

A Phenomenological Exploration of How One Partner's Religious Change Impacts Their
Couple Relationship

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Terri Karis", is written over a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

This investigation is a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry into the experiences of four couples where one partner underwent a religious or spiritual change after their marriage. Data analysis explored themes among the individuals, couples, and group of couples. The experiences of these couples, though unique, had some common elements. These included the idea that the religious or spiritual change was a positive thing for the changed individual, that things got worse in the marriage relationship after the change before they got better, that the change impacted the couple relationship in both positive and negative ways, and that none of the individuals wished that the changed persons had not made the religious/spiritual change. Issues of conflict, isolation, acceptance, and accommodation were explored. Ideas for further research and for application are discussed.

Religious Change in Marriage

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Chapter One

Introduction

"... we believe that unity within diversity adds a richness and beauty to marriage and to life."

-The Rev. Tom Chulak, *Unitarian-Universalist*

Congregation of the Palisades in Englewood NJ.

(Religious Tolerance, 2005)

"Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? "

- St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:14-15

(Bible Gateway)

Marriage between people of different religious/spiritual beliefs and practices is common. Perceptions of these unions vary as broadly as the faiths that represent them. Beliefs regarding religious traditions other than one's own are largely responsible for the attitudes toward mixed-faith marriage (Religious Tolerance, 2005). Religions which believe that they have exclusive knowledge of the whole truth are less likely to be accepting of mixed-faith unions while those which believe that spiritual truths are multiple and overlapping are more likely to approve of mixed-faith unions and may even encourage them. Religious diversity may be viewed as enriching or compromising, facilitating or resisting spiritual and personal growth. In any case, change itself can be a challenge for couples, and transition that widens the gap between integral beliefs of marriage partners can be even more challenging. This study looks at and seeks to learn from that transition with four couples, following the change from its inception and through various transitions to the present.

History of the Researcher

As the daughter of a Pentecostal preacher, I have spent much of my lifetime on a church pew - hearing the passionate preaching, listening to the full bodied sound of the gospel style organ, rolling marbles under the pew to my friend a couple of rows down, falling asleep during prayer meetings, and watching members of the congregation.

One common message that I received was that it was important to “marry in the church.” Teachers, preachers, and evangelists uniformly delivered this message. At youth camps we were admonished to date within our faith. Church members who had a spouse “out of the church” and requested prayer for their loved one and their children, sometimes every Sunday for decades, reinforced the message. Certainly, I grew up with a strong impression that it was best for couples to share the same religious faith. I also had a mental picture of the enduring partner who came to church week after week, admirably sticking with the spouse despite the many challenges. When speaking with my friends of other Christian denominations - Catholic, Wesleyan, and Baptist among others - I noticed that they were receiving similar messages. What I did not think about as much was the perspective of the other person - the partner who was not present in his or her spouse’s religious life. More specifically, I wondered about those couples that married in one circumstance that was changed by one partner making a religious or spiritual change not shared by the other partner. This was of interest to me because these couples could not foresee the potential challenges in their relationship due to mixed faith at the time they committed to one another in marriage.

Upon entering graduate school in the Mental Health Counseling Program, I began to look at families more holistically and through the more objective eye of a therapist and consumer of research. As I continued to hear church members request prayer for the spouse “not in the

church,” I wondered what it was really like for a couple to marry in one circumstance and then try to negotiate the relationship when that circumstance changes - in this case, when one person “gets religion.” Because of my upbringing I naturally sympathized with the person who had chosen to embrace their newfound faith. Now, I also realized that “unchurched” persons might legitimately feel themselves in a relationship that they had not anticipated. It seemed possible that they would feel that a change in their relationship had been imposed upon them because their partner had changed. I also became aware of recent books and radio broadcasts by Christian authors that had a much more positive spin on these relationships, claiming that there were undeniable challenges, but that these marriages can still be happy and satisfying - even if the unchurched partner never chooses to convert. After years of exposure to this situation from one perspective and several pews away, I realized that I really knew very little about the actual experience of living this situation, and, since it is a common one, set out to discover more.

Potential Benefits of Studying this Topic

Curiosity, while helpful in motivation, is not a sufficient impetus for many (including me) to embark upon such a consuming task as research. It was important that the information resulting from this study have potential to be useful. To me, this study seemed to have that potential and be long overdue.

Couples and families may find themselves in a number of challenging situations. Some of them will choose to seek help from friends, spiritual leaders, or professionals. Couples who have conflict or at least major differences in their world-views may have more difficulty in finding agreement about who can best address their issues. Certainly, non-religious partners may not feel as comfortable receiving counseling from the clergy of their spouse. Similarly, religious persons may believe that a secular therapist will be unable to fully appreciate their spiritual life and

commitment. A related point is that most therapists are not trained to work with spiritual issues and most religious leaders are not trained to work therapeutically, leaving mixed-faith couples in a neverland for finding the best sources of help for themselves.

It would be helpful both for spiritual leaders and for secular therapists to be more knowledgeable about the unique challenges that these couples face. It would be helpful for partners to be more knowledgeable about “the course” that is ahead of them and how other couples and families have navigated through times of personal change, relational transition, reorganization of expectations and roles, and different ways of being a couple and family. This study provides the beginning step in describing this process - if there even is a common process - that couples may progress through.

I hope that this study serves as an exploration that sparks related interests for the reader. The results suggest a beginning understanding of commonalities and differences among couples, providing a sense of direction that could be narrowed for further study. My hope is that the project also provided a few couples the comfort of knowing that others are facing the same kinds of challenges they are and that someone cares enough to do a thesis about it. In any case, I believe there to be potential usefulness in this topic and hope that this study will in some fashion result in couples and families feeling better able to meet the challenges of spiritual difference.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

*To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary.
To one without faith, no explanation is possible.*

-St. Thomas Aquinas, 1225-1274 (Quotations Page)

Humanity's first sin was faith; the first virtue was doubt.
-Unknown (Quotations Page)

Ever since science has supplanted religion as the dominant culture's way of knowing about ourselves and our environment, there has been an antagonism between the two. Science has become the intellectual mainstay of our contemporary, largely humanistic, modern society. And yet, religion and spirituality have endured, continuing to provide a foundation for the values of our society. The intellectual elite are less likely to believe in God than are those with lower levels of education (Harris Poll, 2005). This is true in the field of psychology as well as in other fields. Bergin and Jensen (as cited in Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001) conducted a national survey on religiosity and psychotherapy. They found that, while 72% of the general population agreed that religious faith was the most important influence in their lives, only 33% of psychologists agreed with the same statement.

After decades of science and religion settling into a grudging tolerance of one another, a new relationship has begun to emerge between them. That is, rather than being in two separate camps, there arose a third position with goals to integrate the best of both world-views. This is evident in debates about stem cell research and its scientific value weighed against the ethics (largely morally based) rooted in religious or spiritual beliefs. It has also become evident in the area of research where the scientific study of religion has become a "hot topic." Scientific journals such as the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* have sprung up to address this integration. In my search for literature on the topic of families, marriage, and

religion/spirituality, I found an increasing number of articles beginning in the late 1970s through the eighties and nineties. In recent years, there have been reviews of articles and critiques of the original research. There has also been more careful research on the topic that addresses some of the problems with the research from the past twenty-five years. Some of these problems include samples consisting of largely white, middle class, Christian participants and a lack of longitudinal studies. Empirically driven rather than theoretically driven data was also cited as a problem because of the lack of framework or organization for the data.

One thing emerges as important - it is wise to consider religion and spirituality when working therapeutically with individuals, couples, and families. Snarey and Dollahite (2001) discuss the popularity of the topic of religion in current research and suggest that religion interacts in the deepest dimensions of the psyche - influencing attitudes, behaviors, and personal ideology. Therefore, it makes sense that it be considered when working with couples and families. Some warn that while it is important that therapists consider religion and spirituality as vital to many families, they not feel compelled to address religion in a substantive way as most are not qualified to do so (Mark, 2004).

Having considered the changing relationship between science and religion, the connections between religion/spirituality and behavior, attitudes, relationships, marriage, and family will now be explored. The breadth of the literature review was important to this study because I could find no research on the experience of mixed-faith married couples. In fact, there was very little research done on the prevalence of mixed-faith marriage and its correlation to other factors such as marital satisfaction or marital adjustment. By looking at the different ways that religion and spirituality interact with individuals, couples, and families, I could begin to build a mental framework for organizing the study and its results. This was difficult because

of the volume and variety of research as well as the lack of solid theory to guide the investigation. Given this, I decided to begin the literature review broadly and slowly narrowed it to this particular study. I did this in hopes of finding some themes that might inform this study, even if they were not on the specific subject of this study. There were two studies that did specifically discuss mixed-faith marriages in some way (e.g. divorce rates for mixed-faith couples). These were as particular as I could find to the topic of this investigation. The first task, however, was to consider the ideas of religion and spirituality themselves, as both terms are used throughout the literature and in this study.

