Family Relations Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies

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Sanctification, Stress, and Marital Quality

This article contributes to recent work investigating the role of religious sanctification, that is, the process via which one's spouse or marital relationship is perceived as having divine character or sacred significance. We outline a series of theoretical arguments linking marital sanctification with specific aspects of marital quality. A recent probability sample of Texas adults is used to gauge the links between general religiousness, marital sanctification, and marital quality and functioning. Key findings include the following: (1) General religiousness bears a weak link with marital outcomes; (2) sanctification strongly predicts desirable marital outcomes; and (3) sanctification appears to buffer the deleterious effects of financial and general stress on marital quality. Study limitations and practical implications are discussed, and promising directions for future research are identified.

Throughout much of the 20th century, social scientific research indicated that the institutions of religion and family enjoyed a mutually reinforcing relationship. In recent years, investigators have reinvigorated their interest in the religion-family connection (Mahoney, 2010; Wilcox, 2005). Although studies in this area have examined an array of topics, a significant body of work has explored possible religious influences on marriage. Specific outcomes of interest have included marital happiness and satisfaction (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008), marital dependency (Wilson & Musick, 1996), frequency and types of conflict (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999), sexual infidelity (Atkins & Kessel, 2008; Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore, 2007; Fincham, Lambert, & Beach, 2010), and risk of divorce (Brown, Orbuch, & Bauermeister, 2008; Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993).

This focus on the links between religion and marriage has been driven by several factors, including (a) the continuing vitality of religious institutions, practices, and beliefs in the lives of many Americans (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999); (b) widespread concern among scholars, policymakers, and the general public about the state of marriage as an institution in light of historically high divorce rates, delayed marriage, and rising rates of cohabitation (Cherlin, 1992; Heaton, 2002); and (c) changes in the economic environment and the nature of work that have put increasing pressure on families, especially dual-earner couples (Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Brock & Lawrence, 2008). Although most studies in this vein have relied on a narrow range of religious indicators, such as

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Key Words: family stress, marital quality, marriage, religion, sanctification, spirituality.

Family Relations 60 (October 2011): 404 – 420
DOI:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2011.00658.x

frequency of attendance at services or self-rated religious salience, recent psychological work on the sanctification construct has advanced our understanding of the role of religious meaning and the degree to which it permeates (or does not infuse) the marital relationship. Sanctification, described further below, refers to the process by which a given object (in this case, one's marriage or partner) is perceived as sacred or to embody elements of the divine (Mahoney, 2010; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). A small but growing body of literature now associates sanctification with enhanced marital and relationship quality and stability in small, specialized samples (DeMaris, Mahoney, & Paragment, 2010; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Mahoney et al., 1999), but further research is clearly needed.

Our study augments the literature on religion and marital quality by addressing the following research questions: (a) Is overall religiousness linked with marital quality? (b) Does marital sanctification mediate the observed associations between overall religiousness and marital quality? (c) Does sanctification moderate (or buffer) the deleterious effects of financial strain and overall stress on marital quality? The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. After developing a series of arguments bearing on these issues, we used data from a representative statewide sample of Texas married adults ($N = 1{,}227$) collected in 2007 to test these arguments. Findings are discussed in terms of our understanding of the correlates of marital quality specifically and research on religion and family life more broadly. Study limitations are identified and several implications for practice and directions for further investigation are noted.

Theoretical and Empirical Background

Previous Research on Religion and Marital Quality

Social and behavioral scientists have shown recurrent interest in the connections between religion and marital outcomes. One venerable strand of research in this area has linked organizational aspects of religious involvement, for example, frequency of attendance at worship services, with enhanced marital quality and stability. Such indicators of religious involvement may signal high levels of commitment to religious values and norms as well as the potential for shared religious activities with spouses (Mahoney, 2010). In addition, attendance may also reflect access to informal social support from church members, relatives, and in-laws, who may promote and validate shared beliefs about appropriate family roles and marital patterns (Heaton & Pratt, 1990). Religious attendance may also communicate moral messages through formal means (e.g., sermons, official statements) and informal means (e.g., role models within the congregation). Regular churchgoers may also benefit from formal supports such as pastoral counseling and church programs aimed at marital enrichment (Ellison et al., 1999). Consistent with these ideas, investigators have linked religious attendance, in particular, with higher levels of marital satisfaction and happiness (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995; Heaton & Pratt, 1990) and expressions of affection for one's spouse (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008) as well as lower levels of domestic violence (Ellison et al., 1999) and divorce (Brown et al., 2008; Call & Heaton, 1997).

In addition, there is growing interest in the role of nonorganizational and subjective facets of religiousness in marital life. For example, it has been suggested that high levels of religious devotion may lead those persons in committed romantic relationships to feel greater caring, love, and empathy toward their partners. This may strengthen the quality of their relationships by encouraging self-sacrifice, that is, encouraging them to put the needs and desires of their partner ahead of their own (Jeffries, 2006; Scanzoni & Arnett, 1987). Further, some prayer or scriptural study carried out within the home, as a family activity, may promote bonding among partners. There are signs that such in-home worship activities can facilitate a renewed sense of God's support, guidance, and purpose in a relationship (Ellison et al., 2010). In addition, a recent experimental study revealed that regular prayer by each partner in a romantic relationship reduces the inclination to engage in extradyadic romantic activity (Fincham et al., 2010). Finally, prayer among marital partners may be especially helpful in response to problems or conflict (Beach, Fincham, Hurt, McNair, & Stanley, 2008). According to Butler, Stout, and Gardner (2002), couples who prayed during times of conflict tended to lower their levels of hostility and contempt, and they achieved greater openness and willingness to compromise

and strengthened the sense of joint responsibility for problem solving and reconciliation.

