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RELIGION AND GENDER IN CHRISTIAN, JEWISH, AND MUSLIM MARRIED COUPLES

by

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

Department of Marriage, Family, and Human Development
Brigham Young University
August 2004
BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Anna Mae Ridley

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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Date         Jason S. Carroll

Date         Carol J. Ward
As chair of the candidate’s graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Anna Mae Ridley in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and departmental style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

RELIGION AND GENDER IN CHRISTIAN, JEWISH, AND MUSLIM MARRIED COUPLES

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Master of Science

This study explores the influence of religion on gender roles in marriage. Past research indicates that previous theories of marital power have ignored couples’ own conceptualizations and have relied on taken for granted assumptions. Thirty-two religious couples (from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faiths) were interviewed regarding their gender roles. Grounded-theory qualitative analyses were conducted for couples’ perceptions of religious influence on gender roles, the development of their gender practice, and their operationalization of marital power. Results are reported according to couples’ discussion of role organization, role design, and outcomes. Valuing gender differences moderated religious impact on couples’ role development and power balance. Traditional couples indicated that gender differences were important to them and that religion was a major factor in their role organization. Non-traditional couples were more
likely to see religion as oppressive to women and report that marital roles were equitable
because they were not determined by gender.
Religion and Gender in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Married Couples

The attribute of equality in relationships continues to be a prevalent indicator of marital quality and couples’ well-being in the literature on marriage (Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Thomas, Albrecht, & White, 1984). Within this line of scholarship, an equal relationship is typically conceptualized as one in which partners contribute proportionally to the marriage. Two specific components in which couples must contribute proportionally in order to successfully establish marital equality are division of household labor and balance of marital power (Zimmerman, 2000).

This predominant conceptualization of marital equality, however, does not account for highly religious couples who maintain traditional gender roles in family life. Roles are situated identities that are socially constructed, learned, and enacted by an individual as situations demand (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Traditional gender roles are enacted when the wife in a marriage fulfills private responsibilities such as domestic labor and the husband performs public pursuits such as earning a living. A growing body of research shows that a large portion of traditional marriages contradict theories that uniformity leads to increased marital quality (Amato & Booth 1995; Gager and Sanchez 1998; Sanchez and Gager 2000; Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998). In fact, highly religious couples have often been found to have higher levels of marital satisfaction, stability, and commitment than their non-religious counterparts (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to examine established conceptualizations of marital power and explore how existing theories may or may not explain religious couples’ relational experiences. The results of a qualitative study of highly religious couples from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths are presented. This study examined gender role practices that occur in
religious marriages, as well as couples’ conceptualizations of marital power and perceptions of
religious influence on gender ideology and roles, with the hope that findings may better explain
how religion influences the marital relationship.

Marital Equity

Due to growing economic pressures and changes in society over the past century, women
have joined the workforce to support their families (Furstenberg, 1999; Glass, 1992). This
modern development has contributed to altered expectations for both men and women in family
life and has resulted in shifted marital roles (Blumberg & Coleman, 1989; Rosenbluth, Steil, &
Whitcomb, 1998). Consequently, new models of marital quality and health have been proposed
by family scientists (Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Spanier & Lewis, 1980). Many of these
theoretical models indicate that equality is an integral element of marital quality, and couples
themselves view marital equality as an ideal that portends marital enhancement (Rosenbluth, et
al., 1998).

Equity Theory of Marital Power

Marital equality can be established through relational equity. Equity theory suggests that
couples achieve a balance of individual relationship inputs and outputs (DeMaris & Longmore,
and outputs are not equal between spouses, power balance is skewed and one partner in the
relationship has more power than another. Marital power is typically conceptualized as authority
in making decisions that affect the marital system (Blood & Wolfe 1960; McDonald, 1980;
Rosenbluth, et al., 1998; Steil & Weltman, 1991) and is determined by the value of resources
(relational inputs) that a spouse contributes to the marriage. Previous researchers have identified
economic influences as the key resource to gain marital power (Blumberg & Coleman, 1989;
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Komter, 1989; Schafer & Keith, 1981; Steil & Weltman, 1991; Zimmerman, 2000) and have speculated that earning capacity is the main determinant of family work (DeMaris & Longmore, 1996; Komter, 1989; Major, 1993; Schafer & Keith, 1981; Steil & Weltman, 1991). They claim that the more powerful spouse contributes less to family work, defined as domestic tasks such as household division of labor and child care. Marital equity is believed to be best accomplished when couples spend proportionate time in the workforce and maintain similar financial earnings (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Blumberg & Coleman, 1989; DeMaris & Longmore, 1996; Komter, 1989).

Scholars propose that because the husband is the bread-winner in a patriarchal family structure, he has more resources to contribute and gains more power in the marriage relationship. The wife on the other hand is more financially dependent and therefore has less opportunity for marital power and equality (Schwartz, Patterson, & Steen, 1995). Hence, marital power is displayed in the family work responsibilities that spouses undertake and separate gender roles are assumed to indicate inequity.

Ultimately, these conceptualizations of marital power portray an androgynous perspective of equity in which men and women must fulfill exactly the same marital roles to be equally powerful. Therefore, many gender/marital/relationship scholars presume that to achieve the same advantages and benefits from their marriage couples must be homogeneous (England & Farkas 1986; Goldscheider & Waite 1991).

Religious Couples’ Marital Quality

Many feminist scholars have criticized religion, especially conservative, orthodox, and fundamentalist religion, on the basis that it is inherently and irredeemably sexist because members are encouraged to follow a patriarchal family structure (Barber & Allen, 1992,
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Rayburn, 1992) and propose that gender is part of a divine plan. However, recent research indicates that wives who advocate traditional gender role ideologies are happier and less likely to divorce (Amato & Booth 1995; Gager & Sanchez 1998; Sanchez & Gager 2000; Wilkie, et al., 1998). Research regarding religious couples also indicates that traditional marital relationships align closely with previously established determinants of marital quality. Religious couples tend to report greater marital satisfaction, higher marital commitment and stability, and lower divorce rates (Dollahite, et al., 2004; Mahoney, et al., 2001), as well as enhanced mental health and self-esteem (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Researchers have linked religiosity with couples’ likeliness to implement use of collaboration and adaptive communication skills (Mahoney, et al., 2001).

Specifically, highly religious spouses are more likely to seek help as an alternative to divorce (Sullivan, 2001), employ problem solving-strategies to work through conflict, and avoid use of verbal aggression and stalemate strategies during spousal disagreements (Mahoney, et al., 1999). Since positive outcomes for religious couples do not seem to coincide with androgynous theories of marital equality, many theorists have speculated about why religious couples maintain their marital satisfaction in spite of the more traditional role relationships that many religious couples advocate and/or practice (see Table 1).

