

## **Spiritual Beliefs and Marriage: A National Survey Based on ENRICH**

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Spirituality and faith are powerful aspects of human experience. According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999), 70% of Americans claim membership in a church or synagogue, with three out of five adults indicating that religion is “very important” in their lives. Of the 90% of Americans who reportedly pray, the most common prayer (98%) is for the “well-being of their families.” With religion so prevalent and important in the family lives of Americans, it is an intriguing time to consider the connection between spirituality and marriage.

Given the potential impact of spiritual beliefs and faith, it makes sense for couples to explore their spiritual compatibility, and for researchers to investigate and evaluate the impact of spiritual compatibility on marriage relationships. The purpose of our study was to look at this relationship between spiritual beliefs and marital dynamics using a multidimensional scale. We looked not only at various areas of marital relating, but also at types of marital systems.

### **Linkage between Marriage and Religion**

The relationship between spirituality and marriage is under increasing scrutiny, with debate as to whether or not a positive relationship exists. While Booth, Johnson, Branaman, and Sica (1995) report little support for a link between religious activity and improved marital relating, the same study found that increases in religiosity were associated with a slight decrease in the probability of considering divorce. Religiosity in the 1,008 participants in their study was assessed with 5 questions regarding frequency of Bible reading, prayer, religious service attendance, church social activity, and a self-report of religious influence. All 5 questions were directed at the individual, with no mention of marriage or spiritual compatibility with a spouse.

Sullivan (2001) found religiosity affected couples’ attitudes; higher levels were associated with more conservative divorce attitudes, increased levels of marital commitment, and more willingness to seek help for marital difficulties. On the other hand, Sullivan’s results were complicated by the moderating variables and lacked longitudinal evidence for a direct link between religiosity and marital satisfaction. In this study, religiosity was measured using a 4-item scale. Again, the 4 questions targeted individual responses concerning frequency of religious service attendance, self report of spiritual beliefs in day-to-day life, seeking spiritual comfort for problems, and a general self-report of how religious one saw them self. Thus, results were mixed and unclear as to what role spiritual beliefs and practices really played in the marriage relationship.

Recently, a meta-analysis of studies focused on religion and family functioning was completed (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). The authors reviewed 94 studies published in journals since 1980. While small effects were reported that suggest greater religiosity appeared to lower the risk of divorce as well as enhance marital functioning, the authors noted several problems with the measures used to assess religious functioning in couples. They found that 80% of the marital studies they reviewed in their meta-analysis relied exclusively on single item, global markers of religiousness (such as frequency of church attendance, or shared church affiliation).

Another strong trend in the research involves assessing the individual's religiosity and linking it to marital functioning. Individually based measures, however, do not measure the degree to which couples integrate faith and spirituality into their relational activities or perceptions of marriage (Mahoney et al., 1999).

### **Spiritual Consensus and Compatibility**

In reviewing the literature on spirituality and marriage, it is often difficult to determine commonality in how the construct of religiosity is defined and assessed. There can be confusion in differentiating terms like "spirituality", "religiosity", or "faith". Some research will define religiosity in terms of behavior or practice, while others look at attitudes and beliefs. One must ask if researchers are assessing and studying the same construct, or a loosely defined range of religious behavior and practices.

Assessing spirituality in individuals and attempting to draw conclusions about how that impacts a marriage relationship is destined to become quite confusing. The compatibility or consensus a couple experiences in their spiritual life goes a long way towards informing whether spirituality will be experienced as a strength or challenge in a marriage. Indeed, Olson and Olson (2000) found that the key factor for distinguishing happy and unhappy couples in terms of religion was "satisfaction and agreement with how spiritual values and beliefs are expressed." In their sample of 21,501 couples, an impressive 89% of those who reported they were "happily married" agreed on this item.

When Mahoney et al. (1999) worked on defining and assessing spiritual constructs that were closely connected to couples' experiences and perceptions of their marriage, stronger associations with marital adjustment emerged. Specifically, they looked at the extent to which couples shared religious or spiritual practices and experiences, and the extent to which they perceived God to be active or reflected in the marital relationship. Results demonstrated that that these factors were related to greater marital adjustment, less marital conflict, more verbal collaboration, and less use of verbal aggression and stalemate in discussing disagreements. Thus, as these researchers assessed agreement and consensus in the spiritual practices and beliefs of couples, the link to positive marital functioning became clearer.

Even when spirituality is present in one or both marriage partners, there can be problems with spiritual compatibility. Olson and Olson (2000) report that 53% of the couples studied said they had unresolved differences in their spiritual beliefs. Moreover, 36% of their sample reported that spiritual differences caused tension in their relationship. Sullivan (2001) found some evidence that newlywed husbands who had more religious wives were actually less satisfied with the relationship than husbands whose wives were not as religious.