The Role of Marital Sanctification

Although previous work has demonstrated clear links between aspects of religious involvement and marriage, the mechanisms via which these relationships operate remain unclear. In particular, few studies have explored how religious meaning infuses the relationship between partners and how and for whom religious meaning is most important (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; Marks, 2004). One key advance in this direction has been the development of theoretical work on sanctification, which has generated a number of rich empirical findings in the past decade. Pargament & Mahoney (2005) have defined sanctification as ''the process through which aspects of life are perceived as having divine character or significance'' (p. 183). This idea has been fruitfully conceptualized and measured in studies dealing with a range of objects, including sanctification of (a) the physical body and implications for health behaviors (Mahoney et al., 2005); (b) the natural environment and importance for environmental concern, policy preferences, and personal practices (Tarakeshwar, Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2001); (c) work and careers and the implications for job commitment, behavior, and emotional work (Walker, Jones, Wuensch, Aziz, & Cope, 2008); (d) sexuality and its links with college students' romantic pursuits and sexual conduct (Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005); and (e) family life and its associations with childrearing practices, gender roles, and other family role behaviors (Baker, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2009; DeMaris et al., 2010; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003).

With regard to marriage, sanctification involves a process via which the spouse or marital union is perceived as having divine character or sacred significance. Specifically, it is believed that God is an active partner in the marriage, and spouses tend to ascribe sacred qualities to the relationship or to their partners (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Mahoney et al., 1999; Mahoney, Pargament, & Hernandez, 2010). Prior theory and research suggest that sanctification may have important and potentially salutary consequences for several specific aspects of marital quality.

Strengthening commitment. For many persons, belief in sanctification is likely to imply that the marriage is part of a divine plan and that God had a hand in choosing one's spouse and uniting the couple. Given the direct hand of the divine in the relationship, couples are likely to reject divorce, on the basis of specific scriptural passages as well as broader scripture-based models of love, for example, for Christians, seeing the model of marriage in the relationship between Christ and the Church (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). In addition, the active presence of God increases the confidence of each spouse that the relationship can and will endure, and the sacred character of marriage increases their willingness to devote time, effort, and emotional energy to nourish and sustain the union (Mahoney et al., 2003).

Promoting bonding. Further, sanctification may encourage partners to view their marriage as a blessing from God and to take joy in the opportunity to spend time together. At least some of this time may be spent in religious activities, including joint prayer, which may enhance their personal spirituality and deepen their shared vision and sense of purpose regarding the marriage (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006; Mahoney et al., 2003). For them, marriage is likely to have a special spiritual significance above and beyond the reproductive, emotional, material, and social functions that are often acknowledged. This distinctive definition of the meaning of marriage can lead to deeper communication and intimacy among spouses (Marks, 2004). Moreover, sanctification may foster relational virtues, such as benevolent love, which inclines spouses to take pleasure in the enjoyment and well-being of their partner and to put the needs and wishes of their partner ahead of their own, without regret or resentment (Jeffries, 2006).

Fostering positive emotions and diminishing negative ones. The foregoing discussion suggests that sanctification promotes altruism and empathy, and these orientations may be manifested via positive emotion work (e.g., frequent compliments, acts of kindness toward one's spouse), along with minimal criticism or negativity (Mahoney et al., 1999, 2003). The perception of divine presence in the relationship may help spouses come to see the best in their partners, to accept basic personality differences that make

them unique, and to focus on their good intentions and desirable attributes. As stated in a well-known passage from 1 Corinthians:

> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres. (1 Cor. 13:4 – 7, NIV)

In addition to reducing conflict within the marriage, sanctification may also help couples to resolve those conflicts that do emerge by (a) encouraging constructive responses of engagement, such as verbal collaboration and negotiation, and (b) avoiding negative responses, such as verbal aggression, stalemate, or withdrawal (Mahoney et al., 1999). Moreover, the belief that God is a partner in the marriage may also lead spouses to practice unconditional forgiveness of one another on the basis of the model and imperative presented in scripture, which in turn can enable couples to move past their disagreements (Holeman, 2003; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006).

Facilitating resilience in face of stress. Finally, sanctification may make couples better able to manage chronic stressors that impact their relationship, including financial strain and work-family role spillover. Briefly, macroeconomic developments over the past two decades have contributed to growing inequality and financial pressure on working families, which have led even many middle-class Americans to experience chronic difficulty meeting their financial obligations. These trends were evident well before the catastrophic economic meltdown that began in 2007. In addition, other changes (e.g., rising numbers of dual-earner couples, changes in domestic norms and practices, expansions in shift work, and other changes in work demands) have led to increases in work-family role overload and other types of work-family conflict (e.g., Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002; Nomaguchi, 2009). Taken together, such developments can leave one or both marital partners feeling exhausted and overwhelmed and can erode the quality of marital relationships (Brock & Lawrence, 2008; Karney, Story, & Bradbury, 2005; Story & Bradbury, 2004). Spouses may lack the time or emotional or physical energy to address the needs of their partners or other family members. This, in turn, can lead to conflict, as spouses express their frustration through irritability, criticism, sarcasm, or other negative exchanges and fail to take individual and collective responsibility for resolving conflicts and enriching the marriage.

Although both financial strain and general perceived stress may take a toll on marital quality, it is reasonable to anticipate that sanctification may moderate (i.e., buffer, mitigate) these deleterious effects of stress (Mahoney et al., 1999). To the extent that partners believe that the marriage has a sacred purpose or that God is present in their relationship, they may make greater investments in their union and undertake more strenuous efforts to preserve it in times of difficulty. In addition, sanctification may make it easier to recognize the positive qualities in spouses, to avoid questioning their motives, and therefore to resist tendencies toward snappishness, recrimination, and other unwholesome behaviors that may be manifested when couples are under stress. Further, stressors themselves may seem more temporary and less threatening to the self and the relationship for those spouses who feel they can trust in their partner's love, support, and commitment.

