their lives (Puchalski & Romer 2000). The FICA has shown to be a feasible and valuable instrument for assessing spirituality in clinical practice (Borneman et al., 2010).

Trustworthiness and Credibility

I used reflective personal journaling, triangulation, and member checking processes to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Through the data collection triangulation process, I collected data for the research using multiple means of face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation from different sources, such as copies of cards, letters, poems, songs, drawings, and journals. Triangulation during data collection, analysis, and interpretation assisted me to collaborate, elaborate, and illuminate the research data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The member checking involved sending the interview data transcription to the participants to check for accuracy and resonance with the experiences that they shared (Creswell, 2013). Throughout the research process, I also maintained reflective personal journals and kept research notes to ensure an auditing trail. An auditing trail allows for all the research activities and processes to be traced from the beginning to the end (Vagle, 2018).

Role of the Researcher and Research Reflexivity

I am the principal author and investigator in the research. In implementing the research, I used the support systems and research resources available through Antioch University New

England including guidance from the faculty research advisor and dissertation committee members. I attended to my role as a researcher by being reflective of my activities throughout the research process, which involved keeping a journal and maintaining research notes as part of the process. The reflexivity helped me to be attentive to potential bias throughout the research. I utilized the *bracketing process*, which involves recognizing and setting aside my own preconceived notions relating to the subject matter in order to fully understand the participants' lived experience (Creswell, 2013).

Researcher Background and Biases

My interest in learning and understanding more about the phenomenon of relationship satisfaction of individuals in heterosexual marital relationships where there are differences in spirituality stemmed from my personal, professional, and pastoral experiences. As a male clinician of Catholic Christian background, I have worked with individuals, couples, and families of different socio-cultural contexts, varied spiritual beliefs, and diverse non-spiritual orientations. I have provided services both in clinical and religious settings. I have long been fascinated by how belief systems impact personal lives and relational experiences.

Personally, spirituality is a huge aspect of my life. The strengths I draw from spirituality help me both in my personal life and professional activities. Remaining connected with my spirituality keeps me grounded mentally, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. Initially in my clinical skills development, especially during master's level practicum and internship, I tended to be hyper-vigilant in my interactions with clients on spirituality related issues. I guarded against any semblance of my spiritual beliefs influencing my work with clients. During that period, my confidence level to explore spiritual dimensions of clients' lives and relational experiences was low. I feared asking unhelpful questions that would jeopardize the therapeutic relationship with

clients. Although I often made my spiritual background and beliefs explicit in therapy, I worried about how the clients would perceive me. My worries often became heightened in therapy with clients who were of non-Christian backgrounds or unaffiliated with any organized spiritual belief system.

During my initial clinical training, there was little attention given to working with spirituality related issues in therapy. In discussing with colleagues and other clinicians, I discovered that many of them shared similar experiences. With supervision, more personal readings, and experience, my clinical confidence level has increased in working with clients on issues relating to different contexts of their lives including in the area of their spirituality. Informed by integrative, relational, and strength-based approaches, I have learned over the years to take more of a curious, flexible, and contextually attuned stance in therapy. As a systemic clinician, I have also learned to incorporate the social justice orientation in therapy, especially when exploring spiritual dimension of clients' personal life and relational experiences. Although different people use various languages to describe the foundations of their beliefs, I believe that every individual, couple, and family have beliefs that inform their lives and relationships. I equally believe that spouses, including those who do not share the same spirituality, are free to be in mutually loving and supporting marital relationships. Also, I believe that understanding the uniqueness of every individual, couple, and family and their relational experiences, including what gives meaning and purpose to them in life, are of great clinical value. My personal and professional experiences give voice to the reason why I chose to use an IPA method for this study. This work also provided opportunity for individuals in heterosexual marital relationships where there are differences in spirituality to share their experiences of relationship satisfaction. As noted earlier, I kept a personal journal throughout the process of this

research. Additionally, I attended to the *epoché* requirement of phenomenological inquiry by

suspending judgment and viewing the phenomenon with a freshness and openness as if *seeing*

from a new vantage point (Moustakas, 1994).

Chapter 4 - Results

Participants

The present IPA study was designed to explore the emotional intimacy experience of couples in heterosexual marriages where there are differences in spirituality. This investigation was guided by a single research question designed to elicit in-depth responses from participants. I conducted semi-structured interviews with five heterosexual couples who displayed differences in spirituality. To protect the privacy and confidential information of the participants, pseudonyms are used instead of their real names. Couple 1 included Gerina and William. Gerina practiced Buddhism and identified as a Buddhist, and William was raised a Roman Catholic but identified as a spiritual person without organized religion. Couple 2 consisted of Mercy and Philip. Philip was raised a Roman Catholic and still practices the faith, and Mercy identifies as a person who does not practice any form of organized religion or specific faith. Abby and Silas comprised Couple 3. Abby was raised Jewish and continues to practice this faith, and Silas identifies as a Roman Catholic and continues to practice that faith. Dave, of Couple 4, was raised a Roman Catholic but identifies himself as a practicing Christian while Anna, who was raised reformed Jewish, still practices and identifies with some aspects of the Jewish faith. The fifth couple, Priscilla and Samuel, are also of different faiths. Priscilla was raised Jewish and continues to practice and identify with the Jewish faith, and Samuel, who was raised a Roman Catholic, practices and identifies as a Universalist. Further demographic information about the couples is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Information

Couple #	Length of Marriage	Highest Education Attended	Race	Ethnicity	Combined Income before Tax	Parent Status	Years as Parents
1. Gerina and William	20+ years	College for both	Both White	Neither spouse is Hispanic nor Latino	$50,000-$69,999	Yes	20+ years
2. Mercy and Philip	16-20 years	Postgraduate for Mercy and College for Philip	Both White	Neither spouse is Hispanic nor Latino	$70,000+	Yes	10-15 years
3. Abby and Silas	20+ years	Postgraduate for Abby and College for Silas	Both White	Neither spouse is Hispanic nor Latino	$70,000+	Yes	16-20 years
4. Anna and Dave	10-15 years	Postgraduate for both	Both White	Dave is Hispanic or Latino, Anna is neither	$70,000+	Yes	5-9 years
5. Priscilla and Samuel	20+ years	College for Priscilla and Postgraduate for Samuel	Both White	Priscilla is Jewish, Samuel is Irish	$70,000+	Yes	20+ years

*Pseudonyms are used for the real names of the participants to protect their identity and privacy.

IPA Data Analysis

      I followed the guidelines and procedural steps that Smith et al. (2012) outlined to conduct

this IPA study. The first step involved a careful reading and re-reading of the transcripts from

each interview to gain a general impression and sense of the whole and to understand the shared

experiences of the participants. After doing this, I read each transcript again, line by line, making

annotations of the claims and understandings of the participants. Examples of these annotations

are provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Examples of Interview Excerpts and Annotations

Excerpts from Interview	Annotation	Code
"Yes, it seeps in and I take it for what it is, but I can't, maybe from my past involvement with the church and all that, I just can't throw myself into any kind of [religion]." – William	William links his possible aversion to anything like organized religion to his past involvement in church	Prior experiences impact spiritual beliefs
"I see [Anna] and I see her parents and how giving and thoughtful they are. With her parents, especially the mom. She is always very generous and the giving, her mom always ties it to the Jewish tradition." – Dave	Dave is connecting Anna's giving nature to her faith/spiritual background	Spiritual belief informs role of faith in daily life
"Kindness, treating each other equally. I'd say those are the two things. Whether it can be each other or the kids or outside [the family], it's very important to me above all other achievements. Can you be proud of the example you're setting?" – Mercy	Mercy uses spirituality to guide her impact on others	Spiritual belief guides desire to be kind

Themes

After annotating one couple's transcript, I coded the transcript, using the annotations as a guide, and assigned excerpts of text with a descriptive word or phrase that captured the sentiment expressed in the excerpt. This process was continued, line by line, for the whole transcript, after which a list of codes for that transcript was produced. An example of how these annotations were used as the basis for the codes is also presented in Table 2. I began to identify emergent patterns in the transcript by exploring the codes and the relationships between them, or their commonalities and nuances. Places where codes and sentiments diverged were also examined. Those codes which showed commonalities and convergence were placed into a theme. This process was repeated for each interview, from annotation to coding to theme development. After I completed this process for each transcript, I explored the themes across the different interviews, or cases, to understand where there were similarities of experiences and sentiments in the couples. The initial themes that emerged from the couples' interviews are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Emergent Themes within Interviews

Couple #	Within-Interview Themes
1. Gerina and William	• Friction about spiritual beliefs permeates married life • Feeling of closeness in relationship • Feeling of kindness and positivity • Experiencing distance and neglect • Connecting through spiritual beliefs
2. Mercy and Philip	• Feeling distance from spouse • Sense of intimacy is not shared by spouse • Shared concerns about the future • Shared spirituality guides behavior
3. Abby and Silas	• Shared spirituality is foundation of relationship • Supporting and respecting the other • Strengthening relationship • Celebrating each other • Setting a good example • Community of support • Satisfaction with marriage
4. Anna and Dave	• Shared spiritual beliefs guide behavior • Sense of togetherness • Content and satisfaction • Growing together • Confidence in therapy
5. Priscilla and Samuel	• Shared spiritual beliefs guide relationship • Contentment and satisfaction • Friction regarding child rearing • Respecting one another

The divergences in experiences between the couples were also explored. Themes were compiled into large categories based on similarity of sentiment and experience. In some cases, the themes generated in the previous step became subordinate themes of a larger, superordinate theme. In some cases, the themes created in the previous step stood alone as superordinate

themes, with no subordinate themes. Some of the themes that were generated in analysis of the

individual interviews but were not sentiments shared by other couples did not qualify as

superordinate themes. In other words, the criteria to become a superordinate theme was support

from more than one couple. The final thematic structure of superordinate and subordinate themes

is shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Superordinate and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
1. Continuing commitment to love spouse in a long-term, loving marital relationship	1. Focus of shared values on spirituality 2. Respect for spouse 3. Commitment to maintain open communication 4. Commitment to providing support 5. Marital expectations
2. Intimacy through sharing of spiritual practices of the spouse	1. Enhanced intimacy and connection 2. Spirituality guides life 3. Perceived differences create distant feelings
3. Influence of family of origin's spirituality	
4. Raising children as a multi-faith married couple	

Continuing Commitment to Love Spouse in a Long-Term, Loving Marital Relationship

All of the couples in the study showed a continued commitment to loving each other in

the context of a long-term relationship. It was evident by how the couples described their actions

toward their spouses. This commitment, which occurred despite the couples' differences in

spirituality, allowed them to be attuned to their spouses' needs and collectively navigated through their differences with a sense of shared common purpose.

This superordinate theme encompassed the ways the couples displayed this commitment. The subordinate themes illustrate the facets of this superordinate theme and the ways couples continued their commitment to loving each other. Couples focused on their shared value of spirituality, instead of their differences, as part of their commitment to one another. The participants described the respect they have for their spouses' spirituality and the respect for their spouses as humans and partners. The participants equally discussed their commitment to open communication as well as their obligation to provide support to their spouses. Additionally, the couples described high levels of satisfaction with their marriages, which contributed to their commitment to their long-term marriages.

Focus of Shared Values on Spirituality. This subordinate theme revealed how participants navigated their spirituality differences with their spouses. For couples who experienced strong emotional intimacy and connections between them, finding the similarities between their spiritual beliefs was the key. This was particularly evident in two couples where one spouse was raised and practices Judaism and the other spouse was raised with a Christian faith and still ascribes to that faith. According to Abby and Silas, it was important in their marriage to find common ground between her Jewish and his Christian backgrounds. Doing so led to their enjoyment of a *deeper* marital connection at another *level*, terms both Abby and Silas used to describe this. Abby explained:

> It took us to another level because we could understand each other's religions. I didn't
>
> understand the tenants of Christianity, but now I understand them. I also feel like it's
>
> important to understand them. If my spouse is Christian and my children are Christian, I

should understand what goes into being Christian, and I do now. That's led us to a deeper

place in our marriage.

Silas shared:

I just think that we connect on a different level. It's almost like we've been studying each

other's religion and traditions and everything all these years. We look at each other's

traditions and things like that closer than if we were the same because we would just take

it for granted. Like, "You grew up catholic just like me, whatever." I feel like we know

each other probably and appreciate each other on a different level than we would have if

we came from the same backgrounds. I believe because it's forced that need to the

forefront to get to know each other and the differences and understand and get this deeper

connection. That plays into every aspect of our relationship.

For Abby and Silas, this greater sense of emotional intimacy and the desire to continue their

commitment to one another through these shared beliefs was understood as something that

created a deeper sense of connection; a connection that occurred on a different level. This deeper

level of intimacy and connection was possible because of Abby and Silas' spiritual differences.

Taking the time to focus on what both of their faiths had in common was critical for them

developing this deeper connection and allowed them to continue to commit to their long-term

marriage. As Silas said, the deeper level of connection occurred because it was necessitated,

which perhaps meant that if he and Abby had not made the conscious decision to understand one

another's spirituality and find common ground, their marriage would not be so successful. For

Silas, it may also mean that if he and Abby came from similar religious upbringings, they would

not enjoy the deep connection that they do.

Anna and Dave shared similar experiences to Abby and Silas, particularly regarding how Anna's Jewish faith and Dave's Catholic faith guided them to *treat others,* terms they both used which may be extended to their treatment of each other in their marriage. Of her spiritual beliefs, Anna noted, "I guess it's ways to treat other people, to treat other people the way you would want to be treated yourself, believing in Mitzvah, Tzedakah, giving back to people, and treating others with respect and tolerance." This was a central tenet of Anna's spiritual beliefs and one she shared with Dave, who noted that she indirectly referenced the teachings of Jesus in this statement. Dave elaborated:

> It's funny, she answered the question for me because she's indirectly referenced Jesus's teaching. The one thing I hold on to it, Christianity is that central idea that Jesus said that you got two things. You have to love God with all your strength, and you have to treat others as you'd want to be treated. I know I'm paraphrasing here. That continues with the idea that she's talking about giving back and being charitable which is a very important part of what I've come to understand of the Jewish tradition. Yes, if you want to break it down to those two things, there is a God who loves you and you have to have a relationship with, but you have to work at it. You have to pray and be aware of it. Then the idea of really treating others as you want to be treated, the golden rule.

While Anna did not explicitly state that Dave's and her spiritual beliefs both came from Jesus' teachings in the Christian Bible, her core spiritual beliefs seem to be grounded in this common theme found in many religious texts about treating others with respect. Meanwhile, Dave noted the similarity here, not only when he mentioned that treating others as one wants to be treated is a tenet of Christianity, but he also linked this to Judaism when he said, "What I've come to understand of the Jewish tradition." In stating this, Dave drew a parallel between the two faiths

and perhaps subconsciously noted this shared value of spirituality and belief in treating others well.

