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Finding Meaning in Religious Practices: The Relation Between Religious Holiday Rituals and Marital Satisfaction

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This study examined the relation between marital satisfaction and religious holiday ritual practices. One hundred twenty couples, married 9 years on average, completed measures of religious holiday practices (current family and family-of-origin) and marital satisfaction. Couples were interviewed about how important religion was to their family life. Marital satisfaction was related to religious holiday rituals beyond a global indication of religiousness. A different pattern was found for husbands and wives, with husbands' satisfaction more closely linked to ritual meaning and wives' satisfaction associated with routine practices. Family-of-origin rituals were connected across generations. Wives' marital satisfaction was related to husbands' report of religious holiday rituals but not the converse. Results are discussed in terms of how rituals affirm relationships, connect values and beliefs, and may have differential meaning for men and women.

Family researchers have shown sporadic interest in the relation between marital satisfaction and religious life for the greater part of the 20th century (Burgess & Cotrell, 1939). Much of the empirical effort has been directed toward studying links between religious affiliations and marital happiness. Religious homogamy, or couple similarity in religious affiliation, has been proposed to affect marital satisfaction through a shared religious belief system. These beliefs are proposed to decrease the likelihood that there will be spousal conflict over such issues as child raising and leisure activities (Heaton & Pratt, 1990). An alternative to considering similarity in religious affiliations as influencing marital satisfaction is to consider how religion may contribute to marital satisfaction through shared religious practices. For example, religiousness may affect the couples' relationship because they engage in shared religious activities, such as church attendance, that foster relational well-being.

Recently, Mahoney et al. (1999) proposed that religion can have both proximal and distal effects on marital satisfaction. Proximal variables are construed to include how the couple organizes their activities that express their religiosity, as in joint religious activities. In addition to formal religious experiences such as attending church, proximal contributions include religious rituals and celebrating religious holidays. Joint religious activities are proposed to be linked to marital satisfaction because they "entail opportunities for couples to participate in meaningful or enjoyable rituals together" (Mahoney et al., 1999, p. 323). Indeed, the authors found that the practice of joint religious activities was related to several markers of marital adjustment.

Variables that are more removed from, and thus considered distal to, the experience of marriage include religious homogamy and religiousness. Mahoney et al. (1999) found that homogamy and religiousness were not consistently related to marital satisfaction. The authors concluded that proximal measures of religion that include the practice of regular joint activities provide a more specific and concep-

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tually sound approach to studying the relation between religion and marital satisfaction. The purpose of this study was to examine the relation between the practice of religious holiday rituals and marital satisfaction. Furthermore, we propose that it is the meaning derived from shared ritual practices that contributes to marital satisfaction, above and beyond the sheer practice of the activity.

We aimed not only to examine the proximal effects of religious rituals on marital satisfaction but also to place current religious practices within the context of family-of-origin rituals. We considered how experiences distal in time would affect current religious activities. We anticipated that the religious holiday rituals practiced in the family of origin would affect current practices developed in the family of procreation. We first briefly review the study of rituals in the context of family relationships. Second, we examine the extent to which family-of-origin religious influences have been considered in relation to current marital satisfaction. Because men and women may experience marital satisfaction in different ways (Acitelli, 1992) we speculate on how husbands and wives also may be engaged in different ways with religious rituals. Finally, we argue that the degree to which religion is important to family life and to the marital relationship is affected by the amount of meaning associated with joint religious celebrations.

Family Rituals

Rituals are repetitive patterned interactions that are practiced in a variety of settings. The settings range from daily, routine activities such as dinnertime to more stylized practices linked with religious observances (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). There are two discrete dimensions of family rituals: routine and meaning. The *routine* component involves the assignment of roles and routine practices. The *meaning* component involves expectations for attendance, how important the act is, the symbolic significance of the act, and a commitment to continue the practice into the future and to the next generation. These two components have been found to be reliably distinct from each other across several laboratories and study populations (Baxter & Clark, 1996; Bush & Pargament, 1997; Fiese, 1992; Fiese & Kline, 1993; Markson & Fiese, 2000; Poch, 1994). In a study of 115 families with young children, Fiese and colleagues found that the meaning associated with family rituals was related to marital satisfaction (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Schwagler, 1993). The authors concluded that shared routine practices and the creation of meaning in the context of family rituals help to preserve the marital relationship during the early stages of parenthood, a period noted for its increased challenges to marital satisfaction (Cowan, Cowan, Heming, & Miller, 1991). Thus, we chose to study couples with young children, as they are in an important phase for maintaining satisfying marital relationships.