Covariates

It is important to control for factors that are known (or may be expected) to be related to (a) religiousness or sanctification and (b) marital quality, because they may confound the association between these two key variables of interest. Among the key predictors of marital quality are several sociodemographic variables, including gender (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Faulkner, Davey, & Davey, 2005), race and ethnicity (Broman, 1993; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000), and socioeconomic status (Kreider & Fields, 2002; Lehrer, 2003). Although to date few studies have examined correlates of sanctification in large-scale probability samples, each of these variables is also a well-established predictor of religiousness (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Further, marital duration is inversely associated with both marital happiness and divorce proneness (VanLaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001), and several facets of religiousness are also linked with marital duration (Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009). Marriage order

(i.e., first marriage vs. second or subsequent marriage) is a predictor of the risk of marital disruption in younger cohorts (Amato et al., 2007), and there is emerging evidence that religious factors may influence the likelihood and timing of remarriage among American women (Xu, Bartkowski, & Brown, 2010). Thus, our statistical analysis controlled for each of these variables.

Hypotheses

The preceding theoretical discussion suggested several specific hypotheses, including the following:

H1: Overall religiousness is positively associated with marital quality.
H2a: Sanctification is positively associated with marital quality.
H2b: Sanctification mediates the association between religiousness and marital quality.
H3a: Financial stress and general stress are inversely associated with marital quality.
H3b: Sanctification moderates the association between stressor variables and marital quality.

These study hypotheses were tested using data on a recent probability sample of Texas residents.

Method

Data for the analyses came from the Texas Healthy Marriage Initiative Baseline Survey Project (THMBS). Collection of data was completed by the University of Texas at Austin Office of Survey Research in July of 2007. The survey was a representative sample of community-dwelling adults ages 18 and over residing in the state of Texas. The 45-minute telephone interview covered a variety of topics, including but not limited to reasons for and attitudes toward marriage and divorce and numerous personality and attitudinal domains. Sampling used a random-digit dialing (RDD) design with a sampling frame constructed by Survey Sampling, Inc. Once a household was contacted, the sample respondent was the person age 18 or older with the most recent birthday. If that person was unavailable, there was no reselection within the household. The process yielded 2,003 completed telephone interviews. At the time of the interview 1,227 respondents were married.

The cooperation rates for the THMBS ranged from .607 to .768 and the response rates ranged from .122 to .243. These rates are low by traditional standards but are not especially low for recent RDD surveys with interview times greater than 15 – 20 minutes. The American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) provides four approved cooperation rates, on the basis of how many contacted potential respondents completed interviews (or in the case of two of the rates, completed at least partial interviews), and six approved response rates, on the basis of how many of the telephone numbers selected for the sample, except those of known ineligibility, yielded completed or at least partially completed interviews (American Association of Public Opinion Research, 2008c). In the two examples given by AAPOR to illustrate their Response Rate Calculator (American Association of Public Opinion Research, 2008b), the response rates vary from .179 to .231 in one case and from .225 to .310 in the other, an indication that the person(s) who prepared the explanation of the Calculator did not consider those rates unusual. Furthermore, as a document posted on the AAPOR website titled ''Do Response Rates Matter?'' points out, recent evidence indicates that the relationship of response rates to data quality is weak. According to that document, ''Studies that have compared survey estimates to benchmark data from the U. S. Census or very large governmental sample surveys have . . . questioned the positive association between response rates and quality. . . . Results that show the least bias have turned out, in some cases, to come from surveys with less than optimal response rates.'' (American Association of Public Opinion Research, 2008a). Much of the relevant evidence is in a special issue of the *Public Opinion Quarterly* devoted to survey nonresponse (Singer, 2006).

Comparisons of demographic data from the THMBS and the 2005—2007 American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009) reveal that there is substantial underrepresentation in the former of the kinds of persons normally underrepresented in RDD telephone surveys. Specifically, the compared percentages are 13.6 versus 22.0 for persons age 20 or older who had never married, 34.1 versus 49.3 for men, 10.1 versus 21.4 for persons age 25 or older who had not completed high school, and

19 versus 29 for married Latinos. The underrepresentation of never married persons is not a problem for this study, which deals only with married respondents. The underrepresentation of men is a problem only if there are significant interactions of gender with the variables used in this study; exploratory analyses revealed no such interactions. The underrepresentation of married Latinos and poorly educated persons is noteworthy, because our preliminary analyses revealed significant interactions between these variables and sanctification in predicting four of our five marital outcomes examined here (negative emotion is the only exception). Importantly, the signs of these interaction terms indicated that sanctification is a stronger positive predictor of marital quality and positive marital processes among Latinos and among poorly educated respondents, suggesting that our findings might be even stronger if we had larger subsamples of Latinos and poorly educated respondents in our sample. Thus, the underrepresentation of Latinos and poorly educated persons may have actually resulted in an artificially low estimate of the real-world role of sanctification in marital life.

Measures

Five dependent variables, assessing various dimensions of the quality of the respondents' marital relationship, were used in the analysis.

Marital quality. The six items used to construct this index reflect varied dimensions of marital quality, including ''overall satisfaction,'' as well as ''bad'' and ''good'' feelings toward marriage (Fincham & Linfield, 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1996). A higher score indicated higher marital quality. The Cronbach's α for this index was .77.

Relationship commitment. Respondents in this survey were asked five questions about their level of commitment regarding their marriage, including, ''I'm just about ready to give up trying to make this relationship work,'' and ''I often think that there may be someone better for me out there.'' (Stanley & Markman, 1996). Items for this index were reverse coded where necessary, such that higher scores indicated higher levels of relationship commitment. The Cronbach's α for this index was .82.

