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## CLIENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SPIRITUALITY IN COUPLE'S THERAPY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Jillian M. Puckett

*University of Kentucky*, [jillianmpuckett@gmail.com](mailto:jillianmpuckett@gmail.com)

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Jillian M. Puckett, Student

Dr. Trent S. Parker, Major Professor

Dr. Jason Hans, Director of Graduate Studies

CLIENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SPIRITUALITY IN COUPLE'S THERAPY:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in the  
College of Agriculture  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Jillian M. Puckett

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Trent S. Parker, Professor of Family Sciences

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### CLIENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SPIRITUALITY IN COUPLE'S THERAPY: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

While spirituality has been an increasingly researched topic within the field of marriage and family therapy, it has been largely overlooked within the context of couple's therapy. The goal of the present study is to enhance the understanding of the role of spirituality in therapy by describing clients' experiences of spirituality in couple's therapy. The study utilized a phenomenological approach to come to a better understanding of the essence of clients' experiences of spirituality in couple's therapy. Semi-structured interviews with couples enrolled in couple's therapy were conducted and analyzed. Four major themes emerged: spiritual experiences in couple's therapy, perception of spirituality, spirituality as beneficial, and spirituality as a journey. Implications for clinicians and recommendations for future research are discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Therapy, Couples, Spirituality, Religion, Clients

Jillian Puckett

April 24, 2012

CLIENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SPIRITUALITY IN COUPLE'S THERAPY:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

By

Jillian M. Puckett

Trent S. Parker  
Director of Thesis

Jason Hans  
Director of Graduate Studies

April 24, 2012

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Incorporating spirituality into therapy is an increasingly researched topic within the field of marriage and family therapy. Most therapists agree that spirituality is an important subject and should be included and respected throughout the therapeutic process, yet the term ‘spirituality’ is surrounded by social sensitivity and a sense of ambiguity that can create a feeling of uncertainty when addressing spirituality in therapy (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, 2002; Kahle, 1998). Unfortunately, psychotherapy has a history of bias against spirituality and religion, which may help to explain the lack of understanding and the feelings of discomfort that arise when therapists are encouraged to integrate spirituality into therapy (Adams, 1995). For example, in the earlier years of psychotherapy, professionals were attempting to gain respect from other scientific fields and were striving to be recognized as a scientifically based study. The psychotherapy field began to separate from religious or spiritual notions in order to emphasize the scientific aspect of therapy. As a result, religion and spirituality were often rejected in therapy and were sometimes classified as symptoms of mental disorders. While obstacles do exist when attempting to understand the role of spirituality in therapy, strides have been made to recognize the impact spirituality has not only on the personal lives of therapists and clients, but also on the therapeutic process (Carlson et al., 2002; Gockel, 2011).

Current research on spirituality in therapy has examined several different dimensions, including clients’ perceptions of spirituality in individual therapy, therapists’

beliefs on incorporating spirituality into therapy, and the lack of training on spirituality in graduate schools and training programs (Carlson et al., 2011; Erikson et al., 2002; Grams, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2007). Despite the increased literature on spirituality in individual therapy, there is relatively little research on the role of spirituality in couple's therapy. Research on intimacy in couple relationships has found that spiritual intimacy is associated with emotional intimacy, which points to the need for further research on the subject of spirituality and couple's therapy (Hatch, James & Schumm, 1986). The present study will provide more information on the role of spirituality in couple's therapy from clients' perspectives.

## Chapter 2

### Relevant Literature

#### **Defining Spirituality**

Spirituality is a broad concept that can evoke a variety of personal meanings for different people. In order to understand the role spirituality plays in couple's therapy, one must first understand what is meant by the ambiguous term, "spirituality". Because spirituality is such an intimate and personal experience, the current literature provides numerous definitions. Anderson and Worthen (1997) define spirituality as the "human experience of discovering meaning, which may or may not include the concept of a personal God". Aponte (1998) defines spirituality as "the meaning, purpose and values in people's lives". In yet another article, spirituality is defined as:

A personal belief in and experience of a supreme being or an ultimate human condition, along with an internal set of values and active investment in those values, a sense of connection, a sense of meaning, and a sense of inner wholeness within or outside formal religious structures (Wright et al., 1996, p.31).

The numerous definitions of spirituality illustrate its personal nature and the different meanings people may associate with the term.

It is especially important to note that spirituality does not equate to religion, although religion may fall under the category of spirituality. While someone may consider themselves to be religious and spiritual, another person may consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious. The two terms are not mutually exclusive or inherently

the same, but they may interact together or exist independently of one another. Anderson and Worthen (1997) emphasize the distinction between religion and spirituality by stating that “religion solidifies [spirituality] in particular forms, rituals, sacred scriptures, doctrines, rules of conduct, and other practices”. Religion and spirituality may seem to be closely related, but it is important to not confuse spirituality with religion in order to avoid offending clients in therapy. Gockel (2011) found that some clients did not classify themselves as religious, but did consider themselves to be spiritual and believed that therapy was a spiritual process. Clients’ beliefs, whether religious, spiritual, or both, should be respected throughout the therapeutic process. One way of respecting clients’ beliefs is through honoring their definition of spirituality and not discounting their beliefs as unimportant in therapy because they do not identify with a specific religion.

The multiple definitions and ambiguity that surround spirituality creates difficulty in understanding the role of spirituality in therapy. Crossley and Salter (2005) interviewed psychologists about spirituality in therapy and found that one theme emerged concerning the definition of spirituality. The theme, “spirituality as an elusive concept”, described psychologists’ views of spirituality as hard to define and having diverse meanings for different people. This finding points to the ambiguity surrounding spirituality and the obstacle clinicians face when working with spirituality in therapy. Because of the personal differences in the definition of spirituality, clinicians must attempt to maintain a broad understanding of spirituality in order to respect clients’ beliefs.

While many researchers have attempted to define spirituality in order to clarify what is meant by the broad term, a universal, agreed-upon definition does not exist.

However, much of the qualitative research regarding spirituality has emphasized the unique and individualized definitions of spirituality that clients hold for themselves (Gockel, 2011). The personal nature of spirituality and the varied definitions provided by clients, therapists, and researchers illustrates opposition for one definition. As a result, for the sake of this study spirituality will be defined by the clients who will be interviewed. The participants' views and beliefs of spirituality will be respected through granting them the freedom to define spirituality for themselves, instead of imposing the researcher's specific definition on their experiences of spirituality.

### **Therapists' Beliefs Regarding Spirituality**

Several studies have indicated that therapists believe spirituality is an important topic and should be integrated into therapy (Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, & Killmer, 2002; Carlson, McGeorge, & Anderson, 2011; Kahle, 1998). Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker, and Killmer (2002) found the majority of marriage and family therapists (MFTs) believe that spirituality is important in their professional work, and is also a major aspect of their personal lives. Therapists' personal spiritual beliefs contribute to their professional viewpoints, meaning that their personal beliefs may influence them to be more likely to address spirituality in therapy. In addition, the same study found that 95% of therapists reported believing that spirituality is associated with mental health, but only 62% believed that spirituality should be considered in therapy. Even though the overwhelming majority of therapists believe spirituality is connected to mental health, some do not feel comfortable or capable of integrating spirituality into their clinical work.

When discussing therapists' beliefs surrounding spirituality in therapy, it is important to note the differences that exist between types of clinicians. Kahle (1998)

devised a research study to compare marriage and family therapists with psychologists in terms of addressing spiritual beliefs in therapy. The study found that while almost all clinicians indicated they would discuss spirituality in therapy if clients initiated the conversation, marriage and family therapists reported higher levels of personal religiosity and were more likely to explicitly incorporate spirituality into therapy than psychologists (Kahle, 1998). The results of this study point to the role of personal factors of the therapist in the decision of whether or not to address spirituality in therapy. Higher levels of religiosity, for example, may influence the likelihood that the clinician will explicitly address spirituality in therapy. Another interesting finding of this study indicated that both MFTs and psychologists felt more comfortable with discussions of spirituality in therapy when clients initiated the conversation. Clinicians may feel cautious when thinking of addressing spirituality because of the fear of offending clients or the possibility they may not agree with clients' spiritual beliefs.