Religiosity and Spirituality

The research reviewed for this study has different ways of looking at religiosity and spirituality. Social science has traditionally defined religion as the more behaviorally-based and external dimension of organized spiritual activity and spirituality as the more intrinsic dimension, such as attitudes and values (Pargament as cited in Marler & Hadaway, 2002). Most of the research defines religion and spirituality in this way - using church attendance or observance of religious rituals as measures of religion and personal prayer or perceived influence of the Divine on the personal realm as measures of spirituality. Marler and Hadaway (2002) conducted a study that examined the notion that Americans are becoming more spiritual and less religious. In the course of the research they looked at the traditional way that religion and spirituality have been studied in the United States - with one being exclusive of the other. Their most significant finding was that most Americans view themselves as being both religious and spiritual. The complexity of the definitions of spirituality and religion is just one of the factors that makes it difficult to sort out the many relationships shown in the research.

In this investigation, I used the definitions of “religious” and “spiritual” as commonly used in the social sciences and described above. Among those participants who had made a change, they all described changes that were of both a religious and spiritual nature – such as attending religious services and maintaining inner peace through private prayer. Because of this, I spoke of them as having experienced a religious/spiritual change.

Divorce and Commitment

*The first divorce in the world may have been a tragedy,
but the hundred-millionth is not necessarily one.*

- Anatole Broyard (Quotations Page)

What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.

- Matthew 19:6, KJV (Bible Gateway)

One of the commonly measured connections between religion/spirituality and marriage is that of divorce. Yet, one of the main challenges of looking at religiosity and divorce is that many sociodemographic factors are related to divorce, such as age at marriage, previous history of divorce, and education (Call & Heaton, 1997). This complexity makes it difficult to establish clear relationships. Also, quantitative studies that examine divorce rates and religious affiliation are unable to take into account the complex interconnections between religiosity and spirituality, as well as all of the various motivations and reasons behind divorce. Those studies that more extensively measure religiosity/spirituality and commitment/divorce are mostly cross-sectional or short longitudinal studies (five years) that cannot look at the interaction of these variables over time. Even so, there is sufficient research to piece together and start to get a coherent picture of how religiosity and commitment/divorce interact.

In general, religiosity has been linked to higher marital commitment and less tolerance for divorce (Call & Heaton, 1997; Mahoney et.al, 1999); Sullivan, 2001). However, the research

has been inconsistent depending upon the measures and methodologies used. While it appears that divorce occurs more frequently in the general population than in the segment of the population espousing a religious affiliation, in some studies that control for demographic factors related to divorce - such as age at marriage, prior experience with divorce, and marital duration - that link disappears (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). It is important to note that 90% of American adults report some type of religious affiliation although many of them might not be found to be "religious" according to most measures (Mahoney et al, 2001). Self reported affiliation means that people associate themselves with a particular faith or denomination whereas being religious means participation at some level in the religious process. Often membership requirements of religious organizations include such things as attendance, financial support, and commitment to pass religious beliefs on to your children. Therefore, a simple reporting of religious affiliation might not be a very accurate way to measure if being religious is linked to commitment and divorce.

Using more extensive measures of religiosity and/or spirituality, there is a stronger link. More specifically, higher reported religiosity and/or spirituality is linked to fewer divorces, less tolerance for divorce, and higher levels of commitment (Mahoney et. al, 2001). For example, more frequent church attendees have been found to be less likely to be divorced, and increases in religiosity slightly decrease the probability of a couple considering divorce (Sullivan, 2001). Even when controlling for marital satisfaction and age, religiosity significantly accounted for variations in divorce attitudes and commitment. That is, husbands and wives who were more religious had less tolerance for the idea of divorce and more commitment to their marriages (Sullivan, 2001). A caution in interpreting this finding is that Sullivan studied attitudes toward divorce, not divorce rates themselves. Part two of Sullivan's study was longitudinal, actually

examining who stayed together and who did not. The relationship between religiosity and divorce/commitment was weakened when looking at the couples over five years. A potential explanation for this apparently weak relationship is that the full impact of religiosity on marital commitment may not be realized in the first five years of marriage but may take more time to clearly impact the stability of the marriage.

More directly related to this study is research done by Bahr (1981) on religious intermarriage and divorce. Bahr's study was confined to Utah and the mountain states, examining Catholics, Protestants, and Mormons. This study was also longitudinal and conducted over a period of five years. It found that Catholic and Mormon same-faith marriages had the lowest divorce rate with the highest divorce rate involving one Mormon partner and one partner with no religious preference. Also significant was that the rate of divorce depended not only on the faiths involved, but also on which spouse belonged to which faith. Data from Bahr's study (1981) suggested that female partners were more likely than male partners to tolerate a spouse of a different faith. Furthermore, interfaith marriages were less likely to end in divorce if one partner had no religious affiliation as opposed to having a different religious affiliation. In this case, marriages were most stable (over the five years studied) if the husband was the non-believer as opposed to the wife.

Related but different is the study done by Call and Heaton (1997) on religion and marital stability. This study supported earlier research by finding (again) that the frequency of religious attendance had the greatest impact on marital stability; couples who attend religious services more frequently have lower divorce rates. Interestingly, the highest divorce rates were among couples where one attended religious services regularly while the other did not. In summary, those couples who regularly attend religious services together have the lowest divorce rate, those

couples who do not attend have a higher divorce rate, and those couples where one regularly attends and one does not have the highest divorce rate. These results were found even when controlling for other demographic characteristics. Again, the gender of the spouse attending or not attending mattered, with marriages being more stable when the wife is religious and the husband is not as opposed to the husband being religious and the wife not. This study also used logistic regression to look at components of religious attendance and attitudes. The results implied that the wife's attitude toward non-marital sex was the most significant factor in avoiding marital dissolution. Specifically, when women believe that non-marital sex is wrong, the risk of divorce decreases.

The finding that couples who share faith are more stable than those whose marriages are mixed-faith is supported by Wineberg's (as cited in Mahoney et al. 2001) study on religious homogamy and marital reconciliation. Wineberg found that couples belonging to the same denomination at the time of their marriages were twice as likely to reconcile as couples who were religiously heterogamous. Interestingly, couples where either partner converted to the other partner's denomination prior to their marriage were four times as likely to reconcile.

Help Seeking and Social Supports

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.

- Psalm 46:1, KJV (Bible Gateway)

Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close knit family in another city.

- George Burns (Quotations Page)

Seeking help in times of trouble is another factor linked strongly to being religious. Sullivan (2001) found that, as couples' religiosity increased, so did the likelihood that they would seek help. This held true when controlling for different demographic characteristics. Some

religious couples view prayer and Bible reading as a way to seek help and deal with marital adjustment (Gruner, 1985). Gruner looked at four groups of Christians that he labeled “Sects,” “Evangelicals,” “Liberals,” and “Catholics.” The findings, among others, were that some groups looked to the Bible and prayer for help more often than others and that this was positively correlated with marital adjustment.

In looking at religion and its potential for helping families, it was found that assistance was primarily in the form of help seeking by petitioning God for help with family problems, and enhancing the social network of the family through religious institutions and opportunities (Abbott, Berry, and Meredith, 2001). Both Marks (2004) and Fiese & Tomcho (2001) looked at the significance of religious rituals and practices and how they provide opportunity for family connection and meaning. It seems clear that being religious often increases social opportunities and the likelihood of seeking help while enhancing social supports. What is not clear is whether there are any differences between these religious families and non-religious families who engage in a comparable amount of help seeking and socially enhancing opportunities.

Marital Satisfaction

*By all means marry. If you get a good wife you will become happy,
and if you get a bad one you will become a philosopher.*

- Socrates, 470-399 BC(Quotations Page)

While one might assume that lasting marriages must be more satisfying marriages, it is important to separate the concepts of “stable” and “satisfying” when looking at marriage, at least with regard to religiosity/spirituality. Although conservative divorce attitudes and increased likelihood to seek help were related to religiosity, they were not found to relate strongly to current marital satisfaction (Sullivan, 2001).

Sullivan (2001) did an integrated study - both cross sectional and five-year longitudinal - on newlywed couples, looking at how religiosity might affect marital functioning. Two potential models for how marriages could be affected included the direct model, where religiosity directly affects the couples' satisfaction level, and the compensation model, where religiosity moderates the relationship and compensates for the couples' vulnerabilities, resulting in increased marital satisfaction. No evidence, either in this study or in the literature, was found to support the direct model, although there was some evidence for the compensation model. For example, Hansen's study (as cited in Sullivan, 2001) found that wives with higher levels of religiosity but low rewards in their marriages were found to be satisfied despite this lack. Similarly Wallin (as cited by Sullivan, 2001). found that young wives with low sexual satisfaction but high religiosity were just as happy as less religious wives who were sexually satisfied. Wallin and Clark (as cited by Sullivan, 2001) later replicated this study with middle aged wives with similar results.