Theoretical Explanations for High Marital Satisfaction Among Religious Couples

Compensation Model

Hansen (1987), Scanzoni & Arnett (1987), and Wallin & Clark (1964) represent a group of scholars who have proposed that a compensation model may explain religious women’s satisfaction. These scholars have hypothesized that a compensation model in which rewards and costs are reconciled may predict relative satisfaction despite marital vulnerabilities. This model suggests that religious rewards such as social support and spiritual enhancement compensate for
the relational hazards “imposed” upon women by religious patriarchy. This model proposes that religious women believe the benefits of religion to be worth the sacrifice of marital equality and chose to ignore their other options and remain content with their religious affiliation and marriage.

**Cognitive Restructuring**

Ozorak (1996) has suggested that women may employ cognitive restructuring to maintain marital satisfaction. Cognitive restructuring involves shaping or reframing thoughts so that beliefs coincide with current practices or reframing ideas to change behavior. Scholars have noted that some religious leaders encourage couples to perceive their gender roles in this manner, by pointing out the benefits of men’s headship, including lack of burdensome responsibility for women (Bartkowski, 2001) and invested paternal involvement in family life (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Latshaw, 1998; Wilcox, 2002). Ozorak argued that because faith communities offer inherent benefits for their members such as comfort, security, a sense of belonging, and personal growth (Spilka, Hood, & Gorsuch, 1985), women desire to be involved in their religion. As a result, wives must reframe their interpretation of church doctrine by focusing on the positive features of their faith to empower themselves (Ozorak, 1996).

**Social Negotiation**

Gallagher and Smith (1999) suggested that rather than restructure cognitions to fit patriarchal practices or disregard alternative options, couples chose instead to implement “symbolic traditionalism.” This concept implies that couples assent to religious principles of patriarchy in theory but do not follow them in practice. This perspective suggests that gender schemas are a product of negotiating between social forces and personal ideals and are modified contingent on availability of resources when applied to novel situations (Gallagher & Smith,
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Husbands and wives in religious cultures attempt to balance their internal gender ideologies with external pressures to obtain the greatest benefit. Gallagher and Smith (1999) theorized that because traditional gender roles do not augment benefits when applied to current economic realities of a two-income family, evangelical ideals are adjusting and the meaning of men’s headship is being transformed (Bartkowski, 2001). For some couples this means that gender roles have transitioned into dividing time comparably between home life and the workforce (Gallagher & Smith, 1999). As a result couples choose to implement equivalent marital roles and do not practice what they preach regarding traditional married life.

Limitations of Previous Theories

Many theorists have thought that religious couples should undergo greater marital discord because they experience a lack of balance in marital power as a result of religious influence on gender roles. The theories that they have proposed to explain the empirical finding that religious couples find joy in their relationships suggest that spouses (a) choose either to overlook their options (Scazoni & Arnett, 1987), (b) feign contentment by restructuring their individual belief systems (Ozorak, 1996), or (c) fail to adhere to religious principles of men’s headship (Gallagher & Smith, 1999). These theories suggest that for couples to establish marital quality, they must lower their expectations for equality (Wilcox & Nock, 2004). This conclusion coincides with the notion of false consciousness (Jost, 1995; Whisner, 1989) claiming that religious couples have not obtained true happiness but are simply fooling themselves.

Although these theories make sense psychologically, they are also founded on some unsupported assumptions and are limited in several ways. First, these theories only address religious couples’ marital satisfaction while failing to explain reports of high marital quality and stability. Two of the three models focus entirely on women’s experience while failing to
incorporate the couple as the unit of analysis, a weakness that feminist theorist Mary Van Leeuwen (1996) identifies as a key constraint on furthering family theory about gender. Most importantly, these explanations are founded on one important assumption: the expectation that separate gender roles and unequal family work are always a display of unbalanced marital power (DeMaris & Longmore, 1996; Komter, 1989; Steil & Weltman, 1991).

Though relatively few comprehensive studies have been conducted to test whether or not this assumption is true, two studies in particular provide evidence that previous conceptualizations regarding religion, gender roles, family work, and marital power may not be accurate.

*Family Work and Marital Power*

In an ethnographic study on marriage and family life among evangelical Protestants, Bartkowski (2001) found that family work was not a depiction of marital power. Couples in his study, whether egalitarian or patriarchal supporters, applied mutual submission and domestic task-sharing in their marital relationship. Rather than assign partner duties based on gender, each individual family member acquired responsibilities established on convenience and ability, while decisions were regularly made jointly. Husbands did not carry any more explicit authority in the home even when women agreed that wifely submission was the ideal marital role.

The idea that marital power is not represented by gender roles was especially demonstrated in Bartkowski’s finding that women were “running the show” in many “patriarchal” households. Rarely did any wives appear to trust their husband to take care of household errands, frequently portraying them as incompetent and highly unreliable in performing domestic chores. Often women gave the impression that they were pulling puppet strings from backstage. “Smart wives” seemed to use this type of submission to their advantage.
Although their intent was most likely not manipulative, these women attempted to exercise some control over their husbands through their acts of subordination. This “strategic submission” worked in women’s favor by gaining them power in their relationship and justifying their submission based on what men, not women, lack (Bartkowski, 2001).

Kaufmann (1993) also discovered that marital power is not based on family work. She recognized that although traditional gender roles were displayed by Orthodox Jewish couples in the home, women in these relationships did not exhibit feelings of subordination, rejection, or oppression but instead reported experiencing increased sense of empowerment. Kaufmann’s previously feminist and now newly Orthodox women respondents explained that their duties as a wife and mother made them feel important and liberated. They shared the advantages of feeling appreciated more than they would have without their faith and indicated that they were grateful to belong to a community that values the nature of women. Jewish women assured their interviewer that the religion was not oppressive but empowering and that anyone inside or outside of the faith community who thought otherwise did not fully comprehend the doctrinal interpretation of gender. They asserted that only truthful application of religious teachings could grasp the underlying concepts of equality and concluded that women are not at all inferior to men, but rather that the sexes serve different purposes.

Participant responses from these studies suggest that couples derive a greater sense of balance in the relationship not by accumulating equal amounts of duties and responsibilities, but through their perception of roles as appropriate. These research findings suggest the need for further examination of the family processes and family operationalizations of marital power and gender ideology (Erikson, 1993; Komter, 1989; McDonald, 1980; Rosenbluth, et al., 1998; Steil
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& Weltman, 1991; Thompson & Walker, 1989) and indicate that previous models of power balance in couples may have been insufficient.

The Need for New Models of Marital Power

Researchers have limited their ability to understand marital power in several domains. Models of marital power and equity have been tested primarily through survey methods and have included conceptualizations deemed appropriate by researchers but not respondents (DeMaris & Longmore, 1996; Greenstein, 1996; Lavee & Katz, 2002; Schafer & Keith, 1981; Steil & Weltman, 1991). These constructs typically focus on gender role behaviors such as family work as their central example and have been narrowly operationalized to include decision-making, economic provision, participation in the workforce, and division of household labor (Blumberg & Coleman, 1989; DeMaris & Longmore, 1996; Komter, 1989; Rosenbluth, et al., 1998; Steil & Weltman, 1991). Previously cited studies illustrate the logical gap in this theory, resulting in family scholars operationalizing marital power inaccurately.