Interfaith relationships can be particularly challenging, requiring much tolerance and understanding (Olson & Olson, 2000). Issues such as dealing with relatives, rituals, and holidays, and what faith to raise children, can be quite problematic. In a qualitative study that researched 376 individuals involved in interfaith relationships, findings indicated that most functional spouses and couples de-emphasized theological and differences and focused on similarities. However, when theological differences were emphasized, they were related with lingering conflicts, and a corrosive effect on marital stability (Joanides, Mayhew, & Mamalakis, 2002).

### **ENRICH: A multidimensional Couples Assessment**

In the majority of cases, the assessment of marital satisfaction has suffered from the same limitations as the assessment of spirituality in a couple. Specifically, when assessing marital satisfaction, studies are not truly measuring the dyad, limiting their assessment to individuals' reports (Fowers & Olson, 1988). Because of the confusion in assessment tools and strategies, the field needs more detailed and multidimensional assessment tools in the area of religion and marriage (Mahoney et al. 2001).

ENRICH couple inventory, developed by Olson, Fournier, and Druckman (1983) is a multi-dimensional assessment. Version 2000 of PREPARE/ENRICH has been updated and expanded (Olson & Olson, 1999). It is a 165-item self report measure in which scores are derived by evaluating both married partners' responses and comparing them to one another. The instrument yields 20 scales, including scores for 12 content areas, 4 personality/intra-personal scales, and 4 scales of the family/couple system (cohesion and flexibility), based on the circumplex model of marital and family systems (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1989). The ENRICH scales have high levels of reliability and validity (Fowers & Olson, 1989; Olson & Olson, 1999).

Marital satisfaction and spiritual beliefs are 2 of the 12 content areas. Importantly, each content area is made up of 10 questions that assess positive couple agreement and consensus on each item. For example, both partners respond on a 5-point likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" to an item such as, "We are satisfied with how we express our spiritual values and beliefs." In other words, the dangers of a single item, or more individualized assessment of spirituality and marriage satisfaction are avoided through this scoring strategy.

### **National Sample of Married Couples**

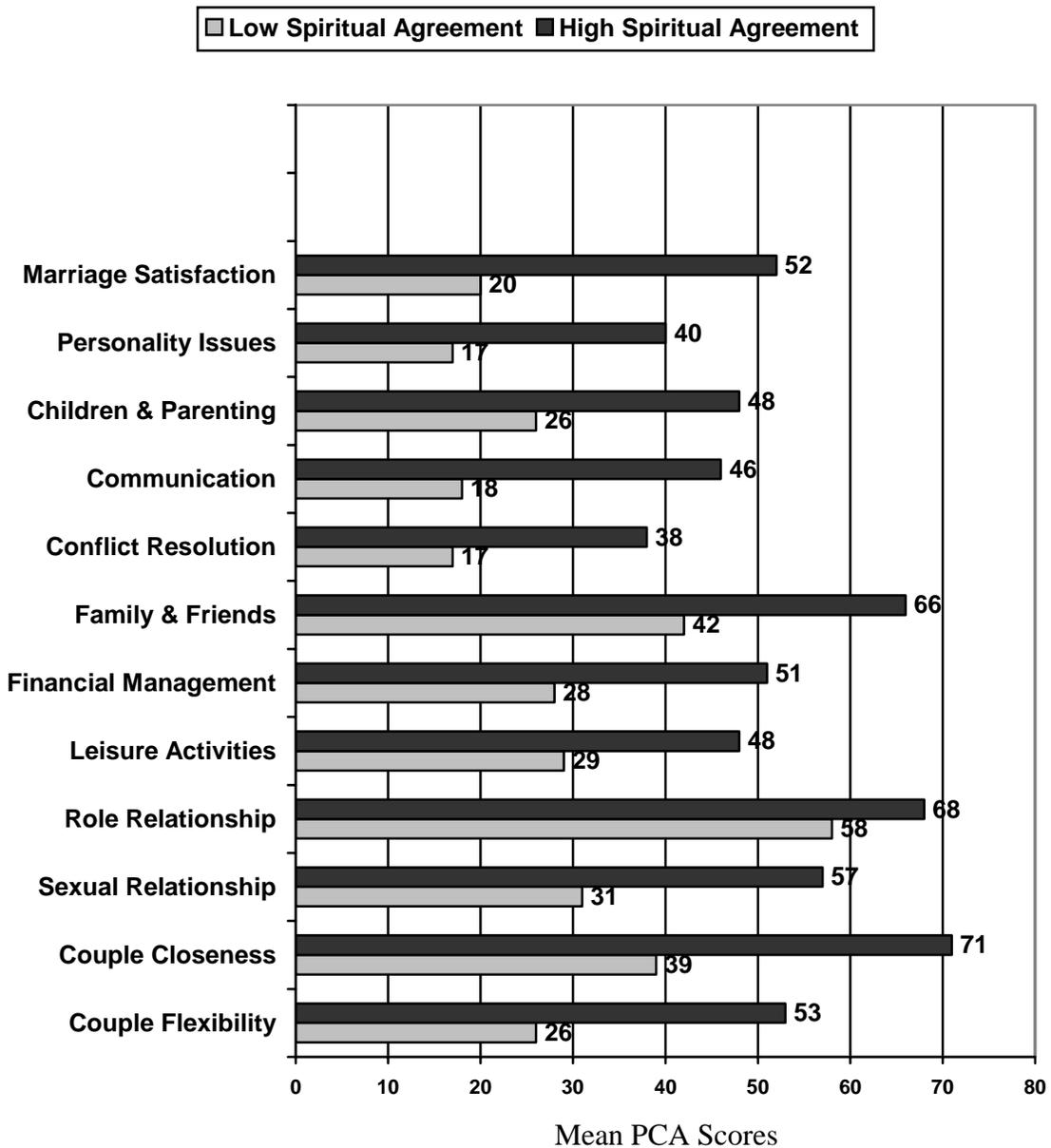
A national sample of 24,671 married couples who took the ENRICH in the years 2000 and 2001 was investigated. The sample was split into three distinct groups based on their Positive Couple Agreement (PCA) scores, a measure of consensus, on the Spiritual Beliefs content scale of the ENRICH. Couples who's PCA on the 10 items pertaining to the Spiritual Beliefs scale was 30% or less were placed in the Low Spiritual Agreement (LSA) group (n = 6,562). Couples who's PCA on the 10 items was 70% or higher were placed in the High Spiritual Agreement (HSA) group (n = 6,557). The remaining 11,552 couples scored in the moderate range for agreement in spiritual beliefs and were not included in the current analysis.