Differences in spiritual beliefs are present within the field of marriage and family therapy, as well as among the different realms of psychotherapy. Several research studies have examined the spiritual beliefs of marriage and family therapy faculty members in order to have a better understanding of the training of MFT students and clinicians (Carlson, McGeorge, & Anderson, 2011; Grams, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2007). Most faculty members believe spirituality is important in their professional and personal lives, and should be included in MFT training programs (Grams, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2007). While the majority of MFT faculty members agree that spirituality plays a crucial role in a variety of contexts, non-faculty clinicians tend to report higher levels of spirituality in their personal and professional lives than MFT faculty members (Carlson, McGeorge, &

Anderson, 2011). Grams et al. (2007) found that MFT faculty members' personal spiritual beliefs impact how they feel about incorporating spirituality into MFT training. Understanding the spiritual beliefs of faculty members offers valuable insight into the type of training MFTs are receiving and the role of spirituality in MFT training programs.

MFT graduate students also provide an interesting perspective on the role of spirituality in MFT training programs. Prest, Russel, and D'Souza (1999) examined the beliefs and attitudes of MFT graduate students concerning spirituality in their programs. Their findings indicated that most graduate students valued spirituality in their personal and professional lives and believed spirituality is associated with mental health. However, none of the students reported any type of spiritual training in their MFT programs and most students felt restrained from discussions of spirituality in their professional lives. While MFT faculty members believe spirituality should be included in training programs (Gram et al., 2007), MFT graduate students do not report that spirituality is incorporated in their training (Prest et al., 1999). Not only do students feel as though spirituality is overlooked, they reported feeling restrained from discussing spirituality in their professional lives. While both MFT faculty members and students appear to believe that spirituality is important in both their personal and professional lives, spirituality is not being explicitly addressed within training programs. Although this research indicates a major gap in students' training, it is possible that spirituality is addressed indirectly throughout training programs. For example, respecting clients' beliefs and valuing clients' narratives are often emphasized messages throughout training programs that can also be applied to spirituality. Therefore, it may be possible that spirituality is implicitly addressed throughout MFTs' training. However, the lack of

direct training surrounding spirituality may contribute to the ambiguity surrounding spirituality and the general feeling of uneasiness many therapists experience when working with spirituality in therapy.

While most therapists recognize the important role spirituality plays in their personal and professional lives, incorporating spirituality into therapy can be intimidating. Crossley and Salter (2005) interviewed psychologists about spirituality in therapy and found that a major theme emerged, “finding harmony with spiritual beliefs”. This theme illustrates the belief that clinicians should strive to understand and value their clients’ spirituality. In other words, in order to incorporate spirituality into therapy, clinicians have a responsibility to create a safe space where clients’ spiritual views will be respected and welcomed, regardless of the views of the therapist. This belief, while necessary for the quality of therapy, poses a great challenge for clinicians and may be especially daunting when therapists’ beliefs and values clash with their clients’ spiritual beliefs. Therapists may feel torn between their own belief systems and honoring their clients’ spirituality. The notion that therapists must value, respect, and welcome all clients’ spiritual views can be an intimidating goal and may partially account for the reluctance to incorporate spirituality into therapy, even when therapists believe spirituality is associated with mental health (Carlson et al., 2002).

Although the majority of clinicians agree that spirituality has a role in therapy, Jackson and Coyle (2009) identified a major obstacle many therapists face that may urge them to question the usefulness of addressing spirituality in therapy. Therapists were interviewed in order to explore spiritual issues in therapy and reported that the most difficult situation they encountered when working with spirituality was to feel as though

clients' spiritual beliefs damage their mental well-being. In this case, therapists reported feeling confused because they wanted to value and respect the client's beliefs, but at the same time they needed to help improve the client's mental health status (Jackson & Coyle, 2009). The results of this study help to illustrate the complex nature of spirituality and the reasons clinicians may feel hesitant to incorporate conversations of spirituality in therapy. While therapists must be open to clients' beliefs and should honor their spirituality, they may perceive their clients' beliefs to be harmful and, as a result, feel as though they cannot value their clients' spiritual beliefs to the extent they should.

### **Clients' Perceptions of Spirituality**

Throughout the course of therapy, there are two parties involved: the therapist and the clients. Therefore, in order to have a holistic understanding of spirituality in couple's therapy it is crucial to explore both the therapists' and the clients' views of spirituality. There has been a growing amount of literature that examines clients' perspectives of spirituality in individual therapy. Gockel (2011) explored clients' perceptions of spirituality and found that many clients reported their spiritual views helped shape their expectations of therapy and their decision to continue or terminate therapy. Incorporating clients' spiritual beliefs into therapy can provide therapists the chance to understand clients' expectations of therapy. Through a better understanding of clients' spirituality and therefore a clearer view of their therapeutic expectations, clinicians can tailor therapy to meet clients' needs and improve therapeutic outcomes. Clients' spirituality also offers valuable insight into their choice to continue or terminate the therapeutic process.

Researching clients' perceptions of spirituality in therapy has provided several valuable insights into understanding how to meet clients' needs. Erikson et al. (2002)

found that most clients thought their therapist did a good job incorporating spirituality into individual therapy. The majority of the clients attended university clinics with religious affiliations and were more likely to want to incorporate spirituality into therapy than clients who were attending clinics with no religious affiliation. Clients who attended the clinics with religious affiliations were found to be more satisfied with spiritual discussions than clients who attended a secular university clinic. In another study, however, clients provided both positive and negative characteristics regarding their therapist and the topic of spirituality (Knox, Catlin, Casper, & Schlosser, 2005). Clients indicated that they were more comfortable when they initiated discussions of spirituality, and they felt the conversations were encouraged when they perceived their therapist to be open to their beliefs and experiences. This finding also coincides with many therapists' beliefs of feeling more comfortable with spiritual discussions when the client initiates the conversation (Kahle, 1998). Therapists may feel more comfortable when clients initiate discussions because they are aware that clients are also more at ease when they are able to control the course of spiritual conversations.

In addition to the more positive aspects of clients' experiences of spirituality in therapy, clients also reported that some spiritual discussions were unhelpful. These unhelpful discussions were characterized by feeling judged, were initiated equally by therapists and clients, and were related to negative therapeutic outcomes (Knox et al., 2005). While much of the research on spirituality emphasizes the need for increased incorporation in therapy, it is important to recognize that some spiritual conversations are unproductive, hurt the therapeutic alliance, and are associated with negative outcomes. Understanding clients' perceptions of therapy provides a wealth of information to help

recognize the role of spirituality, how to successfully include spirituality in therapy, and improve therapeutic outcomes.

Clients' perceptions of spirituality in therapy have also provided insight into their beliefs of therapy when their clinician's spiritual views may differ from their own. Mayers et al. (2007) interviewed spiritually and/or religiously self-identified clients who were working with secular therapists. Results indicated that clients believed their viewpoints could be incorporated into therapy regardless of the spiritual background of their therapist. Several clients reported that their faith was even strengthened throughout the course of therapy. Another study found that most clients did not know the spiritual background of their therapist, but still perceived their therapist to be open towards their beliefs (Knox et al., 2005). These research findings may be indicative of bridging the religiosity gap between clients and therapists, meaning that spirituality can be competently addressed by therapists regardless of their spiritual background (Mayers et al., 2007).

### **Spirituality in Couple Relationships**

When discussing spirituality in couple's therapy, it is vital to recognize the role of spirituality within the couple relationship. Several studies have examined spirituality in intimate relationships and have found that spirituality can help to increase marital stability (Call & Heaton, 1997), enhance sexual satisfaction (Landry, 2002), and promote emotional intimacy (Hatch et al., 1986). Kory (2007) found that couples who view their commitment to their relationship as a "spiritual path" experienced personal growth, more connection to a spiritual power, and inner joy. These positive experiences reported by couples who view their relationship with a spiritual lens indicate a certain level of

individual well-being that is rooted in their intimate relationship. Addressing spirituality in couple's therapy may help strengthen the couple relationship, but it also has the potential to increase each individual's sense of well-being.