Few studies have analyzed other types of marital power, examined alternative methods to the balance of family work or studied other important aspects of gendered relationships such as complementarity, trust, and distinct but equal gender roles (Blumberg & Coleman, 1989; Erickson, 1993; Komter, 1989; Rosenbluth, et al., 1998). Although couples are often asked to indicate their perceptions of fairness in family work in their responses (Greenstein, 1996; Lavee & Katz, 2002; Major, 1993), participants have not been asked to discern whether or not they believe religion has influenced their marital equity or if they perceive their relationship in terms of gender roles. This neglect hinders the research since previous findings are not representative reflections of how couples themselves understand marital power (Rosenbluth, et al., 1998) and may not be generalizable to populations such as highly religious couples (Karney & Bradbury,
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1995). Scholars have suggested improving upon the research by examining the marital processes that occur in negotiating marital roles, utilizing other research methods such as qualitative measures (Blumberg & Coleman, 1989; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and considering possible alternatives to the previously established behavioral conceptualizations of marital power (Erikson, 1993; Komter, 1989; McDonalds, 1980; Rosenbluth, et al., 1998; Steil & Weltman, 1991; Thompson & Walker, 1989; see also Daly, 2003).

Current Study

In order to extend previous research, the current study will attempt to fill three previous gaps in the research on the topic of marital power and gender ideology in highly religious couples. First, the study will discuss couples’ perceptions regarding the influence of religion on ideology and roles. Secondly, this study will examine the processes which occur in marital operationalization of gender and power. Finally, this research will include couples’ conceptualizations of marital power and gender roles.

Research Questions

Within these topics, the following research questions will be addressed:

Perceptions of religious influence. How do couples perceive religion to influence their gender practice?

Processes. What methods do religious couples employ to develop their marital roles?

Conceptualizations. How do religious couples view marital power?

Methodology

Participants

As a response to the call for more inclusive comparative research on diversity in religious families (Dollahite, et al., 2004; Snarey & Dollahite, 2001) this study compares gender issues
within a sample from the population of “Abrahamic” religions (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim). Purposive sampling was used to create a sample that would represent a wide range of relevant experiences, attitudes, and views.

Data were collected from interviews conducted by Dr. David Dollahite during a six month research leave in the spring of 2002. Thirty-two couples from two New England states were interviewed and questioned about the ways their religious beliefs, practices, and communities influenced their marital relationship and family life.

The sample included 22 Christian couples which was comprised of seven Conservative Protestant couples (four Baptist, one Seventh-day Adventist, one Missionary and Alliance, one Pentecostal); six Mainstream Protestant couples (two Episcopal, one Congregational, one Lutheran, two Methodist); three Catholic couples; and six New Christian Religions (two Jehovah’s Witness, four Latter-day Saint/Mormon). Six Jewish couples (two Ultra-Orthodox, two Modern Orthodox, two Conservative) and four Muslim couples (three immigrant couples from India and Malaysia, one African-American) were also included in the sample.

Twenty-five of the couples were Caucasian, two were African-American, two were Hispanic/Latino, and three were East Indian. Couples were typically in their mid-forties and had been married approximately 21 years. All couples had at least one child (mean = 3) (see Table 2 for details on sample demographics).

Participants were recruited through recommendations made by religious leaders who identified families in their congregation that might be willing to be interviewed and were deemed strong in their families and their faith. Couples were contacted by phone with a request to participate. For those who agreed to participate, a letter was mailed before the interview date
informing them of questions to expect and the approximate amount of time that the interview would last.

Couples interviewed represent the Abrahamic religions of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are highly religious as reported by themselves and by their religious leaders. Respondent couples reported attending religious worship services at least once a week and donated an average 7% of their income to their faith community or for other religious purposes.

Qualitative Research Design

Since qualitative research is ideally suited to examine issues of interpretation and behavior rationale (Gilgun, 2001), in-depth interviewing was selected as the best available method able to gather information regarding how religion influences family life, from the reported perspective of family members. Lofland and Lofland (1995) suggest that through intensive interviewing researchers are able to collect the richest possible data by achieving intimate familiarity with the topic of interest. They conclude that face-to-face interaction is the most complete method of participating in the mind of another human being and that to acquire social knowledge, you must participate in the mind of another human being.

Types of Data Collected

Twenty questions regarding links between marriage and faith were asked of participants during the interview (see Appendix A). This study specifically targets responses to three questions regarding religious couples’ perception of gender roles and gender beliefs or practices that may be harmful to marriage. These three questions are: (a) To what extent do you think of God as gendered (male/female) or familial? (b) Does your faith influence how you think about gender roles in marriage? (c) Do you feel there are any religious beliefs or practices that, if misunderstood or misapplied, can be harmful to marriage? If so, what are they? However,
responses to all 20 questions were considered and a subsample of six interviews were coded in their entirety.

*Interview Procedure*

Following the suggestions of Lofland and Lofland (1995) the interview process began with the researcher briefly explaining the nature of the study in order to acquaint couples with expected topics to be covered and the anticipated duration of the dialogue. Respondents were instructed that they could choose to skip any of the questions that they would prefer to not answer or that they may ask for clarification at any point. Additionally, couples were told that if a question seemed to be difficult to answer or strange, they should simply let the interviewer know so that they could move on to the subsequent question. Couples signed a consent form during the introductions informing them that the interview would be taped and ensuring confidentiality (see Appendix B). Interviewing typically took place in each couple’s home and lasted about one hour. Each participant was paid $20.

An interview schedule was utilized to help direct the discussion. A flexible format was followed as the instrument was used primarily to provide a checklist of topics to be covered to develop a “guided conversation.” Included on the interview schedule were a list of follow-up questions and probing suggestions under each broad inquiry, serving as a prompt for the researcher if appropriate to ask.

*Reducing Interviewer Bias*

Specific methods were employed to maintain as close of an approximation to impartiality as possible during the interview process. Asking general questions helps prevent irrelevant subject matter from being discussed when an outsider’s point of view differs from the respondent’s. By allowing participants to comment on their perspectives, the researcher avoids
incongruence between the interview questions and participants’ experiences. This prevents the participant from responding to questions that seem irrelevant or unanswerable. Interview guides were developed following Berg’s (2001) suggestions that interview topics remain simple, avoiding overly complex or double-barreled questions. Wording was chosen to remain non-specific and avoid leading questions, intending to leave topics open-ended so that respondents could develop their own interpretations and elaborate upon the broader ideas that were presented.

Additionally, interview methodology coincided with Andersen’s (1993) recommendation to approach the respondent with sensitivity, as a willing student who acknowledges his lack of expertise and is eager to learn. By adhering to these suggestions, the interviewer established trust so that respondents could disclose honest accounts.

