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BRIEF REPORT

Spiritual Intimacy, Spiritual One-Upmanship, and Marital Conflict Across the Transition to Parenthood

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Dyadic discussions that directly tap into spouses' views on spirituality and religiousness (S/R) represent an understudied but important facet of marital functioning that may be tied, for better or worse, to marital conflict and resolution processes. This study used longitudinal data gathered from 164 married couples across the transition to parenthood (TtP) to address this possibility. Specifically, during late pregnancy and when their infant was 3, 6, and 12 months old, husbands and wives completed measures about both spouses' spiritual intimacy (i.e., self-disclosure and support of partner's disclosures about spirituality) and spiritual one-upmanship (i.e., relying on spiritual and religious [dis]beliefs and opinions to assert superiority in conflicts). Criterion variables were the frequency of marital conflict and both partners' use of collaborative, hostile, and stalemating communication strategies during marital conflicts. Using fixed-effects regression models with both predictors entered, we found that greater spiritual intimacy by wives and husbands predicted less frequent conflict ($p < .01$), more collaborative communication by husbands ($p < .01$) and less stalemating ($p < .01$) by both spouses. Wives' spiritual intimacy also predicted more collaboration and less verbal hostility by wives ($p < .01$). By contrast, greater spiritual one-upmanship by both spouses predicted greater stalemating by both spouses ($p < .05$) and verbal hostility by husbands ($p < .05$). The findings indicate that 2 contrasting types of S/R dialogues are differentially linked to disagreements and conflict-resolution skills after accounting for stable aspects of the couples across the TtP (e.g., personality traits).

Keywords: spirituality, religion, marriage, transition to parenthood

Literature on the transition to parenthood (TtP) highlights that many heterosexual couples tend to experience decreased marital satisfaction and increased negative marital interactions from the time of pregnancy through the first years of their child's life (Doss & Rhoades, 2017; Mitnick, Heyman, & Smith Slep, 2009; Ryan & Padilla, 2019). For example, overall marital quality declines for around 60%–80% of couples, and many engage in less general conversation and sex postbirth (Don & Mickelson, 2014; Doss & Rhoades, 2017). First-time parents also often report more frequent disagreements over physical intimacy, finances, division of household labor, family and in-laws, shared leisure time, and life goals (Kluwer & Johnson, 2007). In observational studies, couples tend to display more hostile, critical comments and less positivity during problem-solving discussions after they have an infant (Cox, Paley, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Houts, Barnett-Walker, Paley, & Cox, 2008; Ryan & Padilla, 2019; Trillingsgaard, Baucom, & Heyman, 2014). Despite these trends, a minority of couples report increased marital satisfaction (Doss & Rhoades, 2017) and communicating in a supportive manner that draws them together as they deal with the challenges of having an infant enter their lives (Holmes, Sasaki, & Hazen, 2013).

Given the marked variation in marital adjustment across the TtP, researchers have called for more attention to be paid to both adaptive and maladaptive marital communication behaviors that couples may exhibit as they cope with the strains of new parenthood (Mitnick et al., 2009). Vulnerability stress adaptation (VSA) models of relationship dynamics likewise promote identifying dyadic processes that nondistressed couples may employ to navigate stressful, yet normative, challenges in their daily life and enduring psychological vulnerabilities that each partner possesses (Falconier, Jackson, Hilpert, & Bodenmann, 2015; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Such work

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reflects efforts to broaden the search for key marital factors that could help couples sustain high-quality unions (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000).