Spirituality within the couple's relationship has been studied in terms of marital stability, as well as general well-being. Call and Heaton (1997) found that couples who regularly attend religious services have the lowest risk of marital dissolution. In addition, couples who differed in their attendance of religious services were at an increased risk of divorce. In a separate study, joint spiritual practices were found to be a central component of couples' shared spirituality (Benioff, 2007). Homogeneity of spiritual beliefs and practices may be especially important for the stability of intimate relationships for a variety of reasons. Religious practices provide couples the opportunity to establish and reinforce certain family values, as well as the chance to socialize with a network of similarly spiritual people. The role of spirituality within couples' relationships should not be overlooked, as it is an important aspect of marital stability.

Spirituality has also been connected with both emotional and sexual intimacy. Spiritual intimacy is associated with increased emotional intimacy, which appears to improve couple's marital satisfaction (Hatch et al., 1986). Recognizing the role of spirituality in emotional intimacy highlights the importance of addressing spirituality in couple's therapy in order to enhance couples' emotional connection and relationship satisfaction. In addition, spirituality has also been viewed in terms of sexual satisfaction. Landry (2002) found that religious well-being and shared religious practices are significantly related to sexual satisfaction. This finding supports the notion of the importance of shared spiritual practices in couples' relationships discussed above (Call &

Heaton, 1997, Benioff, 2007). Spirituality should not be ignored in therapy because of the vital role it plays within couple relationships. Embracing couples' spirituality may improve therapeutic outcomes through increasing emotional intimacy, improving marital stability, and increasing sexual satisfaction.

### **Significance of Understanding the Role of Spirituality in Couple's Therapy**

There is a general consensus in the field of marriage and family therapy that spirituality does play a role in the therapeutic process; therefore, it is vital to understand the experiences of couples' spirituality in order to understand the role of spirituality in couple's therapy. The majority of both therapists and clients report that spirituality is a significant aspect of their personal lives, which makes it an important area to understand within the therapeutic process (Carlson et al., 2007; Knox et al., 2005). Because spirituality does have a presence in clients' lives, it cannot be overlooked or ignored in therapy. Instead, it is important to explore both clients' and therapists' experiences of spirituality in therapy in order to understand how to cater to clients' needs and improve therapeutic outcomes.

Exploring spirituality with couples presents additional obstacles because of the lack of research that has been conducted in couple's therapy. While spirituality has been an increasingly researched topic within the field of marriage and family therapy, the overwhelming majority of the research has examined spirituality in individual therapy, as opposed to couple's therapy. All of the studies cited throughout the literature review explored spirituality in individual therapy or couples' relationships, but did not examine the role of spirituality in couple's therapy. However, spirituality plays an important role in couple relationships. As discussed earlier, spirituality is associated with increased

emotional intimacy in romantic couple relationships (Hatch et al., 1986). Because couples often seek therapy in order to increase intimacy with their partner, exploring spirituality may be a useful avenue in creating more emotionally intimate connections. In addition, because spirituality has been found to play a significant role in individual's personal lives and therapy, it may also have an important presence in couples' relationships and therapy. Therefore, understanding couples' perspectives on the role of spirituality may offer valuable insights on incorporating spirituality into couple's therapy and improving therapeutic outcomes. The present study intends to fill the gap in research by exploring the role of spirituality in couple's therapy.

### **Purpose of Present Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe clients' experiences of spirituality in couple's therapy. Spirituality in therapy was defined by the clients' beliefs of spirituality. The fundamental questions that were asked of participants are: (1) How do you define spirituality?, (2) What are your experiences of spirituality in couple's therapy? And (3) What are your experiences of spirituality in your intimate couple relationship?

## **Chapter 3**

### Methodology

#### **Characteristics of Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is conducted when an issue needs to be further explored. This exploration is a process and begins with the researcher's assumptions and worldview, the potential use of a theoretical lens, and the study of a research question (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research analysis operates from an inductive approach, meaning that researchers analyze data from the bottom-up by categorizing data into increasingly more abstract units (Creswell, 2007). Throughout the data analysis process, researchers form themes, patterns, and categories to create a comprehensive set of themes concerning their research question.

Qualitative researchers act as the key instrument throughout the research process because they collect data themselves, usually through interviews and observations which require face-to-face interaction. Researchers tend to collect data in natural settings, meaning that data is collected where participants experience the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007). During data analysis, researchers attempt to focus on understanding the participants' meanings, instead of focusing on existing research in the literature (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative researchers must make an interpretation of the data, so it is important to recognize the researchers own biases, assumptions, and worldview that contribute to data analysis. Throughout the process of qualitative inquiry, researchers hope to develop a holistic, complex illustration of the research question (Creswell, 2007).

## **Qualitative Research Study**

The present study used a phenomenological research design. The purpose of a phenomenology is to understand the essence of an experience (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the phenomenological research design was used to understand clients' experiences of spirituality in couple's therapy. Through the use of a phenomenology, the lived experiences of clients were reduced to a description of the essence of their experiences of spirituality in therapy (Creswell, 2007). The present study compiles descriptions of four couples' experiences of spirituality in couple's therapy and their intimate couple relationship and describes themes, or commonalities, in order to better understand the phenomenon

## **Role of Researcher as Instrument**

As discussed earlier, qualitative researchers are often the key instrument in data collection. The researcher acts as the data collection instrument through collecting the data themselves, often through the use of interviews during face-to-face interactions with the research participants. It is important to note the personal experiences and biases of the researcher in order to have a clear understanding of the impact of the researcher throughout the study. This process of exposing personal situations and biases that may influence the research exploration is referred to as bracketing (Creswell, 2007). As the qualitative researcher and the key instrument in the present study, I will disclose my own interests and experiences that influence my bias.

I have had a particular interest in spirituality for as long as I can remember. I was born into a family who identifies as both spiritual and religious, and we always participated in religious activities. I have attended church on a weekly basis, and I went

to a religious school for elementary and middle school. Throughout my upbringing, I was taught to find comfort and balance in my spiritual beliefs. When circumstances seemed to be especially difficult, I turned to my spirituality to cope with the painful times. While religion is a large component of my spirituality, I have also had an interest in other spiritual forms, such as yoga and meditation. As a result of the huge role of spirituality in my personal life, it feels only natural to incorporate spirituality in my professional life as well.

I have developed an interest in couple's therapy throughout my educational career. As an undergraduate, I studied human development and family sciences and found that my natural interest in family life was enhanced through my coursework. My passion in the family sciences and my interest in psychology led me to the field of marriage and family therapy in graduate school. As I began to see clients, I found that I was especially interested in couple's therapy and that I thoroughly enjoyed the work, even when it seemed to be especially challenging. As a result of my professional interest in couple's therapy and my largely personal interest in spirituality, I wanted to explore the role of spirituality in couple's therapy.

My interests and passions influence my current assumptions concerning spirituality in couple's therapy. Because spirituality is such an important aspect of myself and my personal relationships with others, I believe that spirituality can play an important role within the couple relationship. I believe spirituality has the ability to unite and strengthen a couple's relationship and their personal well-being. As a result, I believe that spirituality should be considered in couple's therapy because of the importance it can hold in one's personal life and intimate relationships.

Throughout my experience of researching the role of spirituality in therapy, I have found that spirituality seems to be largely ignored within the therapy room, in spite of the research that points to the relevance of spirituality in therapy. In addition, spirituality seems to be especially overlooked in the context of couple's therapy. As a result, I have grown to become more motivated to explore the role of spirituality in couple's therapy. Because of the general lack of research and the personal nature of spirituality, I believe that a qualitative approach will provide the opportunity to explore the phenomenon of spirituality and provide a better understanding of the role of spirituality in couple's therapy.