Respect for Spouse. Building somewhat on the previous subordinate theme, focusing on shared values of spirituality, participants also demonstrated respect for their spouses. This happened in general and specific ways; participants described more generally they respected their spouses as humans, and they also shared they respect their spouses' spiritual beliefs. This subordinate theme of respecting their spouses demonstrated the couples' commitment to their marriages and their spouses.

Priscilla and Samuel and Abby and Silas described the significance of respecting the spiritual beliefs of their spouses and feeling this respect was part of the ongoing commitment to a loving marriage. Priscilla felt that participating in Samuel's religious traditions was a display of her respect for Samuel's spiritual beliefs, and she said she participates out of love for her husband. Priscilla did not just passively participate in these traditions; she actively created the traditions for her husband. Priscilla used the terms *honor* and *respect* in her explanation of her participation in spiritual traditions that are not her own:

> For every year that I've been with him I've had a Christmas tree, I've celebrated Christmas. I've made a ham for Easter, we did eggs, did all the things that were part of his tradition growing up, for his comfort, for him. I do them because I love him. My parents would have a Christmas tree in their house for him. We've tried to honor each other's differences and treat them with respect while recognizing that we're different and we were brought up differently.

Samuel agreed with his wife, Priscilla, that as a couple, they put in effort to respect each other's

religious beliefs. Samuel also used the term *respect* when describing how he feels about

Priscilla's spiritual beliefs:

> I didn't think it was going to be as hard as it was to figure out other religion. I thought we
>
> both go to a temple once in a while or church once in a while. In the end, it was a real
>
> benefit because we put a lot of time into religion. We put a lot of effort into showing each
>
> other's religion's respect, and our kids have been the major witness to that. That is giving
>
> a little of each other to each other in the interest of each other and your kids being there
>
> to witness that.

This statement supports Priscilla's examples of how they respect each other's beliefs. Samuel

acknowledged that putting in the effort to respect Priscilla's religion was hard work, and Priscilla

also said, "It hasn't always been easy." Samuel felt that this respect has benefitted his marriage

to Priscilla and also has benefitted their children, who both Priscilla and Samuel said have been

witness to this respect. This is evident in Samuel's quote and Priscilla's, who said, "[Our

children] have been a witness to that."

Abby and Silas also used the term *respect* when describing the other's spiritual beliefs.

Of the conversation early in their dating relationship, Abby said:

> We both respected the faith of each other. We saw that as a good quality, and I think
>
> going into that conversation and having that already established mutual respect and
>
> admiration for how we both have served our faiths; I think made that conversation easier.

Abby appeared to feel as though not only did she respect Silas' spiritual beliefs, Silas respected

hers as well. In their marriage, this continued respect extended to their children. Silas said, "We

have to worry about [our children], too, and respect that, and respect what they decide to do."

Commitment to Maintain Open Communication. This subordinate theme is related to the previous theme (i.e., respect for spouse), demonstrating an aspect of the participants' continued commitment to love their spouses in a long-term, loving marital relationship. Commitment to communicating openly meant that participants felt comfortable expressing themselves and discussing any topic, including their spirituality, with their spouses, and the participants also felt heard and understood when communicating. It was also important that the participants felt their spouses were there to talk when needed. Priscilla explained that part of the open communication she enjoys in her marriage to Samuel is related to availability; "I feel like he's available to me." Priscilla admitted there were times she would prefer to talk to her mother about certain things, and she "[does] not feel like [Samuel's] not available to talk." Samuel, on the other hand stated he tends to be "a private person," meaning he rarely opens up to anyone other than Priscilla. Samuel said sometimes he might try to work through his feelings on his own but "I can't think of anything that I wouldn't try to resolve unless with [Priscilla]." For Samuel and Priscilla, maintaining open communication was very important in their relationship, despite there being times when Priscilla would consult with her mother. Like Samuel, Priscilla also enjoyed being able to communicate openly with Samuel if she needed advice or an opinion, because she valued his input. Priscilla stated:

> We understand each other, we help each other. Usually, if I have a problem or I want an opinion, he's the person that I go to because I want to hear what he has to say. I think he's really smart, and I want to know what he thinks about it.

This communication takes a bit more effort in a marriage for people from two different spiritual backgrounds, Samuel acknowledged, explaining:

I think that we try to understand each other. We don't come from the same background,

so sometimes we have to put in a little extra effort to understand why we feel that way.

We're together 36 years, but the only thing we knew before we were together was our

homes, and our homes are different. We try to understand each other and how things have

worked. We have done a lot of talking about stuff like that, so we understand.

There was a sense that, for Samuel, feeling listened to was feeling understood. This was evident

in the last line of his quote, where he links doing a lot of talking with understanding, and perhaps

a greater sense of feeling heard. Anna and Dave also described the sense that their spouse

understood him/her because they were committed to open communication in their marriage. For

Dave and Anna, an important part of this communication was to listen to the other. Dave gave an

example when he felt that Anna listened to him:

[Anna] always listens to me whatever I'm going through, and she always takes it

seriously….When we joined the [interfaith] group, which is fairly recently, I was the one

who initiated, and I think when we talked about it, she immediately saw how important it

was to me, but also obviously, how it would provide structure and benefit for our kids

and give them some grounding in both faiths without having to choose one over the other.

As we started talking about it, I definitely felt that she was listening to where I was

coming from and that she saw how important it was to me to have some kind of structure

in terms of our children's religious upbringing.

In Dave's statement, it is evident he felt that Anna really listened to what was on his mind and

took him seriously. Dave's example of deciding to join the interfaith group showed he felt Anna

listened to and understood him. He also appeared to feel that Anna took seriously what was

important to him, and so this was something that became important to Anna because it was

important to Dave. Anna seemed to think this openness to listening was part of "who [Dave and I] are as people" instead of their "intrinsic belief sets." However, while Anna does not appear to attribute this openness to her shared spiritual beliefs with Dave, it is possible because they share the value of treating others with respect, which is supported by their spirituality, this openness and willingness to listen to one another may also be grounded in their shared spiritual beliefs.

From its inception, Abby and Silas's marriage was rooted in open communication precisely because of their different spiritual backgrounds. Abby's family was, at first, not accepting of their relationship due to the differences in their religion; Abby came from a Jewish family and Silas was Catholic. Abby and Silas had to establish a baseline of open communication when they first began dating, because Abby was concerned her family would disown her if she dated or married someone who was not Jewish. Abby explained the significance of one early conversation with Silas:

> I was going to have to give up so much to stay in this relationship that it couldn't be, we're going to date for a while. I have no family to go back to when it's done. We had to have a really serious conversation. Silas' family was so welcoming to me that it was almost embarrassing to have to have that conversation. His family was so kind, and so welcoming, and so curious about my religion. My family was so off put by it and so didn't want to interact with him that I had to say to him, "I can't just date you. Are we going to be together forever? I can only be in this relationship if we're talking about like this is it. We're going to be together forever." He listened. He was ready to dive in and be there for me, knowing the situation he was going to be up against with my family. He was taking me on like, "This is it. Look what she's giving up. I got to stick with it."

In this example, Abby describes feeling that Silas listened to her and took her, and her situation, seriously. Silas also recalled the significance of this early discussion and felt that, in that conversation, Abby really listened to him. Silas said:

> I feel like it goes back to that same moment is one thing I think one of the most important times was that a conversation. I think knowing that she genuinely, she listened to me and received what I was saying like genuinely. She didn't think I was just saying what she wanted to hear to advance our relationship. I feel like that was one of the most important conversations that we ever had. I think that would be a moment where I'm very grateful that she listened, and she accepted what I had to say. She did understand that I was okay going into this relationship. We spoke about kids, everything.

According to Silas, this was "one of the most important conversations" he and Abby ever had. Both recalled the conversation as an example of a time they communicated openly, perhaps initially out of necessity. In the same conversation, both Silas and Abby felt heard and taken seriously by the other. This has continued in their long and loving marriage. Silas said that now, "We're just very open about how we talk and accept things," and Abby added that, "We don't disagree a lot." Silas attributed this lack of disagreement in his marriage to Abby to their understanding of one another and their open communication style. Perhaps because of their commitment to open communication throughout their marriage, Silas said that they know, "so much about each other's religion that we don't challenge each other's beliefs." Their communication has allowed them to learn about, know, and respect each other's spirituality in a way they do not disagree about or challenge the other's spiritual beliefs. Part of their continued commitment to their marriage, then, is maintaining this base of open communication between the two of them.

Commitment to Providing Support. Another facet of the superordinate theme of continuing commitment to love spouse in a long-term, loving marital relationship, is the commitment to providing support. Participants such as Gerina and William spoke of the ways they felt their role in the relationship was to provide *support* for their spouse, which contributed to their commitment to their marriage and sense of connection. For William, being supportive meant also being connected to Gerina. William said, "To be supportive, to be connected with her, and do things just to be on the same plane, and just, my role is to be, yes, supportive, to be there for her." Gerina also felt her role was to provide support for William, and she used this term as well. "I would say an emotional support and a partner, I like to be part of a team, I feel like I try to be an emotional support." For both Gerina and William, providing support for the other was not simply something they wanted to do, but the sense here is they both felt this was part of their role in the marriage, or their obligation to one another.

Abby and Silas were serious about their obligation to support one another. Abby and Silas experienced the loss of their mothers in the last couple of years, and the deaths of both happened in a short timeframe. Unlike Gerina and William, who did not connect this support to their spiritual beliefs, either shared or different, Abby and Silas connected the sense of support to their shared religious beliefs. Abby discussed this support in the context of a shared belief in God and the fact she and Silas were *steeped* in religion. Abby said:

> We both went through [the loss of our mothers] within 18 months of each other, and that was a time when we really just had to listen and sharing a belief in God at a time like that is really important. Sharing that belief and sharing our clergy and sharing our spirits of community, I think helped us a lot for that in our conversations… I don't know how we would have gotten through both of our mother's final days, but I think being that our lives

were so steeped in spirituality, that we were able to listen and talk to each other and help

each other through those days.

Silas extended this conversation about support and spirituality to include his and Abby's

children, who were clearly an important part of their lives. Silas said:

Even with the kids, just I think being able to explain and go to those topics of death and

afterlife, and even the process of what's happening with wakes funerals, I think we were

both qualified to speak to them about what was going on and explain it in a way that they

would feel at ease and comfortable. It's almost like, I don't know. I feel like it's another

level of spirituality to be able to take both of those beliefs and utilize them as part of

raising our children. Explaining some of these uncomfortable things in the world that you

don't like to deal with.

In this passage, Silas described the support he and Abby provide for each other and how their

support of each other impacts their children. He connected this to Abby's and his spirituality, and

again referred to "another level" when he described how this spiritual support was something he

and Abby used to raise their children.

Marital Expectations. All five couples in the study had been married for at least 10

years (see Table 1), and most couples described high levels of continued satisfaction with their

marriages. Gerina and William shared they had no real expectations for their marriage when they

were first married, and neither felt as though their differences in spirituality impacted their

marital satisfaction. William said, "I didn't have expectations," and Gerina said, "I don't think I

had any [expectations], either." Upon further elaboration, two things became clear. First, both

had certain baseline expectations, and second, their expectations had been exceeded over the

course of their marriage, which led to a shared high level of satisfaction with their marriage.

William elaborated, "I just figured we would get married and have a decent life, and just be there for each other. If that was my expectation, it worked." While William used the phrase *be there for each other* to describe one expectation of his marriage, Gerina used the term *support* to describe her early expectations. "I think I was just grateful to find somebody that I love and love me, and I didn't have any grand expectations," Gerina said, "I think I expected respect and I expected support and those kinds of things." William and Gerina entered the marriage with the expectations they would support one another, which is something they have done over the years. Today, they described this sense of satisfaction as a partnership or friendship, or two people who remained committed to supporting each other in their marriage.

Dave and Anna described the feeling of being in a happy marriage that has exceeded their expectations. Dave explained his marriage to Anna is in "a very good place." Dave and Anna suggested that though a marriage to someone with the same spiritual background might have been easier, they enjoyed a high degree of marital satisfaction with one another. This satisfaction may have been due to the fact Dave and Anna believed that the other was the right person for them, no matter the spiritual background. There was a sense each believed they were meant to be together; as Dave used the phrase *the one* and Anna, similarly, referred to Dave as *this is it*. Dave elaborated, "Before I met Anna, I probably would have thought, I think I did expect that I would probably marry somebody who had the same belief system. When I met Anna, I knew she was the one." Anna, similarly, said, "[I] can't picture being with anybody but him. There's no other person out there for me. This is it."

Anna and Dave also attributed this satisfaction, in part, to the fact they enjoy their marriage. Anna said, initially, she thought daily married life was going to feel "very grinding," but instead she has found being married to Dave was "really fun," which she attributed to him.

Dave placed this sense of fun in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic, which was raging at the time of this study. Dave said, "It sounds weird to say that I'm getting any enjoyment about our current situation [being quarantined], but I cherish the extra time that I'm having with my family and my wife."

Like Dave, Silas also believed, as someone raised Catholic, he would marry someone who also came from a Catholic background. Abby also believed that, as someone raised in the Jewish faith, she would marry a Jewish man. Like Gerina, William, Dave, and Anna, both Silas and Abby reported a high level of marital satisfaction and a marriage that had exceeded any initial expectations they had for their marriage. Abby said that she was "extremely satisfied," and Silas said that he was "very satisfied" with their marriage. At the beginning of their marriage, Abby recalled, "What I was taught was that I was going to marry a white, Jewish man and have Jewish children." She elaborated:

> I always wanted to get married and have children and have this happy marriage, but I think the level of what I saw as a great marriage and examples and role models that I had seen, I think we've exceeded those… I'm so glad that I was exposed to something else and that there are other beliefs out there and other lifestyles, and that has led us to explore and appreciate other religions and other lifestyles and to show that to our children as well.

Silas also recalled:

> I think that our marriage and our life together has totally exceeded anything that I thought that it would have been. I feel we've done so much together over the past years… I just never imagined when we were dating, that we would build such a beautiful, spiritual, loving, meaningful life together… I just feel like I've gotten so much more, I can only

suspect, out of the situation that we're in, if I would have just [married a Catholic

woman] or whatever. I just don't think my life would be quite as full and meaningful.

For Silas and Abby, their marital satisfaction appeared directly related to their different spiritual

backgrounds. Abby talked about this in terms of being glad she was exposed to Silas, who came

from a different, Catholic, background, and Silas talked about this in terms of having a full and

meaningful life as a direct result of marrying Abby, a Jewish woman. They both seemed to

understand their marital satisfaction in direct relation to their spiritual differences and appeared

to agree that being married to someone of the same faith may not have provided the same sense

of happiness and fulfillment that they enjoy with each other. Being married to someone of a

different faith has enhanced their lives in ways they did not imagine when they were first

married.

