

1 Introduction

The impetus for this Element was to provide a brief exploration of how parents' and couples' religious and spiritual (R/S) beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, and affiliations matter for family functioning and individuals' well-being in the family unit. In this Element, we attempt to provide coverage of this topic that is not exhaustive, but highlight areas we felt were salient. The literature we reviewed comes from the psychological and medical fields, but we are aware that inherently focusing on one or two areas of work may result in overlooking important contributions from other fields. In this Element, we explore R/S factors relevant to couple and family functioning, with an understanding that these domains are often interconnected but may also operate as distinct systems, as will become evident in the sections that follow. Further, in these sections, we provide overviews of major concepts within the R/S literature such as sanctification, R/S coping, prayer, and forgiveness, to name a few, while also discussing relational spirituality frameworks that may be salient in familial communication, conflict, and satisfaction. We also delve into fragile medical environments in relation to R/S aspects of family functioning along with methods of spiritually integrated psychotherapy for couples in need of support. Throughout this Element, as we cover the literature in this field, we are also cognizant of the correlational methodological commonalities in the works that we review. Thus, language to suggest otherwise is simply provided to highlight how we were most interested in work that could support how R/S factors have implications for psychological and relational outcomes.

The authors of this Element are both clinical psychologists who believe that engaging with the spiritual, religious, and psychological aspects of families is important for relational health and familial thriving. We hope that this Element will provide a stimulus for further study and development of supportive psychological interventions for families in need. Families are comprised of a multitude of unique configurations and ways of engaging with families in need may include supporting individuals within the system, providing resources for family members' exploration of R/S values, beliefs, and attitudes, or encouraging engagement with psychological professionals when mental health needs are in crisis or need additional support. Cultivating a culture of support for the whole person, including the R/S aspects of families, is multifaceted and often devoid of a roadmap. However, charting this path with the realization that course correction is possible can yield the most promising and exciting results and should be encouraging for scholars and practitioners in a multitude of fields.

2 Spirituality, Religion, and Family within Positive Psychology

Key virtues and character strengths are emphasized as sacred teleological goals inspired by spirituality and religion. Considerable research supports positive psychology factors rooted in religion and spirituality (R/S) in healthy family functioning (Mahoney et al., 2023), with a small amount of research indicating the potential for negative coping. Humility, compassion, and gratitude have a growing base of literature supporting moderate to strong correlations. Research in positive religious coping is especially strong in the virtue of forgiveness (Washington-Nortey et al., 2023) within a relational model. Two relational models of spirituality emphasize the followers' interpersonal stance with the divine, which then extends to their intimate relationships (Mahoney et al., 2023; Sandage et al., 2020). Most research is limited, as it is cross-sectional and correlational, yet there is promising theoretical development and research activity.

For most people, most of the time, R/S are positive influences in couples and families. The breadth of research investigating how R/S influence family dynamics within a positive psychology lens is an impressively growing field of study. This section will discuss hypotheses on the relationship between R/S and families within a positive psychology lens, with some attention to processes that detract from thriving. Positive psychology is a field of study that is especially focused on thriving, positive processes that increase human enjoyment, virtues, and eudaimonia.

What Is the Thriving Family?

Positive psychology requires a definition of the thriving family. There is not one definition of thriving, as each sociocultural group and family creates their own definition of thriving. Throughout this Element, we use the term “positive psychology” or add positive to another construct such as “positive prayer.” We draw the terms “thriving” and “positive” from the field of positive psychology, where these terms don't necessarily mean happy, pleasant, or the absence of suffering. Positive refers to psychological processes, traits, and contexts that enhance human flourishing, thriving, and eudaimonia (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The term positive can reflect subjective experiences, traits, and even institutions such as families or communities that are functioning with well-being. Thriving is the term often used in research that describes growth, meaning, and positive engagement with life (Edmondson et al., 2025). Each family orders their own meaning in life around what brings its collective thriving.