Analyses

Data were analyzed using the grounded theory approach, in which categories developed are derived directly from the data gathered, attempting to avoid preconceived notions. In order to inductively build theory from the data, Strauss and Corbin (1998) have suggested employing specific analytical tools to become sensitized to relevant properties and dimensions of a category. These tools include asking questions about the data, conducting word, phrase, and sentence analyses, and making comparisons. These techniques facilitate the coding process by building theory from the specific to the more general, the purpose being to establish what details about a single case teach us about all cases. One case provides guidelines for analyzing other cases, so that the researcher discerns prospective relationships as she proceeds. This method progresses through description of the data to developing conceptual ordering of ideas to final theorizing through formulating an explanatory scheme. NVivo, a qualitative statistical software package that
was developed with grounded theory in mind (Gibbs, 2002), was utilized during every step of coding to speed up the process and allow codes to be more accessible to the researcher.

**Organizing the Data**

The process of organizing the interviews in order to make coding easier began by first dividing couples’ transcribed interviews into questions. This was accomplished by assigning “nodes” to each of the interview questions in each document. Nodes in *NVivo* represent construct categories and enable the researcher to pull up any dialogue that has been categorized under the node by a simple click of the mouse. Responses to the same questions were assigned to the same node, so that I could click on a question node and read responses to that question from every participant. This allowed me to focus on coding those questions that pertain to my study as well as compare couples’ differing responses. Secondly, couples’ responses were divided into faith group by creating document sets within the *NVivo* program. This process assisted me later in comparing faith groups responses to specific topics of interest.

**Coding**

Open coding is the first step of grounded theory analysis. I began open coding with the purpose of developing a general understanding of participant’s words which led to generating original categories from the data. This occurred as I explored responses to the questions of interest and coded responses line by line, word by word. Each sentence, phrase, or word that described a new idea was assigned a separate open node within *NVivo*. This resulted in the accumulation of literally hundreds of open nodes. The next step in this process was to develop some general categories that explain how the line-by-line codes were related. I did this by gathering nodes that were associated at a broad level as “child” nodes under a “parent” tree-node
labeled with the category title. One example of this cataloging system is the connection I made between all open nodes describing women.

Secondly, I conducted axial coding in order to discover conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences of a phenomenon while making connections between subcategories. Utilizing inductive reasoning, categories are created by identifying emergent patterns and are clarified during this step. During axial coding, categories are associated at the level of properties and dimensions, providing greater explanatory power in developing theory. This procedure involved creating more specific tree nodes that represented the details of the broadly developed categories. One way I accomplished this within the previously cited example was to explore the roles of women, what they are, how they are organized, what responsibilities they hold, and what the reported outcomes are. Each tree node was labeled according to these questions, and then child nodes were created to represent participant answers to these inquiries.

Selective coding, which involves integrating the data and refining theory, was conducted next. During this step, more overarching themes were discovered by examining differences between faith group responses and separate but related categories, such as the roles of men and women. One outcome of this coding was the discovery of different gender role purposes and practices for traditional and non-traditional couples.

Finally, coding for process was completed, in which I examined the action patterns in which a concept or event occurs. Coding for process provides insight into some broader questions, relating how a concept evolves over time and how it interacts with the social context. An example of this type of coding is the examination of whether couples indicate that their gender roles have remained consistent or if they have changed over time.
Additionally, a sample of six full interviews (all 20 questions) was coded and a boolean search was conducted of all 32 interviews for gender topics (e.g. gender, roles, responsibilities) to ensure conceptual saturation had been achieved and to make certain that I did not miss any relevant discussion covered during responses to other interview questions. Conceptual saturation is achieved when established codes have reached a level of inclusiveness that does not necessitate modification when additional participant responses are considered (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). No new codes were created from responses detected in the Boolean search, indicating that conceptual saturation had been achieved.

Although these coding procedures were completed separately there were also instances in which steps occurred simultaneously. The coding process is a continual cycle and even after completing selective coding I often discovered new ideas and returned to the data to form new open codes and modify axial relationships. The sequencing of steps is less important than the amount of time the researcher spends immersed in the data and the depth of the investigation.

**Reducing Analytic and Interpretive Bias**

In studying sensitive issues such as gender roles, patriarchy, and religion, several crucial concerns arise regarding interviews with distinct cultural groups. Researchers who are dominant group members may impede precise response interpretation through maintaining preconceived notions about the conduct of a minority group (Andersen, 1993). Such expectations may result in self-fulfilling prophecy during dialogue with respondents and final analyses. Because this research includes groups as diverse as Orthodox Jews, Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Evangelical Christians, and Mormons and addresses highly emotional content regarding gender, religions, and relationships, precautions were implemented to produce adequate cultural interpretations. Researchers involved in this project followed Blea’s (1995) proposal to develop
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respect for the community in order to minimize observer bias and obtain accurate data. In addition to the careful preparation of interview questions by Dr. Dollahite prior to meeting with couples, I personally have completed an extensive literature review of familial research among Jewish and Islamic populations as well as taken courses relevant to topics of Judaism and Islam in order to increase my knowledge base about the beliefs and practices of these groups so that data analyses would be relevant and valid.

My best defense against permitting bias to influence interpretation of the participant responses was in maintaining an acute awareness of my predisposition and attempting to remain as neutral as possible in coding procedures and analysis. Careful attention was given to researcher bias in navigating through the dilemma of being both an insider and outsider to the population(s) under investigation.

As an active Christian worshipper in the LDS church, I am predisposed to certain ideas that could interfere with objectivity. Belonging to a Christian religion which emphasizes a patriarchal family structure could increase the likelihood of perceiving some familial structures as more suitable than others. Additionally, my familiarity with Christianity could affect my capability to understand the experiences of respondents in other traditions. Moreover, as a liberal feminist and a woman, I might be inclined to misinterpret the intentions of those who adhere to a patriarchal ideal as oppressive. However, this study does benefit from a gender balance in that the interviews were conducted by a male while the analyses and interpretations were conducted by a female.

Results

Findings are reported according to the themes that emerged based on a grounded theory approach to participant responses. Responses have been categorized into couples’ discussion of
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(a) what their marital roles are, (b) how their roles are designed, and (c) what outcomes these roles create for their marriage. How the data relate to my research questions will be examined during the discussion section.