In Sullivan's study there were conflicting results regarding the compensation model. First of all, there was support for the idea that religiosity affects attitudes (about divorce, help seeking, and commitment) but not behavior. These attitudes, however, did not seem to affect marital satisfaction over the five years. Cross-sectionally there was a negative relationship between highly religious wives and their husbands' marital satisfaction, with the husbands being less satisfied when their wives were more religious. Longitudinally, husbands low in neuroticism (as indicated by lower scores on the neuroticism subscale of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire) reported higher levels of satisfaction when the couple was religious. However, religion had a negative impact when husbands were high in neuroticism. This difference may account for the conflicting results of other studies. Another point to consider is that religiosity may impact marital satisfaction, but not until later than five years into the marriage.

Cross-sectionally, there has been a small relationship between church attendance and marital satisfaction (Mahoney et al., 2001). A greater relationship was found when attempting to measure personal religiosity/spirituality such as frequency of prayer or Bible reading. When using personal religiosity/spirituality, the relationship to marital satisfaction is better supported. A criticism of this finding is that people who report high levels of personal religiosity/spirituality may be more likely to over-report marital satisfaction (Mahoney et al., 2001). When measuring the religious or spiritual behavior of couples, there is a significantly higher report of marital satisfaction than from national samples of couples. The differences are small but rise considerably when personal religiosity/spirituality (rather than merely religious affiliation) are considered. The challenge is in discovering what, specifically, contributes to greater satisfaction.

An earlier cross-sectional study done by Mahoney et al. (1999) looked at marital satisfaction, problem-solving strategies, and the belief that God is manifest in marriage. It was found that couples with a stronger conviction that God was manifest in their marriages reported greater marital satisfaction. Interestingly, this conviction was not related to a decrease of maladaptive problem solving strategies such as “avoidance” or “stalemate.” This lends even more support to the idea that attitude rather than behavior is more likely to be influenced by religiosity.

Fiese and Tomcho (2001) looked at religious holiday rituals and marital satisfaction. They found that marital satisfaction was related to the meaning of the religious ritual to a couple's current family. Husbands' marital satisfaction was largely influenced by the roles, routines, and meaning ascribed to the religious holiday ritual. Wives' marital satisfaction was positively related to the roles and routines associated with the religious family rituals as well as the husbands' report of family ritual meaning. Actual religious affiliation did not have significant

influence on marital satisfaction. This has implications for the mixed-faith couples - especially when the wife is religious and the husband is not. It appears that the husbands' affective investment in holiday rituals impacts the wives' satisfaction. Given this, it may also be that husbands can ascribe meaning to religious holiday rituals without being particularly religious themselves.

Hatch, James, and Schumm (1986) also found this indirect relationship between religiosity/spirituality and marital satisfaction. Their study looked at spiritual intimacy, emotional intimacy, and marital satisfaction. Responses to questions such as "My husband/wife and I are united by our faith" and "I think that our perceptions of God are basically the same" were analyzed and compared with scores on marital satisfaction. Results showed a relationship between spiritual intimacy, emotional intimacy, and marital satisfaction. However, there was not a direct relationship between spiritual intimacy and marital satisfaction when controlling for emotional intimacy, suggesting that spiritual intimacy operates indirectly through emotional intimacy to influence marital satisfaction. Again, there is an implication that, if emotional intimacy can be achieved without the help of spiritual intimacy, then marital satisfaction would be comparable for same-faith and mixed-faith couples.

Relating the Literature to this Study

Religion and spirituality influence individuals and, since relationships are comprised of individuals, must influence relationships as well. Directly, they often influence individuals' beliefs about marriage and relationships. They influence attitudes that provide a framework for understanding what is happening within a marriage. Interestingly, they often do not influence the behavior of individuals, but rather the interpretation of those behaviors. For example, a religious

couple might have marital conflict but interpret it as a test of their faith and commitment rather than as proof that the relationship is not working out.

Often, religion and spirituality are a means by which couples achieve a perception of unity and intimacy, although there is little evidence that they directly influence those things. Same-faith couples may enjoy the advantage of these “tools” for facilitating their relationship. However, since the effects of religiosity and spirituality are indirect, it may be that mixed-faith couples still achieve emotional intimacy, satisfaction, and meaning through other shared beliefs or experiences. This study provides an opportunity to listen to mixed-faith couples talk about themselves, their faiths, and their marital relationships. It is intended to provide insight into their challenges and successes as well as how they negotiate both. Since sharing a faith is not realistic for all couples, learning how to nurture the relationship without the tools of “common faith” could be useful and encouraging information for the many couples who live in this circumstance. More specifically, this study is intended to offer information about how couples negotiate the transition of the spiritual or religious change of one partner, along with the differences this change inevitably brings to the relationship.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This study was a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry into the experiences of couples where one partner has made a religious or spiritual change. In an attempt to explore each partner's point of view regarding changes and how they accommodated them, a constant comparative method of data analysis was used.

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research grew out of the intellectual movement of constructivism or social constructionism (Sprenkle & Moon, 1996). This movement suggests that rather than there being one "objective" reality - as is assumed by quantitative methodologies - there are multiple and equally valid realities. In fact, the meanings that people attach to things in their lives are separate and distinct "realities." This means that there can be several realities based on the "same" event through the different perceptions of what that event means.

In social sciences, and especially in family work, this paradigm shift was an important change from the reductionism of quantitative research. It made room for the "systems" view that members of a family system each have a unique perspective. This perspective impacts how each member responds and reacts to events that, in turn, impacts how other system members respond to them. Interactions are not linear with clear causes and effects. Rather they are like a web, with one strand impacting many others and those strands impacting others, rippling outward and back around with new causes and effects of their own.

It does not follow that quantitative methods are not important to family studies. Rather, qualitative and quantitative research complement each other. Newfield, Sells, Smith, Newfield, and Newfield (1996) explain that the science of family therapy must be both linear and holistic,

predictive and explorative. It must be able to capture the individual as part of an organism but as something more than an organism. Qualitative methods are the most reliable and established vehicle we have for capturing the more holistic and deeply explorative facet of family studies.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a search for meaning behind a particular phenomenon and is rooted in the social structuring of reality (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). Phenomenology is more of an approach through which a variety of methods can be used rather than a distinct methodology. The phenomenological approach requires that the following assumptions be accepted by the investigator (Boss et al., 1996):

1. Knowledge is socially constructed and therefore inherently tentative and incomplete.
2. Researchers are not separate from the phenomena they study.
3. Knowledge can be gained from art as well as science.
4. Bias is inherent in all research regardless of method used.
5. Common, everyday knowledge about family worlds is epistemologically important.
6. Language and meaning of everyday life are significant.
7. Objects, events or situations can mean a variety of things to a variety of people in the family (p. 85-86).

Boss et al. (1996) describe the phenomenological method of reduction through the metaphor of peeling an onion. The investigator begins with a generalization and then goes about peeling away layers (like an onion) in order to get closer to the core of the phenomenon.

Grounded Theory

The actual method used for this study was based on the constant comparative method of grounded theory. Grounded theory is a way of conceptualizing data as the base from which theory evolves (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). The constant comparative method involves a constant interaction between the data collection and data analysis. The data are collected and analyzed for emerging themes or categories. That analysis then feeds back into the collection of the data and is re-analyzed (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). This allows the investigation to evolve with the new information. The actual process of constant comparison involves data collection, sorting and resorting, coding and recoding. It is a common practice for the investigation to continue until the point of theoretical saturation, when the researcher is no longer hearing something new, but is simply getting a repetition of information already gathered.

This study conformed to the general process of the constant comparison method of grounded theory. However, it was not a large enough study for theoretical saturation to occur. That is, some new information was still coming forward when the final couple was interviewed.

Sample Selection

Participants for this study were selected using a case sampling method. Local religious leaders were contacted and apprised of the general nature of the study and criteria for participation. I asked that the participants fit the following criteria:

1. Be married and both willing to participate in the study.
2. Neither individual believed themselves to be strongly religious or spiritual at the time of their marriage.
3. One individual experienced a religious or spiritual change that significantly impacted his or her life.

4. The other individual did not share the same religious or spiritual experience with his or her spouse.

There were many variables that I did not get specific with as a requirement for participating in the study. Such variables included religious affiliation, years married, or gender of person who changed. Because I had difficulty getting couples to participate in the study, my final couple was one where the wife first made a religious/spiritual change and then, eight years later, the husband made a similar religious/spiritual change. In this case, I asked that they respond to questions focusing on the period in which she had made her change and he had not.

Getting participants for this study was challenging. I called about thirty religious leaders and received only three return calls. Following up did not improve the response rate. Of the three religious leaders who called back, two had one couple that had agreed to hear more. Religious leaders reported that many other couples did not want to participate, citing that the topic was sensitive and that they were unwilling to discuss it with a stranger. Those two couples referred to me did become part of the study. In addition I approached one couple from my own congregation who agreed to participate. The other couple came to participate in an unusual way. While speaking with a Jehovah Witness who had come to my door, I mentioned that I was working on this study. She disclosed that she and her husband fit the description and might be willing to participate. They did become participants.