Analysis of background items and demographics showed that these two groups (LSA and HSA) were quite similar. Average age was early thirties, and education levels were high, with over 80 percent of the sample having at least some college education. The sample was largely Caucasian (85%), followed by African American (4.4 %), Hispanic-Latino (4 %), and Asian American (2%). When asked about religion, 50% of the sample identified themselves as Protestant, followed by 15% Catholic, 1% Jewish, and 33% reported their religious affiliation as "Other." When asked to report how long they had been married, 45% of the couples reported they had been married between 0-5 years, 20% had been married between 6-10 years, 13% between 11-15, and 21 percent of the sample reported they had been married 16 years or more.

**Comparison of Marriages High and Low in Spiritual Agreement**

The two groups (HSA and LSA) were compared on several dimensions of their relationship using the ENRICH Inventory.

Figure 1: High vs. Low Spiritual Agreement on ENRICH Scales



Comparison scales included: Marriage Satisfaction, Personality Issues, Children and Parenting, Communication, Conflict Resolution, Family and Friends, Financial Management, Leisure Activities, Role Relationship, Sexual Relationship, Couple Closeness, Couple Flexibility.

Independent samples t-tests were run comparing the HSA group to LSA group on all of these dimensions using PCA scores, which are based on the agreement of the couple items within each ENRICH category. In each case, there were significant differences in the mean PCA scores between these two groups. See Figure 1 for a summary of these results. In other words, higher couple consensus on spiritual beliefs (PCA) was associated with higher couple agreement on every other ENRICH scale. These results are dramatic in that they suggest spiritual beliefs may be powerfully related to a wide range of marital issues.

We developed a correlation matrix for the PCA scores for Spiritual Beliefs and the other 11 content scales of the ENRICH using the data from the 13,119 couples in both the LSA and HSA groups. The largest correlations emerged between PCA score for Spiritual Beliefs and Marriage Satisfaction ( $r = .55$ ), and PCA scores for Spiritual Beliefs and Couple Closeness ( $r = .52$ ), both of which were statistically significant.

In considering consensus on the Spiritual Beliefs scale, it is important to understand the level of shared religious affiliation among couples. These percentages were explored for the 13,119 couples in the HSA and LSA groups by creating a cross tabulation table of religious affiliation for men and women. For the LSA group, women shared religious affiliation with their partners 40% of the time for those identifying themselves as Catholic, 34% of the time for Jewish, and 60% of the time for Protestants. Percentages of shared religious affiliation were higher for women in the HSA group: 77% for Catholic, 75% for Jewish, and 87% for Protestant.