My beliefs and experiences will influence the present study in various ways. My personal experiences of spirituality have led me to believe that spirituality is a major component of intimate relationships and has a healing power when people are in difficult situations. In addition, my research in the field of spirituality and couple's therapy provides me with a certain level of education that seems to enhance my personal beliefs of the importance of spirituality. As a result, it is vital to recognize that my personal beliefs and assumptions can impact the present study. For example, the questions I asked and the way in which I delivered the questions might have influenced the type of responses I received. As a result of biased responses during the interviews, the data interpretation, overall themes, and the eventual essence of the phenomenon could be skewed.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

**Sampling Approach.** The present study used criterion and convenience sampling approaches. Criteria sampling required participants to be a couple actively

participating in couple's therapy. Convenience sampling was used because participants were recruited from the University of Kentucky Family Center.

Four couples agreed to participate. The primary researcher contacted the participants at the University of Kentucky Family Center and via phone to schedule interview times and to answer questions regarding the research.

**Informed Consent.** The informed consent was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before participants were recruited. The IRB reviewed the informed consent in order to ensure ethical treatment of research participants. Participants were given a copy of the informed consent to read and sign. The researcher also reviewed the informed consent verbally in-person before interviews were conducted to ensure participants' understanding of the process.

The informed consent included the following topics: the purpose of the study, the procedures of the research study, the benefits and possible risks of participating in the study, information regarding confidentiality, and the participant's right to discontinue the study at any time without penalty.

**Interview Procedures.** I interviewed four couples using semi-structured interviews that lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. The interviews were audio and video-taped and I also kept a journal for field notes throughout the interviews. Three central questions were asked of participants: (1) How do you define spirituality? (2) What are your experiences of spirituality in couple's therapy? and (3) What are your experiences of spirituality within your couple relationship? The interviews consisted of these three central questions as well as other prepared open-ended questions and discussion-stimulated questions. (See *Appendix A* for interview questions.) The

participants were compensated for their time with twenty dollar gift cards to a local restaurant.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The present study completed data analysis procedures following the general guidelines set forth for phenomenological research by Creswell (2007). The first step of data analysis encourages the primary researcher to describe their own experiences of the topic of study. During this step, the researchers own biases are recognized in order to better understand how the data may be interpreted. Next, the primary researcher transcribed the interviews. The researcher then created a list of significant statements from the participants' interviews, which is referred to as the horizontalization of the data. The significant statements were then organized into larger categories, or themes, that generally describe the statements. After themes were created, textural descriptions were written to describe what the participants experienced. Structural descriptions were also written in order to describe how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Finally, a full description including both textural and structural descriptions was produced to convey the essence of the experience.

### **Strategies for Validating Findings**

Validation in qualitative research is a process that describes the attempt to assess the accuracy of findings, as determined by the primary researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2007). In order to ensure validation for findings in qualitative research, Creswell (2007) outlines eight different validation strategies and recommends that researchers utilize at least two techniques to engage in the validation process. For the present study, I used five strategies to validate the findings:

*Debriefing* was utilized through working with a thesis committee member.

Debriefing, or peer review, consists of working with a peer debriefer to gain perspective in order to ensure honesty and to promote validation of the findings. This process is particularly important because of the nature of the interviews and the relationship the interviewer has with the research participants' therapists. While the primary researcher did not know the clients who were interviewed prior to the interview, the researcher did know the clients' therapists. As a result, it is especially important to participate in debriefing in order to ensure accurate interpretation of findings and honest results.

*Clarifying researcher bias* describes the primary researcher's past experiences and beliefs that may contribute to their bias in order to provide readers the necessary information to interpret the results.

*Rich, thick descriptions* were used to enable readers to understand the findings and decide the transferability of the results.

*External audits* were performed by consultants to provide a sense of interrater reliability. For the purposes of the present study, the thesis committee was utilized to perform an external audit to help ensure validation for the findings.

*Member checking* was utilized through soliciting participants' views regarding the results of their interviews. Participants were encouraged to provide feedback of the researcher's analysis in order to enhance the accuracy and credibility of the results. The participants reported feeling as though the researcher's analysis was a valid and accurate illustration of their experiences.

## **Anticipated Ethical Issues**

Research with humans is bound to present ethical concerns. The present study acknowledges the risk involved for research participants and attempted to minimize such risks as much as possible. The informed consent notified participants of their rights throughout the study, the purpose of the study, and the protocol for the interview. Participants were reminded that they may cease participating in the study at any time without negative consequences.

Participants may have a concern regarding their confidentiality throughout the course of the study. Because the participants will be actively attending couple's therapy, there may be an especially sensitive concern that other people will discover they are attending therapy, as well as participating in the present study. Because the interviews took place with both members of the couple relationship and the primary researcher present, the participants may also worry their partner will not maintain their confidentiality. Therefore, each individual would take the risk of two people breaking their confidentiality: their partner and the researcher. As a result, the researcher assigned aliases in order to heighten the protection surrounding participants' confidentiality. Also, because of the sensitive information that was shared throughout the interviews, it is important to note that the researcher may have to break confidentiality because of her role as mandatory reporter. Participants were made aware of the instances the researcher would be required to break confidentiality.

## Chapter 4

### Results

Four major themes emerged from the data including: spiritual experiences in couple's therapy, perception of spirituality, spirituality as beneficial, and spirituality as a journey. All of these major themes also included sub-themes. Spiritual experiences in couple's therapy revealed three sub-themes: relevance of spirituality, spirituality as a resource, and comfort level with therapist. Perception of spirituality housed four sub-themes: similarities between spirituality and couple's therapy, spirituality defined as broader than religion, spiritual practices, and spirituality as a sensitive topic. Spirituality as beneficial incorporated three sub-themes: quality time, unity, and few disadvantages. For spirituality as a journey, two sub-themes emerged: spiritual history and spiritual fluctuations.

The following text provides both structural and textural descriptions of each theme. The themes will illustrate the similarities of each couple regarding what they experienced and how the phenomenon was experienced by the couples. Excerpts from the interviews are included to demonstrate the themes and provide rich, thick descriptions.

#### **Spiritual Experiences in Couple's Therapy**

Spiritual experiences in couple's therapy is a major theme that consists of three sub-themes: relevance of spirituality, spirituality as a resource, and comfort level with the therapist.

**Relevance of spirituality.** The relevance of spiritual discussions in therapy played a major role in participants' satisfaction of spiritual experiences in couple's

therapy. Some participants reported high satisfaction of spiritual experiences because spirituality was not relevant in therapy and, as a result, it was not addressed. One participant describes the non-relevance of spirituality in therapy and her satisfaction with the therapeutic process:

I don't feel like its being left out or being ignored. It just isn't a topic that needs to be addressed because it's not prevalent enough in our lives. It doesn't need to be factored in and it isn't an issue.

Another participant explains her views of the role of spirituality in couple's therapy by explaining the relevance of spirituality in the couple relationship:

I mean I think when people are in therapy and they are trying to work through their issues and they know there is something in regards to their spirituality that is an issue, then it should be a part of therapy. I think just like in therapy people talk about other issues that might be taboo at a dinner table like sex and other things like that, religion is usually on that list of things you don't talk about, right? In therapy it's different because that's probably the best time or the most appropriate time to have those discussions.

Furthermore, one client described her experiences of spirituality in couple's therapy. She describes the relevance of spirituality in her relationship and the reason it was discussed in therapy:

I feel like, um, I don't think I would have brought it up in here, in therapy, except for the fact that it was causing like an issue between us. And so I felt it was relevant with what we were talking about at the time. So I don't think, I don't think that necessarily I would have you know, just talked about our religiousness when we were in therapy, you know what I mean?

While spirituality may or may not be explicitly addressed, there is also the possibility of clients implicitly viewing therapy as a spiritual process. For example, one client expressed a spiritual view of the therapeutic process:

Um, I think it's [spirituality] probably like therapy, like to train your life, how you live your life. Like in religion, they give messages on how to be good, to try and shape your personality, and how to be better and stuff. Same thing with therapy, you're trying to shape yourself for the better and improve yourself.