All of the couples were white. They ranged in ages from early twenties to elderly and from lower to mid socioeconomic status. Three of the religious conversions were to a Christian faith - two Pentecostal and one Wesleyan. The other was a conversion to becoming a Jehovah's Witness. All participants lived in rural, Midwestern communities within ninety miles of each other and the university the researcher attended. In all four cases, it was the female spouse who

experienced the religious or spiritual change. The years of marriage since the change ranged from about eighteen months to twenty-three years.

Data Collection and Analysis

Upon making telephone contact with the couples, I explained the study and extent of participant involvement. If they agreed to participate, I arranged for an interview with each spouse individually. Interviews were set up at the convenience of the participants. Three of the couples chose to be interviewed back-to back while one set up separate appointments. One of them was interviewed in a church and the other three in their homes.

The eight interviews (four couples) took between thirty-five minutes to one hour each and were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. They took place in April, May, and June of 2005.

Interviews were semi-structured around a questionnaire that I had developed but questions often went out of order or overlapped each other. I tried to keep the important wording of the questions the same in order to not lead the participants. However, I was flexible with the order and with non-critical wording of the questions, fitting them into the flow of the conversation. Also, lines of inquiry were added in keeping with the constant comparison method and with the way that the participants told their stories.

Analysis of the information was continual throughout the interviews and while reviewing the transcripts. Information from the first interview inspired the addition of a question on subsequent interviews. As I heard the stories, I became more attentive to particular issues that were being emphasized by the participants, encouraging elaboration on those issues.

Once all eight interviews were transcribed, they were reviewed and analyzed by the researcher and three other graduate students. Each graduate student and I reviewed the transcripts

individually and without consulting with the others. Notes were made on the transcripts as themes emerged and then compiled into categories of themes. The categories included themes for each individual, themes for each couple, and themes across couples. Two of the lists ranked the themes according to what the reader thought were the strongest (either most intensely spoken of or most prevalent) to the weakest (either less intensely spoken of or least prevalent). Upon receiving the lists, I compared and contrasted them with each other and my own. In writing about themes, I used those themes that there was agreement on. If I made an observation not shared by the other graduate students, I used language that indicated that this was my impression and not a clearly defined theme.

Other graduate students were used because, in grounded theory, the trustworthiness of the findings increase when there are multiple investigators involved (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). The analysis included sorting and categorizing the types of answers and issues raised in the interviews. All eight interviews were then reviewed collectively in search of connecting themes - attention was paid to where the themes converged or fit together or where they diverged or remained distinct from the others. If there was divergence in themes from one couple to another, the theme was noted as a theme for the one couple, but not as a theme across couples. The graduate students and I had strong agreement on what themes were present among many of the couples or for just one. Often, it was obvious – such as parenting issues only for couples with children.

In analyzing the transcripts for themes, there was no disagreement among the graduate students and I about what the themes were. Sometimes one person identified a theme that another did not, but, upon looking at all the lists, there was agreement to add some of the themes to the final list or to combine identified themes that were worded differently by different analysts. In

the end, a master list of themes for individuals, couples, and across couples was achieved.

Reliability

The concept of reliability has long been defined from a quantitative perspective where it means that, if the study were replicated, the results would be about the same. In qualitative research this definition does not fit. Instead, from a qualitative perspective the question is, under a similar set of conditions, would another researcher come up with a similar explanation of the data (Rafuls & Moon, 1996)? For this reason, it is important that the circumstances of the study and processes of analysis are apparent. This allows the reader to make an informed judgment about the data, either strengthening or weakening the reliability of the study with those judgments. Including verbatim accounts is also helpful in enhancing reliability by eliminating the bias introduced by the investigator's interpretation of the account. Finally, using multiple analysts improves the reliability of the study, as does disclosure of the researcher's personal and professional information that might affect data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). All of these methods were employed in this study to some degree.

Although the researcher readily admits the inherent bias in research, objectivity is still a standard to work toward. This is done both by full disclosure of potential researcher bias and also, to the extent possible, by laying aside personal assumptions and beliefs in order to accurately hear the participants and understand their perspective.

I felt I did a good job of openly hearing the situations of the participants. Several of them thanked me for listening to them. Others expressed discomfort at talking to me in the beginning, but became more relaxed as the interview progressed. With time, they were more willing to be open with me - talking, laughing, and reflecting upon their lives. This seemed especially true with the partner who had not made the religious/spiritual change. When I reflected back without

judgment what I believed they were expressing, they became more willing to share their thoughts and feelings.

Certainly I understood what it is like to have strong spiritual convictions. I also had the experience of finding out that something was not what I had expected. I employed these common human experiences to help me be empathic with participants and to encourage them to speak freely about their subjective experiences. My training as a counselor was a major asset in helping me to be warm, non-judgmental, and empathic - all skills that encourage disclosure. My training also assisted me in maintaining objectivity about what I was hearing.

Validity

Validity is concerned with whether the researcher is measuring what was purported to be measured. From a qualitative paradigm, it refers to whether what the researcher believes was observed was what actually was observed (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). Triangulation or getting information from a variety of sources is one way to improve validity. This study employed this technique by using the graduate students to verify or disaffirm the perceived observations of the researcher.

External validity is most often associated with generalizability. In qualitative studies, generalizability of the findings is not a feasible goal. Rather, grounded theorists want the analytical generalizations to be transferable from case to case rather than from sample to larger population (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). In grounded theory this is achieved by making comparisons across differing cases and contexts until saturation occurs. Clearly, the generalizations must be specific enough to be meaningful but general enough to fit diverse situations and people.

This study did find some generalizations that were common among the four couples who were very different in some respects and similar in others. These generalizations are useful for

these four couples in particular, as they indicate a common process or way of thinking and believing that they shared. Perhaps these generalizations will be found to fit other couples as well, helping them to make sense of their own situations. Ideally they will be a building block for more complete information on this topic.

Strengths of the Study's Methodology

The stories collected in this study are deep and rich accounts of real, human experiences. Along with factual information, they contain emotions, beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes. Having genuine human contact with the people behind the data was an asset of the research, providing indirect information unavailable in less personal methods of data collection.

As a researcher I brought a genuine interest in the topic and a desire to accurately understand these couples' situations as best I could. My training as a counselor aided me in facilitating the interview as well as in maintaining objectivity. My deepest respect for these couples and their choices regarding their spirituality and relationship fueled my desire to not project my own beliefs upon them, but to hear about their perspectives.

I strived to be rigorous and objective in how I approached the data collection and interpretation. By carefully transcribing the interviews, I was acutely aware of my own process of interviewing and of the responses of participants. This allowed for careful analysis of both the participant stories and of my way of talking with them. This analysis was shared by three graduate students, and this investigator triangulation strengthened the study.

Overall, I believe that an in-depth, phenomenological investigation of a few cases was an ideal way to begin exploring this topic. It is a topic that requires the integration of perspectives into the interpretation. It is not a study of a particular event interpreted by the researcher. Rather, it requires an understanding of the meaning of the event to both the husband and the wife. The

study revolves around two different interpretations (the husband's and the wife's) of the same event (spiritual or religious change). It also included the husband and wife's perspective on how the changes impacted themselves as individuals and as a couple.

Limitations of the Study's Methodology

Personally, I would have liked to follow the study through to the point of theoretical saturation, the lack of which limits the theoretical transferability of the findings. Time constraints, along with the difficulty of getting participants, prevented this. Given more time, I would have interviewed a larger sample with more diversity, including more religious affiliations and couples in which men were the ones who experienced the religious or spiritual change.

Another limitation was my inexperience as an investigator. While interviewing, I found the questions I had written to be stiffly formal and awkward. A couple of the questions were very similar with the subtle differences between them requiring significant insight. Many participants seemed to feel like I was asking the same question over again. (E.g. "What were you like as a couple...?" and then, "What was your relationship like...?") I also noticed that I provided words at time, as a therapist would, to help the participant define his or her feelings. In research, I believe that this might be leading and probably should have been avoided.

Ethical Considerations

Strong efforts were made to not coerce people into participating. I requested that the religious leaders get a preliminary reading on whether the couple was interested in hearing more. This spared them having to turn me down directly. Once a couple showed some interest, I spoke with them on the telephone and fully explained what participation would mean for them. Once they agreed and I met them for the interview, informed consent was provided and explained.

I was very thorough in discussing the issue of confidentiality, letting them know that,

although identifiers would be removed, their spouse would likely be able to ascertain which comments were theirs. All of the participants expressed comfort with the process and appeared to feel fine about the interviews afterwards as I left.

To preserve confidentiality, I changed the names of all the participants and their identifying information such as church names. The graduate students who helped analyze the data were not familiar with any of the participants nor did they have access to their names or other identifying information. Not even the religious leaders knew (from me) which of their referrals decided to go through with the study and which did not. The original data (such as consent forms and audio recordings) were accessible only to me.