Although family rituals have been studied for their global effects on relationship health, little attention has been paid to the specific type of rituals practiced by families. In this study we specifically examined rituals associated with religious holidays. The study of religious holidays allows for a closer look at not only how religious practices are related to marital satisfaction but also whether the meaning associated with religious holiday celebrations is related to how satisfied couples are with their married life. We expected that marital satisfaction would be related to the meaning associated with religious holiday rituals. Because the meaning component encapsulates the symbolic beliefs associated with rituals, we expected this effect to be stronger in predicting marital satisfaction than the practice of mere routines associated with religious holidays. Thus, our first hypothesis was that ritual meaning associated with religious holidays would be related to marital satisfaction. Furthermore, we predicted that this effect would remain when we considered roles and routines associated with religious holiday practices.

Importance of Religion to Family Life

To date, researchers have measured religion in a variety of ways when examining its effects on marital satisfaction. As previously mentioned, similarity in religious affiliation has been one standard of measurement (Heaton & Pratt, 1990). Church attendance and religious beliefs have also been used as markers of religiousness (Mahoney et al., 1999). Consistent with our concerns for the meaning associated with religious holidays, we chose to measure how important religion was to the family as a marker of religiousness. When the area of in-

terest is religiousness and not institutional affiliations, single-item measurement of religious importance has been found to be a valid approach (Gorsuch & McFarland, 1972). Consistent with the findings reported by Mahoney et al. (1999), we expected that religious importance would not be as strongly related to marital satisfaction as the more proximal variable of religious holiday ritual meaning. Furthermore, we expected that religious holiday meaning would be predictive of marital satisfaction above and beyond stated religiousness in the family. In this regard, we propose that whereas religiousness may reflect how connected individuals feel to their religious beliefs, the meaning derived from participating in joint religious activities may be more closely related to relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, we predicted that this effect would hold when we controlled for the roles and routines associated with religious celebrations.

Family-of-Origin Influences

Family rituals are not created in a vacuum. It has been proposed that there may be a generational continuity to family customs and rituals (Bennett, Wolin, & McAvity, 1988), a process noted by family therapists (Imber-Black, 1988; van der Hart, 1983). Models of family-of-origin influences on the marital relationship have often focused on the transmission of maladaptive patterns of relating rather than on more positive influences across generations. For example, Bowen's influential theory proposes that emotional bonds are transmitted across generations and can result in triangulation, fusion, or control in the marital relationship (Bowen, 1978). Empirical efforts support these contentions, as family-of-origin indicators of fusion and triangulation have been found to be related to marital satisfaction (Bray, Williamson, & Malone, 1984) and attitudes toward marriage (Larson, Benson, Wilson, & Medora, 1998). Somewhat surprisingly, less is known about the more positive influences of the family of origin on current marital relationships. In a brief report, Fine and Hovestadt (1984) found that health in the family of origin was related to more positive perceptions of marriage in college students. Wamboldt and Wolin reported that young couples who consider their origin families as supportive and warm are more likely to enter into satisfactory marriages (Wamboldt, 1999; Wamboldt & Wolin, 1989).

The study of family of origin influences on current relationships has been limited in its focus on pathological versus healthy influences, the use of global measures of family functioning, and samples restricted to primarily college students or young couples. We propose that the family of origin may influence current marital relationships through the repetition of ritual traditions across generations. As couples create their own rituals, they ostensibly draw on their childhood experiences. We expected that couples who reported considerable meaning in their family-of-origin religious holidays would be more likely to create meaningful rituals in their current families. Furthermore, given a strong generational base of religious meaning, we expected family-of-origin religious holiday meaning to be related to current marital satisfaction. Thus, our third hypothesis was that there would be relative continuity in family ritual meaning across generations and that meaningful religious rituals in the family of origin would be related to satisfaction in the current marital relationship. Building on our earlier points, we expected that the family-of-origin ritual meaning effect would hold when we considered the roles and routines associated with religious holidays.