Marital Roles

Marital roles that couples described tended to be extremely complex (see Table 3). However, couples’ description of roles leaned towards either a traditional or a non-traditional structure. Some couples described their roles in a way that met the criteria for this dichotomy, while other couples’ role subscription was more nuanced. Twelve couples (three Muslim, three LDS, four Conservative Protestant, and two Jehovah’s Witness) described their marital relationship in traditional terms while nine couples (three Jewish, four Mainstream Protestant, two Catholic) described their marriage as non-traditional. Three couples fell under a “mixed-discourse” category. One Conservative Protestant couple did not report enough information regarding their marital relationship to determine if they fell under the previously defined categories. The other two couples, one Mainstream Protestant and one Seventh-day Adventist offered explanations for times when they were traditional in structure and times in which they were non-traditional. These two couples did not seem to clearly fit within the dichotomy. The remaining eight couples did not respond to the interview question regarding religious influences on gender roles which was coded to determine marital role structure. A general description of the way respondents conceptualized these roles is provided as well as the main responsibilities allotted to each.

Traditional Role Organization

Male shepherd. Traditional couples suggested that the man’s role involves acting as the material provider, spiritual guide, and role model. They explained that the man leads the home as
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the head of the house and has a shepherding responsibility. Yusif, an East Indian Islamic
physician, stated:

    And in Islam, the male, the husband or the father has been given the shepherd-hood, if
    you will, of the family. So there is great responsibility of taking care of your wife’s
    spiritual and physical needs, and protection and love and all of that.

Duties that were most frequently aligned with the husband’s role included providing for his
family financially, doing the “dirty work” (taking out the trash, mowing the lawn, etc.), money
management, and acting responsibly with the headship he has been endowed. Jason, a Mormon
religious educator, said that his most important job is loving his family:

    The first commandment is love God, the second commandment is love your neighbor.
    And your neighbor can be defined as your wife, you know, your spouse. And I think the
    way in which I reflect and do some inner thinking and so forth about how I treat my wife,
    and how I talk to her. . . . And it’s good to go to church and hear that and be reminded of
    that so . . . be more mindful of the way you talk to your wife and your children.

Female caregiver. Traditional couples discussed women’s most important role in raising
the children and keeping the home. Jamila, an Indian American Muslim, said, “[A] woman’s
responsibility is your home . . . and the children . . . to raise them in [the] Islamic way.”
Responsibilities typically associated by couples with the traditional woman’s role included
preparing meals, childcare, and cleaning. Jared and Mercy, a Baptist couple explained, “[Jared]:
Mercy does all the cooking, and all the laundry. . . . [Mercy]: And all the cleaning.”

Both. Traditional couples also asserted that there were important responsibilities in which
both partners shared responsibility. Shawn, a Baptist university chaplain, explained, “There’s an
egalitarianism in the sense that we both are to live before God. We both are to really nurture this family spiritually. And that Emily is an equal partner.”

Non-Traditional Role Organization

Non-traditional couples emphasized that spouses were both equal leaders of the family. They had equivalent capabilities and contributed similarly. Ed, a Seventh-day Adventist, explained, “I don’t consider any task out of bounds just because I’m male, just because I’m the father. And I don’t think Carmen feels that way either.” These couples specified that tasks were equally distributed and not assigned based on gender. Participants particularly highlighted instances in which they fulfilled duties that would normally be assigned to their spouse in a traditional setting. Jake and Abby, a Congregationalist couple, said, “Abby is much more handy around the house than I am . . . And Jake likes to vacuum . . . He bakes bread and vacuums and washes up.”

Role Design

Couples discussed the various ways in which they designed their roles (see Table 3), including (a) influences on role choice, (b) considerations for task designation, (c) processes of deciding on roles, and (d) explanations for type of gender practice.

Influences

Socialization. Several respondents indicated that socialization had guided their acceptance of specific gender roles. The most frequently reported influence was parental role-modeling. Heidi, an LDS homemaker, revealed that establishing gender roles in her marriage was a simple process because she and her husband had been taught gender responsibilities during their childhood. She explained, “Because we both grew up in it, it just seems natural to us.”
*Religion.* Four couples, three of which described themselves as non-traditional, reported that they purposely structured their gender roles in opposition to religious doctrine. Martha, a Lutheran college professor, said, “We make it a point to do the opposite of what [religious leaders] tell us.” However, this account was the exception to the rule. Nearly 40% of spouses indicated that one of the leading influences on family roles was religion. Traditional couples specified that gender roles were specifically outlined in their religion and that they chose to follow the guidelines that their faith community provided.

Respondents conveyed that the main way that they receive information from their religion was through instruction from sacred texts. Brent, a Jehovah’s Witness, said, “The Bible definitely speaks about gender and has specific instruction for the genders.” One wife indicated that she learned the qualities of a capable wife from her mother having read Proverbs 31 to her growing up. Two common themes identified as religious instruction from the Bible were submission and loving family leadership. Ed, a Seventh-day Adventist, explained that his beliefs about mutual submission are directly related to Bible teachings, “But we also believe there’s a degree of submissiveness, based on instructions we read in the scriptures, on both parts, on the part of both.”

*Considerations*

*Preference.* Personal preferences were also commonly cited by both traditionalists and non-traditionalists as determining family roles. Ezra, an Orthodox Jewish operations manager, said that he breaks out of stereotypical roles to cook for the family because he enjoys it, “I like baking . . . I like doing it . . . I like making soups, if I have the time or doing that stuff. That to me is relaxing.” Gary, an African-American Methodist teacher, stated that he regularly tends to
housekeeping because, “I like to keep the house clean, I like to do the clothes . . . It gives me an order that I don’t have at school.”

*Availability and practicality.* Participants of both traditional and non-traditional role divisions also indicated that roles were frequently assigned based on who was available to take care of the need. Kurt, a Catholic school teacher said that his family roles are based on pragmatism rather than gender. Additionally, Ariel, an Orthodox Jewish doctor, stated that in his family “It’s not a role as much as, well I’m here, I can get this done; you’re there, you can get that done.”

*Potential harmful effects.* Participants who asserted that religion did not play a role in allocating gender roles, especially those who held non-traditional gender ideologies, identified fear of unrighteous dominion as a primary reason. Although none of the couples from any faith group reported that their religious beliefs regarding gender had actually been harmful to their own relationship, the possible misapplication of male headship was an important consideration that all couples discussed when asked about potential harmful effects of religion. Couples acknowledged the potential detriments to family members’ health and well-being when male headship and submission are misused. Mark, a Jehovah’s Witness, explained, “Headship can be misapplied. [A] husband can take that and think of himself as the dictator rather than the loving head.” A few participants even explained that religion had impacted their decisions, by influencing them to combat the doctrines they had received.

*Individual strengths.* One quarter of the couples interviewed indicated that one of the primary influences on their determination of roles was each individual’s strengths, such as special gifts or skills that create competence in fulfilling a specific objective. Seventy-five percent of the couples who indicated that individual strengths were determinant of gender roles
subscribed to traditional gender principles. Though several couples did attribute these skills or gifts to gender, roles described were also non-traditional. Ed, a Seventh-day Adventist, suggested that when the quality of the result depended on who performed the task, it should be allocated to the most capable spouse.