Chapter Four

Case Studies

The following case studies include extensive verbatim dialogue in which the participant is noted by his or her first initial and the investigator by an “I.”

Jeannie and Jeff

Jeannie and Jeff are a couple who have been married about seventeen years. They have an adolescent daughter and a pre-adolescent daughter. Jeff works long hours at more than one job; Jeannie also works full time but with more predictable hours.

Jeannie grew up in a Catholic family with a strict father. She says that she never thought much about God, only what her father said that she ought to do. Describing her family of origin as “dysfunctional,” she attributes some of her adult struggles to her childhood.

About ten years ago, Jeannie began attending a Wesleyan church. She describes this decision as an “original step” that was followed by “baby steps” leading to a more deeply spiritual life. Although she acknowledges growth over those ten years, she believes that she has made the most progress as a Christian person in the past couple of years. When talking about what things were like in her family before she made her spiritual/religious change, Jeannie talks about how she felt at the time.

J: Before...well, I wanted everything to be right, you know? Like I said, I came from a dysfunctional family, and it was important to me, control was important.

I: Mmm-hmm.

J: I wanted things to be right, and I wanted to have control over it.

I: You had small children.

J: Yes, two girls, and I was, umm, it was like I would wake up in the morning and

start right in. I would keep really busy all day until I, until my back hurt or I was so tired...

I: Mmmm.

J: ...it was, I guess it was my way of dealing with it, of not wanting to face things...

I: O.K.

J: I was, umm, I was so concerned about my image, about what people would think...

I: You had an idea of what a family ought to be, and wanted people to view you that way?

J: Yeah, and as a mom. I wanted people to think I was a good mom. Well, I still do, but...

I: Back then it was really important to you that people think you were a good parent.

J: Yes. I was, I had to have everything just right, to be in control. It was awful, really stressful.

She describes her early relationship with Jeff in terms of her own neediness, and that she was looking to him for a sense of completeness. Jeff also talked about Jeannie's "rough childhood" and that she was "dealing with a lot of different things." His perspective of her at the beginning of their marriage concurred with her description of needing to be in control, using words such as "hyper" and "kind of a clean freak" to describe her at that time.

Jeannie believed that her spiritual/religious change was responsible for her growing sense of calm.

I O.K., so how would you describe your family after your spiritual change?

J Well, it was gradual, too. I learned that things couldn't be perfect, how to accept

myself...

I Mmm-hmm.

J ...because God did. I felt that I could be more calm about things.

I Mmm-hmm. So you felt more at peace?

J Yes, that's a good way to put it. I was less...rigid.

Jeff did attribute some of Jeannie's growth to her religious spiritual change saying that after the spiritual/religious change she "mellowed out a lot" and that it seemed to "relax her a bit." He also noted some other things happening such as counseling and the passing of time (especially the girls getting older) that may have also been responsible for her calmness.

Similarly, Jeff was not sure how to make sense of changes in their relationship, and whether to attribute them to Jeannie's spiritual/religious change.

I Was there any change in the relationship from before to after...that you could speak about?

J: Well (pause), I don't know what's from what really. We've had our ups and downs...

I: Sure.

J: ...and Jeannie had a rough childhood and was dealing with a lot of different things and...

I: O.K.

J: ...types of counseling, so I don't know what added up to what. You know what I mean?

I: Sure. Things change. They go up and down. Who knows what part, if any, the spiritual...

J: Yeah.

I: ...thing had to do with it?

He did note that she seemed more caring toward him and their daughters after her change. For the most part he said he did not notice much difference in their relationship at first, saying, "I don't think there was a whole lot of difference." A few sentences later he described himself as working a lot, saying, "That's probably one of the reasons I didn't notice any change...when I'm working so much."

Jeannie seemed to agree with this estimation in some ways, saying that her change was gradual at first. But, she did indicate some challenges revolving around her changing.

J He was very suspicious when I started going to church.

I Mmm-hmm.

J He thought they were brainwashing me. It seemed, he didn't understand why I was changing.

I Mmm-hmm.

J It was hard until I decided that, that divorce wasn't an option.

I You considered divorce.

J Yes. For a while, I thought about it. It just seemed like we were getting more and more different.

I Sure. You made this change, and he decided not to, so you were drifting apart.

J Yes, and it seemed like it was only going to get harder until I decided that God wanted this marriage to work and that divorce was not an option for us. Then things started to get better.

Considering how the transition has been since the beginning of Jeannie's change to the

present, she says that it definitely got worse before it got better. One of the things she attributes to the relationship improving is her lowered expectations of how he might change and ability to accept what she does not have control over.

J Yes. And it was hard because I wanted him to change too. I was excited about my life, how things were so much better, and I wanted to be in heaven with him.

I Sure.

J So, I tried to get him to come to church with me. I mean, I still want him to, but I've lowered my expectations now. That's helped me to be more happy.

When asked about ways in which Jeannie's change was a good thing or not so good a thing for the family, both agreed that it was good for Jeannie. Nothing was mentioned from either person to suggest any negative impact on Jeannie. Regarding the family, there were mixed responses. Jeannie cited some conflict with Jeff on how to raise the children, especially on issues like what music and movies are appropriate or on drinking alcohol. She implied that her sense of calm and lowered expectations helps them through this, saying, "I can't expect Jeff to feel the way I do. He doesn't have the Holy Spirit, so why would he know that some things, they don't please God?" She added, "but I've started trying to respect his opinion...He was resentful that I was making the decisions, and this helped a lot." Jeff cited Jeannie's happiness, contentedness, and increased social opportunities as being positive changes for her. He noted that those positive changes in her impacted the whole family in a positive way, that she copes better with stress. He also cited the church related time commitments for Jeannie and the girls as being a minor issue in that they sometimes conflict with family activities. At this time, they seemed to be mutually committed and willing to live with their religious/spiritual difference.

Patty and Mark

Patty and Mark have been together for about eleven years and married for about nine. Both have children from previous relationships and one daughter together. At the time of the interview, their eight-year-old daughter and Patty's adolescent daughter lived in the home with them. Both Patty and Mark were working about full time but indicated that finances were tight.

Patty had a very troubled childhood that included several foster homes, running away, and abuse. As an adult, her relationships with men were often abusive as well. Before her spiritual/religious change, she described herself as being addicted to alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, and sex. At the time she met Mark she was married to a man that she described as a "beater." She says, "Mark was my knight in shining armor. He was the one that, umm, scooped me up..." She ran away from her marriage and children to be with Mark, but eventually missed her children and came back to divorce her husband and get custody of the children.

Before she met Mark, Patty had begun attending a Christian church and underwent a spiritual change. However, she became involved with a man who disapproved of the spiritual/religious lifestyle she was trying and demanded that she choose between him and God. She chose to be with him at that time and returned fully to her former way of living. Once married to Mark, Patty continued in this destructive lifestyle for nine years. At that point, she found a Pentecostal church and "got saved." This was a turning point for Patty and the beginning of some major changes in her life.

When asked what life was like before Patty got saved, both described similar scenarios that involved Patty's addictions, infidelities, and inability to care for herself or her children. When asked to describe her relationships before her change, Patty spoke about her family having to take care of her.

- P: They were basically taking care of me.
- I: O.K. "They" meaning your kids and...
- P: And Mark.
- I: ...and your husband.
- P: Yeah, taking care of me when I had my hangovers or...
- I: O.K.
- P: ...you know, uh, I just recently got Kelsy (daughter) back because I gave my kids away because they were getting too old. They were getting in my way. They were knowing what I'm doing, you know.
- I: Mmm-hmm.
- P: And when Sandra (daughter) was two, I just told him one day, "Come get them."
- I: You told the girls' father...
- P: Come get them. Because they were older. Sandra was young and was in daycare. She (older daughter) could tell Mark what I was doing. The older ones were getting in the way.
- I: So when they were older, "getting in the way" means that they could tell you were drinking, and they could tell Mark...
- P: Well, yeah, they could tell Mark what I was doing with boys.
- I: Oh, O.K. So there was some stuff going on with other men, and they were old enough to notice that.
- P: Mmm-hmm.

Similarly, Mark compared their family to the movie *Rudolf* in that they were "like the toys from Misfit Island." In fact, Mark had difficulty coming up with anything good about their

relationship at that time.

M: ...it was rough. You know, a lot of bad times.

I: And, what, what would you say was a good thing about your family before...

M: At that time?

I: Mmm-hmm.

M: A good thing?

I: Mmm-hmm.

M: Umm. (Very long pause).

I: Not much, huh?

M: Not much. There really wasn't a lot.

I: Pretty tough.

M: There wasn't much. Uh, I guess the only good thing I thought that maybe came out of it was the daughter we have, Sandra.

I: Mmm-hmm.

M: That was a wonderful day.

I: O.K

M: Prior to that, there uh, wasn't a lot of happiness.

Patty described some mixed results of her change. On the negative side she talks about her older daughter not wanting to visit anymore, challenges in her marital relationship, and the loss of friends. She spoke of one friend in particular.