Spirituality and religiousness (henceforth referred to as S/R) encompass an intriguing yet understudied sphere of life that may shape marital functioning as couples adapt to parenthood. Major world religions have long taught that sustaining a stable, well-functioning marriage within which to conceive and raise a child is a highly valued goal for women and men (Goodman, Dollahite, Marks, & Layton, 2013; Mahoney, 2013). Three studies using global, brief measures have suggested that S/R may contribute to marital well-being across the TtP. For example, a four-item measure of private prayer, importance of religion, and individual and joint religious attendance related to greater maternal, but not paternal, marital satisfaction over the transition (Nock, Sanchez, & Wright, 2008). In a study of mothers, frequent attendance at religious services while pregnant predicted smaller postpartum declines in marital satisfaction compared to infrequent or no attendance (Dew & Wilcox, 2011). However, Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman (2009) found that a one-item measure of religious involvement before the birth of a first child did not later predict marital satisfaction. Although intriguing, these studies relied on brief indices of the complex and overlapping domains of S/R that tend to exhibit limited variability that may contribute to null results. More important, such global indices cannot disentangle specific S/R processes that theoretically should increase or decrease the frequency of couples' conflicts and effective ways of coping with disputes during times of stress. Dialogues between couples focused on S/R represent potentially important processes that may be tied, for better or worse, to communication strategies (Mahoney, 2010, 2013). In this study, we examined two types of S/R verbal exchanges: one likely to inhibit conflict—namely, spiritual intimacy—and the other likely to intensify conflict as couples adjust to the TtP—that is, spiritual one-up-manship.

Spiritual intimacy refers to dialogues where partners mutually engage in spiritual disclosures and provide empathic support about such disclosures (Kusner, Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2014). It represents a particular subtype of intimacy interaction focused on the sensitive domain of openly sharing one's opinions, experiences or (dis)beliefs about supernatural being or powers, existential concerns, and/or faith communities and facilitating such disclosures from another person. People may especially hesitate to make such revelations due to fears or experiences of being dismissed, misunderstood, or ridiculed by the listener given that such disclosures are difficult (if not impossible) to prove as ontologically "true" (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008). Conversely, eliciting sensitive disclosures from another person require a listener to respond in an open-minded, empathic, and nonpunishing manner (Mirgain & Cordova, 2007). In a longitudinal study, greater self-reports of spiritual intimacy during pregnancy predicted greater emotional support across the TtP based on observed marital interactions where couples discussed their fears and vulnerabilities about parenthood during pregnancy and when their infant was 3, 6, and 12 months old (Padgett, Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2019). Using fixed-effects modeling, Kusner et al. (2014)found that greater spiritual intimacy was also tied to less negativity and more positivity during observed conflict interactions across the TtP, after controlling for marital love and collaborative communication skills.

In contrast to spiritual intimacy, dyads may sometimes engage in verbal exchanges that tap into S/R and would be expected to be destructive and distancing. As a case in point, Brelsford and Mahoney (2009) surveyed midwestern U.S. college students and their parents on ways each party might draw upon S/R (dis)beliefs and opinions to reinforce one's superiority when the pair had disagreements and conflictual interactions. In this study, we chose to label this factor as *spiritual one-upmanship* rather than *theistic triangulation* as originally coined by Brelsford and Mahoney (2009) because the items were not limited to asking about God (i.e., a theistic being). The more frequently one or both parties relied on spiritual one-upmanship, the more each engaged in verbal aggression and stonewalling to handle disagreements. Some studies with married couples indirectly have suggested that spiritual one-upmanship, although likely to be rare, may also predict greater negativity between spouses. For example, dissimilarity between spouses' self-reported religious attendance or beliefs about the Bible has been tied to higher marital conflict (Curtis & Ellison, 2002) and divorce rates (Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009).

We examined associations of spiritual intimacy and spiritual one-upmanship with the frequency of marital conflict and conflict resolution strategies across the transition to parenthood. Specifically, we relied on husbands' and wives' combined reports of the frequency of their marital conflicts and each spouse's communication behaviors near the end of pregnancy and when their first biological child was 3, 6, and 12 months old. We took advantage of having four waves of data to rule out time-invariant, third factors that may drive associations when examining the following hypotheses. We expected that greater spiritual intimacy (i.e., disclosing and being supportive of the other party's disclosures about spirituality) would be associated with less frequent marital conflicts as well as more collaboration and less hostility and stonewalling communication strategies, whereas the reverse would occur for spiritual one-upmanship (i.e., drawing upon spiritual and religious [dis]beliefs and opinions to assert superiority in conflicts).