Mercy and Philip, unlike the other couples interviewed in this study, appeared to view

their marriage a little differently. Indeed, it seemed as though Mercy and Philip shared a bit of

concern for their future based on their lack of high marital satisfaction and the differences in

their spiritual beliefs. Mercy was the only participant across all couples who said that she had, in

fact, questioned her marriage at times. Mercy said:

> Being with Philip was the first time where I felt I could be tolerant of that other person
>
> and what they needed. That was a very new experience for me. When times are tough, I
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> do sometimes regret and think maybe what caused me to feel differently, and maybe I
>
> was meant to be in it on my own… I guess I would think of myself as I would be content
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> to be alone, interacting with people. I guess the times where I regret it would be [when I
>
> think] how would things have been different had I made that choice instead. In balance,

I'd say I'm usually not feeling that way, but honestly, yes, there's where I think, yes, had

I gotten a different whereabout.

There is the sense in Mercy's statement that her regrets about being married to Philip are not about Philip, and more about herself. Mercy said that she thought she would be content and happy on her own, which perhaps means that she would feel some sense of regret, or even loss, in a marriage to anyone. Mercy reflected on the idea that she was "meant to be in it on my own," and not married to anyone, and this has caused her some regrets in her marriage. Philip was more specific about the times he has questioned, or regretted, being married to Mercy. These were times when "We're arguing, or something bad is happening with our relationship," according to Philip. Philip suggested that this was something like an escape defense, and stated, "It's just me, it's my common escape, blaming all my problems." Interestingly, and perhaps importantly, in neither statement from Philip nor Mercy did they say that they regretted their relationship specifically to the other person precisely because of their differences in spirituality. Instead, their reflections were self-directed, and they appeared to absorb the blame for their feelings in their moments of regret.

Mercy and Philip also agreed that there was *room for improvement* in their marriage, evidenced by Mercy's statement that, "It's not the ideal marriage… I'd say it's middle of the road. There's room for improvement," and Philip's statement that, "There's always room for improvement." In terms of their satisfaction with their marriage and each other, though, there seemed to be a difference in the degree to which their marriage could improve. Philip said, "I guess I'm with Mercy on there's room for improvement. Maybe I don't see it… that we need as much improvement maybe as Mercy thinks." Philip admitted that hearing Mercy say there was

room for improvement was "maybe hard hearing a bit," as it indicated to him that there was some lack of marital satisfaction on Mercy's part.

Philip suggested hearing Mercy's assessment on the need for improvement in their marriage was a concern to him. As their children grow up and move out of the house, Philip shared his concern that, "As the kids get older, a little more independent, there might be a little more strain there, because we're going to be alone more, and we're going to have to talk more and communicate more. That definitely would be a concern of mine." This statement indicated that perhaps there are communication problems between Philip and Mercy that have led them to feel less satisfied within their marriage. Mercy also described this sentiment, stating, "So much of our day revolves around the kids, and from Philip's perspective, I know, like he's said to me, well, it's too much about the kids; it needs to be about us." There is a sense that Mercy and Philip share a concern they have not built a base of communication independent of their children that would carry them forward in a happy, satisfied marriage when their children become more independent and they spend more time as empty nesters.

The couples mostly described high levels of marital satisfaction, which was related to their commitment to remain in long-term, loving marriages. Where couples differed was in the ways they linked or did not link marital satisfaction to differences in spirituality. Abby and Silas, for example, believed that their marital satisfaction came directly from their spiritual differences, but Gerina and William did not make any connection to spirituality, indicating their marital satisfaction came from other sources. Mercy and Philip, on the other hand did not precisely link their level of marital satisfaction to their differences in spirituality but believed that there was room for growth in their marriage and shared a concern for their relationship in the future.

Intimacy through Sharing of Spiritual Practices of the Spouse

This superordinate theme is about couples deriving intimacy through sharing of the spiritual practices of their spouses. The couples with different spiritual backgrounds experienced intimacy when they focused on sharing in the spirituality of their spouses. The couples felt a greater degree of intimacy created when they sought to understand their spouse's spiritual beliefs, which was one facet and subordinate of this theme. Another facet, or subordinate theme, of this superordinate theme was that couples felt that their spiritual beliefs guided their lives, which created a greater feeling of intimacy. However, in some situations the spiritual differences between spouses were too great to overcome, and when these situations occurred, the perception of different spiritual beliefs led to feelings of distance in the couples which negatively affected the spouses' intimacy experience.

Enhanced Intimacy and Connection. Four couples described the sense of enhanced intimacy and connection they felt as they sought to understand their spouses and their spouses' spiritual beliefs. Gerina felt a deeper connection to her husband William because of her spiritual beliefs. Gerina described how her spiritual beliefs led her to seek greater understanding of and connection with herself, which in turn enhanced her connection to William:

I like to encourage that openness in him because sometimes he can be emotionally distant, and so I try to encourage a connection. Whatever I'm doing spiritually actually helps me do that. It helps me connect more on a deeper level. It's not as maybe my way of emotionally connecting is deepened through my spiritual practice or my beliefs. I feel like it benefits the emotional connection between us actually. Whether he's aware of it or not, or whether I'm aware, I just feel like it does anyway.

There is a sense from Gerina's statement that without her spiritual beliefs, she would not feel the same closeness or connection—the emotional intimacy—to her husband. Through what Gerina does spiritually, she believes that she is helping open William up to a deeper level of connection with her. Based on this statement, Gerina seems unsure of whether this strengthening of their emotional connection happens consciously or subconsciously, but Gerina *feels* that it happens. William agreed with Gerina that her spiritual beliefs enhanced their intimacy and connection. William was forthcoming in sharing that he did not have an interest in adopting Gerina's spiritual beliefs as his own. What was important to him, though, was how Gerina's spiritual beliefs guided her to share her spirituality with him. William said:

> I mean, emotionally, she gives me things, even though, you know, emotionally, I might not embrace it, but she's still giving it to me, and I still take it. Even though I put up this standoffish, sometimes, attitude, she just still gives me these things and it gets in there, you know what I'm saying, emotionally… I don't think I'd want it different. It adds to the relationship, even though I don't believe in it 100%, or once she goes to further reaching things sometimes, but it definitely opens up conversation and my outlook on life, and stuff like that.

Here, William shares how Gerina is freely giving of her spiritual beliefs. His statement is revealing for a couple of reasons. First, he appears to appreciate Gerina's gestures, even though he does not share her spiritual beliefs. Second, he seems to be saying that though he demonstrates a standoffish attitude towards sharing in Gerina's spiritual practices at times, he is still able to share them with her in part because of Gerina's continued willingness to give of herself and share the practices with him. Finally, William feels that Gerina's willingness to share her beliefs provides him with different perspectives on life. Together, it appears that even though

William does not share Gerina's beliefs, he is willing to hear them because they are important to Gerina and thus, important to him.

Gerina and William experience this intimacy as a sense of *connecting* or *connection*, which was a term that they both used to describe this intimacy. William referred to this intimacy as "Connecting, conversing… just being there with each other. Having moments together with her, connecting." A sense of connection is ever-present in Gerina's and William's marriage; as Gerina said, "We are in close contact generally with each other. We're very connected in that way, we always have been, even when we're arguing." This statement indicates that there is not only an emotional intimacy and connection between Gerina and William, but also a physical connection and literal sense of closeness that perhaps amplifies their feelings of emotional intimacy. Both Gerina and William equated this intimacy and connection with *love*, a word they both used. Gerina relayed, "[Intimacy] feels just like love, like being loved," and William said, "It'd feel the same, like happy, love, feel good."

In Dave and Anna's marriage, like Gerina and William's marriage, working to understand the other spouse's spiritual beliefs also created a shared sense of intimacy and connection. Anna and Dave discussed how hard the other tried to understand the beliefs and religious rituals of the other. These efforts to understand one another, despite not sharing the same spiritual beliefs, creates a sense of unity and makes the other feel appreciated. Anna said:

> Yes. He makes a lot of an effort, prayers, and during Hanukkah and they're in Hebrew, he'll pull up the phonetic versions so he's able to say the words with the family. He always tries to be a part of it. It's not just something that's happening to me or something that I'm doing separate from him. It's something that we're doing.

For Anna, it appears that when Dave makes an effort to join in the spiritual practices of her religion, this makes her feel like she and Dave are a team, evidenced by the phrase, "It's something that we're doing." Anna feels as though Dave includes himself, so he is not separated from her. Dave explained:

> She tries so hard. Walking into somebody else's religious institution whether it's on my part you're going to synagogue and wearing a kippah, or on her part, going into church, with the pews and the priest and the Eucharist and all that stuff. She learns the song. She knows a lot of the responses and she tries very hard. That makes me feel appreciated that she's trying hard to engage in something that is in some way strange and unfamiliar to her like learns the songs, with everything, when we're singing she knows some of the songs better than I do because I'm not really a singer. She likes that part of it.

Dave and Anna regularly attended religious services in the tradition of the other, and together they are part of an interfaith religious group. In hearing Dave talk about this group, there was a sense of unity, of oneness and connection, that the interfaith group helped facilitate in their relationship. Dave said, "We do belong to [the interfaith religious group]. That's the religious group we belong to, is interfaith." Dave's use of the word *we* here is important and builds on Anna's previous statement about feeling that religious services are something she and Dave do together. For Dave and Anna, it appeared that even though they came from different religious backgrounds and traditions, through the interfaith group and trying hard to understand each other's backgrounds created a sense of "we," and a greater connection between them.

Abby and Silas also used the word *we* to describe the sense of connection they share in their spiritual beliefs. Abby and Silas talked about belonging to an interfaith community instead of simply Abby's temple or Silas's church. Abby said, "Together, we belong to The New

Synagogue [of our region], which is one of the few synagogues I know of that is open to having interfaith couples as members," and Silas said, "This is the faith community that we belong to; they have a Reformed Christian church as well… We celebrate our Christian holidays there; we go to those services." Though Abby and Silas both talked about their own religious backgrounds in these statements, the emphasis was that they attend together, as a couple and family. These statements make clear that Abby and Silas work to understand each other's spiritual beliefs, and in using this *we* language, there is a clear sense of connection and togetherness in Abby and Silas's marriage.

Abby and Silas' intimacy also came from being drawn to the spirituality of the other person. Though Abby was raised Jewish and Silas Catholic, they were drawn to each other's sense of spirituality, where they found common ground. "One of the many things that drew me to Silas was how spiritual he was," Abby said, "We shared the same level of spirituality." This sense of shared level of spirituality, despite differences in specific faith, has led to "A deeper place in our marriage," Abby said.

Like other couples, Samuel and Priscilla enjoyed a greater sense of intimacy that they attributed to their spiritual differences. Samuel said:

I think in some ways, the differences heighten our intimacy because we are always trying to understand. I think we put a lot of effort into trying to understand each other's perspectives. She'll always ask me a lot of questions about different stuff from my parents, and how this worked… it's the same with her. I think it's been something that has brought us closer in a lot of ways because we both want to try to understand and try to comfort the other person.

According to Samuel, the differences between his and Priscilla's spirituality have necessitated them to really work to understand each other. This hard work has led to a greater sense of intimacy, so their differences are precisely the reason why, as Samuel said, they "enjoy a deeper sense of connection in their marriage." Understanding each other's spiritual differences is an aspect of Samuel and Priscilla's marriage they see as their role in the relationship. "I think that my role, and I've always perceived this, is to be, I always looked at it that I wanted to be tolerant of her beliefs. I wanted to be understanding," said Samuel. Similarly, Priscilla shared, "I wanted to be respectful and I wanted him to have the things that made him comfortable… I always felt my role was to be supportive of what is important to him." Both Samuel and Priscilla use the same language of *my role* in the relationship, and that their role is to be *supportive* and *understanding* and make the other feel *comfortable* in their beliefs. Conceiving of their respective roles in their marriage in such a way leads to greater intimacy experience for them, as this understanding seems to be something engrained in them.

Spirituality Guides Life. All couples had in common with each other the sense that their spirituality guided everyday life and how spouses treated one another. The participants believed their spouses' spiritual beliefs led their spouses to be better people, kinder, and more thoughtful. The participants also drew from the shared aspects of their faith to guide their daily lives and parenting. Fundamental to this, for every couple, was understanding that despite coming from different faiths, the core message of those different faiths was still the same, and so couples connected through a shared system of values not unique to any particular church or religious background.

Philip and Mercy used their spiritual beliefs to guide their actions, though Philip admitted he could be better about this. Philip said he would "like to find that spirituality on a daily basis,"

but he works to "live by example, being nice to people, little things like that," in his life. For Philip, he felt good about his actions and his spirituality guiding those actions when he was at church but struggled to apply the message of church outside the service itself. Mercy also used her spirituality to guide her actions but did not link this to a church service in quite the same way that Philip did. Mercy explained:

> For me, personally, I feel that whatever you believe in that guides you to do right by others and be kind, and all of those things, have a sense of community, whatever it is — In terms of why I do go to church or why I don't go to church, I do like to go to church. I don't often get there, but for me, it's more about a sense of, I guess, reflection and just a reminder to focus on the right things, on kindness and so forth. For me, it doesn't necessarily have to be a church that I have that feeling.

While Philip struggled to apply the messages of kindness and being nice to people that he heard in church in his daily life, and thought he could do better in this area, Mercy appeared to use religious guidance in her daily life and in her treatment of others regardless of whether she went to church and heard this message. Philip did, however, acknowledge that the spiritual message of forgiveness was one message that resonated with him, and that he used in his marriage. "I think forgiveness; I think Mercy and I are a couple that, we do forgive whether it's an argument, whether it's how we deal with the kids, which is, as you know, with three teenagers, it's tough," explained Philip. Philip and Mercy's spiritual beliefs connected through a shared sense of partnership. Philip said their shared spiritual beliefs make him and Mercy "want to be a partnership," and Mercy explained that their shared spiritual beliefs guide her in "kindness, treating each other equally." There was a sense that Mercy and Philip sought to treat each other kindly, compassionately, and in a way where they set a good example for their children.

Philip and Mercy seemed to view their spiritual beliefs, and the commonalities between them, as tools to use in their marriage and relationships with others. Samuel and Priscilla had a somewhat different conception of their shared spiritual beliefs. In Samuel and Priscilla's marriage, their spiritual beliefs were the cornerstone of their marriage and family. Samuel likened their spirituality to wallpaper in a room: "If the marriage is a room, the religions are the wallpaper. They are always there, and they'll always be there, and there's always reference to them." In this analogy, everything that Samuel and Priscilla did in their marriage was surrounded by and influenced by their spiritual beliefs, including seeking understanding of the other person.