**Priorities.** Couples also indicated that they developed their roles based on priorities. This response was split evenly between traditional and non-traditionalists. Emily, a Baptist departmental assistant, explained that she enjoys her gender role because her first priority is caring for her family:

> You know, I put a high priority on the kids and the marriage. So we’ve been pretty traditional. I think I have a very high value on caring for the family. Making sure that the family really is working, running smoothly. You know that people’s needs are being met . . . But I feel very strongly that it is much more important than me having a career. And I have lots of interests; there’s a lot of things that I would like to do. But, I do find myself making decisions on a regular basis to take care of, it’s a priority thing, to take care of the needs of the people in the family before I . . . you know I’m not going to just go off and get myself a career and ditch . . . .

Abby, a Congregationalist homemaker, stated that the principle of justice is applied to role negotiation in their home so that each family member has time to take care of their own needs.

**Processes**

**Communication.** Communication was another leading factor in making decisions about family roles that 25 percent of couples described. Five of the eight couples that reported communication to be an important factor were traditional, while the other three were non-traditional. Couples emphasized that negotiating decisions about gender roles was essential to
ensure that family needs were being met. Emily, a Baptist departmental assistant, suggested that couples need to discuss how each spouse is going to benefit the family as a whole:

I guess what it boils down to for me is that someone needs to care for the kids and the family and the household. And if you’re going to take that responsibility on as a couple, then you gotta work it out somehow, that people are being cared for and loved.

Unintended habituation. Three couples described simply “falling into” their gender roles unintentionally. Jared, a Baptist real estate developer, said, “I think we have high ideals about not being stuck in gender roles, but I think it often just ends up being that way.” Kathy, a Catholic counselor depicted their marital role transitions:

I was very much a tom-boy and so I’d play sports, coached a lot. I have to be the one that mows the lawn. And I think I fought against the gender roles . . . We [tried] to share so much in the beginning. Everything’s equal. Share, share. But, when I was home nursing the baby, I’d try to stay home with the kid. It did fall on me to do the laundry, right? And so it was like, yeah, now we’re becoming a typical couple where I do all the inside stuff and you get to do all the outside stuff.

Explanations

Gender differences. Many traditional religious couples indicated that one of the primary reasons they felt separate gender roles were appropriate was because they strongly believed in inherent gender distinctness. Because males and females are different, family responsibilities may be allocated more appropriately by talent as Ed, a Seventh-day Adventist, explained:

Well there’s some things . . . like making a loaf of bread. I mean that’s something that she does so well, it doesn’t even make sense for me to make an attempt at it, unless she wanted me to and she wanted to teach me how to do it.
These gender differences were typically described as physical differences (the man being larger or the woman being capable of carrying a child) or innate talents (such as teaching ability or level-headedness). Andy, a member of the Missionary and Alliance community, gave an example of why one gender may be more capable in a specific situation:

I think men have kind of been a little more mechanically oriented so that they fix the house, or if a situation comes up, like in a crisis, emergency, type thing, I think a lot of [the] time a man will try to come to a, maybe he might be wrong, but some kind of decision to act, you know, maybe a little bit more quickly. Whereas a woman might really analyze it a lot more and maybe it’d be too late, or something.

Couples emphasized that these differences were especially helpful in providing complementarity in the marriage relationship. Using a family systems approach, Mark, a Jehovah’s Witness, stated, “So when we combine as a husband and wife in a family, we can actually be more than we would be as two individuals. . . . So we appreciate that we each have strengths that are typically associated with gender.” Brent, another Jehovah’s Witness, said, “I believe there are differences between men and women, and women have generally a set of strengths that’s different than the man’s set of strengths. And combined together they are forced to be reckoned with.”

Although non-traditional couples agreed that family responsibilities should be based on ability and that couples contribute in different ways, they pointed out that these differences are not attributable to gender. Ariel, an Orthodox Jewish doctor, said:

And who we are as people, I mean, we’re just souls, you know. I happen to be in a male body, my soul has a male body, her soul has a female body. Who we are as souls, I mean,
it’s hard to know on a day-to-day basis. So that doesn’t, that’s irrespective of what our roles, or jobs are. That’s irrespective of our division of labor.

These couples suggested that families profit the most when both spouses provide equally. Abby, a Congregationalist homemaker, discussed the wide variety of ways that spouses contribute to the family:

[I] am learning that God, you know, that people are, whatever works for the person is okay. If the strict thing works for you, that’s great, you keep that role, organization, ‘cause that works for you and your family. But for some people, we can be freer than that, you know, if one person eats meat, great, and if the other person doesn’t eat meat, that’s great. And for us, we eat everything. We eat it all. But we can just, we feel like we have a certain freedom, in our, because of what God gives us. You know I really do believe that one should submit oneself to another.

*Outcomes*

Many couples indicated that an important part of gender practice was the outcomes of the role choices that they made. Responses have been organized into comments on (a) role benefits, (b) difficulties, and (c) the marital power balance achieved (see Table 3).

*Benefits*

*Appreciation.* One of the benefits of role development most frequently referred to by traditional participants was appreciation for one’s role. Jamie, a Jehovah’s Witness religious educator, said, “Jehovah’s arrangement for headship is a blessing. I love it. And I like my role. I would love to fulfill it better, always. But it just, it’s a cherished role. I absolutely love it.”

*Becoming a better spouse.* Traditional husbands typically reported that their role allowed them to become a better spouse. Alex, a Puerto Rican Pentecostal police officer said of his role,
“[My role has] shown me how to be a better husband. Listen more, [be] more patient. So it’s made me into a better person, [with] better character.”

**Difficulties**

*Culture.* The principal difficulty in establishing gender roles that couples identified was negotiating with outside cultural pressures. For most couples this meant deciding how much of the outside world to let into family life. Emily, a Baptist mother, describes the controversy in making decisions considering the difficult situations of this generation:

But it is challenging to live in this day and age where you have to try to relate to other people that have a very different view of it. And it does get complicated because . . . In the current context, the current climate of what other people are wrestling with, and decisions that they’re making. . . . It seems like there’s a real pressure . . . to have your identity wrapped up in what you’re doing. And so the way my faith intersects with that is, that the more I move along in my walk with the Lord, the more I realize, ‘You know, my identity is not in what I do. My identity is in being a child of God. And I can be that child of God no matter where I am. I can be that child here in the home. . . . I’m in a different place because of my faith.’

**Power Balance**

*Equality.* Interestingly, traditional and non-traditional couples alike each reported that equality was an important foundation of their relationship. However, a dichotomy arose in couples’ conceptualizations of equality. Couples who emphasized traditional gender roles stressed contributing equivalently through different means. Heidi, an LDS homemaker stated, “We don’t think one is less that the other, they equally contribute to the betterment of the family, the betterment of people. But, they are distinct, separate, divine roles.”
Non-traditional spouses reported that they had the same capabilities and, therefore, their contributions could be matched. Erin, an Episcopal college professor said, “Our gender roles are very mixed. We both work full time and we both do most of the things that need to be done. I mean, I guess, you mow the lawn and I do more of the laundry. But, other than that, there’s not an awful lot of typical gender divisions.” Mitch, a Methodist chemistry professor, discussed the importance of finding a faith community that supports gender equity. He explained that equity and equality are not the same:

I don’t know if this is stronger for me or for Susan, but I think we probably would . . . eliminate a possibility if it didn’t support the notion that we had of relative equality. Maybe not equality, equity. Whatever the right word is, for people having sort of comparable positions of prominence, man and woman in a family.