Method

Participants

Participants were 164 married husbands (M_{age} = 28.7 years, SD = 4.4) and wives (M_{age} = 27.2 years, SD = 4.0) who underwent the transition to parenthood with both spouses' first biological child. Self-described ethnicity for wives and husbands, respectively, was 92.0% and 85.0% Caucasian; 3.7% and 5.0% Asian American; 3.7% and 5.5% African American; 0% and 3.7% Hispanic or Latino; and .62% and .62% Other. The highest education for husbands and wives, respectively, was 11% and 6% high school, 28% and 21% partial college or post−high school education, 42% and 46% college degree, and 19% and 27% graduate or professional degree.

Annual household income at pregnancy was as follows: 8% at $0−$25,000; 29% at $25,001–$50,000; 30% at $50,001–$75,000; 19% at $75,001–$100,000; and 13% at greater than $100,000. Couples had been married an average of 2.7 years, with an average length of union of 5.9 years and cohabitation 3.5 years. Wives and husbands' religious affiliation was, respectively, 31% and 30% Protestant, 35% and 29% nondenominational Christian, 27% and

27% Catholic, 4% and 7% None, and 3.6% and 6.6% Other or Jewish. Couples were no more involved in organized religion than are other married U.S. couples with biological offspring based on national norms of wives' religious attendance.

Procedure

Heterosexual couples were recruited from a midsized, midwestern city and surrounding region and recruited from childbirth classes (64%); announcements posted in medical offices, retail locations, or newspapers (14%); word of mouth referrals (15%); or direct mail (8%). Data for this study were drawn from a larger project approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Inclusionary criteria were that spouses (a) be married, (b) be pregnant with each individual's first biological child, and (c) both spoke English. Couples were assessed in their homes during their 8th−9th month of pregnancy (Time 1 [T1]) and when the baby was 3 (T2), 6 (T3), and 12 (T4) months old and were paid $75.00, $100.00, $100.00, and $125.00, respectively, across these time points, with 164 of the 178 couples who participated at T1 also completing surveys at T2, T3, and T4.

Participant Reported Measures of Major Variables

Spiritual intimacy. To assess spiritual intimacy, we modified four items from a 20-item index of spiritual disclosure previously used with college students and their parents (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008), so each spouse answered two items about disclosure by self (i.e., "I tend to keep my spiritual side private and separate from my marriage" [reverse-scored]; "I feel safe being completely open and honest with my spouse about my faith") and two items about the spouse's disclosure (i.e., "My spouse doesn't disclose her/his thoughts or feelings about spirituality with me" [reverse-scored]; "My spouse shares his or her spiritual questions or struggles with me"). We created four new items, so each spouse answered two items about support by self (i.e., "I try not to be judgmental or critical when my spouse shares his or her ideas about spirituality"; "I try to be supportive when my spouse discloses spiritual questions or struggles") and two items about his or her spouse's support (i.e., "My spouse really knows how to listen when I talk about my spiritual needs, thoughts, and feelings"; "My spouse is supportive when I reveal my spiritual questions or struggles to her/him"). Items were rated on a 4-point Likert-scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a great deal*). A joint report of each spouse's spiritual intimacy was create by summing self and spousal reports about each spouse's disclosure and support (i.e., eight items). Alpha coefficients at T1, T2, T3, and T4 were equal to, respectively, .67, .72, .67, and .72 for joint reports of wives and .73, .72, .76, and .70 for husbands.