**Spirituality as a resource.** Spirituality can be a useful resource throughout the therapeutic process. Participants often referred to spirituality as an important resource the therapist can utilize to help couples improve their relationship in couple's therapy. One participant described her views of spirituality as a resource for the therapist to recognize and use throughout therapy:

I mean, I think your therapist while they kind of need to be unbiased and things like that, I think that, that [spirituality] is a big issue in people's lives and relationships and I think that could really help or harm how they deal with issues or problems or whatever the word is. Well I think if we were religious then that's like another thing that she [the therapist] can use to help us.

Another participant also emphasized the usefulness of spirituality in couple's therapy by describing the role of clients' values and religion, and the opportunity therapists have to utilize clients' beliefs:

But to "exploit" it [spirituality] if it helps make their marriage better, sure! I think, I mean that's what the therapist's job is, is to find where their common ground is and to build on it. And if religion is something they come in with common ground, then why not build on it?

**Comfort level with therapist.** Participants reported feeling comfortable with their therapist regarding experiences of spirituality. While some participants did not have explicit discussions of spirituality with their therapist, they often reported feeling comfortable with the idea of incorporating spirituality into therapy if it was relevant. One participant described her and her partner's level of comfort with the therapist regarding spiritual discussions when she explained, "Yeah, if it was important or if we had an issue relating to it, I don't think we would have a problem at all."

Participants who did report having discussions of spirituality in couple's therapy also described feeling comfortable with their therapist. One participant explains her experience of spirituality with her therapist when saying, "It had to be pertinent to what we were talking about but it wasn't uncomfortable talking about it at all because it, it was it was something we needed to talk about." Another participant also reported feeling comfortable with the therapist when discussing her views of spirituality: "I was comfortable telling [the therapist] my beliefs."

### **Perception of Spirituality**

Perception of spirituality is a major theme that consists of four sub-themes: similarities between spirituality and couple's therapy, spirituality defined as broader than religion, spiritual practices, and spirituality as a sensitive topic.

**Similarities between spirituality and couple's therapy.** Clients often indicated similarities between the concepts of spirituality and couple's therapy. Some participants described a general sense of self-improvement that was characteristic of both therapy and spirituality. For example, one client described the similarities between her spiritual practices and couple's therapy when she discussed a religious talk-show she listens to on the radio:

It's kind of like therapy for me because they're always talking. The lady that I listen to, she talks about all the time how she interacts with her husband, and like problems that her and her husband have and frustrations and things like that. And

that was super helpful for me when we were having problems. Listening to that was helpful for me.

Another participant also illustrated similarities between his perceptions of spirituality and therapy when he described the benefits he experiences from spirituality and couple's therapy:

They [spirituality and couple's therapy] encourage you to be more positive, you know, in your relationship too. Sometimes it teaches you or like some messages ... about like, how couples argue, and then they tell you how to deal with them in a better way or how to be more patient and stuff like that, you know.

Similarly, another participant described similarities between spiritual practices and couple's therapy when she discussed her experiences of attending church and therapy:

I think they both [church and couple's therapy] talk about things that you need to practice in your everyday life. Like when you come to therapy, you talk about things that you do to, you know, help your interaction on a regular basis, or things like that. And I think at church they talked about things like that too.

**Spirituality defined as broader than religion.** Spirituality is often conceptualized as broader than the definition of religion. While religion often falls

within the category of spirituality, spirituality does not necessarily equate to religion. Although many participants identified as both religious and spiritual, most participants recognized a difference between the two terms. It is important that therapists recognize clients' definition of spirituality in order to better understand the clients' spiritualities and to better honor and respect clients' beliefs. One participant described the difference between spirituality and religion:

Yeah and I guess to add something to spirituality, spirituality to me is not necessarily going to church or listening to a preacher tell you what he thinks. Spirituality is how you are within yourself and your relationship with God or whoever (points up to the sky). It's your spirituality. Spirituality doesn't necessarily mean God necessarily.

Similarly, another participant described spirituality by distinguishing between religion and spirituality:

Just the belief in something bigger. It's you know, that there's a God or a lot of other religions say there are a lot of different gods. Or even something like karma or something like that. Just something bigger. I don't think you have to be religious or be in a certain religion to be spiritual.

While some participants did not specifically address the difference between religion and spirituality, they often described spirituality in very broad terms. One

participant defined spirituality as, “I’d say my definition is, you know, you’re view of a higher power, and you know what kind of guides you to do the things you do and then kind of where you think you’re going to go.”

**Spiritual Practices.** While spirituality was often conceptualized as being broadly defined, it was also linked to spiritual practices. When discussing spirituality, many participants gravitated towards discussing tangible practices, such as attending church. One participant describes spirituality by listing different spiritual practices:

I think spirituality can be a lot of things. You know, teaching our children Bible songs... I mean, I think like singing more of the little children’s songs. I think all of that is sort of just incorporating it into your life, saying prayer, you know, or saying your blessing for dinner, saying bedtime prayers with the children before they go to bed. I mean there’s other things you can do that sort of you know, show your spirituality without necessarily going to church.

Another participant explained that many other people view spirituality in terms of spiritual practices. She described her feelings of spirituality and its association with attending church:

It’s like most people do define it as how often you go to church, like how often you are involved in church things versus like, and, versus you know other things I guess. So no, I wouldn’t say that. Um, I don’t think that most people would think

that I was spiritual at all but I am. I just, I just I mean, it's my own thing or it has been for a long time.

Participants also tended to view spirituality in couple's therapy in terms of spiritual practices. For example, when asked about the idea of the therapist incorporating spirituality into couple's therapy, many participants responded with answers regarding specific spiritual practices. One participant expressed hesitation regarding the inclusion of spirituality in therapy because of her fear of being directed on specific spiritual practices, "Um but, but if we had been in therapy and someone said, you know, 'maybe you guys should begin attending church together' I would have been like 'ok, that's not the answer'." Another participant also expressed her feelings regarding the role of spiritual practices in therapy when she explained her openness to the idea of spirituality in couple's therapy, but her discomfort with the idea of the therapist directing her to participate in specific spiritual practices:

If someone ... had a spiritual approach that, I would be open to it, if that makes sense. See it depends, like it wouldn't be [acceptable] if they [the therapist] came in here and said "well you need to go to church and that will fix everything". But if they could, if the root of what they were trying to do or how they were trying to help us was spiritual or religious, I would of course be open to it.

**Spirituality as a Sensitive Topic.** Spirituality is often surrounded by a societal sensitivity and uneasiness. Many participants described spirituality as a sensitive topic to

discuss in social situations. It is important for therapists to understand clients' apprehension regarding conversations of spirituality in order to understand how to delicately approach the topic in therapy. One participant described his discomfort when discussing spirituality with friends and people outside of his couple relationship:

I mean, I've got friends that I don't talk about it [spirituality] with. Just because I know, you know, I know some people I can talk about it with and say my opinion and they're fine with it, but you know, other people, you know it could, you know they're not ready or willing to listen to certain things.

Similarly, another participant described the sensitivity surrounding spirituality and religion when she said, "People don't talk about that stuff though. You're not supposed to talk about politics and you're not supposed to talk about religion."

Furthermore, one participant described other people's discomfort when he does try to discuss spirituality, "Like I was talking to my hair guy about religion and you can tell he can't stand it. Like man, why do you get tense about it?"

While spirituality is considered to be a sensitive topic, most participants reported feeling comfortable discussing spirituality with their partner, even though they did not feel comfortable discussing it outside of the relationship. One client expressed her comfort level when talking about spirituality with her partner versus her irritation when discussing spirituality with people outside of the couple relationship:

Yeah same thing, with him I could talk about it all day long, but other people I feel, and I guess that's another kind of issue I have is that people who are religious don't accept that simple no thanks, I'm not interested you know, and they're trying to keep you, and again this is probably generalization but I think a lot of people, you know I think we have one friend, the one who saw a ghost, who is religious, knows we're not, and hasn't made that an issue. Most people who find that out, they want to ask us to go to church with them and this and that and we just politely say no, because like he said, it becomes an issue if we say our beliefs and that kind of irks me.