Gender Differences in Marital Satisfaction

There is a growing literature suggesting that men and women experience marital satisfaction in different ways. Simply put, women are more often perceived as being relationship oriented and taking as their personal responsibility the health and maintenance of the marital relationship (Acitelli, 1992; Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997; Gottman, 1994). As women are also typically responsible for creating and maintaining ritual practices across generations (Oliveri & Reiss, 1987), we expected that wives' marital satisfaction would be related not only to their own reports of family rituals but also to their husbands' reports of ritual meaning. Thus, we predicted that wives' marital satisfaction would be related to their reports of ritual meaning as well as to their husbands'. Furthermore, we expected that wives' reports of current ritual meaning would be related more strongly to their report of family-of-origin ritual meaning than would their husbands'.

In sum, we propose that religion is related to marital satisfaction through the meaning created in shared rituals. We propose that the study of religious holiday rituals offers a unique opportunity to contrast the symbolic meaning created in such settings with the assignment of roles and routines. We generated the following hypotheses. We predicted the meaning associated with family religious holiday rituals would be related to marital satisfaction. We expected this effect to be stronger than the mere practice of religious holiday routines or the degree to which religion is considered important. Second, we expected continuity between family-of-origin religious holiday meaning and current ritual meaning. We expected this effect to be stronger for wives than for husbands. Third, we expected wives' marital satisfaction to be related to husbands' report of family ritual meaning but not the converse.

Method

Participants

One hundred twenty families were recruited as part of a larger study on family process and child adjustment. All of the families had at least one child who was of preschool age. The couples had been married on average 9.5 years (SD = 4.1 years), with a range of 3 to 22 years of marriage. Husbands ranged in age from 26 to 69 years old, with an average age of 36.5 years. Wives ranged in age from 24 to 45 years, with an average of 34.6 years. The majority of the families were middle to upper middle class, with Hollingshead (1975) scores ranging from 18 to 66 with a mean of 55.88 (SD = 9.12). With respect to religious affiliation, the majority of wives reported being either Catholic (51%, n = 61) or Protestant (34%, n = 40), with the remainder reporting Jewish (3%, n = 3), other (7%, n = 8), or no religious affiliation (6%, n = 7). Similar patterns of religious affiliation were reported by husbands, with 46% (n = 55) endorsing a Catholic affiliation and 29% (n = 35) endorsing a Protestant affiliation. The remainder of husbands reported Jewish (3.5%, n = 4), other (11%, n = 13), or no religious affiliation (10%, n = 12). The sample was primarily Caucasian (90%, n = 109), with the remainder African American (3%), Hispanic (2%), or Asian (5%).

Procedure

We recruited families through area nursery schools through letters and stamped return postcards. Because little is known about how family structure affects ritual practices, single-parent families were excluded from this round of sampling. As part of a larger study on family process, parents were interviewed in their homes for approximately 2 hr. Families received monetary reimbursement for their time. Parents were asked to complete a series of questionnaires, including the Family Ritual Questionnaire (FRQ; Fiese & Kline, 1993) and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976). Husbands and wives completed the FRQ twice, once as it pertained to their current family and once as it pertained to their family of origin. Couples were mailed one version of the FRQ prior to the home interview. The second version was completed during the home visit. Completing the family-of-origin version or the current version of the FRQ was counterbalanced across families. Husbands and wives were instructed to complete the questionnaires independently. Couples were interviewed together about the relative importance of religion in their families as they were growing up and in their current family. Couples were asked to reach a consensus about how important religion is in their current family. In the few cases where couples disagreed, they were asked to reach a consensus based on the general importance of religion to the family as a whole.