P: Umm...(long pause), yeah, I only have one friend outside the church, and that's Jill. Umm, I lost all my friends.

I: All your friends that you had...before.

P: Yep. Because they said, “let’s go, let’s go party” like we did before. I mean the closest person in the whole world to me is Jill, and she’s worse now than before.

I: Hmm.

P: I haven’t talked to her...we’re going on a year...

She talked specifically about how she believes that Mark feels displaced by God in her life, and that he used to take pride in rescuing her but that she does not have the same acute needs as she did before.

I: Yeah. Now, his relationship with you is different in that he’s not taking care of you anymore, then.

P: Right, and I think he has a problem with that.

I: It’s hard for him.

P: Yeah.

I: And then, then you give credit to God that he used to get...

P: Yeah.

I: ...for being your savior in a way.

P: Right.

On the other hand, she attributes many positive changes to getting saved as well. When asked if she relates her decision to stop drinking to her spiritual change, she says, “Oh, yeah. Definitely. I’ve tried to quit smoking. I tried to quit drinking. I tried to quit drugging, and that was the only way that I could. I said, you, ‘I can’t do it by myself. You’ve (God) got to do it.’” About her fidelity she says, “I couldn’t have done it without God. I couldn’t be faithful this long without God.”

Mark concurred with Patty on many of these points.

M: Umm, since her change...uh, it's been a lot better.

I: Mmm-hmm.

M: It's been a lot better. She, uh, she, umm, it's been a lot better. She, she used to be on drugs and she's not on that.

I: Mmm-hmm.

M: She used to be a real, uh, alcoholic, and she's not on that.

I: Uh-huh.

M: Of course, whenever you take stuff like that out of a marriage it will supposedly get better, and it did.

I: Mmm-hmm.

M: Uh...she quit cheating. That was all good. Uh, we argue a lot less now that we used to.

I: Oh.

M: A lot less.

Mark talked about how proud he is of Patty for making the changes she did. Patty says that, over the past two years, they have come to an understanding and that he knows how important her spiritual and religious life is to her. In the beginning he was uncertain, saying, "Things were hard at first with her change. Number one because I just wondered if this was a phase that she was going through like everything else in life. You know, within a month it gets dropped."

Mark also made some changes at Patty's request. He stopped smoking, drinking, and swearing saying that, "It was my way of respecting her." He did emphasize that this worked "for her" but that he does not like to be pressured to attend church with her or to experience the same

changes. This has resulted in some conflict for them. In sum he says, "...and I look at it like this - if that's the only conflict our marriage has right now, it's pretty minor."

Bonnie and John

Bonnie and John are a young couple who have been married for a little less than two years. They both work full time and have no children.

Just a couple of months after their marriage, Bonnie began contemplating a spiritual/religious change and decided to become a Jehovah's Witness. Bonnie called this change a "realization." John had been raised Lutheran and continues to affiliate with the Lutheran faith, although not active in a church.

Both Bonnie and John describe their relationship before Bonnie's realization as good. They both talked about how they got along very well, and especially how much they enjoyed doing things together. Each said or implied that many of the things they enjoyed as a couple were not in their own best interest, but enjoyable at the time. Bonnie said that she and John had the same goals in life and enjoyed the same form of entertainment. John also spoke of how they were us a couple, adding his opinion on the subject.

J: Things were good.

I: Mmm-hmm.

J: We did a lot together. We basically did everything together at the time.

I: O.K.

J: It just wasn't, uh, the things that we should have been doing, stuff like that.

I: Mmm-hmm.

J: But, things were real good. We had a lot of fun. But...

I: Yeah.

J: ...She, she came to her senses, and so...

I: O.K.

J: ...we kind of cleaned up a little bit.

I: Uh-huh.

J: Her obviously more than me, but...

I: All right.

Both Bonnie and John acknowledge that the time following Bonnie's realization was a difficult period. Bonnie talked specifically about how she experienced the changes.

B: I kind of, umm, I made the decision that I was going to make changes in my life and at first I didn't include him. So he was kind of, umm, about the same. But then as I made more and more changes, things became more and more tense between us.

I: O.K. So maybe the atmosphere in your home as things went on got a little more tense.

B: Yeah.

I: O.K.

B: Quite a bit more, actually.

I: Quite a bit more.

B: Uh-huh.

Speaking of how well things for going for them as a couple before Bonnie's realization, John intimated that it was not the same after her realization. I encouraged him to tell me more.

I: Yeah, O.K. Yeah. And it sounds like that changed when she changed, at least somewhat.

J: Somewhat, yeah.

I: Mmm-hmm.

J: Especially when it first happened because it seemed so drastic from where we were at.

I: O.K.

J: And, you know, now that I look back I think I overreacted, but it was just, it was just a lot for me to take, you know.

I: Mmm-hmm.

J: So, it went downhill from there a little bit.

I: O.K.

J: But, we just climbed back up.

I: Mmm-hmm.

J: You know, you have to work at these things, but...

I: Yeah.

J: For a little while it went downhill, you know. I wasn't used to it.

I: Sure.

J: You know, I wasn't completely all for her religion.

I: Mmm-hmm.

Bonnie believed that when she stopped doing things that she did not think were according to the Bible, John felt like she was judging him. Her perception was that this made their relationship even more strained. He began spending more time with their friends, and she felt left out. John said several times that, in retrospect, he believes that he overreacted. Bonnie said that she made a mistake by not fully including him in her process of contemplating and then making

the change. John describes his experience with Bonnie changing and how he had to change in order to accommodate her.

J: It was really tough for me because I like to go out, and I like to have fun, and she used to do that with me all the time, and now she doesn't.

I: O.K.

J: And so I, I've had to cut back on that.

I: Mmm-hmm.

J: It's better for me. I've had a hard time doing it, cause I really like to go out with some of my friends and party, but...

I: Mmm-hmm.

J: ...it's much better for me, and I realize that now.

I: So one change is that you used to go out together...

J: Yeah.

I: ...with the same friends it sounds like, and do some partying, and then all of a sudden she's like...

J: Yeah.

I: ...no, I'm not doing that anymore.

J: Yeah.

I: So you're looking at each other. So, what do we do now?

J: Yeah! (Both laugh).

When talking about how she changed as an individual after her realization, Bonnie says that she felt more contented as a person, despite the challenges of the marriage relationship.

B: I felt more, umm, content with who I was.

I: Mmm-hmm.

B: And, I felt that I was doing what was right.

I: O.K.

B: So, I felt that I was closer to Jehovah, because of, umm, leaning on him to help me through...

I: Hmm.

B: ...and to try to make things better, you know?

I: Mmm-hmm.

B: I think that it's, in the long run, it's strengthened our marriage to...to a certain degree.

John and Bonnie agreed that their relationship got easier with time. John cites getting to know some of the members of Bonnie's fellowship as being helpful. Also, communicating about her schedule and faith-related time commitments helped. He talked about how he began to understand how important this was to her.

I: ...and then you decided, "Well, maybe it's not so bad" and to accommodate her on some of those things?

J: Yeah.

I: Even if it wasn't your own personal belief.

J: Well, it, it makes her so happy.

I: Hmm.

J: She comes home with a big smile on her face, you know.

I: Mmm-hmm.

J: You know, if she comes home this happy, why should I try to, you know, rain on

her parade?

Bonnie added that she believes that her realization helps her to be a better wife. While she says that she would love for John to join her in her realization, she respects his choice to remain Lutheran. There are some topics they do not discuss in order to maintain peace. Instead of directly confronting John with the prospect of changing, Bonnie says, “I just try to be a good example and lead a good life.” John speaks of Bonnie’s realization in positive terms saying, “It’s helped us both, especially as a couple. It gives us more to work at, more to talk about.”

Kelly and Eric

Kelly and Eric are a couple who have been married for about twenty-six years. It was a first marriage for Kelly but not Eric, who is quite a bit older than Kelly. Eric had been married twice before, has children from those relationships, and had a past of alcoholism. He had become sober before meeting Kelly. The couple has two daughters that they adopted about two years ago. Eric is currently suffering from health problems and is unable to work outside the home, staying with the children while Kelly works. Previously, Eric worked while Kelly stayed home.

Kelly had some experience with the Pentecostal faith as a child but had chosen not to follow it. She describes one attempt to become a more spiritual/religious person, an attempt motivated by her mother’s death and final request of, “Jesus, save my children.” She did not last long in her faith, discontinued her effort, and eventually met and married Eric.

Kelly describes she and Eric as being very in love when they married. Both recall doing a lot of things together and really enjoying one another’s company. Three years into the marriage, Kelly decided to get back “into the church,” but this time for herself rather than for someone else. She describes how this was for her and her husband.

K: And, it was awesome coming back, and I stayed. (Laughs).

I: O.K.

K: But, umm, you know, I don't know. He wasn't real thrilled with it (laughs).

I: O.K.

K: To say the least.