Men's percentages of shared religious affiliation were largely similar to the women's. For the LSA group, men shared religious affiliation with their partner 34% of the time for Catholics, 26% for Jewish, and 65% for Protestant. In the HSA group, affiliation scores were 75% for Catholic, 62% for Jewish, and 83% for Protestant.

It is notable that these two groups reflect large differences in percentage of shared religious affiliation. Still, shared affiliation does not ensure positive couple agreement on the 10 Spiritual Beliefs questions. Indeed, while 65% of the Protestant men in the LSA group had a Protestant partner, they still scored below 30% on positive couple agreement on the Spiritual Beliefs scale.

### **Five ENRICH Couple Types and Agreement on Spiritual Beliefs**

An empirically derived typology of couples based on the Positive Couple Agreement (PCA) scores from the multidimensional ENRICH inventory was done by Olson and Fowers (1993). Five clusters emerged through their analysis of over 6,000 couples, and marriage satisfaction increases with each of the following 5 types discussed.

Table 1: ENRICH Couples Types and Spiritual Agreement

Couple Types	High Spiritual PCA	Low Spiritual PCA
<b>Vitalized</b>	36%	5%
<b>Harmonious</b>	11%	10%
<b>Traditional</b>	21%	4%
<b>Conflicted</b>	23%	19%
<b>Devitalized</b>	9%	62%
Total	100%	100%

**Devitalized couples:** The first marital type included 31% (N = 1,004) of the primary sample and had the lowest scores on all of the ENRICH scales. Due to their low PCA scores, these couples were designated “Devitalized.” They tend to be at the highest risk for divorce and tend to be unhappily married. In the current study, 62% of the LSA group was classified as the Devitalized, while only 9% of the HSA group scored this low.

**Conflicted couples:** The second cluster contained 28% (N = 918) of the couples in the original study. These couples’ showed distress on many of the ENRICH scales and were called “Conflicted.” Lowest scores were found on the Personality Issues, Communication, and Conflict Resolution Scales. They reported dissatisfaction with their partner’s personality and habits. Problems existed in their ability to communicate and discuss problems in the relationship, as well as in the areas of leisure activities, their sexual relationship, and relating to one another’s family and friends. They tend to be at high risk for divorce and tend to be unhappily married. In the current study, 19% of the LSA group scored as the Conflicted type, while 23% of the HSA scored in the Conflicted range.

**Traditional couples:** Approximately 15% (N = 504) of the couples in the original study were classified in the third type. They tended to have lower PCA scores in the interpersonal scales (Communication, Conflict Resolution) but higher scores in the more traditional external areas (Children & Parenting, Family & Friends, and Spiritual Beliefs.) This set of couples was called “Traditional” to match the combination of their moderate interpersonal satisfaction and higher scores on parenting and spiritual belief scales. Marital satisfaction is only moderate, but they are at a low risk for divorce. In the current study, only 4% of the LSA group was classified as Traditional, while 21% of the HSA group emerged in this category.

**Harmonious couples:** The original typology study classified 12% (N = 407) as “Harmonious” because they were relatively high on most scales, except Financial Management, Children and Parenting and Spiritual Beliefs. They tended to be generally

happy and are at low risk for divorce. In the current study, 10% of the LSA group was classified as Harmonious, with a similar 11% of the HSA group.

**Vitalized:** Finally, the fifth group of couples comprised 13% (N = 427) of the original sample. These couples were called “Vitalized” due to the high level of satisfaction across the ENRICH scales. They had particularly high scores on the Personality Issues, Communication, Conflict Resolution, and Sexual Relationship scales. These couples saw religion as important to their marriages and indicated a strong preference for egalitarian roles. They tend to have a high degree of marriage satisfaction and are the least likely of the 5 types to divorce. In the current study, only 5% of the LSA group scored as Vitalized, compared to 36% of the HSA group.

When the two groups, HSA and LSA, were compared on these 5 couple types, an intriguing frequency pattern emerged. The most dramatic in this comparison is the 53% difference in the frequency of Devitalized couple type when comparing HSA couples to the LSA couples. Almost two thirds of the 6, 562 couples with LSA were in the Devitalized category, which suggests the highest risk of divorce. While only 9% of couples with HSA fell into the Devitalized category.

Large differences were also observed on the other end of the spectrum, with a full 31% difference between the two groups in the Vitalized category. Thirty-six percent of HSA were in the Vitalized typology, while only 5% of the LSA scored as the Vitalized type. These are major differences that cannot be ignored. See Table 1 for summary.