Spiritual one-up-manship. To assess spiritual one-upmanship, we modified items from an index previously in Brelsford and Mahoney (2009), so each spouse answered six items about the extent to which each spouse engaged in one-upmanship behavior during conflicts. The items, beginning with the item stem "I/spouse," were "suggest that other is arguing or acting against God's will"; "suggest that own view is spiritually superior to other's"; "suggest that God disagrees with other's position"; "suggest that own view is more spiritually mature than other's"; "suggest that God is unhappy with other's opinion"; and "suggest that God is on own side, not other's." Items were rated on a 4-point Likert-scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a great deal*). Husbands' and wives' ratings about each spouse (i.e., 12 items) were summed to create joint reports of each spouse's one-upmanship at each time point. Alpha coefficients at T1, T2, T3, and T4 were equal to, respectively, .75, .79, .85, and .85 for joint reports of wives' scores and .74, .81, .89, and .88 for husbands' scores.

Frequency of couples' conflicts. We used the two-item subscale on frequency of conflict created by Kerig (1996) to assess the frequency of minor and major disagreements. Each spouse rated items on a 6-point scale from 1 (*once a year or less*) to 6 (*just about every day*), and their combined ratings (i.e., four items) were used to create joint reports of couples' conflict at each time point. This subscale has displayed good internal consistency and convergent and divergent validity in prior studies (Kerig, 1996). Alpha coefficients at T1, T2, T3, and T4 were equal to, respectively, .82, .77, .79. and .77 for joint reports of the frequency of marital conflict between spouses.

Conflict and problem-solving communication skills. We used the collaborative (eight items), hostile (eight items), and stonewalling (seven items) subscales from the Conflict and Problem-Solving Strategies measure created by Kerig (1996) to assess conflict-resolution strategies. Each spouse rated themselves and their spouse on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*often*) on items. Wives' and husbands' ratings about each spouse were summed to create joint reports of each spouse's collaboration (i.e., 16 items), hostility (i.e., 16 items), and stonewalling (i.e., 14 items) at each time point. Previous research on these subscales has indicated good internal consistency and evidence of convergent and divergent validity (Kerig, 1996). Alpha coefficients at T1, T2, T3, and T4 for collaboration were equal to, respectively, .87, .75, .83, and .82 for wives' scores and .73, .78, .81, and .81 for husbands' scores. Alpha coefficients for verbal hostility at T1, T2, T3, and T4 were equal to, respectively, .87, .88 .89, and .87 for wives' scores and .87, .88, .88, and .86 for husbands' scores. Alpha coefficients at T1, T2, T3, and T4 for stonewalling were equal to, respectively, .77, .74, .73, and .77 for wives' scores and .72, .72, .72, and .67 for husbands' scores.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

As seen in Table 1, the means of each variable at each time point indicate that spiritual intimacy occurred relatively often, whereas spiritual one-upmanship was infrequent. Because the spiritual one-upmanship scores for each spouse were highly skewed, a square root transformation was conducted on the scores for all analyses. The bivariate correlations between spouses' joint reports about each partner's spiritual intimacy and one-upmanship ranged from $r = .04$ to $r = -.16$ for wives and $r = -.04$ to $r = .05$ for husbands. The two predictor variables were essentially unrelated. The magnitude of the bivariate correlations between spouses' joint reports of the frequency of conflicts and three conflict resolution strategies by each spouse were in the moderate to moderately high range and in the expected direction (absolute values between .21 and .70, with most falling between .30 and .60).

Table 2 displays the bivariate associations between the predictor and criterion variables at each time point. Spiritual intimacy by

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Spiritual Intimacy and One-Up-Manship With Marital Conflict and Resolution Processes