There are constant sociological shifts in the definition of a positive, thriving family. The family modernization hypothesis has described two social forces acting on families that explain threats to family thriving, and thus a pathway toward the good family. This hypothesis states that rapid structural and technological changes in the last century have driven the labor market to be selective (Thornton et al., 2015), which has caused the educational and economic systems to apply meritocratic principles to individuals, affecting family behaviors such as gender roles, childbearing, living arrangements, and divorce. This cultural model started with European elites but has been noted as a global phenomenon with changes in beliefs and norms which has become a more recent theory called developmental idealism (Thornton et al., 2015). Developmental idealism is a cultural model linking social changes with particular family forms and behaviors, where modern families are seen as desirable, which spreads ideas globally. Some research on developmental idealism has demonstrated predictive power in a variety of countries and decisions, such as delayed age of marriage (Allendorf et al., 2019). These sociological theories are informative to the study of R/S in families as they illuminate the moral conflicts that occur when modern ideals can clash with religious, cultural, or family values.

Sociological research on modernization helps explain the clash with traditional families, which place greater emphasis on traditional family roles, reproduction, and attachment bonds (Browning & Miller-McLemore, 2009). These roles and relationships are often imbued with R/S sacred meaning. Religious values and virtues offer an alternative picture of thriving, especially for children produced within families. Children may become driven toward meritocracy, but their value is not realized through merit. In contrast, religious communities provide their followers with teachings on family roles and attachments that counter modern achievement orientations, especially for ethnic (Hatcher et al., 2009) and religious minorities (Acevedo et al., 2014). These forces encourage families to create a virtuous home environment where their own definition of thriving is inculcated from generation to generation. There is very little direct research on this topic for the family system.

Within the fields of psychiatry and psychology, family systems theory diverges from individualistic research paradigms by considering the relationships and spaces among family members (Becvar & Becvar, 2023). The bonds of the family are interdependent emotional systems where a change in one person or subgroup of the system can lead to imbalances or

stressors. Families will strive for stability, even at the expense of unhealthy patterns. Emotions in the system, especially anxiety and conflict, will affect every member of the family system, not just individuals within the family. These family-level dynamics are different from the individual perspective on stress and coping, which tends to emphasize the importance of individual cognitive factors.

Both families and religious institutions are systems, operating with bonds and relational patterns that tend to repeat over generations. Religious institutions in communities or families provide alternatives to Western cultural constructions of childhood (Browning & Miller-McLemore, 2009). In fact, children are seen as sacred or even divine in all major religions. Jewish and Christian traditions teach the divine spirit or image of God in every new child. In Buddhism, children reflect the Buddha, especially regarding joy. Confucian and Hindu families inculcate filial piety and harmony as R/S values in children. Latter-day Saints families have their children choose Biblical heroes of virtue, while Islamic families in the West create virtuous environments in their homes to protect themselves from Western society. The Lakota tribe teaches that the divine is visible through children. Lakota especially focuses their children on bravery, generosity, truthfulness, and wisdom. In a quote from an interview with a teacher in the Lakota tribe, Browning and Miller-McLemore (2009) explain:

Children are Wankanyeja, Sacred Beings, and how you treat them is how you live their lives. We are here to take care of them because they do not belong to us, they are gifts to be taken care of. Wakan Tanka can take them if we do not treat them correctly. (p. 126)

This is in contrast with secular Western market capitalism where intimate partnerships and children do not easily fit the values system, since they can't directly contribute to efficiency and capital gains (Browning & Miller-McLemore, 2009).

How Are Couple and Family Positive Principles Taught in R/S Traditions?

Religious institutions and spiritual philosophies set forth norms, networks, and nomos (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008) within the home and community where couples and families are embedded. Norms include things such as sexual morals or golden rule ethics in relationships. Networks are relational roles and models within a family or community defined by the R/S traditions. Nomos are social behaviors that are specific and can

be imbued with spiritual significance. A nomo might include things like adherence to religious teachings in order to be in a state of approval by the deity.