Positive emotion. Positive emotion was assessed with six indicators such as: ''How often have you felt that your [partner] felt especially caring toward you?'' and ''How often have you felt that your [partner] made your life especially interesting and exciting.'' The positive emotion items were provided by the Texas Marriage Family survey team. A high score on these items denoted a higher level of relationship affirmation from the respondent's partner. The Cronbach's α for this index was .84.

Negative emotion. A four-item index was created to assess the level of negative emotion between marriage partners. Some of the items used in the index include, ''When we have an argument, it takes me a long time to get over it,'' and ''I think a lot about the bad times in our relationship.'' All items used in the negative emotion index were adapted from other widely recognized scales (e.g., Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Fincham & Linfield, 1999; Stanley & Markman, 1996). Items were reverse coded where necessary, so that higher scores indicated more pessimistic emotions toward the partner. The Cronbach's α for this index was .72.

Bonding. To measure the level of quality time spent together, the respondent was asked his or her level of agreement with four questions that ranged from having ''fun together'' to ''an active sex life'' (Karney, Garvin, & Thomas, 2003; Stanley & Markman, 1996). Items were reverse coded where necessary, and higher scores indicated a stronger bond between partners. The Cronbach's α for this index was .68.

Key Covariates

Religiousness. This two-item index was based on responses to the following items: (a) ''How religious do you consider yourself to be? Would you say that you are: very religious, somewhat religious, not very religious or not religious at all?'' (b) ''How often do you attend religious services?'' These are among the most common items used in surveys to measure general religiousness. Items were scored so that higher scores indicated greater religiousness and then standardized and averaged. The Pearson correlation coefficient for these two items was .53, $p < .001$.

Marital sanctification. As previously described, marital sanctification involves a process via

which the marital relationship is endowed with sacred properties. Our measure of sanctification was based on the level of agreement with the following two statements, adopted from the measure originally developed by Mahoney and colleagues (1999): (a) ''My marriage is holy and sacred.'' (b) ''I sense God's presence in my relationship with my partner.'' The wording of these items gauged both theistic and nontheistic expressions of sanctification. Response categories included *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree*. Items were scored so that higher values denoted greater marital sanctification, and they were averaged to create the index. The correlation between the items was .53, $p < .001$.

Controls

Stress measures. The respondents' ongoing stress was measured on two dimensions: financial stress and general stress. Using items from Conger and Elder (1994), financial stress was measured via two items. The first item asked the respondents their level of (dis)agreement with the question: ''Over the past year, it has been difficult to pay bills.'' Respondents who reported *strongly agree* were coded as 1 versus all others. A second dummy variable was created for the other item; respondents were given a 1 if they responded they did ''not have enough to make ends meet,'' at the end of each month (1 = *not enough to make ends meet*, 0 = *all others*). The correlation between the two financial strain items was .54, $p < .001$. Four items were used to create the general stress index. Some of the items used were: ''There are too many demands on my time,'' and ''I often feel like I am under a great deal of stress'' (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). The Cronbach's α of the general stress index was .74. On each stress index, higher scores indicated higher levels of stress.

Demographic measures. The analyses controlled for several background factors that are known or suspected correlates of our dependent and independent variables and therefore could confound the associations of interest in this study. These factors included age (in continuous years); sex (1 = *female*, 0 = *male*); race/ethnicity (1 = *African American*, 1 = *Hispanic*, 1 = *other minority*, 0 = *non-Hispanic White*); education (1 = *less than high school*, 1 = *some college or technical school*, 1 = *bachelor's degree*, 1 = *graduate or professional degree*, 0 = *high school diploma*); household income (coded 1 = *less than $15K*, 2 = *$15K–$24.99K*, 3 = *$25K–$49.99K*, 4 = *$50K–$74.99K*, 5 = *$75K–$99.99K*, 6 = *$100K or more*); previous marriage (1 = *previously married*, 0 = *first marriage*); marital duration (in continuous years); and partner educational differential (1 = *wife has more education than husband*, 1 = *husband has more education than wife*, 0 = *spouses have similar education levels*).

On average, study participants were approximately 49 years old and had been married to their current partner for roughly 22 years. More than one third of the respondents (39%) had been married previously. As noted earlier, women are overrepresented in the sample, making up more than two thirds of the sample, whereas Hispanics (19%) and African Americans (5%) are underrepresented. In our sample, approximately one fourth of the respondents had attained at least an undergraduate degree. Missing data on predictor variables was handled via multiple imputation, using the MI procedure in SAS software, version 9.2.

Data Analysis Strategy

Our data analysis proceeded in several steps. First, we examined descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among key variables of interest. This information is displayed in Table 1. Next we estimated a series of ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to test hypotheses regarding the estimated net effects (main effects) of religiousness, sanctification, and stress on marital quality (H1, H2a, and H3a, respectively). These results are presented in Table 2. H2b, which held that sanctification would mediate the link between religiousness and marital quality, was assessed on the basis of guidelines proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), using SAS procedures outlined by Preacher and Hayes (2004). Finally, H3b, which held that sanctification would moderate (i.e., buffer, mitigate) the links between stressors and marital quality, was tested by adding multiplicative interaction terms to the OLS regression models described above. Prior to calculating the cross-product terms, we zero-centered variables as recommended by Aiken and West (1991) to reduce collinearity between raw and product terms. These results are presented in Table 3.