Priscilla had a similar idea of the role of her spiritual beliefs in guiding her life with Philip but explained her beliefs in terms of her upbringing. Priscilla was raised in a Jewish household, and said, "For me, in a lot of ways, religion is family, and family and religion are very tied together. It was not so much that my family was so religious as they were very Jewish… it's a cultural thing." Priscilla's spiritual beliefs appeared to be woven into the fabric of her life, just like the *wallpaper* that Samuel described. Samuel acknowledged that he viewed Priscilla's spiritual beliefs in a way similar to hers. He said, "My impression of Priscilla and her family's brand of Judaism is much more culturally Jewish than formal Jewish worship… [they are a] very culturally Jewish and family and in a very, lovable, wonderful way, and all about family and in each other's business." The shared spirituality and understanding, for Priscilla and Samuel, seemed to be fundamentally about how spiritual beliefs were interwoven into their lives. They see their spirituality serving as the basis for their family life and connection as a couple.

In their marriage, Priscilla and Samuel have sought to understand their differences in spiritual beliefs. Understanding and navigating these differences has strengthened Priscilla and Samuel's connections to each other and their children. Priscila said:

Every marriage is going to have differences, whether they're religion or other things,

you're always going to have differences. [Our kids have] watched us for their whole lives

navigate these differences. It hasn't always been easy, but we've always done it; and so,

they've been a witness to that and so they have a very great understanding that differences

can be overcome, and you can respect. To love someone, you don't have to be the same

as them. You can be different from them; you can navigate these differences. That's, I

think, a very important lesson to teach children. I think through our navigation of this

difficult situation, we've taught them a lot, so I think that that is a real benefit.

It appears that in Priscilla and Samuel's marriage, the commonalities in spiritual belief were

important to find and build from. However, in Priscilla's statement, there is a sense that the

differences were also important to acknowledge. In a way, it was almost as though Priscilla and

Samuel built their marriage not from what they had in common, but from the mutual respect and

understanding of their differences.

Much like Priscilla and Samuel, Anna and Dave also believed that their spirituality

guided their marriage, as they sought common ground and to understand their differences. Dave

elaborated, "There are certain things in terms of structure and having spirituality a daily part of

our life that I really push." For Dave, this included simple gestures like praying before each

meal, but also larger life changes like seeking out and joining the interfaith group. Anna

appreciated in Dave his focus on their family. "For him, family is everything… Seeing that

actually play out, seeing him, the length that he goes to for us, to care for us, it's definitely how

he was raised," Anna said of Dave. This focus on family enhanced their connection as a couple

and as parents to their children and were informed by Dave's spiritual background. Similarly,

Dave sought to understand and appreciate the difference between his and Anna's spiritual

backgrounds. Dave said, "All I can say is, her upbringing made her who she was… made her who she is for that kind and generous, thoughtful person that she is." Dave noted that these are behaviors he saw Anna's mother demonstrate, too.

Perceived Spiritual Differences Create Distant Feelings. All the couples in this study, despite coming from different religious backgrounds, focused on those shared aspects of their spirituality. This led to a greater sense of connection and intimacy among couples and served as the foundation for their marriages, thus guiding their interactions with each other. There were times, for most couples, where those spiritual differences proved to be overwhelming, and the couples could not help but focus on their differences. In these situations, the couples appeared to experience a sense of distance from one another. This sense of distance led to further feelings of frustration and aggravation, and a sense of loss and loneliness.

Two couples in the study, Gerina and William and Mercy and Philip, seemed to have the most trouble moving past their spiritual differences, and these differences appeared to take a real toll on their relationship. William made statements during the interview that he did not believe their spiritual differences negatively impacted their relationship. William said, "No, I don't think [our spiritual differences have] a negative effect on the relationship. I don't know." However, further discussion revealed a sense of frustration on both his and Gerina's part due to their differences. Gerina and William both used the term *friction* related to these differences. Gerina explained:

> I would say sometimes there's friction. It creates some friction, because sometimes I feel
> like he's not interested, so then I don't want to share [my beliefs]. If it's not going to be
> interesting to somebody, then I don't want to share it with them… I keep things to myself
> more when it comes to spiritual stuff. It's my own concern… If I'm in meditation,

working on a particular idea, I'm not necessarily going to tell him that. It depends.

Sometimes it's frustrating.

William also said their spiritual differences caused friction sometimes, especially when he tried "to make the discussion on the case, why I don't believe," and Gerina "feels that my opinion on it may be wrong." William explained that he will give Gerina reasons why he does not share her spiritual beliefs, which "creates a little friction." Gerina and William's frustration appeared to have more to do with the fact that Gerina believed William did not approve of her beliefs, which manifested in him shutting her down when she tried to express herself to him. This was likely as Gerina noted because of her history as a member of a "cult-like" religious group and William's concern for her. William recalled a time when he felt like Gerina was getting too involved in her spiritual beliefs, and he worried because he thought her behavior was similar to being in a cult. He explained:

Yes, she was getting very deep in [a new spiritual belief], watching the practices on YouTube; which is fine, but then I just felt she was going a little too far, like she wanted, really wanted to go to one of his retreats. I was like, it was a lot of money, but I just felt like, you're getting too immersed. I always feel like people are just asking for money involved with it as opposed to just doing it and Buddhism or something like that. I don't know. I just felt she was getting very caught up in it.

William's concerns appeared related to Gerina becoming too immersed in a new belief system, or in following a new spiritual leader she discovered. In this case, Gerina described William's concern as "healthy, because it keeps me balanced and it gives me understanding where something could be dangerous and problematic." In other cases, though, Gerina felt like William disapproved of her beliefs. She said, "Where I'm questioning something or trying something

new, generally, I feel like he's not approving… I feel like I'm all alone there." Her statement is revealing, as she uses the word *generally* to describe her sense that William does not approve of her. That is, in one particular case she believed that William's concern for her was healthy, in most other situations, or in general, Gerina appeared to feel that William did not approve of her spiritual beliefs. This led Gerina to a feeling of loneliness created by the distance she felt from William when she lacked his approval.

Gerina described feeling disappointment with William when she felt he was uninterested in her spiritual beliefs. When Gerina wanted to share a new practice with William and "he's not interested, really, not into it," Gerina said "it's a little disappointment to me." The root of this seems to be that Gerina does not believe William is intellectually curious, which may point to a larger problem than their spiritual differences alone. Gerina stated:

> Yes, I would say he's not curious. He doesn't strive to know. I strive to know more. He's like, I don't need to know more. I know as much as I want to know, and that's enough for me, which is fine, but it's, I definitely want to know, and I definitely try to learn more things about it. I'm seeking more knowledge always, always trying to open myself to new ideas and stuff.

While William is concerned that Gerina is too wrapped up in her spiritual beliefs, Gerina is concerned that William does not share the same level of curiosity about the world that she does. For Gerina, this appeared rooted in a sense of fear that, as a couple, she and William were not growing together. "I always want him to come along with me," Gerina shared, "I feel like I'm afraid to move further ahead because I don't want to leave him behind." Gerina's fear that she and William were not growing together spiritually was something that William sensed. He said,

"Now she's afraid we're not growing together, but we are growing together. We've been growing together for 28 years."

When William appeared to be uninterested or disapproving of Gerina's spiritual beliefs and practices, this made Gerina shut down. "I feel sometimes I don't listen to him. Honestly, I feel sometimes I don't listen to him, because if he doubts what I'm doing…" Gerina trailed off. Here, Gerina clearly stated that the reason for their communication breakdown was her perception that William doubted what she was doing in her spiritual life. However, Gerina also recognized that perhaps sometimes she shared too much with William, knowing that William is not as receptive to her spiritual beliefs as she would like. She said, "I have to realize that I don't need to share everything… That's part of it, too… He doesn't want to be hit over the head with it, which is fair."

Gerina and William described feeling friction, fear, and loneliness because of their spiritual differences. These differences created distance between them that was hard to overcome. William described this distance as "just kind of a void," and Gerina said that the distance was "painful." Both also described a sense of loneliness. Gerina said that feeling distant from William "makes me feel lonely, sad, small," and William said he felt "alone, scared." Clear from their interview was the fact that, despite William's claim that their spiritual differences did not impact his marriage to Gerina, there were problems as a result of these differences, and those problems led to uncomfortable feelings for William and Gerina.

Mercy and Philip also appeared to have a hard time working through some of their spiritual differences. One of these differences was in the importance of attending church. Mercy explained that Philip feels "the obligation to get to church" each week, whereas she does not. Philip agreed:

This is no knock on Mercy whatsoever; It's just, in my mind, that I think there's more of

a commitment for me to get to church on a Sunday basis. Bringing the kids, committing,

getting them to the religious education classes. Sometimes, it's like Mercy joined in the

journey, but I don't expect her to… I think at the end of the day, I feel like I'm a little

more committed to it.

The fact that Mercy does not go to church with Philip and their kids appeared to create some

tension and distance between them. Mercy shared:

We never talk about a difference in beliefs. I'd say the only time we ever have conflict is

if I'm not going to church with them. I always get the sense, and he'll correct me if I'm

wrong, but it's more, "Let's go as a family; you got to be there with me," or the kids are

saying, "I don't want to go." He thinks it would be really helpful if you would go,

because then maybe they wouldn't be arguing so much.

According to Mercy, her lack of interest in attending church with her family sometimes creates

conflict between her and Philip. She perceived that Philip wanted to present a united front to the

kids, since they wanted the kids to attend church. Philip seemed to experience this more as a lack

of companionship and wanted Mercy to come to church so they could be together.

The distance that Mercy's lack of church attendance created between her and Philip were

"frustrating," according to Philip. Mercy said, "when you're distant, you're not connected,"

which created a lack of intimacy. Philip connected these frustrating feelings of distance which

led to a lack of intimacy to differences in parenting, including ideas about attending church. He

said, "I think it's important to be on the same page with how we bring our kids up, because that's

certainly as a common denominator some of our distancing, when it happens." From this, it may

be interpreted that the differences in church attendance, especially as they relate to their children, directly cause this lack of connection and sense of intimacy between Philip and Mercy.

Influence of Family of Origin's Spirituality

The couples in the study were influenced to varying degrees by the spirituality of their family of origin, which is the topic of this theme. For couples like Gerina and William, there was a negative impact on their emotional intimacy. For others like Abby and Silas, emotional intimacy appeared to be positively impacted by their family of origins' spirituality.

William was raised in the Catholic church, where he was baptized and confirmed, though he no longer practiced. The last time William said he attended church was about 30 years ago, when his grandmother died. Gerina had a somewhat different upbringing. Gerina said she identifies most with the Buddhist belief system, but she had a history of involvement with a cult when she was younger. The last time Gerina attended church was about a decade ago, when she and her children attended a Unitarian Universalist church, but William did not accompany them. Gerina said of the Unitarian church, "I didn't even join it. We just went. [William] didn't, though," and William confirmed, "I didn't want to go." Gerina's history of involvement with spiritual beliefs led her to a spiritual evolution over the years, during which she explored many different spiritual beliefs. Gerina recalled:

> When I was 16, my parents had split up a couple years before, and my mother joined a group, it was a religious group, which later I found out was a cult. She got very heavily involved in it quickly. Then, I also got involved with it. At the time, I thought I would lose her if I didn't. My brother essentially did lose her. I was in that until I was 23. I was involved with that group and it was all-encompassing. It was just, it was a lot, and so

every time I'm going towards something that might be, like, culty, [William's] radar goes

up.

This statement from Gerina during the interview highlights the impact of her family of origin's

spirituality on her marriage to William. Gerina was so influenced by her mother's cult

involvement that she, too, became involved in the cult. Every time Gerina explored a new aspect

of her spirituality, this raised red flags for William, which created some distance between the two

of them. William seemed to appreciate Gerina's spiritual journey but was also impacted by his

family of origin's spiritual beliefs and religious upbringing, which in turn impacted how he

viewed Gerina's spirituality. When Gerina was meditating or wanted to share something of her

spirituality with William, William said this "seeps in," meaning that he listened to her. The

problem, it appeared, was William's religious upbringing in a Catholic family. He seemed

resistant to share in Gerina's excitement about her spirituality. William said, "I can't, maybe

from my past involvement with the church and all that, I just can't throw myself into any of it."

Gerina's and William's families of origin, and the impact of those families on their

spirituality as adults and as a married couple, seemed to impede their emotional intimacy,

because they could not connect through their spiritual beliefs. Gerina was influenced by her

family to seek continual spiritual growth but seemed to have a tendency toward more cult-like

religious beliefs. William's background in a Catholic family impacted him to the point where he

wanted nothing to do with religion as an adult.

Abby and Silas' marriage was impacted by Abby's family of origin spirituality, but in a

somewhat different way than Gerina and William's marriage. Abby said that her family of origin

expected her to marry a Jewish man; "That wasn't an option not to," Abby recalled. She found

herself drawn to "how spiritual [Silas] was," despite coming from a Catholic background. When

Abby and Silas started dating her family disapproved, and Abby had to choose between her family and Silas. She said, "I made the choice for Silas… What I believed was going to be a happy and successful marriage was so important to me that I was willing to stop speaking to my family to be in a relationship with him."

Abby believed that her marriage to Silas would be successful precisely because of his spirituality, and his activity in his own church and faith. The differences in Abby's and Silas' spirituality have enhanced their intimacy and connection, as well as their own senses of spirituality. Abby said that she feels "more Jewish than [my family of origin], and I enjoy bringing that to life for them. Silas and I… I think we have a deeper spirituality than my family ever had." Abby relayed she takes "joy in showing my family that differences can actually be a positive, because I grew up in a home where differences were a negative." Silas recalled getting the impression from Abby's family of origin that "I was going to make Abby change her religion, and all of her years in Hebrew school were a waste." Abby and Silas' sense of emotional intimacy seemed to come from the differences in their families of origin and religious upbringing. They also attributed their emotional intimacy to the hard work they put into their marriage to understand each other and appreciate their differences. In addition, they seemed to believe that these differences enhanced their emotional intimacy and their spirituality as a couple.

Raising Children as a Multi-Faith Married Couple

Raising children together as a multi-faith married couple also impacted the participants' marriages. The couples experienced the impact of raising children on their intimacy in different ways. For some couples, the spiritual differences made raising children a challenge, which negatively impacted their emotional intimacy and sense of closeness. In other couples, focusing

on the shared spirituality and instilling this in their children appeared to have positively impacted their emotional connection and intimacy experiences in their marriages.