Measures

FRQ. The FRQ is a 56-item forced-choice questionnaire that assesses rituals across eight aspects. The FRQ has been found to be related to established measures of family functioning such as the Organization subscale of the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1986), and test–retest reliability has been reported to be .88 over a 4-week period (Fiese & Kline, 1993). Two distinct but related factors have been identified in several studies (Baxter & Clark, 1996; Bush & Pargament, 1997; Fiese, 1992; Fiese & Kline, 1993; Poch, 1994). The *Roles and Routine* factor consists of questions pertaining to the assignment of roles and routines, and the *Meaning* factor consists of questions pertaining to affect and symbolic significance of the event. The full version of the FRQ includes seven settings ranging from dinnertime to cultural traditions. Only the Religious Holiday scale was used for this analysis. Seven questions about religious holidays were included in this analysis: occurrence, roles, routines, attendance, affect, symbolic significance, and deliberateness.[1] Items used in this study are presented in the Appendix. The

[1] In the complete version of the FRQ, an item labeled "continuation" refers to the likelihood that a practice will continue on to the next generation. Although of relevance to this study, the psychometric properties of this item have been inconsistent across studies and thus we did not think it was appropriate to include in the meaning dimension.

roles and routine dimension was calculated by summing the responses to roles and routines. Coefficient alphas for the roles and routine dimension for the current family were .49 for husbands and .53 for wives. For family-of-origin roles and routine, dimension coefficient alphas were .80 for husbands and .67 for wives. The roles and routine dimension included only two items, which may account for the relatively low alpha coefficients. The meaning dimension was calculated by summing responses to occurrence, affect, symbolic significance, and deliberateness. Coefficient alphas for the meaning dimension in the current family were .74 for husbands and .81 for wives. For the family-of-origin responses, coefficient alphas for the meaning dimension were .89 for husbands and .88 for wives.

DAS. The DAS is a 32-item scale that assesses degree of marital satisfaction. A total marital satisfaction score was derived by summing responses to all items. The DAS has been used extensively in the study of marital satisfaction in families with young children (e.g., Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; Fiese et al., 1993). Coefficient alphas for this study were found to be .91 for husbands and .90 for wives.

Religious importance. During the course of the interview, couples were asked how important religion was in the family in which they grew up and in their current family. After husbands and wives briefly described their family of origin, they were asked whether religion was *not at all* (1), *somewhat* (2), or *very important* (3) in their respective family of origins. Separate religious importance scores were calculated for wife and husband family of origin. After husbands and wives briefly described their current family, they were asked whether religion was *not at all* (1), *somewhat* (2), or *very important* (3) in their current family. The conjoint response was recorded for each family.

Results

Overall, the sample was relatively satisfied with their marriages as measured by the DAS (for husbands, $M = 108.54$, $SD = 13.70$; for wives, $M = 110.42$, $SD = 12.98$). Approximately one third of the husbands (32%) and wives (39%) considered religion to be very important in the families in which they grew up, and approximately half (48%) of the couples reported that religion was very important in their current family. To determine whether there were any systematic demographic effects, we correlated responses to the FRQ and DAS with number of years married and Hollingshead scores. Only number of years married was significantly correlated with DAS scores for wives ($r = -.21$, $p < .05$). There were no significant correlations between the FRQ and demographic variables. Thus, we used number of years married as an initial predictor in the multiple regression analysis.

We first present the correlation matrix among marital satisfaction, religious importance, and religious holidays in the family of procreation (i.e., current family) and family of origin. As can be seen in Table 1, husband and wife marital satisfaction was not related to religious importance but was related to husband and wife report of religious holiday ritual meaning in the current family. In addition, wives' report of the roles and routines associated with religious holiday celebrations was positively related to their marital satisfaction. Consistent with our first hypothesis, we found that the symbolic meaning associated with religious holiday rituals was related to marital satisfaction. To determine whether this effect still held once we considered number of years married, the degree to which religion is important, and the roles and routines associated with religious holidays we conducted hierarchical regressions separately for husbands and wives. As presented in Table 2, approximately 10% of the variance associated with husbands' marital satisfaction was accounted for by their report of the roles and routines and meaning ascribed to religious holiday rituals when we controlled for religious importance and number of years married. Furthermore, the symbolic meaning associated with family religious holiday rituals accounted for an additional 6% of the variance when we controlled for roles and routines. For wives, however, the variance associated with marital satisfaction was best accounted for by the routines associated with religious holiday rituals. Thus, our first hypothesis was partially confirmed whereby marital satisfaction was related to religious holiday rituals beyond stated religiousness. However, a different pattern of relatedness was found for husbands and wives. Husbands' report of meaning and wives' report of routines was more closely linked to marital satisfaction.