Table 1. *Correlation Matrix, Pearson Correlation Coefficients, and Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Marital quality	—	.655***	.684***	−.667***	.616***	.091***	.367***	−.234***	−.351***
2. Relationship commitment		—	.504***	−.723***	.570***	.111***	.454***	−.225***	−.267***
3. Positive emotion			—	−.559***	.589***	.082*	.330***	−.155***	−.293***
4. Negative emotion				—	−.590	−.058	−.357	.236***	.317***
5. Bonding					—	.042***	.318***	−.226***	−.315***
6. Religiousness						—	.422***	.007	−.044
7. Marital sanctification							—	−.041	−.120***
8. Financial stress								—	.337***
9. General stress									—
Column mean	3.43	3.28	3.38	1.93	2.95	0.00	3.17	2.19	2.35
Column *SD*	0.44	0.52	0.53	0.49	0.49	0.89	0.52	0.71	0.52

Note: $^{*}p < .05$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among key variables are presented in Table 1. Several patterns warrant mention. Each of the dependent variables was scored from 1 to 4; sample means ranged from 2.95 (bonding) to 3.43 (overall marital quality) for the positive indicators, whereas the mean for negative emotion was well below the midpoint of the scale at 1.93. Levels of marital sanctification were rather high as well among our respondents, with an average score of 3.17 on a 1 – 4 scale. On average, respondents reported moderate levels of financial strain (2.19) and general stress (2.35), slightly below the midpoint of the respective scales.

Turning to the bivariate patterns presented in Table 1, the correlations among the dependent variables were relatively high, ranging from roughly .50 to .70 ($p < .001$). Bivariate associations between overall religiousness and marital quality were quite modest, ranging from .05 to .11, although most were statistically significant, offering preliminary—albeit tepid—support for H1. On the other hand, the associations between sanctification and marital quality were much stronger, ranging from .30 to .45 ($p < .001$), consistent with H2a. The bivariate correlation between religiousness and sanctification was .42 ($p < .001$), leaving open the possibility of a mediating relationship, as anticipated by H2b. Finally, consistent with H3a, financial stress and general stress were associated with poorer marital quality, with correlations ranging in magnitude from .20 to .35 ($p < .001$). Although these correlations among predictor variables were robust, they were generally moderate in magnitude, suggesting that collinearity among predictors was unlikely to pose a significant problem in our multivariate models.

Table 2 displays the results of OLS regression models estimating the net effects of religiousness, sanctification, and stressors on our five indicators of marital quality, controlling for several potentially confounding background factors. There was mixed evidence of the positive associations between general religiousness and marital quality that were anticipated by H1. Such patterns surfaced in the initial models of overall marital quality ($b = .046$, $\beta = .102$, $p < .01$), relationship commitment ($b = .034$, $\beta = .065$, $p < .05$), and positive emotion ($b = .052$, $\beta = .100$, $p < .01$). There appeared, however, to be no meaningful links between religiousness and either negative emotion ($b = -.022$, $\beta = .045$, *ns*) or bonding ($b = .021$, $\beta = .041$, *ns*) in the initial models. On the other hand, we found unequivocal support for H2. Sanctification was a potent predictor of all marital quality outcomes examined here, including overall marital quality ($b = .287$, $\beta = .335$, $p < .001$); relationship commitment ($b = .459$, $\beta = .454$, $p < .001$); positive emotion ($b = .326$, $\beta = .322$, $p < .001$); negative emotion ($b = -.331$, $\beta = -.353$, $p < .001$); and bonding ($b = .310$, $\beta = .325$, $p < .001$). Consistent with H3a, general stress and, to a lesser extent, financial strain were significantly related to lower marital quality for every outcome in every model.

The results in Table 2 also cast light on our Hypothesis 2b, which held that sanctification would mediate the association between religiousness and marital quality. As anticipated,

Table 2. *Estimated Net Effects of Religiousnes, Marital Sanctification, and All Covariates on the Five Dependent Aspects of Marital Quality: OLS Regression Coefficients, Texas Family Survey*

	Martital Quality		Relationship Commitment		Positive Emotion		Negative Emotion		Bonding	
Variable	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
Religiousness	.046**	−.024+	.034*	−.077***	.052**	−.026	−.022	.058***	.021	−.054**
	(.102)	(−.056)	(.065)	(−.146)	(.100)	(−.049)	(−.045)	(.119)	(.041)	(−.111)
Marital sanctification		.287***		.459***		.326***		−.331***		.310***
		(.335)		(.454)		(.322)		(−.353)		(.325)
Age	.001	.002	−.004*	−.003	.002	.003	.000	−.001	.001	.002
	(.019)	(.051)	(−.129)	(−.085)	(.053)	(.084)	(.016)	(−.018)	(.030)	(.063)
Female	.001	−.005	.072*	.062*	.000	−.005	−.065*	−.058*	.067*	.062*
	(.001)	(−.005)	(.066)	(.059)	(.002)	(−.003)	(−.065)	(−.059)	(.067)	(.063)
Black	−.179**	−.190***	−.193**	−.225***	−.110	−.133+	.189**	.212***	−.200**	−.221***
	(−.087)	(−.091)	(−.079)	(−.092)	(−.045)	(−.054)	(.084)	(.094)	(−.088)	(−.097)
Hispanic	−.070*	−.053+	−.197***	−.167***	.026	.046	.072+	.050	−.042	−.022
	(−.062)	(−.046)	(−.152)	(−.127)	(.022)	(.038)	(.059)	(.040)	(−.034)	(−.016)
Other	−.071	−.075	−.017	−.022	−.050	−.053	.025	.029	−.042	−.045
	(.031)	(−.032)	(−.006)	(−.007)	(−.017)	(−.018)	(.010)	(.011)	(−.017)	(−.018)
<High school	.080	.066	−.074	−.091+	.077	.062	.015	.027	.042	.031
	(.055)	(.045)	(−.042)	(−.053)	(.045)	(.036)	(.010)	(.018)	(.025)	(.018)
Some college (<4 years)	.008	−.000	.110*	.095*	.059	.049	−.084*	−.074+	.002	−.007
	(.008)	(−.002)	(.096)	(.082)	(.051)	(.040)	(−.080)	(−.069)	(.002)	(−.007)
Bachelor's degree	.054	.042	.165***	.144***	.048	.034	−.123**	−.108**	.040	.027
	(.051)	(.038)	(.135)	(.117)	(.036)	(.024)	(−.109)	(−.109)	(.035)	(.023)
Graduate/professional	.075	.068	.239***	.226***	.129*	.120+	−.214***	−.204***	.104+	.095+
	(.055)	(.050)	(.153)	(.145)	(.078)	(.072)	(−.150)	(−.143)	(.072)	(.066)
Wife edu > husband edu	.025	.028	−.016	−.008	.007	.012	.013	.007	−.011	−.006
	(.025)	(.029)	(−.013)	(−.005)	(.007)	(.012)	(.012)	(.006)	(−.010)	(−.005)