	Couples							
Primary variables	T1	T2	T3	T4				
Frequency of conflict								
M	11.5	11.5	11.6	11.5				
SD	3.7	3.6	3.7	3.5				
Range	4–20	4–21	4–21	4–20				
	Wives				Husbands			
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T1	T2	T3	T4
Spiritual intimacy								
M	18.6	18.2	18.2	18.0	18.0	18.0	17.1	17.1
SD	3.4	3.7	3.5	3.9	3.7	3.9	4.1	3.8
Range	9–24	8–24	6–24	8–24	8–24	6–24	6–24	5–24
Spiritual one-upmanship								
M	2.3	2.0	2.0	1.8	2.1	1.7	2.0	1.7
SD	3.1	3.2	3.3	3.4	2.9	3.2	3.8	3.5
Range	0–17	0–16	0–21	0–17	0–17	0–17	0–23	0–25
Collaboration								
M	39.5	39.3	37.6	38.0	39.1	39.3	37.6	38.0
SD	4.8	4.5	5.6	5.3	4.6	5.1	5.5	5.3
Range	25–48	29–48	20–47	24–48	25–48	22–48	18–47	19–47
Hostility								
M	20.1	18.7	18.4	20.0	20.8	18.7	18.4	20.0
SD	7.9	7.9	8.2	7.6	7.6	7.7	7.8	7.2
Range	6–42	3–38	2–42	4–37	5–38	3–41	2–44	2–44
Stonewalling								
M	11.1	10.0	9.9	11.3	6.9	6.1	6.2	7.2
SD	5.2	4.8	4.9	5.3	4.2	3.9	4.0	3.9
Range	1–28	0–25	1–23	1–30	0–20	0–22	0–21	0–19

Note. T1 = Time 1 (8th−9th month of pregnancy); T2 = Time 2 (baby 3 months old); T3 = Time 3 (baby 6 months old); T4 = Time 4 (baby 12 months old).

both spouses was consistently correlated with each spouse's greater collaboration and less stonewalling during conflicts, with two exceptions. Mixed or null results emerged for other associations. A contrasting pattern of significant cross-sectional associations tended to emerge with spiritual one-upmanship, with this factor being consistently associated with more frequent marital conflict, verbal hostility, and stonewalling.

Fixed Effects Regression Modeling

Using fixed-effects regression modeling, we regressed each dependent variable (couples' marital conflict and each spouse's use of collaboration, hostility, and stonewalling during conflicts) one at a time with both spiritual constructs for the target spouse (spiritual intimacy, spiritual one-up-manship) entered simultaneously, plus dummy variables representing the effect of time (i.e., T1 [1 month prior to baby's birth] = 0, T2 [baby 3 months old] = 4, T3 [baby 6 months old] = 7, and T4 [baby 12 months old] = 13). This strategy presupposes the existence of one or more unmeasured selection factors in the cross-sectional model of a regressor's effect on a response. With more than one wave of data for the same respondents, unmeasured confounds can be eliminated from the model through a "differencing" process. This technique is designed to control for time-invariant, unmeasured heterogeneity (i.e., unmeasured and stable characteristics of individuals or couples that affect both predictor and criterion in the model). In other words, we used our longitudinal data (i.e., multiple measurement occasions for each case) as a vehicle to enable fixed-effects regression analyses. In this study, there was no need to use multilevel regression, because we were not examining the trajectory of change over time. Rather, our results are best understood as capturing the association between levels of each predictor and criterion variable. We presume that the S/R factors have causal effects on the criterion variables but recognize that such apparent "effects" might be driven by third, unobserved, time-invariant characteristics of respondents. The use of longitudinal data enables the activation of fixed-effects estimation, which removes such confounds from the equation. Essentially, in our fixed-effects regressions, each subject functions as their own control, employing information from only the changing variable scores over time to tap the explanatory and criterion variables. Mathematically, the between-subjects variability in the focal variables is eliminated from the equation, along with time-invariant characteristics that are particular to each subject (e.g., race, personality traits). Fixed-effects regression modeling is a staple of econometric analyses and is described in detail in a number of sources (see Allison, 2005, 2009).