Priscilla and Samuel seemed to have different attitudes toward raising children with spirituality, which at times appeared to cause some defensiveness. Samuel, who came from a Catholic upbringing, said, "I don't care what religion [our kids] end up choosing to pursue; I want them to be good people, tolerant of people." Samuel believed that he had given his kids a "tremendous gift," which was the ability to see another person's perspective and to learn from that experience, and as long as his children could do this he did not care if they became Catholic or Jewish or another religion. However, Samuel also said he believed Priscilla wanted their children to have some Judaism. "It is a difference between us, because I don't perceive at least that Priscilla would be satisfied for [our children] to be anything if they didn't retain some Jewishness," Samuel relayed. He identified this as a "significant difference" between him and Priscilla. Priscilla also sees this as a difference. She elaborated:

> I guess it is true that it is important to me… In some ways, I'm so culturally Jewish that I do think it maybe is the right way to be… I just feel like it's very important to me that they know that that's in them, and a part of them, and always have respect for that… I think that's something that's deep inside of me that I don't actively think about, but that I probably have always felt.

While Samuel does not care if his children end up Jewish or Catholic, Priscilla admitted that it was important to her that her children retain some of her Jewish faith. In her statement, she said that she did believe that being Jewish was the right way, which implied that if her children became Catholic as adults, this would be the wrong religion. However, Priscilla also recognized she thought this because Judaism was so important for her, and she did not want their children to

neglect this important aspect of their identity. Samuel, on the other hand was more focused on how their children treated others, and that their children were good people, despite their religion.

Considering their differences in spiritual beliefs, when Priscilla and Samuel argued, Samuel said it was most often about parenting. "We have strong opinions about what should be done in particular situations, usually with our kids," Samuel acknowledged. When this fighting occurred, Samuel admitted he wished Priscilla would "just understand how I think about things. If she's not being sensitive, it makes me feel angry." Priscilla also expressed she felt angry when she and Samuel fought about the kids. She said, "I think that any time that you feel like you're not being listened to, you get angry at each other, if we take each for granted… I think that makes you angry at the other person, but we usually talk through it and work it out." The major feeling expressed by Priscilla and Samuel related to arguments about parenting and differences was anger. In turn, these feelings of anger could lead to a sense of distance and lack of emotional intimacy if not resolved. However, Samuel said, "We've never gone to bed mad," so the sense is that despite the occasional arguing related to parenting, any lack of closeness between Samuel and Priscilla likely does not last long.

In Dave and Anna's relationship, raising children in an interfaith marriage has been a joyful experience. According to Dave, having children "brought [Anna and me] even closer together." Dave said, "We're just both completely enraptured in the awe of our two girls… they bring us joy every single day." This joy in parenting has brought Dave and Anna closer together. Connecting through their children was something that happened in Philip and Mercy's marriage, too. Philip explained:

> We have a lot going on in the house, the demands of kids, the demands of the jobs. When
> we are able to have that connection, it feels good… We feel connected on things. I'll

speak for Mercy, a lot of it revolves around how we support each other when it comes

down to affairs with the kids, because they're at the age where they need mom and dad;

so, then we get to support each other.

In this statement, Philip admitted he was speaking for Mercy, too, but in the interview, she did

not contradict this point. The sense of connection between Mercy and Philip comes from those

times when they feel they are united in their parenting.

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that differences in spirituality of couples in

marital relationships affect various aspects of their individual, relational, and family life

experiences. The results demonstrate that spiritual belief differences provide both contexts that

enhance emotional intimacy satisfaction as well as contexts that undermine it. More specifically,

the findings show that differences in spirituality positively influence emotional intimacy

satisfaction in contexts where spouses emotionally connect with their partners' needs and

negatively influence emotional intimacy satisfaction in contexts where spouses emotionally

disconnect from their partners' needs.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

The present study explores the emotional intimacy experience of heterosexual couples who display differences in spirituality. On the whole, the results suggest that spirituality differences of married couples affect various aspects of their individual, relational, and family life experiences.

Continuing Commitment to Love Spouse in a Long-term, Loving Marital Relationship

Despite their differences in spirituality, all spouses in the study show a continuing commitment to loving their partners in the context of a long-term relationship, which is evinced from the ways in which they interact with one another and how they express their actions toward their spouses. This commitment allows spouses to attune to their partners' needs and maintain relational stability (Stanley et al., 2010), as they work together in navigating their differences with a sense of common purpose.

Shared Values on Spirituality

This study suggests that it is not so much the differences in the contents of spiritual beliefs between spouses in married relationships that determine the direction of their emotional intimacy satisfaction but their shared or divergent values on spirituality. Experiences of the spouses in this investigation suggest that focusing on their shared values on spirituality provides a bridge of connection with their partners, which enhances their emotional intimacy. Therefore, for couples that display differences in spirituality, de-emphasizing theological differences allows them to connect through their shared spiritual values, as well as create context for emotional intimacy. Research shows that lingering conflicts, and a corrosive effect on marital stability, are

related with couples of diverse spiritual beliefs emphasizing the theological differences in their marriage (Joanides et al., 2002).

These findings are consistent with the triangular theory of love (TTL) (Sternberg, 1986), which suggests that there are three components of love: intimacy, passion, and decision/commitment, which can be viewed as forming the vertices of a triangle. The TTL indicates that in a loving relationship, the intimacy component of love has to do with the feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness while passion refers to the drives that lead to romance, physical attraction, sexual consummation, and related phenomena. The decision/commitment component of TTL is comprised of two aspects, a short-term aspect (i.e., the decision to love a certain person) and a long-term aspect (i.e., the commitment to maintain that love) (Sternberg, 1986). In the TTL structure, the commitment component of love is essential for couples in getting through challenging times and for maintaining stability in their relationships. From the GST framework, spouses focusing on their shared values on spirituality with their partners, instead of on their differences, as part of their commitment to one another, show respect, maintain open communication, provide support for each other, and experience emotional intimacy satisfaction. In turn, this contributes to their commitment to their long-term marriages.

This study also demonstrates that for couples who display differences in spirituality, focusing on their shared experiences and values, related or unrelated to spirituality, are the key to strong emotional intimacy and connection that sustain commitment to a long-term loving marital relationship. By focusing on their shared experiences and spiritual values, the couples formed a common sense of *meaning in life*, which is a crucial element of spiritual and religious coping and psychological well-being (Dein, 2018; Krok, 2015). From a GST lens, couples' spiritual coping

through focusing on shared values and experiences support their psychological well-being, which allows them to maintain emotional intimacy and connections that keep them committed to their long-term marital relationship.

Respect for Spouse

Couples demonstrated their respect for their spouses in two ways: generally and specifically. Generally, they respected their spouses as humans, and specifically, they respected their spouses' spiritual beliefs. Research suggests that intimate behavior experiences and responses of spouses to each other in a couple relationship affect both their individual and collective relationship satisfaction (Finkbeiner et al., 2013). Both the general and specific respects that the couples in the study show for each other interact to inform and reinforce their commitment to long-term loving relationships. Additionally, feeling respected and reciprocating respect to their spouses nurtured couples' connection and emotional intimacy, which sustained their commitment to their marriages. By mutually respecting and supporting each other, the couples enhance the degree of their satisfaction and commitment (Collins et al., 2009) to their marital relationships.

The present study seems to indicate that by making respect for their spouses a centerpiece in their relationship system, the spouses practiced their spirituality with ease without feeling negatively judged by their partners. Also, the shared experiences of the spouses show that their mutual validation of their experiences through their acts of reciprocated respect for each other enhanced their marital satisfaction and emotional connection with their partners. Research indicates that spouses who are equitably treated tend to be satisfied and are more likely to engage in communicative behaviors to maintain their marriages than those who are unfairly treated (Stafford & Canary, 2006). From a GST lens, couples' positive relational experiences were

expressed through respect for each other, generally and specifically. Their mutual validation of their individual and collective experiences enhanced their intimacy, which sustained their continued commitment to their marriages.

Open Communication

The present study suggests that maintaining open communication fostered participants' continuing commitment to love their spouses in a long-term marital relationship. The findings indicate that couples' subjective attitude and affective experience in the evaluation of their marriages (Gale, 2008) is affected by their openness and patterns of communication (Yoo et al., 2014). The shared experiences of the couples demonstrate that communicating openly meant that they felt comfortable expressing themselves and discussing any topic, including their spirituality, with their spouses.

Furthermore, communicating openly for the spouses in the study also meant that they felt *heard* and *understood* by their partners when they expressed their thoughts and feelings in their marriages. In the GST view, feeling *heard* and *understood*, despite their differences in spirituality, boosted couples' emotional safety and security, which supported their commitment in their marriages. Since feeling emotionally safe provides a natural context for emotional intimacy and marital satisfaction (Johnson, 2008), a lack of open communication may negatively inhibit marital satisfaction. Couples in the study were hindered from communicating openly with their spouses when they feared being misunderstood and were relationally hurt. Avoiding *misunderstanding* and *relational hurt* negatively affected the couples' responsiveness and receptivity to each other in their communication. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; 1988) stresses the importance of addressing in our lives, "the way we deal with basic emotions, engage with others on the basis of these emotions, and continually construct a sense of self from the

drama of repeated emotionally laden interactions with attachment figures" (Johnson, 2009, p. 410). Therefore, increasing marital satisfaction involves fostering emotional attunement and responsiveness through privileging emotional responses and communication as well as directly addressing attachment vulnerabilities and fears (Johnson, 2003). From this perspective, "health is described as the ability to fully listen to and engage inner experience, (particularly emotional experience), to trust this experience, and to create meanings that can then direct behavioral responses" (Johnson, 2004, p. 411). Thus, from an attachment-informed viewpoint, the process of health involves positive relational accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement of the partners with each other (Johnson, 2009).

For all the spouses in the study, it was important for them that their partners were available and open to engage with them when they needed someone. Additionally, all the spouses, including those who were not confident in their abilities to communicate freely with others, shared the need for them to be open and accessible to their partners in their marriages, since communication behaviors, such as self-disclosure and expressions of empathy are "positive predictors of relationship satisfaction" (Luster et al., 2013, p. 370).

The findings of this study show that open communication requires concerted *efforts* for couples who display differences in spirituality because of their diverse personal spiritual beliefs, which inform their *meaning* making processes (Dein, 2018). For the participants in the study, the required concerted *efforts* to ensure open communication in their marriages meant asking probing questions and seeking to understand the stories behind the experiences, practices, and beliefs of their spouses. As suggested in other research, sharing collective sense of meaning in life, which is often shaped by spirituality, enhances social connectedness and influences related life outcomes, such as social engagement, marriage, and separation (Stavrova & Luhmann,

2016). The shared experiences of the couples in the study illustrate that though *feeling listened to and understood* in their marriages cannot exclusively be attributed to their differences in spirituality; however, their beliefs on *listening* and *understanding* others are related to their values of respect, which is grounded in their spirituality. Overall, the findings show that maintaining the baseline of open communication between spouses is part of continued commitment in marital relationships.

Providing Support

Most of the spouses in the present study felt that their role in the relationships was to provide emotional, social, psychological and spiritual support for their partners. From GST lens, by seeing their role in their marital relationships to include providing emotional and social support for their partners (Urbano-Contreras et al., 2017), the spouses mutually connected and attuned to each other's needs, which enhanced their continued commitment in their marriages.

Some of the spouses did not connect their perceived role to *support* their partners to their spiritual values, either shared or different, while others did connect their sense of obligation to *support* partners with their spiritual beliefs. Though all the spouses see the role to *support* their partners as a reflection of their *love* and *commitment* in their marriages, those who connected their role to *support* their partners see their duty to *support* and how they behave towards their partners (Rauer & Volling, 2015) to be informed by their spiritual values. The findings also show that the spouses' sense of obligation to support themselves was heightened during challenging times such as during times of grief and loss in their families. The spouses' shared experiences suggest that going through challenging moments together with their partners, and supporting themselves in the process, provided them contexts for emotional connection and intimacy, which sustained their commitment to their marriages.

Additionally, the results indicate that by providing support, love, health, and well-being through their marital relationships over time (Espen et al., 2014; Olson & Olson, 2000), the couples mutually influenced their satisfaction experience and commitment in their marriages (Cropley & Reid, 2008). As indicated in other studies (Walsh et al., 2017), the cumulative effects of spouses' efforts combined with the degree of their work over time to maintain emotional intimacy through positive shared activities sustains relationship quality.

Marital Expectations

Most of the couples in the study had certain baseline expectations that included *love, respect*, *support,* and *availability to each other*. All the couples had been married for at least 10 years at the time of the study, and most of them reported that their marital expectations had been exceeded over the course of their marriage, leading to their enhanced relationship satisfaction and commitment in their marriages.

Viewed from a GST perspective, the spouses managed their marital expectations in flexible ways, which enabled them to remain connected with their partners, and thereby support their continued marital commitment and satisfaction. The results indicate that the movement of the spouses' perceptions and prospects in their marriages influences the direction of their marital satisfaction and commitment. Other research has recorded similar results suggesting that perceptions of a spouse's positive affectivity and personal positive affectivity are related to relationship satisfaction, which means that optimism, coping skills, and personal expansion are important resources for marriage through their association with each partner's affectivity (Gordon & Baucom, 2009).

Only one out of the five couples in the study shared a bit of concern about their relationship satisfaction, which they agreed meant that there was *room for improvement* in their

marriage. Interestingly, and perhaps importantly, the couple attributed their *concern* about their relationship specifically to their *personality types, history of arguing* and *self-blame,* not to their differences in spirituality. As suggested in other research (Altmann et al., 2013), relationship satisfaction of both women and men appears to depend much on how the partners view their respective spouses' personality types and not on how they view themselves individually. The assumption is that the process of projection activates a "specific component of a stereotype, which then becomes accessible and affects interpersonal evaluations" (Govorun et al., 2006, p. 971). From this perspective, individuals in intimate couple relationships would tend to project their relationship satisfaction experience onto their perception of their partner's personality type, meaning that satisfied people would tend to see their partner as having a healthy personality and vice versa (Altmann et al., 2013). Thus, spouses' perception of emotional intimacy predicts their own relationship satisfaction and that of their partners (Yoo et al., 2014).

All the couples in the study differed in the ways they linked or did not link marital satisfaction to differences in spirituality. Some couples believed that their marital satisfaction were directly attributable to their spiritual differences, while others, did not make such direct connection. Couples who did not directly link their marital satisfaction to their differences in spirituality connected their satisfaction to having a simple goal of living a *decent married life,* which they believed was within their reach and have *worked*. The couples attributing their marital satisfaction to their expectations of *love, respect, support* and *availability for each other*, influences their evaluations and ultimately sets the stage for new emotional responses in future relational events for them (Schoebi & Randall, 2015).