Table 2. *Continued*

	Martital Quality		Relationship Commitment		Positive Emotion		Negative Emotion		Bonding	
Variable	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
Husband edu> wife edu	.013	.008	.054	.048	−.013	−.018	−.007	−.002	.035	.031
	(.013)	(.009)	(.049)	(.045)	(−.013)	(−.016)	(−.006)	(−.003)	(.034)	(.031)
Marriage duration	−.002	−.002	.001	.001	−.004^{+}	−.004^{+}	.003^{+}	.003^{+}	−.003^{+}	−.003^{+}
	(−.060)	(−.058)	(.026)	(.028)	(.116)	(−.114)	(.092)	(.090)	(−.099)	(−.098)
Previous marriage	−.036	−.045	.018	.005	−.008	−.017	−.015	−.005	−.005	−.014
	(−.037)	(−.047)	(.019)	(.006)	(−.011)	(−.019)	(−.018)	(−.008)	(−.003)	(−.013)
Income	−.009	−.008	.010	.013	−.008	−.006	−.001	−.003	−.010	−.008
	(−.016)	(−.015)	(.040)	(.047)	(−.005)	(−.001)	(−.009)	(−.009)	(−.009)	(−.021)
Financial stress	−.088***	−.085***	−.064*	−.059**	−.061	−.057*	.084***	.080***	−.096**	−.092***
	(−.135)	(−.130)	(−.082)	(−.074)	(−.076)*	(−.070)	(.120)	(.120)	(−.136)	(−.131)
General stress	−.254***	−.224***	−.242***	−.193***	−.280***	−.245***	.270***	.234***	−.270***	−.237***
	(−.296)	(−.260)	(−.239)	(−.191)	(−.275)	(−.241)	(.288)	(.288)	(−.285)	(−.251)
Intercept	3.451***	3.416***	3.307***	3.243***	3.364***	3.317***	1.959***	2.006***	2.938***	2.893***
Adj. R^2	0.151	0.244	0.165	0.332	0.097	0.180	0.153	0.255	0.125	0.213
ΔR^2		0.093***		0.167***		0.083***		0.102***		0.088***
n		1,151		1,144		1,146		1,143		1,131

Note: Coefficients are unstandarized, and standarized coefficients are in parentheses.

$^{+}p < .10$. $^{*}p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Table 3. *Contingent Effects of Marital Sanctification and Stressors on Marital Quality*[a,b]

Outcome		Main Effects: Stressor	Main Effects: Marital Sanctification (MS)	Interaction Term: Stress × MS
Marital quality				
Model 1	Financial stress	−.089*** (−.142)	.289*** (.336)	.073**
Model 2	General stress	−.234*** (−.270)	−.095 (−.110)	.161***
Relationship commitment				
Model 1	General stress	−.200*** (−.197)	.184+ (.183)	.116**
Positive emotion				
Model 1	Financial stress	−.062** (−.083)	.328*** (.324)	.091**
Model 2	General stress	−.258*** (−.252)	−.211+ (−.208)	.227***
Negative emotion				
Model 1	General stress	.241*** (.256)	−.078 (−.083)	−.107**
Bonding				
Model 1	General stress	−0.243*** (−.255)	.114 (.120)	.081+

[a]Coefficients are unstandarized, and standarized coefficients are in parentheses.

[b]All models control for sociodemographic variables, marriage duration, education differential, and pervious marriage.

$^{+}p < .10$; $^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{***}p < .001$.

statistical adjustments for sanctification eliminated any salutary association between religiousness and marital quality. Indeed, once the effects of sanctification were controlled, religiousness was actually associated with significantly lower levels of marital quality for relationship commitment ($b = -.077$, $\beta = -.146$, $p < .001$), negative emotion ($b = .058$, $\beta = .119$, $p < .001$), and bonding ($b = -.054$, $\beta = -.111$, $p < .01$). There was also a weak inverse association between religiousness and overall marital quality that was marginally significant ($p < .10$). Further, we employed the guidelines developed by Baron and Kenny (1986) to test for mediation, using the SAS macros provided by Preacher and Hayes (2004). According to these calculations, the conditions for mediation were fully satisfied at $p < .01$ or greater for each of the three outcomes noted above, that is, those outcomes for which general religiousness was a significant predictor of marital quality in Model 1.

Next we tested H3b, which anticipated that sanctification would moderate (i.e., buffer, mitigate) the links between stressors and marital quality outcomes. The results of these moderator analyses are summarized in Table 3. In all, 6 of 10 (60%) of the interaction terms evaluated were statistically significant ($p < .05$), and one other interaction term was marginally significant ($p < .10$), all in the predicted direction. The role of sanctification in buffering the deleterious effects of general (perceived) stress on overall marital quality was especially pronounced in these analyses. An example may help to illustrate how to interpret the findings in Table 3; this presentation also follows the format that was used in other recent studies testing stress-buffering hypotheses (e.g., Webb et al., 2010). The model presented in the first row of Table 3 tested H3b with regard to (a) financial stress and the buffering role of sanctification vis-à-vis overall marital quality. Here, the association between financial stress and overall marital quality was significant and negative (Column 1, $b = -.089$, $\beta = -.142$, $p < .001$), whereas the association between sanctification and marital quality was significant and positive (Column 2, $b = .289$, $\beta = .336$, $p < .001$). The cross-product term estimating the interaction of Financial Stress × Sanctification is positive and significant (Column 3, $b = .073$, $p < .01$), indicating that the deleterious effects of financial strain on marital quality diminish as levels of marital sanctification increase.