Discussion

After reviewing participants’ reports of gender role practice from a grounded-theory (inductive) perspective, I will now discuss how couples’ accounts of marital roles, role design, and role outcomes fit within the framework of the proposed research questions. After examining the research questions, I conclude by re-exploring the previously cited theories of religious couple’s marital quality and the implications of the study regarding the models’ underlying assumptions. Then I propose how this study relates to previous research and discuss the limitations. Finally, implications for future research are offered and a personal reflection is conveyed.
Research Question 1

How do couples perceive religion to have influenced their gender practice?

Perceptions of Religious Influence

Eight couples (five Mainstream Protestant, one Jewish, two Catholic) said that religion had no effect on their practice of gender roles, while eleven couples (two LDS, four Conservative Protestant, two Islamic, two Jehovah’s Witnesses, and one Seventh-day Adventist couple) stated that religion definitely had an influence. The remaining 21% of couples who responded to this question did not clearly identify an effect or provide examples of instances when religion was an influence and times when it was not.

Traditional couples typically indicated that religion was a major factor in their gender role organization. Interestingly, out of the 33% of couples who reported that religion had no influence on their gender roles half (four couples) asserted that they chose to follow androgynous roles because their religion proposed the opposite. Leah, a Conservative Jewish arts administrator, said, “Well for me it would be the opposite, because Judaism keeps gender roles very strong . . . The faith has, in that I, it makes me battle leaving more gender roles in the marriage.” For this sample, religion seemed to both encourage couples to establish separate gender-based roles and to implement role sameness as a response to concerns about potential oppression. Hence, religion had an influence, even if it was reactive in the opposite direction of what the faith taught.

Couples primarily differed in their assessment of how religion played a part in perception of equality. Traditional participants believed that conservative religion created egalitarianism by identifying how spouses contribute to family life in different but equal ways and how everyone is created in the image of God. Non-traditional respondents reported that religion established
inequality through the importance placed on male-headship. Support for either of these beliefs guided couples in their role choices and gender practice. Current theories pertaining to religious couples’ marital power do not appear to offer room for this dichotomy.

Researchers typically conclude that those who follow traditional religious doctrine are oppressing women, while those whose gender ideology is not persuaded by religion are making more equitable choices. However, this study illustrates that this is not a completely accurate conclusion. Couples indicated that religion influenced perception of equality, so that the two groups cannot be measured by the same standard. For those who adhere to traditional roles, equality may be established through complementarity, while non-traditional couples might establish equality by dividing household tasks proportionally.

The main religious influence on gender practice reported by couples in this sample was in their belief about God’s design for families. Couples who believed that God designed the family for male and female spouses to serve in separate, divinely assigned functions, were more likely to establish traditional roles and view gender uniqueness more favorably. Andy, a Missionary and Alliance computer technician, explained, “There’s a lot of things that Kari does better than I do, and I think it’s probably because she’s a woman. And there’s some things that I do better than Kari does. It’s probably because I’m a guy. And that’s the way God makes us.” This belief that God created genders to be different was the main religious influence on traditional couples’ role development and perception of marital power.

Many traditional respondents also explained their belief that men’s headship has been divinely established based on their conviction that human beings were created in the image of God. Kari, a Missionary and Alliance school teacher, stated, “And since God was a man, I think, and He created Adam in His image, I think that’s why.” Jennifer, a Jehovah’s Witness
homemaker said that the two genders are incomplete without one another, and only when they are together do they reflect godliness:

> Usually if someone asks me this, I tell them, well if you go to Genesis, where it talks about man being created in God’s image, it says “He made them male and female.” So really to equal God, for human[s] to completely reflect the qualities of God, to be an image of God, spiritually and emotionally, you need both what man and woman can give.

Those who did not indicate believing that God assigned spouses with separate purposes explained that roles did not need to be limited by gender. Mercy, a Baptist caregiver, said that she believes God’s creation of gender did not have anything to do with specific roles, “We’re somewhat traditional in the way we work it out, but I don’t know that we’d say everybody should do it this way. God made women to do such and such and men . . . you know it’s not like that.”

**Research Question 2**

*What methods do religious couples employ to develop their marital roles?*

**Role Specialization**

Both traditional and non-traditional couples, however, utilized both religious and non-religious means to establish marital roles. As explained previously, preferences, priorities, availability, and individual strengths were all strong determinants of who did what in the relationship. One possible explanation for how couples develop their marital roles is that they evaluate these factors collectively to create a role especially suited for their specific needs as a couple. This development of specialized roles is likely to begin with couples weighing the importance of marital role influences and considerations individually. Once the most important factors have been identified, the process of determining roles as a couple through communication
or unintended habituation begins. Next, marital roles are decided and enacted, and when explanations of the appropriateness of the roles are taken into account, either positive or negative psychological outcomes result (see Figure 1).

One example of this development taking place is the link between couples’ valuing of gender differences and their choice of role organization. For those who indicated a strong belief in divinely designed gender distinctness, traditional roles were more frequently elicited. For those couples who believed God’s purpose for gender was based on equivalent capabilities, religion influenced role decisions through conscientious refuting of doctrinal teachings or couples unintentionally returned to traditional roles.

Consensus

Couples operating under both traditional and non-traditional structures especially emphasized that role decisions were made based on consensus between spouses. Kathy, a Catholic college counselor explained, “Our communication helped a lot in just saying, let’s talk about this, you know. I’m going to have to do most of the cooking, but he cooks too.” This finding of equal decision-making authority in determining roles suggests that previous conclusions made by family scholars regarding the sacrifice of equality that traditional couples accept may be inaccurate. If both spouses are equally involved in traditional role development no inequality is present in their current situation. Hence, couples are not obligated to forfeit equality to participate in patriarchal religion; they are choosing to be different in their roles.

Research Question 3

How do religious couples view marital power?

Conceptualizing Power

This idea of choice leads to a discussion of how religious couples conceptualize marital
power. Though couples were not asked explicitly to define marital power, the previous
examination of participant responses helps determine how couples believe their relationship to be
proportionally balanced. Two types of power that were discussed were decision-making and
submission.

**Decision-making.** Only five couples brought up the issue of decision-making in relation
to gender roles, suggesting that religious couples may not strongly associate decision-making
power with family work and gender roles. Three couples (one traditional and two “mixed-
discourse”) related that in their household, although family members are encouraged to make
recommendations, the man has the final word in the decision-making process. Yuusif, a Muslim
physician stated:

> So we take everybody’s opinion and then a decision is made by the head of the
> household. So everybody feels that they are a partner in it. And they had a chance to
> voice the positives and negatives. And then they accept whatever decision is made.