To examine the relative continuity of religious rituals across generations, we return to Table 1. There were significant correlations linking family-of-origin religious rituals with the report of current religious ritual meaning and routines. As expected, these effects were strongest for within-respondent comparisons such as those between husbands' report of family-of-origin and

Table 1
Intercorrelation Matrix Among Marital Satisfaction, Religious Importance, and Family Religious Holiday Rituals

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Marital satisfaction													
1. Husband	—												
2. Wife	.62***	—											
Religious importance													
3. Family of procreation	.07	.15	—										
4. Husband family of origin	.17	.02	.10	—									
5. Wife family of origin	.09	.14	.38***	−.01	—								
Religious holiday rituals—Family of procreation													
6. Husband routines	.16	.09	.20*	.06	.20*	—							
7. Husband meaning	.29***	.25**	.45***	.28**	.22**	.49***	—						
8. Wife routines	.07	.22**	.20*	.03	.13	.28**	.28**	—					
9. Wife meaning	.02	.22**	.39***	.08	.22**	.27**	.44***	.48***	—				
Religious holiday rituals—Family of origin													
10. Husband routines	.12	.08	−.02	.25**	.00	.33***	.36***	.24**	.13	—			
11. Husband meaning	.18*	.14	.10	.57***	.00	.32***	.40***	.20*	.28**	.66***	—		
12. Wife routines	−.02	.07	.06	−.07	.22**	.12	.03	.45***	.16	.07	.01	—	
13. Wife meaning	−.02	.09	.29***	−.03	.44***	.08	.09	.28**	.36***	−.03	.05	.55***	—

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 2
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Marital Satisfaction From Family of Procreation Measures

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	ΔR^2	Adjusted R^2
–	Husband marital satisfaction				
Step 1: Years married	−0.13	0.31	−.04	.00	
Step 2: Religious importance	1.11	1.68	−.03		
Step 3: Husband report religious holiday rituals					
Ritual routine	0.78	1.26	.07	.10*	
Ritual meaning	1.82	0.69	.30		.10
	Wife marital satisfaction				
Step 1: Years married	−0.65	0.28	−.22	.05	
Step 2: Religious importance	2.48	1.46	.16	.02*	
Step 3: Wife report religious holiday rituals					
Ritual routine	1.75	0.89	.20	.07**	
Ritual meaning	0.53	0.54	.10		.14

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

husbands' report of family-of-procreation rituals. To examine whether current family rituals could be predicted by family-of-origin rituals while also considering how important religion was in the family of origin, we conducted multiple hierarchical regressions separately for husbands and wives. As can be seen in Table 3, husbands' report of current family routines was predicted by the roles and routines and the meaning associated with family-of-origin rituals. For men, the meaning ascribed to religious holiday rituals in the family of procreation was predicted by religious importance and roles and routines perceived in the husbands' family of origin. For wives, a more distinct pattern emerged, where current roles and routines were clearly linked to the report of past routines and current meaning was linked to family-of-origin meaning while still accounting for how important religion was to wives when growing up.