According to the other estimates in Table 3, sanctification moderated the association between general stress and overall marital quality (Model 2, $b = .161$, $p < .001$); relationship commitment (Model 1, $b = .116$, $p < .01$); positive emotion (Model 2, $b = .227$, $p < .001$); negative emotion (Model 1, $b = -.107$, $p < .05$); and bonding (Model 1, $b = .081$, $p < .10$). For each of these outcomes, general stress bore a strong inverse association with positive marital outcomes. As anticipated, however, the deleterious influence of general strain diminished as levels of marital sanctification increased. Finally, there was partial support for the expectation that sanctification would moderate the link between economic strain and marital outcomes. In addition to the significant buffering pattern involving overall marital quality, discussed in our example above, sanctification also mitigates the effects of financial strain on positive emotion (Model 1, $b = .091$, $p < .01$). Although two of the five hypothesized interactions are statistically significant and in the predicted direction, sanctification does not appear to moderate the deleterious effects of financial strain on relationship commitment, negative emotion, or bonding in our sample.

Discussion

Our study has examined the links between marital sanctification and multiple aspects of marital quality (e.g., happiness, commitment, positive and negative emotions, and bonding), using data on a statewide probability sample of Texas adults. Findings can be summarized as follows: (1) Sanctification, an indicator of the integration of religious meaning into marriage, was an important predictor in all models. (2) Statistical adjustments for sanctification sharply reduced or eliminated the estimated net effects of general religiousness, and further statistical tests confirmed that sanctification mediated the observed links between religiousness and marital quality. (3) Although sanctification was associated with desirable outcomes for the married sample as a whole, these salutary relationships are especially pronounced among those persons who (a) were facing elevated levels of financial strain and (b) were experiencing high levels of general (perceived) stress in their lives. Several of these findings merit particular discussion.

Sanctification was linked with overall marital quality as well as several more specific indicators of marital life. Spouses who regard their unions as sacred and who sense God's presence in their relationships tended to report more good feelings and fewer negative emotions toward their partners. It is possible that their spouses engaged in more frequent positive emotion work, such as acts of kindness and consideration, expressions of affection, exchanges of compliments, and other behaviors, and that they have avoided providing critical feedback or making unreasonable demands (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). Mahoney and associates (1999) found evidence of such patterns in a small ($N = 97$) convenience sample of couples. Furthermore, in their study, sanctification was also associated with avoidance of unproductive conflict resolution approaches; couples scoring high on sanctification engaged in more collaborative problem solving, with fewer tendencies toward aggression and stalemate when working out differences. Our own findings also revealed positive associations between sanctification and the frequency of bonding experiences between partners. Given the specific items used to gauge bonding in this study, this finding indicates that these couples apparently enjoy spending time together in leisure pursuits, conversation, and other activities, and they tend to enjoy a more rewarding sex life. Sanctification also predicted the degree of commitment, as indicated by the willingness of partners to work on the relationships and their disinclination to consider searching for another mate. Although the distinctive microdynamics of marital life among highly religious couples have received some limited recent attention (Dollahite et al., 2004; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006), this topic clearly warrants more sustained investigation in the future.

Although the patterns discussed above held true for our overall sample of married adults, links between sanctification and marital quality were especially pronounced among respondents who face several specific types of challenges. First, we found that sanctification buffers the deleterious effects of overall perceived stress and role strain on all five indicators of marital quality. Numerous studies have linked general measures of stress and role conflict with deteriorations in marital quality and have attempted to identify resources and practices that may assist with the coping process (Brock & Lawrence, 2008; Karney et al., 2005; Story & Bradbury, 2004). Stress and strain can lead to feelings of exhaustion and despair, making

it more difficult for partners to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and engage or bond with their spouses. Although few if any studies in this area have focused on religious or spiritual coping, there is ample evidence from other fields that individuals can gain emotional refreshment, hope, and energy from religious cognitions and practices and especially from the perception that they are engaged in ongoing communication and collaboration with God to deal with their problems (Pargament, 1997; Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000). Those persons who perceive God as actively involved in their relationships may derive similar benefits in terms of marital quality. Second, the attribution of religious or sacred significance to one's marriage may also bolster some facets of relationship quality in the face of chronic financial strain, that is, among couples who have regular or recurrent difficulties in meeting financial obligations. This finding surfaced in models of two of our five outcomes. Household finances are among the most common foci of conflict among married couples (Curtis & Ellison, 2002), and economic pressures can take a significant toll on marital unions. It is possible that sanctification (e.g., perceiving God's involvement in the marriage or ascribing sacred qualities to one's marriage or partner) aids partners in the primary and secondary appraisal stages of coping. That is, couples with high levels of sanctification may be more inclined to reframe economic challenges in less threatening terms (e.g., as opportunities for growth or part of a larger divine plan) and may also be better able to identify strategies for managing negative emotions or solving economic problems (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 2000).