Intimacy through the Sharing of Spiritual Practices of the Spouse

The findings show that the spouses' sharing of spiritual practices of their partners created

context for enhanced intimacy and connection, which interacted with their spirituality that guides

their life. The results also reveal that in situations, where the spouses felt that their spiritual

differences between them and their partners were too great to overcome, the perception of

differences led to feelings of distance, which negatively affected the spouses' intimacy

experience.

Enhanced Intimacy and Connection

The results of the present study show that through sharing in the spiritual activities of

their partners, spouses experienced some emotional intimacy, which as Sinclair and Dowdy

(2005) suggest is a critical aspect of marital satisfaction that involves a perception of closeness to

another that is conducive to the sharing of personal feelings, accompanied by expectations of

understanding, affirmation, and demonstrations of caring. A majority of spouses in this study felt

a greater degree of connection and intimacy when they sought to understand their partners'

spiritual beliefs. The spouses' narratives also reveal that having positive experience sharing in

spiritual activities of their partners enhances their emotional connection and intimacy in their

marriages. Thus, the findings suggest that *experiences* of couples engaging in spiritual activities

together is as important in determining the movement of emotional intimacy as the *sharing* act

itself. As such, the experience of individuals in couple relationships sharing meaningful spiritual

practices, such as holiday rituals, enhance spouses' relationships (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001), and

the frequency of shared attendance of meaningful religious and spiritual activities also has a

positive impact on marital quality (Myers, 2006) and stability (Call & Heaton, 1997). Through

their shared experiences, the spouses demonstrated that their partners' efforts to understand and

participate in their spiritual practices, despite having different spiritual beliefs, create a sense of unity, which makes them feel appreciated. Other couple relationships studies (Cropley & Reid, 2008) have shown that relational satisfaction is contingent not just on individual perceptions, but also on the mutual satisfaction experiences of the partners.

The findings also indicate that the spouses' perception of their partners making effort to join in their spiritual practices of their religion make them feel valued and validated (Matthews & Clark, 1982) and that they and their partner are a team. Spouses feeling validated by their partners enhance their emotional satisfaction in their marriages (Finkbeiner et al., 2013). From a GST framework, the results demonstrate that when spouses share positive experiences, which affect their personal well-being, their individual evaluations of their relationship experiences equally become positively influenced. For individual experiences, relational responses, and the dynamics within a given system as a whole mutually influence how the system operates (von Bertalanffy, 1968); thus, GST has shown to be key in understanding the process and structure underlining the movement on the relationship between spirituality and religious practices and marital satisfaction.

The shared experiences of the couples in the present study also reveal that the movements of their emotional connection and intimacy simultaneously and systemically depended on both their similar and divergent spirituality, and on other qualities in their relationships, including communication, conflict-resolution, decision making, and sexuality (Giblin, 1997). The result is consistent with Moore et al.'s (2004) articulation of the major qualities of a healthy marriage which include "commitment of the couple, satisfaction, respectful communication, successful conflict resolution, lack of domestic violence, fidelity, positive interaction/time together,

intimacy/emotional support, commitment to the children (where present) and duration/legal marital status" (p. 3).

Spirituality Guides Life

The results show that the couples in the study attributed a greater sense of intimacy to their spiritual differences because it created contexts for them to put concerted efforts to understand themselves, which ultimately enhanced their connections and marital satisfaction. The present study also suggests that couples' spiritual beliefs on different aspects of relationship, such as, *receiving* and *giving care* and *affection,* influenced their expression and reception of *care* and *affection* in their marriages. Informed by their spiritual values, all the spouses in the research, see *receiving* and *giving care* and *affection*, particularly in reference to their partners, as part of their roles in their marriages. Through moral guidance and socio-emotional support (Robert, 1994), the couples' spirituality and religious values on relationship, influence their marital stability and quality.

The shared experiences of all the couples indicate that their spirituality guided their daily lives and how they treated one another. The spouses believed that their partners' spiritual beliefs had positive impacts in enhancing their kindness and sense of responsibility in their marriages. From the GST lens, the practice of spiritual beliefs, such as compassion and forgiveness (Orathinkal & Vansteenwegen, 2006), in a couple relationship can lead to the strengthening of mutual trust and respect, which in turn can increase relational satisfaction. The experiences of the spouses in the present study show that despite coming from different faiths, they connected with their partners through a shared system of values that are found in major faith traditions, which include showing kindness to others.

All the couples in the study reported that *meaning in life* provided by their spirituality influenced their marital commitment and satisfaction experience. Graham et al. (2017), describes *meaning in life* as how people make sense of their lives, how they commit to pursuing purpose in life, and how they come to see their lives as significant and worthwhile. As shown in other studies, people with greater levels of spiritual well-being, religiousness, and meaning or purpose in life experience greater quality of life and fewer depressive symptoms (Braam & Koenig, 2019), whereas negative aspects of spirituality or religiousness, like existential anxiety, are related to poorer outcomes (Hooker & Bekelman, 2015). It appears from the findings of the present study that spiritual beliefs of the couples seemed to be woven into the fabrics of their lives and relational experiences. And given their differences in spirituality, all the spouses sought common ground with their partners while navigating through their personal and relational experiences. As such, most of the couples in the research saw their spirituality as part of the centerpiece of family life and marital connection.

Perceived Differences Create Distant Feelings

In some situations where the spiritual differences between spouses are too great to overcome, the perception of different spiritual beliefs led to distant feelings in the couples, which negatively affected their intimacy experience. In these situations, where spiritual differences prove to be overwhelming, most spouses tend to focus on their differences, which leads to them experiencing a sense of distance that gives rise to further feelings of frustration and aggravation, and a sense of loss and loneliness.

The present study shows that spouses' experiences of frustrating distant feelings, arising from the challenges of dealing with spirituality differences in their marriages, is linked to their desire to be connected with their partners. Thus, situations that threaten spouses' desired

connections with their partners appear to create some tensions that undermine their emotional

intimacy in their marriages. Since low marital satisfaction can lead to divorce (Dew & Wilcox,

2011), and the experience of falling out of love in a romantic relationship is associated with

themes of loss of trust, intimacy and feeling loved, emotional pain, negative sense of self, and

progressive deterioration of the relationship (Sailor, 2013), couples can see distant feeling as a

threat to their marital satisfaction and relational viability.

The findings of this research also indicate that spouses' tendency to focus more on their

spirituality differences with each other, which led to defensive feeling that is linked to emotional

disconnection and dissatisfaction (Johnson, 2008), occurred more frequently at the beginning of

their relationships, and decreased with the passage of time. All the spouses attributed the

decrease in the frequency of emotional disconnection linked to marital dissatisfaction, to their

increased mutual understanding of each other's beliefs and their positive experience participating

in their partners' spiritual activities. Relaying his experience, Dave said:

> This sort of defensiveness which I think earlier in our relationship especially before we
>
> got married was maybe a little bit higher, now has lessened…. and we really have come
>
> to a nice understanding of the importance of our [spiritual] upbringing and how we're
>
> trying to negotiate that.

There are indications in the results that differences in the level of spouses' commitment

to spiritual activities arising from their divergences in beliefs also led to their experience of

distant feeling and emotional disconnections from each other. The shared experiences of the

spouses suggests that the emotional disconnection, arising from varying levels of commitments

to participating in spiritual activities appeared to relate mostly to the feeling of losing the

companionship of their partners in those moments. From a GST perspective, this research

demonstrates that spouses' individual experiences of distant feelings, informed by their differences in spirituality with their partners, influence their relational responses to emotional connection with them and the dynamics of their intimacy experiences, affecting how their whole marital system operates (von Bertalanffy, 1968). The results show that a key to emotional connection and intimacy associated with successful marriage, especially for couples who display differences in spirituality and religious beliefs, lies in communication and compromise (Arora et al., 2008).

Influence of Family of Origin's Spirituality

Except in rare circumstances, the family system is the most foundational emotional system that informs the course and the outcome of our lives, making it our greatest potential resource and source of stress (McGoldrick, 2011). Consequently, from the GST lens personal evaluations of relationships and shared relational experiences are understood not in a vacuum, but in the contexts including family systems in which they occur (Gehart, 2018; Nichol, 2011). The couples in the present study were influenced to varying degrees by the spirituality of their family of origins. For some couples, their family of origins' spirituality had negative impact on their emotional intimacy, while for others, the impacts were positive.

Collectively, the couples' experiences of spirituality-related practices in their family of origins influenced how they handled spiritual matters including their individual reactions and relational responses to spiritual practices in their marriages. This study reveals that in managing tensions arising from dealing with negative influence of spirituality-related experiences from their family of origins, some couples resorted to serving as *checks-and-balances* for each other in spiritual practices, suggesting that within troubled dyads, there is stability-maintaining

complementarity that influence emotional responses of spouses to each other (White & Hatcher, 1984).

For some couples, whose family of origin initially disapproved their relationship because of religious differences, marrying someone of different spiritual background seemed to have positive impact on their emotional intimacy. Such couples attributed their emotional intimacy to the *hard work* they put into their marriage to understand each other and appreciate their differences. Given "the transactional nature of family processes across multiple subsystems within the family system" (Peltz et al., 2018, p. 561), spouses' family of origins' spirituality backgrounds, influence the management of their spirituality differences with their partners, which impacts their emotional intimacy satisfaction. The findings indicate that for some couples dealing with family of origin responses to their relationships with someone of a divergent spiritual background empowers them to co-create relational and family narratives that enable them to address their emotional intimacy needs. For some other couples, their experiences of spirituality in their families of origin adversely impact their ability to create positive spiritual support in their marriages.

Raising Children as a Multi-Faith Married Couple

Experiences of couples who display differences in spirituality show that raising children in a multi-faith marriage impacts emotional intimacy. In this study, the couples' experiences indicate that raising children in their multi-faith marriages impacts their intimacy in different ways. For some of the couples, the spirituality differences made raising children a challenge, negatively impacting their emotional closeness and intimacy. In other couples, focusing on their shared spirituality and instilling it in their children appeared to have positive impacts on their emotional connection and intimacy in their marriages.

The research suggests that because of their diverse personal spiritual beliefs, which inform the *meaning* making processes (Dein, 2018) that guide their view on parenting and family life, couples who display differences in spirituality encounter challenges, particularly in reference to negotiating and compromising on the spiritual values to adopt for their children. As Riley (2013) indicates, "deciding how to raise children is probably the highest hurdle interfaith parents face, because in general American parents find it important that the children carry on in their faith" (p. 80). Viewed from a GST framework, having different positions and beliefs about the spiritual traditions to adopt for their children creates relational tensions that cause couples who display differences in spirituality to be defensive towards their spouses, which negatively influences their emotional intimacy.

The couples' experiences suggest that the defensiveness stems mostly from their desire to *honor* their family of origins' spiritual traditions. Navigating through the situation creates for couples what Riley (2013) described as "a story of competing loyalties" (p. 202), a conflicting feeling between remaining faithful to the traditions of ones' family of origin and adopting new traditions in new relationships. The results of the present study show that spouses felt that they *betrayed* the spiritual traditions of their family of origins when it appeared to them that their children were *walking away* from those traditions. For some couples, raising children in an interfaith marriage is a joyful experience, which enhances their emotional connection and intimacy.

Given the parenting complications and other challenges that couples who display differences in spirituality face, the conventional thinking sees marriages between spouses of diverse spiritual and religious backgrounds to be problematic, and perhaps a destabilizing force, that increases the risk of marital conflict and instability (Lehrer, 1996; Waite & Lehrer, 2003). However, the

present study demonstrates that such marriages cannot only be successful, but also fulfilling, as long as the spouses attune to each other and their particular relational needs, just like other couples of various compositions have to do in their marriages. The findings of this research suggests that marriage between spouses who display differences in spirituality is not a *doomed* undertaking since it can be satisfying provided that the necessary work, which Abby called "a joyful work," is done.

Attitude to Therapy

All the couples in this study expressed openness to the idea of receiving therapy if they were to experience serious emotional or relational crisis. However, they had varying responses on who in their marriages would be the initiator of the process of seeking therapy when in need. Some couples in the study believe that wives would most likely be the ones to initiate the process, whereas other couples hold that the husbands probably would be the first to suggest seeking therapy. Only one couple in the group maintain that given the mutual interdependence, which they have embedded in every aspect of their marriage, either one of them could be the initiator of therapy if the need should arise. As indicated in other research (Doss et al., 2009; Schofeld et al., 2015; Trillingsgaard et al., 2019), both men and women are more likely to initiate therapy if they experience a lower level of relationship satisfaction.

Given that prior experience of seeking therapy is a key factor that increases the likelihood of seeking therapy in the future (Hubbard & Harris, 2020), couples' beliefs about therapy inform their openness to receiving therapy and their impressions of who among them would most likely initiate the process. The findings show that spouses' meaningful past personal experiences with therapy provide confidence to seek therapy, including couples therapy. The shared experiences of couples in this study is consistent with the suggestion made in other research (Trillingsgaard

et al., 2019) that it might be helpful to consider individual therapy as an entry point to couples therapy, especially with women.

Although generally, men may know of problems in their relationship and seem reluctant to seek couples therapy (Hubbard & Harris, 2020), some couples believe that husbands would most likely be the first before their wives to suggest seeking therapy. The results suggest that personal experiences in the family of origin about discussing personal and relationships difficulties is perhaps one of the factors that inform the dispositions of men to be the most likely initiators in seeking supports such as couples therapy outside of their families.

The shared experiences of all the spouses in the present study demonstrate that their openness to seek therapy reflected their belief that therapists have the expertise to help them in finding relief from personal and relational difficulties. All the couples have specific expectations about what they believe make a good therapeutic experience, which suggests that clients form pre-therapy expectations about their therapist, and the process of therapy (Tambling et al., 2016). Some spouses expect that a good therapist would *coach*, *facilitate* discussions between couples when there is disagreement, *foster a safe environment*, and ask *open-ended questions* in therapy. Other spouses expect therapists to be *encouraging, listening closely, teaching relational skills*, and *helping couples to talk about feelings rather than placing blame*. Whereas other couples expect the goal of the facilitative work of a good therapist to include providing a bigger *picture* and broader perspectives on clients' presenting issues. The reflections of other couples in the study suggest that they want a good therapist to provide tools that would be applicable to varieties of situations, while others expect a therapist to be *empathetic*, *non-judgmental* and *solution-oriented* in therapy. This study shows that couples recognize that addressing empathy explicitly in therapy is important and could be a means for creating positive relational change

(Schmidt & Gelhert, 2017). From a GST lens, creating positive relational change and fostering

marital satisfaction entails not only seeing couples to be more than the summation of the

individuals in relationships, but also involving the recognition of how they interact within their

relational contexts (Whitechurch & Constantine 1993).