As seen in Table 3, with both spiritual intimacy and one-upmanship by a given spouse entered, greater spiritual intimacy by both spouses predicted less frequent conflict ($p < .01$), more collaborative communication by husbands ($p < .01$), and less stalemating tactics ($p < .01$) by both spouses. Wives' spiritual intimacy also predicted more collaboration and less verbal hostility

Table 2
Bivariate Pearson Correlations of Spiritual Intimacy and One-Up-Manship With Marital Conflict and Resolution Processes at Each Time Point

Couple conflict and resolution tactics	Wife's spiritual intimacy				Wife's spiritual one-upmanship			
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T1	T2	T3	T4
Frequency of conflict	−.15	−.01	−.11	−.09	.19*	.20*	.25**	.27***
Collaboration								
Wife	.16*	.37***	.34***	.35***	−.14	−.17*	−.17*	−.19*
Husband	.33***	.41***	.32***	.22**	−.06	−.07	−.09	−.14
Hostility								
Wife	−.16*	−.15	−.20**	−.09	.28***	.36***	.30***	.37***
Husband	−.19*	−.16*	−.24**	−.14	.24***	.32***	.30***	.34***
Stonewalling								
Wife	−.20*	−.22**	−.26***	−.20**	.25**	.31***	.33***	.26***
Husband	−.23**	−.24**	−.20**	−.18*	.26***	.26***	.32***	.22**
	Husband's spiritual intimacy				Husband's spiritual one-upmanship			
Frequency of conflict	−.13	.00	−.09	−.02	.19*	.19*	.25**	.27***
Collaboration								
Wife	.11	.33***	.30***	.21**	−.19*	−.16*	−.17*	−.23**
Husband	.34***	.49***	.41***	.34***	−.09	−.07	−.15	−.15*
Hostility								
Wife	−.16*	−.18*	−.17*	−.05	.29***	.30***	.30***	.35***
Husband	−.18*	−.15	−.15	−.09	.31***	.37***	.38***	.40***
Stonewalling								
Wife	−.23**	−.16*	−.19*	−.20*	.23**	.26***	.40***	.31***
Husband	−.20**	−.15*	−.16*	−.15	.29***	.30***	.41***	.25**

Note. T1 = Time 1 (8th−9th month of pregnancy); T2 = Time 2 (baby 3 months old); T3 = Time 3 (baby 6 months old); T4 = Time 4 (baby 12 months old).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

by wives ($p < .01$). By contrast, greater spiritual one-upmanship by both spouses predicted greater stalemating tactics by both spouses ($p < .05$) and verbal hostility by husbands ($p < .05$) and was unrelated to the frequency of marital conflict or collaboration by either husbands or wives.

Discussion

We examined whether two contrasting types of verbal exchanges that tap directly into spouses' views of S/R were associated with marital conflict and conflict-resolution skills. We used four waves of data collected across the TtP to conduct fixed-effects regression analyses to rule out time-invariant, third factors that may drive associations between S/R and marital factors. Spiritual intimacy and one-upmanship were differentially linked to disagreements and conflict-resolution skills as couples adjusted to the stressors of caring for an infant.

Greater spiritual intimacy by both spouses was tied to couples' reporting less frequent marital conflict after accounting for spiritual one-upmanship and stable aspects of the couples across the TtP (e.g., personality traits, education, intelligence, family of origin history). Spiritual intimacy by both spouses was also tied to both spouses being less likely to shut down during conflicts and greater collaboration by husbands. Wives' spiritual intimacy was also tied to wives' greater collaboration and less verbal hostility during conflicts. Reciprocally, greater reliance on good listening skills and avoidance of punishing tactics was tied to couples'

Table 3
Fixed-Effects Regression Modeling of Spiritual Intimacy and One-Up-Manship Predicting Marital Conflict and Resolution Processes

Spiritual intimacy and one-upmanship	Frequency of conflict (couple)	Collaboration		Hostility		Stonewall	
		Wife	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife	Husband
Wife[a]							
Spiritual intimacy	−.12**	.16**	.13**	−.16**	−.07	−.10*	−.10*
Spiritual one-upmanship	.17	−.06	−.08	.19	.54**	.33**	.35**
Husband[a]							
Spiritual intimacy	−.11**	.10†	.17**	.08	.02	−.10*	−.10*
Spiritual one-upmanship	.15	.00	−.11	.05	.49**	.46**	.45**