Norms, networks, and nomos are solidified within the teachings of religious or spiritual traditions and spread beyond kinship groups to larger R/S social movements. These teachings have considerable power over family functioning (Mahoney et al., 2008), particularly moral virtues. The teachings of an R/S tradition are further fueled by formal and informal R/S networks with role models and social influence on families, ranging from rituals and holidays to home-based spiritual practices. Religious education institutions use religious values to teach children spiritual values and virtues, although this is generally outside of the home environment. Parents and partners will enact these teachings and social influence in order to internalize R/S values learned through R/S as they engage in scaffolded parenting practices (King et al., 2023).

Specific positive psychology examples of teachings promoting family flourishing are a growing area of research. Obeldobel and Kerns (2021) reviewed the literature on gratitude instilled in children by their parents. Not many studies have included R/S in the study of children learning gratitude, but one study found that religion predicted the mother–child gratitude relationship (Ramsey et al., 2018). Obeldobel and Kerns (2021) propose that there is a positive family R/S development of moral virtues such as gratitude, inclusive of life stage, context, and culture. One of the core social teachings of virtue from R/S is the ethic of responsibility, which is common to R/S traditions. R/S teaches couples, families, and children that they have responsibility (Wurzbarger, 1994) for each other, their neighbor, the land, elder family members, and civic duties. Fishbane (2023) discusses relational ethics for couples to include mutual responsibility in contrast with sociocultural values of power and competition. She proposes intentional dialogue on relational ethics as a practice to create, maintain, and repair relationships. Research is lacking that examines how couples and families select relational virtues, and intentionally or unintentionally propagate virtues and values within their home to promote flourishing life as a group.

Do Positive Religious Behaviors Promote Healthy Families?

Direct research on religious behaviors and family functioning is scarce. Two religious behaviors that have some studies in the context of couple or family relationships are religious service attendance and positive prayer

for the other person. It is helpful to consider that these two behaviors are common religious behaviors in the research, and there are likely many other religious practices with unknown effects on couples and families.

Shared religiosity or spirituality increases relationship attachment, provides common values for tasks and decisions, and strengthens the shared sacred meaning of the relationship (Waite & Lehrer, 2003). One study of 3,431 Canadian adults found R/S attendance (Upenieks et al., 2023) and divine control beliefs were a buffer on the effects of work–family conflict. Male religious service attendance has predicted more commitment and less violence in family relationships (Nason-Clark et al., 2018).

Some research shows that religious service attendance reduces arguments among couples (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). This effect appears to remain stable across the lifespan, including a recent study of long-term American partners aged sixty-two and older found that religious service attendance heterogamy predicted lower relationship satisfaction, less sex, and less affectionate touch (Schafer & Kwon, 2019). The study of older partners indicates that joint religious service attendance may be important beyond raising children or early stages of couple identity development. One study examined the paradox in the state of Arkansas where both religiosity and marital dissolution are high, finding that empathy, commitment, and church attendance were predictors of marital satisfaction (Goddard et al., 2012). This further supports a unique aspect of joint religious service attendance that may be protective of relationships.

Prayer for Partner or Family Member

Positive prayer for another tends to have a positive effect on the person who is praying, and sometimes on the relationship they are focusing on. Fincham (Fincham & Beach, 2014) found that benevolent prayer would predict positive satisfaction and reduced infidelity. This was replicated in a study of Iranian married partners (Rayesh & Kalantar, 2018). Prayer has an effect globally and specifically on relationship gratitude and forgiveness, creating a kind of positive psychology loop from positive prayer to virtues. An experiment (Beach et al., 2011) compared a treatment that included prayer with one that promoted nonreligious positive ideas with an African American sample. They found that prayer enhanced outcomes for wives in the experimental results. They also found a mediation relationship between prayer and commitment for all participants.