We next examined whether wives' marital satisfaction was related to the amount of meaning that husbands ascribed to their religious holiday rituals. An examination of the simple correlations presented in Table 1 reveals that wives' satisfaction was indeed related to husbands' report of family ritual meaning. The same pattern did not hold for husband marital satisfaction. To determine whether this effect held when considering number of years married and religious importance, we conducted hierarchical regression predicting marital satisfaction from the spouse's report of family rituals. The results are presented in Table 4. The expected pattern for wives was significant, although accounting for a relatively small amount of the variance. For husbands, there was no association between marital satisfaction and wives' report of family rituals.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how joint religious activities, as measured by religious holiday rituals, would be related to marital satisfaction. The findings from this study supported our hypothesis that couples would be more satisfied in their marital relationship when there was more meaning associated with the religious holiday rituals. The more distal variable of how important religion was to the family had little association to marital satisfaction. Furthermore we found that there was relative continuity of religious holiday rituals across generations, which played an indirect role in predicting current relationship satisfaction. We frame our discussion by addressing three aspects of rituals that may influence the relation between religion and marital satisfaction. Rituals are considered to affirm relationships, connect behaviors with values, and involve a symbolic component. We address each one of these points in turn, highlighting how meaning is intertwined in family religious practices. We pay particular attention to how the enactment of

Table 3
Continuity of Family Ritual Routine and Meaning Across Generations

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	ΔR^2	Adjusted R^2
Husband routine—Family of procreation					
Step 1					
Family of origin					
Religious importance	0.09	0.15	.06		
Step 2					
Family of origin				.13**	
Ritual routine	0.13	0.08	.18		
Ritual meaning	0.10	0.05	.25		.13
Husband meaning—Family of procreation					
Step 1					
Family of origin					
Religious importance	0.85	0.27	.28	.07**	
Step 2					
Family of origin					
Ritual routine	0.27	0.16	.19	.10***	
Ritual meaning	0.15	0.10	.19		.17
Wife routine—Family of procreation					
Step 1					
Family of origin					
Religious importance	0.22	0.16	.12		
Step 2					
Family of origin					
Ritual routine	0.37	0.09	.41	.19***	
Ritual meaning	0.02	0.05	.04		.19
Wife meaning—Family of procreation					
Step 1					
Family of origin					
Religious importance	0.68	0.28	.22	.05*	
Step 2					
Family of origin					
Ritual routine	−0.09	0.17	−.06	.10**	
Ritual meaning	0.33	0.10	.36		.15

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

rituals may be different for husbands and wives. We also address some of the methodological limitations in our study. We conclude with future directions in studying religion and symbolic meaning in the family context.

Our study was prompted, in part, by the findings of Mahoney et al. (1999) that suggested that proximal variables, such as participation in joint religious activities, are more closely linked to marital satisfaction than more distal variables, such as religious affiliation. Our findings are consistent with previous reports in that religious holiday rituals were related to marital satisfaction whereas the stated importance of religion to family life was not. We think that our findings extend previous research by focusing on the meaning associated with family gatherings rather than just the activity itself. Particularly for husbands, the meaning associated with religious holiday practices was more strongly related to marital well being than just the practice of the ritual itself. This finding points to a possible pathway of religious influence on marital satisfaction. The work of sociologists interested in the role that rituals play in preserving societal customs and institutions may aid in understanding these potential pathways.

At least three aspects of rituals must be considered: (a) affirmation of relationships, (b) connecting behavior and values, and (c) the symbolic aspect of rituals. A central aspect of ritual practice is the affirmation of relationships and designation that individuals are important members of a group (Bennett et al., 1988). A ritual is

Table 4
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Marital Satisfaction From Spouse Perception of Family Religious Holiday Rituals

Variable	*B*	*SE B*	β	ΔR^2	Adjusted R^2
–	Husband marital satisfaction				
Step 1: Years married	−0.13	1.11	1.68	.00	
Step 2: Religious importance	1.11	1.68	−.03		
Step 3: Wife report religious holiday rituals					
Ritual routine	1.02	1.05	.10		
Ritual meaning	−0.32	0.64	−.06		
	Wife marital satisfaction				
Step 1: Years married	−0.65	0.28	−.22	.05	
Step 2: Religious importance	2.48	1.46	.16	.02*	
Step 3: Husband report religious holiday rituals					
Ritual routine	−0.11	1.12	−.01	.03*	
Ritual meaning	1.17	0.63	.21		.10

*$p < .05$.

an activity that is shared by two or more individuals and that has special meaning to the participants. The participants are privy to the subtle nuances of the practice that may not be easily detected by an outsider. For example, in some families lighting candles during religious holidays may have a special significance to their members that is unspoken but expected. In many ways, the private sphere of intimate ties and connections has the potential to become public in the practice of religious rituals. In this regard, the couple may reaffirm their connection and intimacy through the practice of meaningful rituals.