I: O.K.

K: Umm, I don't know what to say. Umm, he would actually get pretty angry with me. He would do whatever he could to make me not go.

I: To church.

K: Right. He would use the Lord's name in vain. He would threaten. There were a few times...actually when I first came to the Lord our marriage was probably more on the rocks than it ever had been.

I: O.K.

K: And I don't think it was. It was just that there was such a huge change in me, and he was used to how I was, and that's what he wanted - so he thought - and he was just trying to get that person back.

I: Sure.

K: But I didn't want that person back. That person wasn't happy.

Eric talks about it from his point of view at the time.

E: We got married. It was my third marriage. Then, all of a sudden she started going to church, and I wasn't used to that kind of life. But, uh, for years she prayed for me to go to church.

I: Huh.

E: And, uh, I went a couple times, but, uh, like I say, I couldn't get used to them nuts

running around.

I: Uh-huh.

E: Now I'm one of them nuts!

I: You are...?

E: (Chuckles). I'm, uh, for years I heard her in the back room praying. For years she prayed for me. I'd cuss and swear at her...

I: Hmm.

E: ...and, uh, try to drag her back down. It didn't work. She always had a smile on her face and laughter and everything else.

Eric later revealed that one of his objections to her attending church was that he did not believe that she was actually in church for several hours. He thought that church could not really last that long and suspected Kelly of cheating on him. After he attended himself a few times, he became convinced that church could be that long and Kelly was probably telling the truth.

Both describe the period of eight years when Kelly was in the church and Eric was not, as difficult, especially at the beginning. Eric, by his and Kelly's account, became difficult in an attempt to force Kelly to give up her new faith. He did this by frequent swearing, using God's name in vain, yelling, and turning on television shows offensive to Kelly in every room in the house. Kelly says that she dealt with this by going into their bedroom to pray. When asked how he felt about hearing Kelly praying, Eric says, "Well, I wasn't used to that type of prayer. I bothered me a lot, you know, she was praying out loud."

Eric said that he wanted a divorce when Kelly first changed. Kelly talked about her own thoughts of getting out of the relationship and what kept her in it.

K: There was conflict. Umm, actually there was a time there when I thought we

would separate.

I: Mmm-hmm.

K: Cause it was so tense and stressful.

I: Yeah.

K: Umm, but then with me knowing the Lord and serving the Lord, I knew that was not right and that he would help me through it somehow, and he did. "Thank you, Jesus." But, umm, yeah, there were many times when I thought, "Lord, you know, this isn't worth it."

She also attributes personal happiness to her spiritual/religious change, even though her marital relationship was stressful. She describes finding strength to endure Eric's criticisms.

K: But, umm, it didn't matter because I knew the Lord loved me. You know, and that, that has got to be the biggest thing - to know that Jesus loves you, to really know that Jesus loves you.

I: Mmm-hmm.

K: And to feel that in your heart and nothing, nothing...you know, you can go through some pretty hard things when you know that Jesus loves you.

Kelly did say that, with time, things got easier in their marriage. After eight years, Eric heard a Christian song while he was working and made a decision to pursue a spiritual/religious experience as well. He dressed up the next Sunday morning, surprising Kelly by saying that he was going to church with her. He never stopped attending and eventually got the "Holy Ghost." Both Eric and Kelly report that their relationship improved considerably when their spiritual/religious paths were more in line with each other.

When asked about ways in which Kelly's spiritual/religious change was good or not so good, both reported that it was purely a good thing. Kelly even claimed that the hard times were good, saying, "I wouldn't change a thing. All the hard times that I went through, I wouldn't change it because it made me who I am today."

Chapter Five

Discussion

Although each couple was very unique in their circumstances and experience, there were some themes that arose - some strong and consistent across all four couples and some that varied across couples or were present in only one or two couples. Discussing these themes is challenging because the impact is in at least three domains - the changed spouse, the unchanged spouse, and the couple relationship. Added to this is that there are two perspectives on each theme and for each domain. Examined methodically across themes, perspectives, and domains, the number of "mini studies" is very large. For this reason, I decided to discuss the themes in a more summarized fashion, keeping in mind the many facets of each theme.

In family systems theory, it is assumed that when one partner makes a change, then the other must change in some way as the two are systemically connected. This posed a challenge for the language available to describe the partner who did not experience the spiritual or religious change. I eventually chose parsimony over literal accuracy in describing the partners simply as "changed" and "unchanged." It is important for the reader to note that "unchanged" in the context of this discussion only means that the person did not follow the same religious/spiritual change as her or his partner.

The participants were guided into several chronological categories by the questions. These questions asked about what things were like before the change, what they were like immediately after the change, and what they were like in the time following the change until the present. This chronology helps to structure the themes that emerged. One broad theme that came out of this line of questioning is the "Worse before Better" theme in which participants describe some of the immediate effects of the religious/spiritual change as negatively impacting the

relationship, even as it had positive effects on the individual. Two of the couples described their relationship before the change in mostly positive terms and two described it in mostly negative terms. All of the couples talked about things getting worse before better after the change.

How Things "Got Worse"

Suspicion of the genuineness of the experience. Two of the unchanged partners had clear doubts about their partners' change. One wondered with some sarcasm how long this would last, referring mostly to his wife's vow to be free of her addictions. The other believed his wife was cheating on him and using church as a way to cover it up. One man does not specifically discuss this issue but does describe the change as "sudden" and "drastic." The fourth unchanged partner says that, in the beginning, he simply didn't think much about it, but his wife said that she thought that he may have worried that she was becoming involved in a cult.

Several times there was an implication by the changed person that the unchanged person may have been jealous of the new "relationship" that was so consuming of thoughts, time, and devotion. One said that she thought her husband was jealous that she had a new hero, something he had always been to her. Similarly, all of the unchanged persons spoke of the happiness they saw in their partners and how it initially caused some confusion or even suspicion.

Increased Conflict. All of the couples except one described some increased conflict over the change. The one couple who claimed a decrease in conflict said that there was conflict over the change but less conflict overall. Conflicts revolved around behaviors that the changed person now found offensive and chose not to participate in. Sometimes the conflict involved the changed partner wanting the unchanged partner to stop the offensive behaviors as well. New differences in how to deal with the children became a source of conflict for two of the couples. The amount of time spent in religious/spiritual activities was sometimes an issue. Although less

overt, it seemed to me that much of the conflict could have been rooted in the fear of losing the person or relationship because of the change. I came to this thought based on comments of bewilderment about what had happened to this person that they (the unchanged partner) loved and thought they knew.

Undermining and withdrawal. One man made a very strong effort to undermine the change his wife had made. He swore, turned on television shows that offended his wife, and even became physically aggressive in an attempt to force his wife to abandon her religion. This man was also the person who was suspicious of his wife and her activities. The other three unchanged partners did not indicate a desire to undermine their wives' changes. Rather, they withdrew or felt the need to defend their own stand on existential subjects. One mostly ignored the changes at the beginning.

Loss of common interests. All of the couples had to adjust to a loss of common interests. Sometimes it was drinking alcohol or partying. Sometimes it was as simple as spending a lazy Sunday morning together. Three of the couples spent most of their time before the change partying or hanging out at a bar or smoking and drinking together. Those couples had the biggest adjustments to make once the changed partner was not interested in engaging in those activities. The changed partners often expressed a sense of loneliness or being excluded when they refrained from those activities and their spouses continued to engage in them. Some of the unchanged partners expressed frustration and confusion at those activities that were now "off limits" to them as a couple. The issue of judgment and needing to defend one's morality came up as well. Finally, although losing some common interests was talked about in terms of the challenge, it was also spoken of in a positive manner. For example, three of the unchanged partners mentioned how their spouses' change pushed them into letting go of some of their own

unhealthy habits and unwanted behavior. Although it was difficult, all three said that they were pleased with the personal changes they made in response to their spouses' change.

Consideration of separation and divorce. Three of the four couples seriously considered separation and/or divorce in the tumultuous period following the change. It was mostly the changed partner who talked about it, citing feelings of confusion, isolation and hopelessness for them to ever have the kind of marriage that they wanted. The traditional belief that the husband should be the spiritual leader of the family posed a problem for some of the women who changed, as they felt unable to live according to God's plan when their husband remained unchanged. Ironically, although it was mostly the changed person who talked about separation and divorce, it was also the changed person who decided against those measures, citing God's will and the Bible as being in favor of keeping the marriage together. In the interviews, the unchanged person did not bring up the subject of divorce except to note that the changed person had considered it.

How Things "Got Better"

Accommodations made. Increasingly, the couples described accommodations they made for each other's differences. This was particularly true for the unchanged persons who described many accommodations made for their spouses. Some of them were simply agreeing to spend an evening at home alone while the changed partner attended religious services. In several cases it involved refraining from swearing or using God's name in vain. In one case it included giving up drinking alcohol and smoking. In another case it included modification to partying. Many of these accommodations were made to address the problem of not having as much in common anymore. Other times, it was done to show respect or support for the changed person. In one case the changed person chose to continue moderate drinking with her husband even though her

church took a stand against it. She said that she felt it helped for her husband to see that she was not rigid, and she does not personally believe that moderate drinking is wrong. Often the changed partners expressed how much it meant to them when their spouses chose to make changes for the sake of the relationship. Sometimes they even said that their relationships became stronger because of the challenges and sacrifices each were willing to endure in order to be together.