### **Spirituality as Beneficial**

Three sub-themes emerged while couples described their beneficial experiences of spirituality within their relationship and in couple's counseling. These sub-themes included quality time, unity, and few disadvantages.

**Quality time.** Spirituality was often described as being beneficial for couple relationships because of the time spent together while participating in spiritual practices. Participants explained that spending quality time together seemed to enhance their levels of intimacy and relationship satisfaction. It may be helpful for therapists to understand the quality time clients' experience from spiritual practices in order to understand the potential for increased levels of relationship satisfaction. One participant described her experience of attending church with her husband and the heightened sense of intimacy she felt when leaving a church service:

We usually like, either, usually on the way, afterwards, we like, there's some dialogue. You know, something they talked about, or something just random as the lightning, you know at least we have conversation about it .... So usually I have found that afterwards you know, I think we come out feeling a little better, a little closer, and we do talk.

Quality time was also described as a potential healing source for relationships that were experiencing distress. Some clients reported utilizing spiritual practices to increase quality time with their partner while also participating in couple's therapy to improve their relationship. For example, one participant described using spiritual practices to increase quality time spent with his wife in order to improve their relationship after they had been experiencing marital distress:

But I really started going back [to church] when we started having issues and I just wanted to be together as a family and spending more time together more often. You know, so I think that kind of helped... I think it was more me making the effort to go and be with her in the mornings. And, just kind of going out of your way to do something together. You know, let's go, let's be together. Even if this isn't what we want to be doing right now, we're going to go and make the effort and sacrifice to go do this together.

The benefits of spending quality time together while participating in spiritual practices were also made apparent by participants expressing a desire to increase the level

of participation in spiritual practices. For example, one participant described the lack of quality time spent with her husband and the desire to increase their participation in spiritual practices in order to enhance the quality time they spend together:

And honestly I think, I mean, when I hear about couples who do go to church and they're talking about what they've learned, I almost wish that we had that. You know, that we could go and we could have that weekly time set aside and that would be something to talk about, stuff to talk about.

**Unity.** Spirituality is often beneficial for couples because of the increased feelings of unity between the two partners. Clients often described both spiritual and therapeutic experiences as opportunities to increase feelings of unity between the couple. For example, one participant described the beneficial consequence of increased unity as a result of going to church with his partner when he said, "Yeah, that was a way to be more unified. Mmhmm. And working together."

Some clients described their spiritual beliefs as having similar benefits as couple's therapy because they are both ways to improve communication skills and as a result, increase feelings of unity. When couples have a shared sense of spirituality, they may have a clearer understanding of each other's expectations and the roles they each fulfill as partners. One participant illustrated the unity that results from sharing similar spiritual views when she said:

Its definitely beneficial for the couple to kind of live by the same standards. And I think that's what a lot of religions do, kind of set a standard. It keeps each other accountable in a lot of ways and, you know. Not just in the relationship but as a person as a whole, it keeps you on a good track I guess.

The role of spirituality within a couple relationship may also enhance the feelings of unity by increasing levels of commitment each partner has to the relationship. One participant expressed beneficial consequences of a shared sense of spirituality by describing the levels of commitment in a relationship:

I think that when people have a good relationship with God and are spiritual because they want to live their lives as He would want us to live, there tends to be a higher level of commitment, not just to your relationship with God, but I believe that people who are capable of that commitment to God are usually, or should be, more committed to their relationship with their other person.

**Few Disadvantages.** Very few disadvantages of incorporating spirituality into the couple relationship and couple's therapy were reported. Most participants indicated that spirituality was beneficial in both couple's therapy and couple relationships. When one participant was asked about the disadvantages of spirituality, he responded by saying,

I think um, I think it can be very beneficial, especially if you both share that same spirituality. It's like another thing to bond over, another thing to relate to. And I

also think it helps people to live more moral lives, which I think is a wonderful thing, you know, because they believe they are being judged on what they do every day by God. So I think it's, it's really powerful and it's great for relationships because it holds people accountable. Um, yeah, I don't see any negatives to it.

Another participant described the lack of disadvantages regarding spirituality in the couple relationship and therapy when couples share the same sense of spirituality, "You know I think that if both couples are in agreement and they you know, believe, and that's a shared belief, you know I don't think there's anything detrimental about it."

### **Spirituality as a Journey**

Spirituality as a journey is a major theme that emerged from the interviews. Two sub-themes were revealed within the major theme as participants described their spiritual journey: spiritual history and spiritual fluctuations.

**Spiritual history.** Spiritual history is an important factor for clients to feel understood by both the therapist and their partner. Participants often referred to their past experiences and their personal history of spirituality to explain their current beliefs and experiences. While discussing her perspective on spirituality, one participant explained the relevance of her past and why it would be important for the therapist to have an understanding of her spiritual experiences:

'Cuz I think that that's like, the way that I grew up religious is like, you know it's a valid background to why I think a lot of the things I think and um, it's an important part of a lot of people's lives and definitely can cause issues in your relationships. So with all those things in mind, I don't think it would be bad to ask about it [spirituality].

In addition to encouraging the therapist to understand the client's spiritual history, it is also important for the therapist to help couples to be aware of their partner's spiritual history. Participants indicated that it was important for their partner to understand their spiritual history in order to understand their current feelings and experiences. One participant expressed the relevance of spiritual history as important in helping to better understand her partner:

I mean we never really have a disagreement over anything; it's more just like discussions of why he believes what he believes. And now I know because of his dad growing up, and I was raised where we go to church so maybe that's why I'm more open to something being out there.

Recognizing both partners' spiritual journeys can be beneficial for couple's therapists in order to facilitate greater understanding between partners regarding their views and spiritual practices. One participant illustrated how her partner's spiritual history was able to shed light on the differences she observed in her partner's spiritual

practices. She explains how she was able to better understand her partner's actions as a result of knowing his spiritual history:

Every night when I lie down I say a prayer, and usually every morning when I get up I say a little prayer. So, and I have done that for years. Um, I don't know that he really does that. I don't know that it is as active part of his life. I mean, and I don't think there is a criticism in that, I think it is probably just a difference in how we were raised, just the role religion played in our life growing up.

Understanding one's partner's spiritual history was also reported to be important in conflict management. Therapists may find their client's spiritual histories to be an important resource to utilize in order to help their clients better understand one another and improve conflict management strategies. One couple discussed a conflict they experienced because of differences regarding spiritual practices. While discussing the conflict, one partner described coming to an understanding of the reasons his partner would not attend church with him as a key factor to resolving the conflict:

It's just, everybody is at a different level about church or how they feel about church. Like she, she was really like, made to go to church. Like she had to go to church or they would really judge her so she had a really negative, kind of a negative attitude about going to church.

**Spiritual fluctuations.** Fluctuation in one's spirituality is an important aspect of understanding one's spiritual journey. People often find that they are more spiritual at different points of their lives, their partner's spirituality fluctuates throughout their relationship, and the couple's shared sense of spirituality varies at different times. Participants reported spiritual fluctuations and differences as a vital component of their spirituality and understanding their spiritual experiences. Many participants indicated that their spiritual journey and the changes they have experienced play an important role in the planning of the couple's future shared sense of spirituality and spiritual practices. Understanding clients' spiritual fluctuations may play an important role for therapists to understand their clients' future goals for their relationship. One participant illustrated changes in her spirituality and her shared spirituality with her spouse by comparing her past to her present, and wishes for the couple's future:

I wasn't raised in religion so I'm trying to figure out what I want to pursue and what I don't. I know I want it in my life but I just don't know in what form. So I think we're starting to go to church together and starting to incorporate that more into our, I know we both want to incorporate that more into our home setting we are just taking baby steps, like putting the Bible on the ipad is a baby step. We haven't really brought it in a whole lot but we're trying to incorporate that more into our relationship.