Rituals may link behavior with values extending across generations. Berger and Kellner (1964) proposed that rituals validate symbolic systems that produce long-term relationships. When a ritual includes a symbolic and religious aspect, then the behavior involved in enacting the ritual becomes attached to values in the belief system. The patterned behaviors involved in the ritual are given sanction or legitimized in the context of larger social and religious values. In most cases, religious values and practices are experienced first in the family of origin. Previous research has suggested that individuation from the family of origin is a necessary component to a successful marriage (e.g., Bartle-Haring & Sabatelli, 1998; Bray et al.," 1984). However, continuity of family rituals across generations suggests that family-of-origin experiences may also serve as a guide for current family practices. Although family-of-origin ritual practices were not directly related to marital satisfaction, they were related to current ritual practices that in turn were related to how satisfied couples were with their marriage. The family of origin may influence current relationships by structuring religious experiences through holiday celebrations that can be carried on by future generations. Thus, family-of-origin values may be passed on through the behaviors associated with ritual practices.

Rituals involve a practicing and representational component that may explain, in part, different patterns of relatedness found for husbands' and wives' marital satisfaction. There is evidence to suggest that husbands and wives do not experience marriage in the same way and that what makes for a satisfactory relationship for wives is different than that for husbands (e.g., Acitelli, 1992; Clements, Cordova, Markman, & Laurenceau, 1997; Gottman, 1994). A common theme running through these reports is that wives are more relationship focused and that the more husbands are aware of relationships, the more satisfied wives are in their marriage. How might this phenomenon be related to our current findings on religious rituals? First of all, wives appear to have a more distinctive understanding of religious family rituals. When rituals were carried across generations, wives reported a clear link between routine practices

from their family of origin with current family practices. Meaning associated with holiday rituals was seen as distinct from roles and routines, although it too was continuous across generations. Generally, wives are considered the "kin keepers" of ritual practices (Oliveri & Reiss, 1987) bearing the responsibility of carrying out the routine. Thus, from the wives' perspective a successful ritual must first be carried out before it can become a meaningful part of family relationships. The routine practice forms the foundation on which the symbolic meaning can be derived. If husbands report that rituals are meaningful and include a symbolic component, then perhaps they are more affectively involved in the ritual practice and in the relationship. The report of the meaning associated with family religious rituals may be a marker of how individuals represent family activities and the degree to which they are "symbolically minded" about family relationships. If this speculation is correct, then wives whose husbands are involved in the symbolic life of the family may also have husbands who are more relationship focused. Future research that could specifically address this point appears warranted.

Overall, our findings are consistent with Mahoney et al. (1999), who found that the distal variable of religious importance was not related to marital satisfaction. The practice of joint religious rituals was more closely linked to satisfaction than religiousness alone. One area that we did not address in this study is whether religious activities are somehow unique in their effects on marital satisfaction. It may be that other joint activities that carry meaning for the couple may be related to relationship satisfaction. However, this question was beyond the scope of the present study and should be addressed in future research.