### **Discriminant Analysis of Marriages High and Low in Agreement on Spiritual Beliefs**

In conducting discriminant analysis of the two groups (LSA and HSA), the most powerful 6 scales that emerged were (in descending order): Couple Closeness (.87), Couple Flexibility (.75), Communication (.71), Family and Friends (.713), Personality Issues (.68), and Conflict Resolution (.66). The overall accuracy for correctly classifying high versus low couple agreement on the Spiritual Beliefs scale using discriminant analysis was 73.4%.

While it may not be unusual to find the Communication and Conflict Resolution scales as important in discriminating between these groups, the significance of the Couple Closeness and Couple Flexibility scales is intriguing. Olson (2002) defines Couple Closeness as the level of emotional closeness experienced by a couple, and the degree to which they balance togetherness and separateness. Couple Flexibility is defined as the ability of a couple to change and be flexible when necessary.

There are those in the field who would suggest that there are several types of intimacy a married couple can experience: emotional, physical, and spiritual. Further, it is often suggested that there are powerful links between types of intimacy (i.e. healthy emotional connections may result in more enjoyment of physical intimacy). In the current study, an intriguing association between high spiritual agreement and the level of closeness a couple experienced was observed. The positive couple agreement scores for Spiritual Beliefs and Couple Closeness were significantly correlated ( $r = .52$ ). Further, Couple Closeness was also the most heavily weighted item for discriminating between the HSA and LSA groups. Thus, closeness is a construct that deserves more investigation in terms of how it is related to spirituality in couples.

## Summary

In summary, this study clearly demonstrated a significant relationship between the spirituality of a couple and many aspects of marital functioning. These results are dramatic in part because of the use of the 10-item scales, a large national sample of married couples, and because both husbands and wives took the ENRICH couple inventory. When comparing couples who were high in spiritual agreement versus couples who were low in spiritual agreement, significant differences were observed on every ENRICH scale. Strong correlations between consensus on Spiritual Beliefs and Marital Satisfaction ( $r=.55$ ) and Spiritual Beliefs and Couple Closeness ( $r=.52$ ) were observed. High versus low spiritual agreement were also strongly related to couple type as measured by ENRICH, with significantly more Vitalized couples in the HSA group and significantly more Devitalized couples in the LSA group. Finally, discriminant analysis demonstrated 73.4% accuracy in correctly classifying the HSA and LSA groups, with Couple Closeness and Flexibility emerging as powerful discriminant factors.

## Clinical Implications

There are important therapeutic implications that emerge out of these findings. First, spiritual beliefs can be a source of strength or a stumbling block for a couple, based on their spiritual compatibility. It is not enough to know that one or both members of a couple are spiritual; their consensus on spiritual issues must be assessed. Certainly, there will be couples who embrace divergent spiritual views and still experience a good marriage with high marital satisfaction. But these are the exceptional few who can tolerate differences in such a powerful area of life.

While only 5% of the LSA couples experienced a Vitalized marriage, 62% were Devitalized. This finding becomes even more important based on longitudinal research that demonstrates as many as 90% of the individuals in a Devitalized marriage have considered divorce, and over two-thirds (69%) of Devitalized couples are dissatisfied with their marriage (Fowers, Montel, & Olson, 1996). Such results highlight the importance of assessing and discussing spiritual compatibility when working with premarital and marital couples in a therapeutic setting.

Walsh (1999) provides a comprehensive overview of how spirituality can be understood and integrated into marital and family therapy. Walsh acknowledges that therapists often avoid the topic of spirituality in their work; sometimes out of respect for client privacy or because of a lack training in the area, and other times because therapists don't see themselves as very religious. Whatever the reason, it is a therapeutic oversight to ignore the powerful influence of spirituality in clients' lives and marriages.

The current study also points to the value of the ENRICH inventory, and how a multidimensional tool which assesses couple consensus can be very revealing and useful in a clinical setting. Past research has already demonstrated the value of the ENRICH in diagnostic and clinical assessment. Now, it is even more clear that ENRICH is a powerful tool for assessing the spiritual compatibility of couple, and how this relates to a range of other marriage dynamics. For more information on using the ENRICH in a clinical setting, [www.lifeinnovations.com](http://www.lifeinnovations.com) provides an overview.

Finally, for those conducting research on spirituality in a married dyad, the current data would suggest a need to consider assessment strategies. Using couple consensus and agreement appears to be a more powerful way to understand the links

between religion and marriage, as opposed to assessing the religiosity or marriage satisfaction in individuals. Further, because religion and spirituality is a complex construct involving values, beliefs, and practices, multi-item measures should be used over one-item markers.

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