Clinical Implications

Shared Connections

The findings of this study provide important clinical implications for working particularly

with heterosexual couples in marriages where there are differences in spirituality. The themes

from the research illustrate the need for therapists to assist couples in marital relationships to

explore their values on spirituality as part of their relational experiences. This study underscores

the importance for therapists to support spouses who display differences in spirituality not just to

learn about, but to learn *from* each other's experiences of spiritual beliefs and backgrounds. It

will likely be helpful for therapists to invite couples to identify their personal and relational

barriers to learning from their individual experiences of spiritual beliefs. Also, since most

couples across the socioeconomic and cultural spectrum wish their marriages to be satisfying and

long lasting (Karney & Bradbury, 2020), it will be beneficial for therapists to invite couples who

display divergences in spirituality to reflect on the meaning of relationship satisfaction in the

context of their marriage. The process can equally involve therapists exploring with couples who

display differences in spirituality such questions as: "How is marriage understood in their

various spiritual traditions and cultural backgrounds? What are the value systems that inform

their beliefs about marriage? What are some specific actions that they can take to achieve

satisfaction in their marriage given their spirituality differences?" In focusing on supporting

spouses to learn from their partners' experiences of spirituality, therapists would be helping

couples challenged by their spirituality differences to build bridges and connections that support their emotional intimacy satisfaction.

Furthermore, it is important for therapists to assist couples who display differences in spirituality to focus more on their shared values on spirituality, rather than on the particular contents of their different spiritual beliefs. Leveraging the values that couples share in common on spirituality will allow clinicians to assist couples to use their mutual connections as a springboard and strength, to address challenges stemming from spirituality differences. However, in situations where couples have difficulties connecting on shared values relating to spirituality, therapists can aid them in building bridges and connections that support their emotional intimacy by exploring with them other aspects of their individual and relational lives where they share similar values. It will also be beneficial for therapists to invite couples to develop shared languages and common meanings, which would allow them to co-create individual and relational narratives that would be unique to their marital experiences.

Family of Origin

In working with couples in relationships where differences in spirituality exist, therapists need to help couples to be attentive to their different spiritual backgrounds and the needs that arise because of their diverse experiences. Also, given the crucial roles that family systems play in forming the foundation of our first experiences of the world, relationships, and sense of belonging to a group (McGoldrick et al., 2011), it is imperative that clinical work with couples who display differences in spirituality involve assessments and interventions on the impacts of family of origin spirituality. It will be beneficial for therapists to assist couples who display differences in spirituality to create clear boundaries on how much their individual families interfere in shaping their parenting values. Thus, it will be helpful to assist couples to have

clarity on their own value system to adopt in their parenting practices. It will also be

advantageous to aid couples in modeling to their children respect and acceptance of differences,

which provides bridges of connections in relationships. The process of aiding couples who

display differences in spirituality to model respect and acceptance of diversity to their children

could involve exploring such questions as: "What would they do to ensure that their children's

views about their individual family of origins' spiritual traditions are not negatively shaped?

How would they help their children appreciate their unique identity as individuals from parents

of multi-spiritual backgrounds? What would they do to avoid putting their children in the

positions of choosing one part of their family connections above the other?"

Relational Attunement

The present study indicates that when spouses are able to attune to each other's individual

and relational needs, their emotional connection and intimacy experiences are enhanced.

Mutually attuned couples carry equal weight regarding intentionality, continual communication,

partnership, mutual understanding, and joint decision making, which help to build emotional

connection (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin, 2012). Therefore, it is crucial that therapists working

with married couples who display divergences in spirituality explore their attunement to each

other's individual and relational needs. Exploring the couple members' attunement of their

individual and relational needs could involve facilitating explicit discussions with them on the

potential impacts of their spirituality differences in various aspects of their personal, relational,

and family life. The process could involve addressing the spouses' perceptions of each other

within the context of their spiritual beliefs. The results of this study indicate that couples

recognize that empathy—an affective response to another that involves the regulation of emotion

and the cognitive capacity to understand the perspective of another, and communicating feelings

of care (Decety & Jackson, 2006; Underwood, 2002)—is directly related to marital satisfaction (Schmidt & Gelhert, 2017). As such, it will be helpful for therapists to assist spouses in comparing and contrasting their individual perceptions of each other's spiritual beliefs with their respective perspectives of those beliefs, as well as how their perceived differences and similarities square with their individual and relational experiences in their marriages.

Gender Dynamics

Given the gendered nature of attunement in heterosexual relationships, when helping heterosexual couples who display differences in spirituality to build emotional connection, it will be beneficial for therapists to discuss explicitly the effects of gender and power imbalance to emotional experiences, couple communication processes, intimacy, and relationship success (Jonathan & Knudson-Martin 2012; Knudson-Martin et al., 2015). Also, it will be helpful for therapists to explore the spouses' individual spiritual beliefs on gender roles and decision-making processes, including their beliefs on who attends to whom, and who looks out for the relationship (Knudson-Martin, 2013). To achieve the goal of helping couples who display differences in spirituality to attune to their individual and relational needs, therapists would need to foster a safe clinical space that *honors* the spouses' experiences, *validates* their already possessed strengths, and *empathetically* addresses their presenting challenges. In addition to addressing the immediate needs of the couples, therapists' examples of *honoring* spouses' different experiences, *validating* their strengths, and showing *empathy* to their challenges may have isomorphic effects of showing them how to *honor, validate*, and be *empathetic* in navigating their differences in their marriages.

Parenting

Communication and compromise (Arora et al., 2008) is part of a key to a successful marriage, especially for couples who display differences in spirituality and religious beliefs. This investigation indicates that by maintaining connection through communication and compromise, couples fostered emotional and continuing commitment in their marriages. A particular area of attention is assisting couples to reach agreement on the spiritual values that guide their parenting and raising of children. It will be beneficial to explore questions such as: "Will children be raised in one spiritual tradition of the parents? Or will the children be raised in both spiritual traditions of the parents? How would their families strike balance between multiple spiritual practices within their systems without confusing the children?"

Training of Therapists

Achieving martial satisfaction in couple relationships including for spouses of different spiritual backgrounds requires *effort* and *work*. To assist couples in accomplishing the *work*, therapists need to be properly trained to understand the unique experiences of couples who display differences in their spirituality so as to adequately address their particular needs in therapy. Proper clinical training for therapists could involve educational programs incorporating spirituality as part of systemic contexts in their curriculum. The importance of intentionally training therapists in the integration of spirituality in therapy is confirmed in research (Williams-Reade et al., 2018). Also, since understanding how and why couples seek help can improve their engagement in therapy (Hubbard & Harris, 2020), it will be helpful for therapists to be aware of the beliefs and expectations that couples have about therapy. It will be equally beneficial to understand how couples' different spiritual backgrounds inform and interact with their attitude towards therapy. Furthermore, it will perhaps be important for therapists to learn to connect

couples' relational dynamics and interactions on therapy processes, with the patterns and processes of their engagements in other aspects of their marital relationships, such as their problem-solving approaches and communication styles.

Cumulative Effects of Marital Experiences

It is perhaps important for therapists to help couples to appreciate that the health of their marriages is simultaneously and systemically influenced by different qualities in their relationships. Therapists can obtain couples' relationship history and utilize the information, both as part of assessment processes and intervention tools (Sperry, 2012) as they explore the cumulative impacts of couples' relational experiences on their emotional connection and intimacy satisfaction. Moore et al. (2004) articulated major qualities that define a healthy marriage to include "commitment of the couple, satisfaction, respectful communication, successful conflict resolution, lack of domestic violence, fidelity, positive interaction/time together, intimacy/emotional support, commitment to the children (where present) and duration/legal marital status" (p. 3). Thus, a functional and sustainable marital satisfaction depends on the systemic and cumulative effects of couples' experiences of healthy qualities in their marriages.

Intersectionality

Spirituality and religious dimensions of human experience echo cultural values and systems, which often shape the practices of any given social group (Passalacqua & Cervantes, 2008). Moreover, socio-cultural backgrounds intersect with spiritual beliefs, religious practices, and other characteristics such as education, earnings, gender identity of partners, and their similarities or differences on these characteristics (Waite & Lehrer, 2003) to influence their marital satisfaction. Intersectionality provides a critical frame of understanding how the power

structure of gender becomes more complex when it intersects with race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, and ability (Few-Demo et al., 2014) to affect personal and relational experiences. Therefore, it will be pertinent for therapists to explore how couples' unique characteristics intersect with different aspects of their personal and relational contexts to shape their experiences of spirituality differences in their marriages. Part of the process of exploring intersectionality could involve therapists inviting couples to reflect on how their emotional connection and intimacy experiences in their marriages are influenced by their personal and socio-cultural identity in the society. Though the demographic information of the present study shows that all the participants identify as White who are of middle or higher-income brackets, their shared experiences suggest that individuals and couples of minority groups and lower socio-economic status will have more complications (Marks et al., 2019) dealing with differences in spirituality and its intersection with limited resources in their marriages. Therefore, it will be beneficial that therapists are attentive to the nuances and additional complexities that arise from the intersections between couples' differences in spirituality, minority status, and limited resources.

Self-of-the-Therapist

Since therapists become parts of the couple system through therapeutic process, they should also be aware of their own biases, values, beliefs, etc., as it pertains to religion and spirituality. If that work is not done it can have negative ramifications on the people they serve. On the other hand, that self-work can influence positive outcomes among couples. To manage their biases effectively, therapists will need to be reflective by explicitly identifying and taking personal notes on where they are similar or different in values and spiritual beliefs with either one partner or both spouses. Applying self-reflexivity throughout the therapy process creates

opportunities for therapists to be intentional in dealing with personal triggers and addressing issue of transference and countertransference (Livingston, 1995). Awareness of personal reactions and triggers as part of self-monitoring, particularly in therapy, are the keys to effective practice and growth (Kaslow, 2001).

Limitations

Demographics

The findings of the present study should be viewed keeping in mind a few limitations. Contemporary American families and marriages exist in diverse and complex forms (Moore et al., 2004). Thus, marital relationships differ in a multitude of ways, including in reference to characteristics such as education, earnings, religion, spirituality, and cultural backgrounds of each of the partners, and the similarities or differences of their match on these characteristics (Waite & Lehrer, 2003). Additionally, most people at some points in their lifetimes enter into marital relationships, and couples across the socioeconomic and cultural spectrum wish their marriages to be satisfying and long lasting (Karney & Bradbury, 2020). Consequently, there are a variety of factors impacting relationship satisfaction, of which similarities or differences in spiritual values is only one. Accounting for every possible factor affecting emotional intimacy satisfaction is beyond the scope of this project.

Although it was not by design, the demographic information shows that all the couples in this study identify as White and are of middle or higher income. The couples' socio-economic status and cultural experience in the context of the New England states of America possibly influenced their shared experiences and the themes that emerged from their stories. Though phenomenological research enables identification of commonalities and is more interested in accurately reflecting the complexity and diversity of a given family's experience than in

generalizing about families (Dahl & Boss, 2005), the lack of couples from diverse socio-economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds in the study limits the applicability of its findings.

The study also presents a single limited strength in the inclusion criteria since couples were required to be in committed marriages and lived together for at least 5 years post-legal formalities. At the time of the research, only 1 couple out of 5 couples who participated were between 10 and 15 years in their marriages, while the oldest of them had been married and lived together for more than 30 years. Since it is believed that couples who have been together for ten years or more have passed the adaptation period and have fewer psychological problems and stress (Tavakol et al., 2017), having couples in various marital stages together possibly impacted the themes that emerged from their shared experiences.

Recruitment and Sampling

As with all methods of recruitment strategies, the criterion sampling procedure (Rudestam & Newton, 2015) and the snowball approach (Creswell, 2013) used in this study have some limitations. The recruitment strategy necessitated making public announcements about the research in religious institutions, private, and community organizations, as well as in educational settings. As part of the recruitment process, qualified couples were also asked to invite others that they knew who met the criteria to join in the research. Learning about the research through public announcements, and personal invitations from other couples allowed qualified couples who were open to share their emotional intimacy satisfaction experiences to join in the study. The couples' self-motivation and interest in sharing their experiences of spirituality differences and emotional intimacy satisfaction in their marriages potentially could have influenced the contents of the experiences that they shared, as well as how they framed their narratives.

Interview Process

The scope of the present study prompted that couples be interviewed once together as a dyad without follow ups. The spouses sharing their experiences of spirituality differences and marital satisfactions with their partners present potentially could have influenced both the contents and how they told their stories. Also, given that the couples were interviewed once, it is possible that the realities in their personal and relational circumstances at the time of the interview affected their shared experiences. The identified limitations of the study do not diminish the rich information gained from exploring the emotional intimacy experiences of couples in heterosexual marriages where there are differences in spirituality.

Significant Advancements

Despite these limitations, the findings of the present study constitute several significant steps that advance research by adding to the body of knowledge since the literature in the area of diversity in spirituality and marital satisfaction as aspects of systemic context is limited. This research found that in situations where heterosexual couples who display differences in spirituality attentively attuned to their individual and relational needs, their emotional intimacy satisfaction was enhanced; whereas in situations where couples' attentiveness to their spirituality and religious differences was undermined, their individual needs suffered, and their emotional intimacy was impeded. This also study underscored that it is not so much the differences in the contents of spiritual beliefs between spouses in married relationships that determine the direction of their emotional intimacy satisfaction, but their shared or divergent values on spirituality. The information gained from this research provide deep understanding of emotional intimacy of couples who display differences in spirituality. The emerged themes in this investigation lay

solid foundation for future inquiry. Thus, the results of this study have rich implications in terms of practice, training, and research.

Future Research

Methodology

The scope of the present study and the nature of the utilized IPA qualitative research approach necessitated a focused and detailed examination of emotional intimacy experiences of couples in heterosexual marriages where there are differences in spirituality. Thus, in keeping with the IPA methodology standard of practice, this study used a small sample size. Future research might benefit from using a quantitative approach that allows a large sample size that would include participants from diverse socio-economic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Using a larger sample size with a quantitative approach would advance the findings of the present study and further clarify the degrees that the marital satisfaction of couples from various sociocultural groups are influenced by differences in spirituality in their marriages.

Furthermore, the scope of the present study required that couples be interviewed once together as a dyad without follow ups. It will be valuable for future research to replicate the present study with spouses interviewed separately. Insights from such studies could be beneficial in providing further information on whether the perception of marital satisfaction of couples who display differences in spirituality is significantly different or the same when the couple share their experiences separately or conjointly. Finally, it would also be illuminating to replicate the present study using a qualitative longitudinal approach, where data would be gathered over extended periods (Holland et al., 2006). Using a longitudinal method would be beneficial in gaining more insights on how couples who display differences of spiritual experience marital satisfaction over time in their marriages.