Acceptance of difference. All of the changed partners said that they would love for their partners to experience the same change that they did. (And one partner had at the time of the interview). They spoke of wanting their spouses to experience God or Jehovah's will, to feel the emotions that they had experienced (such as peace or joy), and to spend an eternity with them in the next life. In every case, this desire had caused conflict in the marriage when the unchanged partner felt pressured or irritated by the attempts the changed partner was making to "convert" him. It was also a continued source of some sadness for the changed persons.

However, it seemed that the couples had resolved to accept their differences. All of the unchanged partners articulated where they stood on the subject. One asserted that he was born and raised Lutheran and planned to die a Lutheran. Another spoke about the goodness of people, associating it with his own personal spirituality. One spoke of being raised Methodist and his own private prayer life. While all of the unchanged partners eventually accepted the changes of their spouses, three of the four of them strongly maintained their own beliefs regarding spirituality and religion.

It appeared that most of the changed partners had decided to accept the fact that their spouses chose to maintain their own beliefs, even while admitting that they would be delighted if their spouses ever changed their minds. Three of the four changed persons used the word

"respect" to describe how they felt about their spouses' beliefs. Two of the changed partners talked about lowering expectations for their spouses. One in particular explained that her husband did not have the Holy Spirit and could not be expected to be spiritually minded in the way that she is. Both said that being more realistic in their expectations has helped the relationship. Three of the changed persons talked about having a renewed commitment to the relationship once they decided that God was in favor of them preserving the marriage. Through the "worse" times and the "better" times, there were perceived benefits of the change from both partners' perspectives.

Perceived Benefits

All four changed persons said that the change that they made was entirely good for themselves as individuals. They spoke of spiritual benefits such as salvation and internal peace. They spoke of receiving spiritual guidance, support, and unconditional love from God, Jesus, or Jehovah. Many of them said that these spiritual benefits help them to cope with the challenges in their relationships. One suggested that her change made her a better person and therefore a better wife. Another used the phrase, "lead by example." Not one changed person had anything negative to say about how their change impacted themselves.

All four unchanged persons spoke mostly positively about the change in their spouses. One spoke of his wife becoming much more calm, happy, and peaceful. Another talked about the big smile his wife has on her face when returning from religious activities. One gave an entire list of the positive changes his wife made after her spiritual/religious change saying that he was "proud of her." It was often said how important and wonderful it was "for her" to find what she was looking for. When reviewing the transcripts, it was interesting to find that the only perceived negative impacts of the change were on the relationship, not the individual.

Both the changed and unchanged partners had mixed thoughts about the impact of the change on the relationship. Even after the initial transitional period, some challenges persist. For example, how to raise the children and spend time as a couple are still difficult for couples to negotiate at times. Accommodating time commitments related to spiritual/religious activities remains important as does maintaining mutual respect despite the differences. No one - either changed or unchanged - expressed any regrets that the one person had made a change. All four couples mentioned that the positive changes in the individual had some positive effects on the marriage and family such as improved atmosphere (e.g. "peaceful"), more social opportunities, and incentive to improve lifestyle.

Despite the increased social opportunities, feelings of isolation were commonly expressed in the interviews.

Issues of Isolation

Throughout the interviews feelings of isolation were expressed explicitly or, more often, implicitly. The changed persons more often directly expressed feeling lonely, excluded, or isolated. They eloquently expressed a deep and strong desire to share their faith with their spouses, implying that it was the key to a deeper intimacy. It was reiterated many times by one couple how the changed person just wanted her spouse to feel what she felt "just once" so he could better understand her commitment to her faith. One person talked about how her husband continued to hang out with their mutual friends, but engaging in entertainment that she no longer engaged in and how left out she felt. Another said that the people from her congregation were hesitant about calling or inviting her to things because they were unsure how her husband would feel about it. She also said that a lot of church activities are geared towards couples, making it hard for her to participate. Another person said that her husband knows that her spirituality is

important to her, but that he really cannot understand. She also talked about losing her best friend because they have nothing left in common except the "old days" that she would rather forget.

The unchanged partners did not express these things, but, in retrospect, I wonder if they might have some feelings of loss, loneliness, or isolation as well.

Chapter Six

Summary and Conclusions

The strongest and most prevalent conclusion from this study is that all the participants believed that the religious/spiritual change was a good thing for the individual. No one - among the changed or unchanged persons - expressed regrets that the change had taken place. However, the impact of that change on the other partner and the relationship was mixed in terms of perceived positive and negative effects. Sometimes, a single effect was both positive and negative. An example of this is when the couple was accustomed to smoking and drinking together. The negative effect of the change was that there was a period when they did not know how to relate to each other and had little in common. The positive effect was that it impelled them into finding a more healthy way to connect as a couple.

The process of the transition appeared to be very challenging for all of the couples. All except the couple who eventually united in their faith expressed that it is still difficult to live with their differences, although in a different way. Earlier, the conflict or estrangement was apparent and clearly related to the change. Later, the challenges for the changed persons seemed more about the longing for unity of faith and the loneliness of not sharing faith or participating as a couple in religious/spiritual activities. This did not come up for the unchanged persons who did not express any dissatisfaction, except for a few practical issues such as scheduling around religious services.

All of the couples expressed feeling glad that they stuck it out through the difficult transition. All of them expressed commitment to the marriage, although one left room for the possibility of not staying together. Research indicates that these couples may have a harder time keeping their marriage intact than many other couples, but they seemed hopeful about their

chances for satisfying and happy marriages. An encouraging point is that many identified their differences as enriching in some ways and the challenges as opportunities to improve their relationships.

It is unclear, especially since all the unchanged people were men and all the changed were women, how results might have been related to gender specifically, separate from the situation of being the changed or unchanged partner.

Future Research

There are so many potential topics for future research on this subject. For this study in particular, it would have been helpful to expand it to include more couples with the gender roles switched. The inclusion of diversity of race and religion would be an important addition. When this is done, it will be important to be able to separate out the different groups by religion, race, gender, geographic location, etc. in order to discover what is unique and what is common among them.

It occurs to me that many of the attitudes of the changed partners in this study were largely influenced by their religious beliefs - namely, the existence of a definitive spiritual Truth that is the same across cultures and over time. This belief makes religious difference less tolerable to them. It would be interesting to see how those whose religions are open to multiple interpretations or truths (such as Unitarians) would experience the same situation.

All of the changed persons in this study were devout in their faith - fitting the definition for both spiritual and religious. There is potential for looking into the issue from this perspective as well. For example, if one joins a religion but does not make many changes in person or lifestyle, it is reasonable that the transition would be less challenging. However, it may also be that making the change would be less rewarding.

Snarey and Dollahite (2001) remark about the need for a unifying theory, claiming that the lack of it is the largest impediment to our understanding of the relationship between religion and marital functioning. They assert that family focused psychologists on religion focused psychologists have difficulty integrating the findings on family and religion without a theoretical framework.

Applications

It is my hope that a useful model or framework will emerge for working with couples and families experiencing religious/spiritual change, and that this project will contribute to those efforts. Initially the framework used to understand the alcoholic family and the transition of recovery stimulated my interest in this topic. I wondered if, as in many alcoholic families, the unchanged members of the family would undermine the progress of the person seeking religious/spiritual change, all the while claiming to support the change. I wondered if, as in recovery, things might get worse for the family before they get better. I also thought about the process of grief and wondered if there were identifiable stages in the process of religious/spiritual change as well. Perhaps a map would emerge - one general enough to fit the diversity of families but specific enough to be helpful. This kind of map would help families to anticipate what might be ahead and to identify ways that some families have found to make it easier. It might help to normalize the thoughts and feelings that they experience.

One very practical suggestion made by one of the participants was that religious organizations provide support for members whose partners do not share their faith. This could be in the form of a social group or a class that attends to their specific needs. I think that religious leaders would be wise to consider this suggestion. The unchanged partners did not express any need for support, but future research might do well to visit the topic with them.

Conclusion

This study has strengthened my hope for finding a practical way to apply research to this topic. There were some strong common experiences among the four couples studied, and I would be interested in finding out how a potential model evolves. More importantly, I would love to see religious leaders, pastoral counselors, and therapists have a framework for working with these couples. If the findings from this investigation were validated through other studies and then expanded upon, these professionals could use this information to assuage couples' feelings of "things getting worse" with some hope of "things getting better," assisting them on their journey as individuals and as a couple. Although the gap between research and practice may be broad, research is all about improving the quality of practice and enhancing lives, and I hope that this study contributes to those goals.

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