Religious service attendance and prayer do not align with market-driven values as they generally do not produce economic advantage or

achievement, with the potential exception of social networks for some business ventures within religious groups. Religious followers may perceive service attendance or prayers as achievement tasks, but this perspective has not yet been studied. Similar to self-enhancement tactics or extrinsic religious motivations (Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010), a religious practice's achievement intentions versus the intrinsic value may improve our understanding of the family modernization hypothesis applied to R/S families.

Relational Spirituality Framework

Mahoney and colleagues (2023) developed a relational spirituality framework for couples with considerable empirical support. The framework proposes that religion is a search for significance which takes place in institutions, such as marriage and family, in collaboration with religious organizations for those who are religious. The model (Mahoney, 2013) considers the family's developmental stages, which may involve different goals in the discovery phase compared with the maintenance stage or among distressed couples in need of transformation. There are three tiers of spiritual mechanisms in the model:

1. Relationship with God or deity,
2. Relationship with family members invested with spiritual properties, and
3. Relationship with the R/S community.

Each of the tiers has its own R/S resources and struggles. For example, couples who are creating their relationship (discovery phase) may engage in wedding vows both with each other (tier 2) and their community (tier 3) as a sacred resource that positively reinforces commitment. A struggle may include turning to God (tier 1) to forgive relational conflicts (transformation stage), which can lead to discouragement, a sense of abandonment, less forgiveness, and more verbal hostility.

The relational spirituality framework has been tested, including a meta-analysis of fifty-five studies that demonstrated research support, especially in the maintenance developmental phase, for global indicators of R/S associated with family functioning, as well as for some spiritual struggles that damage relational functioning. Mahoney et al. (2023) identified four factors that have support in the extant literature: sanctification, spiritual intimacy, prayer for others, and forgiveness. We will now review each of these aspects of R/S in positive psychology.

A second model that has strong theoretical and research development is the Relational Spirituality Model (Sandage et al., 2020). Within the model, relational developmental systems are posited as the key mechanisms accounting for the influence of R/S on relational functioning and mental health. These systems, attachment, differentiation, and intersubjectivity represent core developmental processes through which individuals learn to form secure bonds, maintain a coherent sense of self within relationships, and engage in mutual, shared meaning-making with others. The model has garnered considerable early research from the Danielsen Institute at Boston University, demonstrating utility in mental health treatment (Paine & Sandage, 2016; Sandage et al., 2022) and psychedelic-assisted training (Palitsky et al., 2025).

Sanctification

Sanctification is the belief that an object, relationship, or idea is holy or set apart from regular life. It can be theistic, such that a deity is manifest (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). For example, a member of the Lakota tribe may interpret a favorable event as a sign that Wakan Tanka is pleased with their parenting. Alternatively, sanctification can be non-theistic, where the thing has sacred qualities. For example, a favorable event may hold sacred qualities due to the event reflecting the common value of humanity for a humanistic atheist parent. It is quite common for family constructs to be sanctified, even for those with moderate or no R/S identity and commitments (Mahoney et al., 2023). Domains such as sex, parenting, the body, work, a place/location, forgiveness, or personal strivings have all been demonstrated to be sanctified for some (Mahoney et al., 2023). There is growing evidence that sanctification beliefs are a moderator between stress and relational quality (Mahoney et al., 2023). Sanctification is the most well-researched aspect of R/S applied to couples and families.

While sanctification is a belief system or set of values and attitudes about sex, marriage, parenting, and family life, these beliefs can drive numerous behaviors. For example, one study (Brelsford, 2013) found in an Actor Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) with 117 parent–child dyads with American college students that sanctification would predict more open communication in the family. It's important to note this study found nontheistic sanctification was predictive of healthier family relationships, pointing to the potential that there are other important aspects of sanctification working in the family patterns of relationships.