Note. $N = 164$ couples.
[a] Intimacy and one-upmanship entered simultaneously.
† $p < .1$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

willingness to share and listen empathically to their respective viewpoints about S/R issues. It is important to note that our results suggest that such a feedback loop is independent of stable, enduring vulnerabilities of the spouses. Our findings reinforce prior findings where spiritual intimacy predicted better observed marital communication of first-time parents discussing their core conflicts (Kusner et al., 2014), and spiritual intimacy at pregnancy longitudinally predicted more emotional intimacy when couples were observed discussing their vulnerabilities about being parents (Padgett et al., 2019).

Why might spiritual intimacy feed into and be facilitated by fewer conflicts and better conflict-resolution skills? Spiritual intimacy involves discussing one's own views about S/R topics and facilitating such another's disclosures as a listener. Such dialogues can leave each partner feeling especially vulnerable to scrutiny because one's (dis)beliefs about a supernatural being or powers, existential concerns, and/or faith communities can be difficult, if not impossible, to verify as ontologically or morally defensible (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008; Mahoney, 2013). As in other family dyads (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008; Desrosiers, Kelley, & Miller, 2011), couples' skills in exploring such sensitive topics in an open and supportive manner may foster a greater sense of trust, attachment, emotional safety, and togetherness, or "we-ness" (Padgett et al., 2019). In turn, such conversations may reflect couples' capabilities to be collaborative when confronted with the challenges of new parenthood, where the optimal course of action in coping with an infant may also often be ambiguous and challenge deeply held values tied to family life. Finally, the willingness and ability to engage in S/R-oriented dialogues and be more collaborative during conflicts may signal greater shared values and tolerance for each another's worldviews.

Conversely, we found that the more that spouses pulled S/R into conflicts to justify their point of view and to disparage their partner's position (i.e., spiritual one-upmanship), the more both wives and husbands resorted to stonewalling and the more husbands used verbal hostility when couples discussed any area of conflict. Thus, although this type of S/R verbal exchange rarely occurred, our fixed-effects results suggest that this reciprocal feedback loop is independent of spiritual intimacy and stable characteristics of spouses that might otherwise account for the association. Our findings align with greater spiritual one-upmanship being correlated with greater stonewalling and verbal aggression in father−adult child and mother−adult dyads (Brelsford, 2011; Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009). Similarly, in a qualitative study of gay men from Orthodox Jewish or Christian backgrounds, most men reported that family members had used spiritual one-upmanship tactics to object to their coming out and that such tactics contributed to a deterioration in their relationships with these relatives (Etengoff & Daiute, 2014). Butler and Harper (1994) also offered insightful descriptions of how spiritual one-upmanship processes can aggravate marital distress within clinic-referred couples. Taken together, these emerging empirical threads suggest that drawing upon faith-based (dis)beliefs and opinions to assert superiority in conflicts may deepen distance and distrust between dyads.

The limitations of our study include that, for practical reasons, we recruited heterosexual couples who had married prior to the birth of both spouses' first biological child. Such couples tend to be more affluent, well-educated, and likely to describe themselves as Caucasian than do unmarried or cohabiting coparents (Brown, 2017). Most of the participants identified as either Christian or being religiously unaffiliated. Thus, our findings need to be replicated using more diverse samples of coparents regarding socioeconomic status, ethnic, family structure (e.g., stepfamilies), and religious tradition backgrounds as well as couples in distressed unions. More research is also needed to determine the interrelationships between dialogues focused on S/R and other value-laded topics that may tap into fundamental sources of identity and values, such as politics, and with religiously discordant or distressed couples who may exhibit relatively higher levels of spiritual one-upmanship than do generally well-adjusted couples.

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