Implications for Practice

The findings reported here hold a number of implications for family practitioners. For example, if they feel comfortable doing so, counselors and family therapists may wish to inquire about partners' views regarding the sanctity of (their) marriages. Such questioning may reveal valuable cognitive and community resources afforded by clients' spiritual practices and institutions, which can be mobilized to assist them and enrich their relationships. It may also be appropriate to consider designing spiritually based interventions based around the sanctification construct; there is reason to believe that such efforts may bear fruit, especially given couples' self-reports of prayer and its effects on conflict (Butler et al., 2002) and recent findings about the relationship benefits of prayer in experimental research (Fincham et al., 2010). Such interventions could be especially helpful for couples facing high levels of stress (e.g., DeMaris et al., 2010). Our results raise the possibility that encouraging them to cultivate or rediscover marital sanctification might enhance relationship commitment, increase positive emotion and diminish negative emotion, and strengthen couples' bonding. For clergy, premarital counseling might provide an important opportunity to encourage the development of spiritual intimacy and the perception of a divine presence within the relationship prior to marriage. Given that most divorces occur within the first few years of marriage, this could be particularly helpful for young or newly married couples, increasing the quality and perhaps the stability of marital ties under conditions of significant financial and overall stress.

Study Limitations

It is important to acknowledge several study limitations. First, these data are cross-sectional; therefore, it is not possible to establish with certainty the causal direction among the variables examined here. It is very possible, and perhaps likely, that partners who experience negative emotions, minimal bonding, and other difficulties with their spouses may find it difficult or impossible to experience the presence of God or the sacred in their relationships. Thus, the patterns identified here may well be bidirectional, as is the case with many other links between the mutually reinforcing social institutions of religion and family (Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992).

Second, there are limitations associated with the THMBS data set, including its relatively low response rate and the underrepresentation of certain population subgroups, including Latinos, men, persons with land-line telephones, and persons with less than a high school education. Because the sample was drawn from Texas only, findings may not be generalizable to other parts of the United States. Further, the Texas Healthy Marriage Initiative project interviewed only one partner at baseline, and thus we have data on individuals rather than dyads. Moreover, there are measurement limitations. Mahoney

and colleagues (1999) have developed multi-item scales to tap both theistic and nontheistic facets of sanctification; our data contain only a single item with which to gauge each construct. Although these items are drawn from the work of Mahoney et al. (1999) and have a high degree of face validity, it would be desirable to have additional items, which could permit greater adjustment for measurement error. It would also have been useful to have controls for social desirability bias, such as Paulhus's (1991) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responses. It is conceivable that our findings may be influenced by the tendencies of some persons to give socially desirable responses, due either to impression management or self-deception. Although it was not possible to explore this issue here, it is worthy of future investigation.

Lastly, estimates of effects on marital quality derived from a sample of currently married persons are susceptible to distortion because many persons whose marriages have gone bad have been removed from the sampled population through divorce (Glenn, 1990). This kind of sample selection bias could logically either attenuate, augment, or reverse the estimates of effects on marital quality, but there are reasons to believe that it usually attenuates them. A known case of attenuation is on estimates of the effects of very early marriage. Numerous longitudinal and retrospective studies conducted over the last several decades have shown that the marriages of persons who wed before age 20 are much more likely to end in divorce than are other marriages (e.g., Glenn & Supancic, 1984; South, 1995). Cross-sectional studies of the marital quality of currently married persons, however, show little relationship between age at marriage and global measures of marital quality (Glenn, 1995). We are confident that sample selection bias due to divorce attenuates rather than augments our estimates of the effects of sanctification. For augmentation to occur, persons high in sanctification would have to be unusually likely to resort to divorce when problems occur in their marriages, whereas the opposite is almost certainly the case. In other words, the real-world effects of sanctification may be at least moderately greater than we estimate them to be.

Future Directions

These limitations notwithstanding, our research extends the literature by offering new findings and insights regarding marital sanctification and its direct and stress-buffering links with marital quality. Nevertheless, much more work remains to be done. For example, in light of these findings and those of Mahoney et al. (1999), it is important to learn more about the social and theological sources of marital sanctification as well as the degree of stability in this integration of religious meaning and marriage over time. Future work might also explore whether there are congregational dynamics and programs that may facilitate or impede the cultivation of this (apparently) beneficial marital resource. One interesting possibility is that sanctification encourages feelings of gratitude or forgiveness, which may, in turn, lead to improved conflict resolution and other positive features of marital interaction (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Hoyt, Fincham, McCullough, Maio, & Davila, 2005). Research into these issues may further illuminate the connection between religion and marital life while spurring the development and targeting of interventions and perhaps even revealing insights that can benefit more secular partners and couples as well. In addition, it would be valuable to know more about the degree of consistency in the perceptions of spouses regarding the presence of God or the sacred character of their unions. Recent work underscores the potentially damaging effects of religious dissimilarity and discord within the family (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Ellison et al., 1999; Vaaler et al., 2009), and thus it would be useful to explore the implications of high consistency and high divergence in views of sanctification for long-term marital quality and risk of divorce. Further, given our evidence of contingencies in the effects of marital sanctification, it could be profitable to explore whether these patterns vary according to race or ethnicity, marital duration, faith tradition or denomination, and perhaps other aspects of social and institutional location. Finally, although sanctification reflects the attribution of sacred qualities to one's relationship or one's partner, Pargament, Magyar, Benore, and Mahoney (2005) have also discussed the implications of sacred losses or violations of the sacred, which they term ''desecrations.'' This ''dark side'' of sanctification may be a highly productive approach to understanding the antecedents and processes of marital discord and dissolution.

Conclusion

Research on the linkage between religion and marriage is presently enjoying a modest resurgence. Our work has contributed to this literature by (a) distinguishing between religiousness, as conventionally conceptualized and measured, and sanctification, a construct that taps the ascription of religious meaning to the marital union; (b) showing that sanctification is a potent predictor of multiple dimensions of marital quality; and (c) demonstrating that the role of sanctification appears to be stronger among couples under stress or strain. Further research along the lines sketched above can further illuminate the complex and contingent nature of relationships between religious beliefs and practices and marital life.

Note

Our friend, colleague, and mentor passed away on February 15, 2011. This paper is dedicated to his memory. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2008 meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Louisville, Kentucky (October 31 – November 2).

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