Similarly, another participant described her spiritual past experiences to explain the changes she has witnessed in her spiritual practices:

I grew up Presbyterian and we weren't, when I was little, little we went every single Sunday and went to Mother's Day Out, we were in daycare there, my mom worked there, and then there was just a really horrible incident where people were just extremely rude to my mom (begins crying). And I honestly think that that's where, maybe I stopped.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

The present study found that the essence of clients' experiences of spirituality in couple's therapy is comprised of four major themes and multiple sub-themes. These themes illustrate the phenomenon by providing both textural and structural descriptions. The findings of the present study demonstrate both similarities and differences to the current literature regarding spirituality in couple's therapy.

Spirituality is a topic that encompasses multiple possibilities within the therapy room. When spirituality is considered throughout the couple's therapy process, it has the potential to reveal several benefits for improving couple relationships. Increasing emotional intimacy is one key consequence of a couple's shared sense of spirituality. Several participants described feeling higher levels of commitment to the relationship and increased levels of emotional intimacy when they experienced a shared sense of spirituality with their partner. This finding supports much of the literature that examines beneficial aspects of spirituality for couples. For example, Hatch (1986) found that spiritual intimacy is associated with increased emotional intimacy, which improves marital satisfaction.

A shared sense of spirituality may help to enhance couples' intimacy through the use of spiritual practices. Spending quality time together as a couple is one important benefit that many couples experience as a result of their shared spirituality. This finding is supported by existing literature regarding shared spiritual practices. A shared sense of spirituality often translates into spending quality time together while participating in spiritual practices. Couples who routinely attend religious services have the lowest risk

of divorce, whereas couples who differ in their spiritual practices were at an increased risk of marital dissolution (Call & Heaton, 1997). In addition, couples who are regularly involved in spiritual practices tend to report greater levels of intimacy (Benioff, 2007). Couples' participation in spiritual practices often increases the amount of quality time the couple experiences, and therefore has the possibility to increase emotional intimacy and improve overall relationship functioning.

In order to enhance feelings of intimacy within the couple, it may be especially important to consider clients' spiritual journeys. Participants tended to stress the importance of their spiritual histories and the relevance of their histories on their current and future belief systems. This finding was emphasized by all of the participants, but it is not evident in the current literature. The clients' spiritual histories seemed to be an especially important resource for the clients to inform their partner and therapist about their spiritual beliefs and experiences. Participants often explained their spiritual history and the way in which they were raised to help their partner and the researcher to understand their current spiritual beliefs and practices. Clients may use their spiritual journeys to construct narratives to describe their experiences and the reasons for their current identity and spiritual practices. These narratives can be used by couples to assist their partner and therapist to better understand their experiences as a way to gain intimacy with their significant other.

Spiritual fluctuations throughout the couples' individual lives and shared sense of spirituality are especially important for understanding clients' spiritual journeys. Participants often described varying periods of spiritual involvement throughout their lives and their couple relationship. Key moments throughout clients' spiritual histories

may have enormous impacts on the clients' beliefs and current spiritual practices. It may be especially important to assist couples to understand their partner's key spiritual experiences in order to encourage empathy and increase the couple's level of intimacy. Enabling couples to hear and empathize with their partner's spiritual journey and important spiritual experiences can result in stronger levels of intimacy and an improved relationship.

Spirituality can be perceived as having conceptual similarities with couple's therapy. Participants discussed both spirituality and couple's therapy in terms of self-improvement, change, and the potential benefits for couple relationships. The current literature does not emphasize the similarities between spirituality and couple's therapy or the implications of such findings. However, the benefits of a shared sense of spirituality between couples are often concepts clients hope to improve in the context of couple's therapy. For example, clients may seek couple's therapy to enhance emotional intimacy, improve sexual satisfaction, or increase feelings of unity. Because spirituality has been associated with similar beneficial experiences (Benioff, 2007; Landry, 2002; Hatch, 1986), a shared sense of spirituality is also a potential avenue for achieving positive change and improving couple relationships.

The commonalities between spirituality and couple's therapy may also lead clients to view couple's therapy as a spiritual process. Couples may use their spiritual beliefs as a lens to interpret couple's therapy and the goals for their relationship. Gockel (2011) found that clients' spirituality often informs their expectations of the therapeutic process. It is important for therapists to recognize the role of their clients' spiritual beliefs in couple's therapy in order to have a clear understanding of their clients' beliefs

regarding therapy. If the therapist addresses spirituality and recognizes the impact that clients' spirituality has on the therapeutic process, they may be better prepared to work with the couple and improve therapeutic outcomes.

While clients may experience couple's therapy through the lens of their spiritual beliefs, therapy can also have an impact on clients' spirituality. Mayers et al. (2007) found that many clients reported that their spiritual beliefs were strengthened throughout the therapeutic process. Because of the intimate nature and commonalities between spirituality and couple's therapy, at times it may be difficult to distinguish differences between the two concepts throughout the therapeutic process. For example, clients may have spiritual experiences while in couple's therapy. It is important to recognize the symbiotic relationship between couple's therapy and spirituality and the possible coexistence of both concepts throughout the therapeutic process.

### **Clinical Implications**

The results of the present study produce multiple implications for clinicians. While the findings can be interpreted from multiple theoretical perspectives, three theories will be applied to illustrate the clinical implications. The relevance of spirituality in couple's therapy will be examined through the lens of emotionally focused therapy, narrative therapy, and the work of John Gottman.

Emotionally focused therapy (EFT) for couples highlights the importance of partners experiencing emotion together in order to increase intimacy and satisfy attachment needs (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). Exploring the topic of spirituality with couples is a potential avenue for creating experiential moments that contribute to the couple's level of intimacy. EFT describes intimacy in the couple relationship as

accepting one's partner for their true self (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). Using the lens of EFT, clients may view both spirituality and couple's therapy as avenues to increase their levels of intimacy in order to gain true acceptance from their partners and satisfy their attachment needs. Couple's therapists can help clients to increase intimacy by creating emotional experiences regarding spirituality. For example, therapists can explore couples' spiritual journeys in order to recreate powerful moments for the couple to experience together. Clinicians can identify key moments throughout clients' spiritual histories that evoke especially strong emotions. After identifying important spiritual experiences, therapists can assist couples to discuss and re-experience the key moments together in order to encourage empathy and understanding between partners. Through participating in meaningful experiences together as a couple, the therapist is able to facilitate a growing sense of intimacy and connection between the partners.

Exploring clients' spirituality in couple's therapy is also relevant from a narrative therapy perspective. Narrative therapy is based on the narrative metaphor, the concept that people's sense of reality is constructed through the stories they create and how those stories help them to interpret and explain their lives (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008). Couple's therapists can examine clients' spiritual narratives to understand their beliefs and the ways in which they view themselves, their partner, and their relationship. Utilizing couples' spiritual journeys may be especially helpful for recognizing parts of the client's narrative that may be especially negative or self-defeating. Through working with a couple's spiritual narratives, therapists can identify thin descriptions that contaminate the couple's relationship. Couple's therapists can begin to expand clients' narratives by thickening their descriptions and allowing for new possibilities. For

example, couples may be experiencing conflict and disagreements because they are not able to clearly communicate with one another. Through exploring clients' spiritual journeys, couples may be able to begin to hear and empathize with their partner's spiritual experiences. When couples are able to hear and listen to their partner's narrative, their thin descriptions may begin to widen to incorporate their partner's experiences and beliefs. As a result of thickened spiritual narratives and broader thinking that can encompass empathy for their partner, couples are enabled to explore new possibilities that can improve relationship functioning and increase emotional intimacy.