Study Limitations

There are several limitations to our study that deserve attention. Our sample was relatively homogeneous in regard to race and religion. In particular, the majority of the couples identified themselves as Catholic. Although representative of the geographic area of the study, it is not representative of the country as a whole. Thus, our findings cannot be generalized beyond this relatively restricted sample. In addition, it may be that association with a religion that is highly ritualized affects the strength of our findings. Second, the method by which we determined religious importance was based on a single item that may not capture the complex nature of religious importance in family life. However, the distribution we found for religious importance was consistent with results of a national survey conducted by the Gallup organization: of 30–49 year olds, 55% reported religion was very important, 31% fairly important, and 13% not very important (Gallup, 1999). The distribution for our sample was 48%, 34%, and 18%, respectively. Third, the relatively low alpha level found for husbands' and wives' reports of roles and routine may have affected our findings comparing the relative contribution of meaning above and beyond routines. The lower reliability may have been due to the small number of items that composed this scale (Nunnally, 1978). However, we did find that the reliability for husbands' and wives' reports of roles and routines in their family of origin was adequate. Given that these were families with relatively young children, it is possible that stage of family life cycle affects the assignment of roles and predictability of routines. Indeed, parents of younger children report less predictability in roles and routines than families with older children (Fiese et al., 1993). Third, we limited our examination of religious practices to religious holidays. Future studies are warranted to examine specific religious practices that may have ritualized and symbolic functions. It would also be important to consider under which conditions religious practices may have a detrimental effect on relationships, particularly those that restrict autonomy or involve abusive practices (Paloutzian & Kirkpatrick, 1995).

The practice of meaningful religious rituals may be but one aspect of how families create meaning in their relationships. Future efforts are warranted to examine more closely how families make use of symbols in their everyday life that may promote a sense of belonging important to relationship satisfaction. When societal institutions are endangered or disrupted, rituals can provide a stabilizing function (Cheal, 1988). In the context of a changing society in which marriage is a vulnerable institution, religious ritual practices may preserve relationships and serve as a positive template for future generations.

Implications for Application and Public Policy

The results of this study, although preliminary, have implications for the practice of family psychology. Clinicians have long appreciated the role that the family of origin plays in current family practices. However, this interest has often focused on how maladaptive patterns are repeated across generations. The findings from this study suggest that highly meaningful aspects of family life may be transmitted across generations and have the potential to promote healthy and satisfactory relationships. Also noted by clinicians are the different ways in which men and women experience marriage. The results from this study suggest that whereas wives may be the kin keepers and carriers of traditions, husbands' affective investment in these events is related to satisfaction in marriage for husbands as well as wives. Targeted efforts to involve husbands in the ritual life of the family benefit multiple aspects of family life. A broader implication of this study is the role that religious holidays play in contemporary American life. Whereas popular culture paints a picture of religious holidays as prospects for marketing and materialism, our findings suggest that couples embrace the symbolic aspects of celebrations and value the opportunity to reaffirm their beliefs and relationship. Social scientists may be well advised to consider how couples seek personal meaning and how marriage, as an institution, may be strengthened through shared ritual practices.

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Appendix

Questionnaire Items Used in This Study

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS: Think of how your family celebrates religious holidays such as Christmas, Chanukah, Easter, and Passover.

FOR OUR FAMILY					FOR OUR FAMILY	
really true	sort of true				sort of true	really true
A	B	1. Some families rarely celebrate religious holidays.	BUT	Other families regularly celebrate religious holidays.	C	D
A	B	2. In some families there are no set jobs; people do what they can during religious holidays.	BUT	In other families everyone has a certain job to do during religious holidays.	C	D
A	B	3. In some families there are set routines during religious holidays; everyone knows what to expect.	BUT	In other families there are few routines during religious holidays; activities vary from year to year.	C	D
A	B	4. In some families everyone is expected to be there for religious holidays.	BUT	In other families it is hard to know who will be around; whoever can will show up.	C	D
A	B	5. In some families religious holidays are more casual; there aren't a lot of strong feelings.	BUT	In other families religious holidays are times of strong feelings and emotions.	C	D
A	B	6. In some families religious holidays have special meaning for the family.	BUT	In other families religious holidays are more just like a day off.	C	D
A	B	7. In some families religious holidays are traditional, with activities passed down generations.	BUT	In other families religious holidays shift across the years.	C	D
A	B	8. In some families there is little planning or discussion around religious holidays.	BUT	In other families there is a lot of planning and discussion around religious holidays.	C	D

Note. Items 3, 4, 6, and 7 are reverse scored. Items were taken from the Religious Holidays Scale, discussed in Fiese and Kline (1993).

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