Couple Dynamics

All the spouses in the present study were in their first marriages at the time of the research. Future studies could focus on spouses who have remarried to explore whether their emotional intimacy experience would be different or the same if their spirituality with their partners is different or similar. Finding from such studies could advance the field by revealing whether prior marital relationships impact the emotional intimacy satisfaction of couples in marriages where there are differences in spirituality. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to explore the question: do experiences of prior marital relationships impact the emotional intimacy satisfaction of couples in marriages where there are differences in spirituality?

Additionally, given that only heterosexual couples participated in the present study, future research could examine emotional intimacy experiences of same-sex couples and others in non-traditional relationships where there are differences in spirituality. Exploring the experiences of couples from diverse backgrounds could shed more light on how individuals and couples of varying socio-cultural contexts are impacted by the intersection between their religious backgrounds, spiritualities, belief systems, and emotional intimacy experiences. For instance, it would be beneficial to explore the question: "how do couples from culturally diverse backgrounds experience emotional intimacy given their differences in spirituality?" Research on the question would allow varying perspectives of couples from different cultural experiences to be reflected, as well as enable practitioners to have a richer understanding of how couples' multiple contexts, and intersections between contexts, influence personal experiences and emotional intimacy. The research could assist practitioners to clarify which contexts enhance or, conversely, undermine emotional intimacy experience of couples.

Given the inclusion criteria for this research, all the participants were in committed marriages and lived together for at least 5 years post-legal formalities. At the time of the study, only 1 couple out of 5 couples were between 10 and 15 years in their marriage, while the oldest of them had been married and lived together for more than 30 years. It would be beneficial to explore the marital satisfaction experience of a specific group of couples (possibly the cohort of couples who are within their first 5 or 10 years of marriage) who display differences in spirituality. Knowledge gained from such research could be helpful to decipher how spirituality differences shape marital satisfaction of couples in the early stage of their marriages, as they navigate through establishing relational identity.

Conclusion

Spirituality has a powerful influence on the individual lives and relational experiences of many. A lot of peoples' sense of meaning and purpose in life is shaped by their spirituality and religious beliefs. Navigating through differences in spirituality for married couples impacts various aspects of their individual, relational, and family life experiences. This investigation demonstrates that in situations where heterosexual couples who display differences in spirituality attentively attuned to their individual and relational needs, their emotional intimacy satisfaction was enhanced; whereas in situations where couples' attentiveness to their spirituality and religious differences was undermined, their individual needs suffered and their emotional intimacy was impeded. Finally, this study shows that it is not so much the differences in the contents of spiritual beliefs between spouses in married relationships that determine the direction of their emotional intimacy satisfaction, but their shared or divergent values on spirituality. Therefore, to better provide effective services, therapists need a robust understanding of the impacts that spirituality and emotional intimacy satisfaction have on married couples.

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Appendix I

Recruitment Flyer

AN INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN AN EXCITING RESEARCH PROJECT

Are you in a heterosexual marital relationship?

Is your spirituality different from that of your spouse because you differ in religious or non-religious identification and affiliations with your spouse?

Have you lived together with your spouse for at least five years following your legal marriage?

You are invited to participate in a confidential and exciting research study that seeks to explore emotional intimacy experiences aspect of marital satisfaction of couples in heterosexual relationships where there are differences in spirituality.

You will receive $25 Stop & Shop gift card for participating as a compensation for your time

For more information please contact:

Collins I. Anaeche, M.Div., MS., LMFT
PhD Candidate
Marriage and Family Therapy Program
Department of Applied Psychology
Antioch University New England

Appendix II

Informed Consent

Dear Participant,

Thank you for considering participating in this research study. The purpose of the present study is to gain a deep understanding of emotional intimacy of couples in heterosexual marriages where there are differences in spirituality. To participate you must be in a legal heterosexual marriage and have lived together with your spouse for at least five years following your marriage while still practicing your different spiritualities. Additionally, you are required to be 18 years or older. You must also possess cognitive ability to remember and share your spiritual and marital satisfaction experiences. The insights that may be gained from the study assist clinicians in understanding the depth of how individuals and couples are impacted by the intersection between their religious backgrounds, spirituality, belief systems, and relationship dynamics.

During this interview, you will have the opportunity to share your experiences of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse as well as how these differences are related to marital satisfaction. The interview will take place in my office and last about 90 to 120 minutes. As a couple unit, you will receive $25 Stop & Shop gift card as a compensation for your time. Your privacy and confidential information will remain protected. Interviews will be videotaped, and videotapes will be kept in a secure, double-locked office before and after the data is transcribed. Videotapes will be kept and unlabeled until the results are written into a report. Some of the significant direct quotes obtained during the interview may be included, but your name and other personal information will remain anonymous and confidential. The report will be reviewed by a committee overseeing my research. After the data is transcribed and written in report form, I will use my personal Antioch University email account to send a copy of

that section to you in a password-protected attachment. I will manually share the password for the attachment containing the written report with you. You will use the password to open the attachment. I will invite you to review the written report and provide feedback regarding its consistency with your experiences shared during the interview. I plan to use these results to provide knowledge via academic journals, and once completed, all documents obtained throughout the duration of the study will be destroyed.

Although there are no major risks in the research, discussing your relationship satisfaction experiences may trigger past painful experiences. You are not required to respond to any questions you feel uncomfortable with, and you can withdraw from the research at any time. If you experience a response that requires immediate assistance, contact 911, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-8255 or visit https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/) or the Crisis Text Line (Text CONNECT to 741-741). Each of these services is available 24/7. Additionally, therapist locator (www.therapistlocator.net) may be used to locate a therapist in your area.

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time and stop participating without explanation, penalty, or prejudice.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Chair of the Antioch University New England Institutional Review Board or Campus Provost of Antioch University New England.

I, _____ understand and consent to all the stipulations outlined above.

_____   _____

Signature   Date

Sincerely,

Collins I. Anaeche, M.Div., MS., LMFT
PhD Candidate
Marriage and Family Therapy Program
Department of Applied Psychology
Antioch University New England

Appendix III

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Name:

2A. Town: **2B. State:**

3A. Telephone number: **3B. Email Address:**

4. Are you currently in marital relationship?

☐   **Yes**

☐   **No**

5. Do you currently live together with your spouse?

☐   **Yes**

☐   **No**

6. How long have you been in a relationship with your spouse?

☐   **Less than 5 years**

☐   **5 – 9 years**

☐   **10 – 15 years**

☐   **16 – 20 years**

☐   **More than 20 years**

7. How long have you lived together with your spouse since your marriage?

☐   **Less than 5 years**

☐   **5 – 9 years**

☐   **10 – 15 years**

☐   **16 – 20 years**

☐ **More than 20 years**

8. What is your gender?

☐ Please specify:

9. What is your age?

☐ 18-29 years old

☐ 30-49 years old

☐ 50-64 years old

☐ 65 years and over

10. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

☐ some high school

☐ high school graduate

☐ some college

☐ trade/technical/vocational training

☐ college graduate

☐ some postgraduate work

☐ post graduate degree

11. What is your race?

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

☐ Asian

☐ Black or African American

☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

☐ White

☐ Other (Please specify):

12. What is your Ethnicity?

- ☐ Hispanic or Latino

- ☐ Not Hispanic or Latino

- ☐ Other (Please specify):

13. What is your spouse's age?

- ☐ 18-29 years old

- ☐ 30-49 years old

- ☐ 50-64 years old

- ☐ 65 years and over

14. What is the highest level of education your spouse has completed?

- ☐ some high school

- ☐ high school graduate

- ☐ some college

- ☐ trade/technical/vocational training

- ☐ college graduate

- ☐ some postgraduate work

- ☐ post graduate degree

15. What is your spouse's race?

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native

- ☐ Asian

- ☐ Black or African American

- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

- ☐ White

☐ Other (Please specify):

16. What is your spouse's ethnicity?

☐ Hispanic or Latino

☐ Not Hispanic or Latino

☐ Other (Please specify):

17**. Please select an income bracket (before taxes) from the options below of you and your spouse's combined income:**

☐ Less than $10,000

☐ $10,000 - $29,999

☐ $30,000 - $49,999

☐ $50,000 - $69,999

☐ $70,00 and above

18. **Are you and your spouse parents?**

☐ Yes

☐ No

19. If you and your spouse are parents, how long have you been parenting?

☐ **Less than 5 years**

☐ **5 – 9 years**

☐ **10 – 15 years**

☐ **16 – 20 years**

☐ **More than 20 years**

Appendix IV

Interview Questions

1. What is your religious preference?

   a. What spiritual tradition do you identify with?

2. Are you a member of a church, synagogue, mosque, or other organized religious group?

3. When is the last time you attended church, synagogue, mosque, or some other religious worship service?

4. Discuss your experience with a person, or group, that you find important or meaningful to you within your religious and spiritual tradition.

5. Discuss your experience of a belief or beliefs that you find important or meaningful to you within your religious and spiritual tradition.

   a. Discuss the influence of those beliefs that you find important or meaningful on how you take care of yourself.

   b. What about their influence on how you relate to your spouse?

6. What do you perceive the differences in spirituality between you and your spouse to be?

   a. Describe your experience of having different religious and spiritual beliefs with your spouse.

   b. What is your feeling about the differences that exist between your spirituality and that of your spouse?

   c. What other contexts or situations in your marriage typically influence your feeling about the differences that exist between your spirituality and that of your spouse?

7. What is your spouse's typical response to you when you express your spirituality?

   a. What is your feeling about your spouse's typical responses to you when you

       express your spirituality?

    b.   What other contexts or situations in your marriage that typically influence your spouse's usual responses to you when you express your spirituality?

8. What is emotional intimacy within the context of your marriage?

    a.   Describe your experience of emotional intimacy with your spouse?

    b.   What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on your emotional intimacy experience?

    c.   What other contexts or situations that typically influence emotional intimacy within your marriage?

    d.   What is your feeling within those contexts or situations?

9. Describe your experience of feeling "listened to by your spouse when you needed someone to talk to."

    a.   What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on the experience of feeling "listened to by your spouse when you needed someone to talk to?"

    b.   What other contexts or situations in your marriage typically influence your experience of feeling "listened to by your spouse when you needed someone to talk to?"

10. Describe your experience of expressing your feelings without your spouse being defensive.

    a.   What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on your experience of being able to state your feelings without your spouse being defensive?

    b.   What other contexts or situations in your marriage typically influence your experience of stating your feelings without your spouse being defensive?

    c.   What is your feeling within those contexts or situations?

11. Describe your experience of feeling distant from your spouse?

    a.   What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on your experience of feeling distant from your spouse?

    b.   What other contexts or situations in your marriage typically influence your experience of feeling distant from your spouse?

    c.   What is your feeling within those contexts or situations?

12. Describe your experience of feeling that your hurts and joys are understood by your spouse.

    a.   What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on your experience of feeling that your hurts and joys are understood by your spouse?

    b.   What other contexts or situations in your marriage typically influence your experience of feeling that your hurts and joys are understood by your spouse?

    c.   What is your feeling within those contexts or situations?

13. Describe your experience of the times where you felt neglected by your spouse.

    a.   What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on your experience of feeling neglected by your spouse?

    b.   What other contexts or situations in your marriage typically influence your experience of feeling neglected by your spouse?

    c.   What is your feeling within those contexts or situations?

14. Describe your experience of feeling lonely sometimes when together with your spouse.

    a. What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on your experience of feeling lonely in your marital relationship?

    b. What other contexts or situations typically influence your experience of feeling lonely sometimes in your marital relationship?

    c. What is your feeling within those contexts or situations?

15. Describe your experience of receiving affection and care from your spouse.

    a. What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on your experience of receiving affection and care from your spouse?

    b. What other contexts or situations in your marriage typically influence your experience of receiving affection and care from your spouse?

    c. What is your feeling within those contexts or situations?

16. What is emotional closeness within the context of your marriage?

    a. Describe your experience of emotional closeness with your spouse?

    b. What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on your experience of emotional closeness in your marriage?

    c. What other contexts or situations typically influence your emotional closeness in your marriage?

    d. What is your feeling within those contexts or situations?

17. Describe what you perceive your role to be within the context of your marriage.

    a. Describe your experience of the role.

    b. What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on your role in your marriage?

    c.   What other contexts or situations in your marriage typically influence your role?

    d.   What is your feeling within those contexts or situations about your role in your marriage?

18. Describe the extent your relationship has met your original expectations.

    a.   What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on the extent your relationship has met your original expectations?

    b.   What other contexts or situations in your marriage influence the extent that your relationship has met your original expectations?

    c.   What is your feeling within those contexts or situations that influence the extent that your relationship has met your original expectations?

19. How would you describe your overall emotional satisfaction with your spouse?

20. Discuss a time (or times) where you regretted being in this relationship.

    a.   How did you feel at that time (or those times) where you regretted being in this relationship?

    b.   What is the influence of the differences between your spirituality and that of your spouse on your experience of regretting being in this relationship?

    c.   What other contexts or situations in your relationship typically influence your experience of regretting being in this relationship?

21. Where do you see yourself in the future with this relationship?

22. If you believed that you were having a mental or relational breakdown, what would you do?

23. Given the spirituality differences between you and your spouse, discuss your belief about the idea of talking about personal problems or relational difficulties with a therapist.

      a. If you have ever had discussions about entering therapy:

          i. Who initiated those conversations?

          ii. What potentially would you want from therapy?

24. If you were experiencing a serious emotional or relational crisis at this point in your life, discuss how confident you would be about finding relief in psychotherapy.

25. Do you have cards, letters, journals, poems, songs, drawings, or any other documentation with you now or at home relating to your emotional intimacy experience with your spouse that you would like to share with me?

26. Is there anything else that you want to share about your emotional intimacy experience with your spouse?

Appendix V

Antioch University New England Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

From: XXX@XXXX

To: XXXX@XXXXXX

Date: Thursday, April 16, 2020, 2:13 PM

Subject: Online IRB Application Approved: Marital Satisfaction of Couples in Heterosexual Relationships where there are Differences in Spirituality April 16, 2020, 2:13 PM

Dear Collins Anaeche,

As Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Antioch University New England I am letting you know that the committee has reviewed your Ethics Application. Based on the information presented in your Ethics Application, your study has been approved. Your study has been approved for Exempt status by the IRB following a Limited Review. As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record. While your project does not require continuing review, it is your responsibility to inform the IRB if the procedures presented in this protocol are to be modified or if problems related to human research participants arise in connection with this project. Any procedural modifications must be evaluated by the IRB before being implemented, as some modifications may change the review status of this project. Please be reminded that even though your study is exempt from the relevant federal regulations of the Common Rule (45 CFR 46, subpart A), you and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your project.

Sincerely,

Chair of Institutional Review Board
Antioch University New England