Clients' spiritual journeys may also be a helpful resource to utilize during conflict management. John Gottman (Gottman, 1999) describes couple's therapy as a process to enable clients to effectively manage conflict and repair negative interactions. Exploring spirituality may be one way to help clients improve their conflict management skills through helping couples to recognize their partner's spiritual journey. Through a better understanding of their partner's spiritual history, couples may be able to better understand their partner's current spiritual actions and the reasons supporting their spiritual beliefs.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of the present study exist that may impact the results and the implications of the findings. All of the participants were recruited from the University of Kentucky Family Center. While the study intended to recruit clients from other clinics in the community and is continuing to do so, only clients from the Family Center agreed to participate in the study. A more diverse population with participants from various therapeutic settings would improve the validity of the findings. Through having more

participants from other therapy organizations, the participants would be able to provide different experiences that would provide a deeper understanding and a clearer depiction of the role of spirituality in couple's therapy. While the findings reveal important results, participants from other agencies would enhance the descriptions and would provide richer illustrations of the phenomenon that would enrich the validity of the results.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of the present study encourage future research in several areas. The conceptual similarities between spirituality and couple's therapy is a major theme that was revealed from the data and is not evident in the current research. Future research should be done on this topic to better understand clients' views of couple's therapy and their expectations of the therapeutic process.

Spirituality as a journey is a key component of the results and is not adequately represented in current spirituality research. Further research on clients' spiritual histories and fluctuations could offer a better understanding of the role of clients' spiritual journeys in couple's therapy and couple relationships.

*Appendix A*

**Interview Protocol**

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**Current Study:** Clients' Experiences of Spirituality in Couple's Therapy

**Central Questions:**

1. How do you define spirituality?
2. What are your experiences of spirituality in therapy?
3. What are your experiences with spirituality in your couple relationship?

**Sub-Questions:**

1. How do you think your therapist defines spirituality?
2. What is the role of spirituality in your personal life?
3. What is the role of spirituality in your relationship?
4. What is the role of spirituality in couple's therapy?
5. How comfortable do you feel discussing spirituality with your partner?
6. How comfortable do you feel discussing spirituality in couple's therapy?
7. How do you experience your therapist when discussing spirituality?
8. What are the benefits of discussing spirituality in couple's therapy?
9. What are the disadvantages of discussing spirituality in couple's therapy?
10. Do you feel satisfied with the way in which spirituality is or is not incorporated in couple's therapy? How so?
11. Who initiates discussions of spirituality in therapy? What are these experiences like?

Appendix B

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:  Male  Female

What is your current relationship status? (Circle one)

- 1. Married How long? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Living with partner How long? \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Dating How long? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you known your current partner? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your religious affiliation? (Circle number)

- 1. Protestant (e.g., Baptist, Lutheran, etc.) Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Catholic
- 3. Jewish
- 4. None
- 5. Non-denominational
- 6. Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

How do you define your ethnicity? (Circle all that apply)

- 1. White (Caucasian)
- 2. African-American
- 3. Hispanic
- 4. Native American
- 5. Asian
- 6. Pacific Islander
- 7. Other (Please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

How would you describe your total household annual income? (Circle number)

- |                    |                    |                      |
|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| 1. \$0 – 9,999     | 2. \$10,000-19,999 | 3. \$20,000-29,999   |
| 4. \$30,000-39,999 | 5. \$40,000-49,999 | 6. \$50,000-59,999   |
| 7. \$60,000-69,999 | 8. \$70,000-79,999 | 9. \$80,000 or above |
-

Appendix C



Office of Research Integrity  
IRB, IACUC, RDRC  
315 Kinlead Hall  
Lexington, KY 40506-0057  
859 257-9428  
fax 859 257-8995  
[www.research.uky.edu/ori/](http://www.research.uky.edu/ori/)

Initial Review

Approval Ends  
January 31, 2013

IRB Number  
11-0975-P4S

TO: Jillian Puckett, B.S.  
315 Funkhouser  
0054  
PI phone #: (614) 725-7951

FROM: Chairperson/Vice Chairperson  
Non-medical Institutional Review Board (IRB)

SUBJECT: Approval of Protocol Number 11-0975-P4S

DATE: February 2, 2012

On February 2, 2012, the Non-medical Institutional Review Board approved your protocol entitled:

*Clients' Experiences of Spirituality in Couple's Therapy*

Approval is effective from February 2, 2012 until January 31, 2013 and extends to any consent/assent form, cover letter, and/or phone script. If applicable, attached is the IRB approved consent/assent document(s) to be used when enrolling subjects. **[Note, subjects can only be enrolled using consent/assent forms which have a valid "IRB Approval" stamp unless special waiver has been obtained from the IRB.]** Prior to the end of this period, you will be sent a Continuation Review Report Form which must be completed and returned to the Office of Research Integrity so that the protocol can be reviewed and approved for the next period.

In implementing the research activities, you are responsible for complying with IRB decisions, conditions and requirements. The research procedures should be implemented as approved in the IRB protocol. It is the principal investigators responsibility to ensure any changes planned for the research are submitted for review and approval by the IRB prior to implementation. Protocol changes made without prior IRB approval to eliminate apparent hazards to the subject(s) should be reported in writing immediately to the IRB. Furthermore, discontinuing a study or completion of a study is considered a change in the protocol's status and therefore the IRB should be promptly notified in writing.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records and Documentation of Human Subjects Research" from the Office of Research Integrity's Guidance and Policy Documents web page [<http://www.research.uky.edu/ori/human/guidance.htm#PIresp>]. Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through ORI's web site [<http://www.research.uky.edu/ori>]. If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at (859) 257-9428.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "N. Van Tubergen Ph.D." with a stylized initial "ah" at the end.

Chairperson/Vice Chairperson



Office of Research Integrity  
IRB, IACUC, RDRC  
315 Kinkead Hall  
Lexington, KY 40506-0057  
859 257-9428  
fax 859 257-8995  
www.research.uky.edu/ori/

Study Personnel, Recruitment, Procedures, Consent, Research Description

Modification Review                      Approval Ends                      IRB Number  
January 31, 2013                      11-0975-P4S

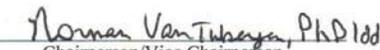
TO:                      Jillian Puckett, B.S.  
                                 315 Funkhouser  
                                 0054  
                                 PI phone #: (614)725-7951  
  
FROM:                      Chairperson/Vice Chairperson  
                                 Institutional Review Board (IRB)  
  
SUBJECT:                      Approval of Modification Request for Protocol 11-0975-P4S  
  
DATE:                      February 20, 2012

On February 17, 2012, the Institutional Review Board approved your request for modifications in your protocol entitled:

*Clients' Experiences of Spirituality in Couple's Therapy*

If your modification request necessitated a change in your approved informed consent/assent form(s), attached is the new IRB approved consent/assent form(s) to be used when enrolling subjects. [Note, subjects can only be enrolled using informed consent/assent forms which have a valid "IRB Approval" stamp, unless waiver from this requirement was granted by the IRB.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records and Documentation of Human Subjects Research" from the Office of Research Integrity's Guidance and Policy Documents web page [<http://www.research.uky.edu/ori/human/guidance.htm#PIresp>]. Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through ORI's web site [<http://www.research.uky.edu/ori>]. If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at (859) 257-9428.

  
Chairperson/Vice Chairperson

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## VITA

Jillian Puckett was born on October 28, 1987 in Muncie, IN.

### EDUCATION

The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH  
B.S. in Human Ecology, 2010  
Minors in Women's Studies and Education

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Department of Family Studies, University of Kentucky  
Research assistant, 2010-2012

University of Kentucky Family Center  
Marriage and Family Therapist Intern, 2010-2012

### PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCES & WORKSHOPS

Kentucky Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (KAMFT) Conference.  
Louisville, KY, 2010

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) National Conference,  
Fort Worth, TX, 2010

Family Psychological Services, Reaching Children Through Play Therapy Workshop,  
Lexington, KY, 2011

Kentucky Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (KAMFT), Emotionally Focused  
Therapy for Couples Workshop, Louisville, KY 2010

### PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAFMT)  
Kentucky Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (KAMFT)  
University of Kentucky Student Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (SAMFT)