Samuel, a Baptist salesperson, explained that this final decision was hardly ever needed in his
marriage:

> Basically the idea was that, if we can’t come to some kind of an agreement on something,
> and a decision has to be made, a decision can’t just be not made or put off or whatever,
> and stuff, then I would go ahead and make the decision. But I really can’t remember
> hardly any of those. But you know, the thing is, we’re here at just about 25 years. You’re
> right, in 25 years. The number of times when that’s happened . . . I can’t even remember
> one to tell you the truth, but I’m sure there was one somewhere along the line.

Two couples (one traditional, one non-traditional), reported that they always made
important decisions together. Evan, a Mormon landscape architect, said, “I don’t think we’ve
ever made a decision . . . a big decision, where we haven’t been completely in agreement. That’s just not how things work in our marriage.”

*Submission.* The idea of submitting to one another was an issue that was brought up frequently by both traditional and non-traditional couples. Both mutual-submission and hierarchal submission were emphasized as a display of equal marital power because people are required to submit to God first and to use compassion in their leadership. Joann, a Methodist psychotherapist, said, “I really do believe we should submit oneself to another . . . mutual submission [is when] we have submitted to God first, and then everything else is a piece of cake.” Alex, a Latino police officer stated that submission is often misinterpreted:

People, especially the Hispanic culture . . . [think] submit [means] she has to be my slave. What I say goes. No, that’s not what the word submit means, you know. Some people, personally, some people, they take that, and I’ve seen them submit to the husband, and like they’ll walk behind them. They’ll do what he says, he’s the man. And more in the Hispanic culture, the men are very dominant, and I wasn’t raised like that. You know, I was raised to respect my wife. I, first of all, submit myself to the word, to the Lord.

Shawn, a Baptist university chaplain, explained, “And yet in the exercise of that responsibility, there’s to be a way that that position serves those under, so to speak.”

*Establishing Equality*

Traditional couples reported that their relationship was based on equality as frequently as did non-traditional couples. Three ways that equality was demonstrated by traditional couples was through their emphasis on (a) selflessness, (b) cooperation, and (c) valuing women’s resources.
Selflessness. One way that traditional couples establish fairness in their gender roles is through selflessness. Dalia, an Orthodox Jewish teacher, explained that in her relationship they achieve balance by maintaining an awareness of each other’s needs:

It’s one of the guidance that you get in terms of how to have a good marriage is, like both husband and wife to be keenly respectful and aware of each other’s needs and not so focused on their own in hopes that someone else is. And so it [is] not an imbalanced situation.

Another opportunity to be selfless that couples depict is in attempting to be “Christ-like” in their relationship. Jason, a Mormon religious educator described how selflessness helps him and his wife reduce conflict,

The selfishness issue, Christ himself would have been the example of the most selfless person that ever lived. He yielded his will and submitted totally to the Father. . . . A key component in our gospel belief of being selfless, service oriented, often helps me. . . .

You know a simple thing as, doing the dishes . . . or I ought to offer to make the bed . . . she expresses that appreciation . . . it makes the relationship a lot better.

Brent, a Jehovah’s Witness explained, “But Jesus went a step further, he says, I’m giving you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you. And he loved others more than himself. And that’s the role model that husbands have in the family.”

Cooperation. Couples also reported that when cooperation was the foundation of their choices they more easily established a sense of equality. Tara, an LDS homemaker, said that role organization is a process, “But I think that there has also been a lot of give and take. You know, talking about getting used to things.” Alex, a Pentecostal police officer, explained that submission doesn’t mean inequality, “Now when my wife says submit, she’s not referring that
she has to be a slave to me, by no means. We are one flesh. And we discuss matters when they do arise. And she understands that I have a role to play, she has her role to play.” Angela, a Catholic religious educator, said that unity and mutual reliance precedes success:

I think it’s important that neither of us lords it over each other certainly . . . and we both look to each other. But it’s, again, you know, to seek the kingdom together . . . we both go to each other so much. I do look up to Brian and see him as a role model and advisor to me. I do that, because he’s Brian, no so much because he’s my husband and that’s my job . . . I do it because of who he is.

Valuing women’s resources. Traditional spouses indicated that their faith communities highly value the role of women and regard their position as mothers and nurturers essential. Ibrahiim, an East Indian Muslim technical director, described his respect for the role of women, “Well it’s respecting the mother. Being at the feet of the mother is a way of, only a way of saying that you respect a person so much, that you are never at the same level as her.”

Additionally, some respondents said that women are encouraged to aspire to their full potential and are not restricted by any religious beliefs. Jared, a Baptist real estate developer, expressed his confidence that women can aspire to be anything they desire, “But I believe that women can aspire to pretty much any role within the church. And I feel that way about my daughters, I feel that way about my wife. . . . Lifting Mercy up and saying, ‘Go for it. . . . I’m not going to hold you back.”

Conclusion

After examining the research questions, I conclude by re-exploring the previously cited theories of religious couple’s marital quality and the implications of the study regarding the
models’ underlying assumptions. Next, I propose where this study fits in with current findings and discuss the limitations. Finally, implications for future research are offered.

Re-Exploring Assumptions

The findings of this study suggest that the assumption that family work is a display of marital power is not an accurate representation of many religious couples’ experience. Results indicate that religious couples approach gender differently than depicted in research on power balance and marital quality. Nearly every couple in this study, whether traditional or non-traditional, deemed their marriage appropriately balanced and equal.

Religious couples in this study did not focus on the benefits of religion while ignoring its hazards as the compensation model supposes. Instead, participants were well aware of the risks of a male-headship role structure. They discussed these concerns vividly with the interviewer, but also provided methods to avoid them, such as selflessness and cooperation.

Refuting the proposal of Ozorak’s (1996) cognitive restructuring model, traditional couples refused to accept that being different means having less power. Although they recognized the potential harm that patriarchy carries, couples also asserted that because their roles were carefully constructed by both spouses together, power struggles were not an issue. Ozorak suggested that cognitive restructuring was displayed in four ways, couples’ (a) focus on the positive aspects of their religion, (b) use downward comparisons to make their religious beliefs look good, (c) show optimism for change in the future, and (d) make substitute interpretations of doctrine. Findings from this study show little support for the idea that any of the traditional couples were employing these techniques to empower themselves.

Additionally, couples’ social negotiation to achieve balance did not limit them to adhere to religious teaching of gender roles only in theory as reported in Gallagher and Smith’s research
(1999). Couples differed in their implementation of separate gender roles. Those who valued having different gender roles discussed making sacrifices so that they could be realized.

**Power and Roles**

For the traditional religious couples in this study power does not seem to be inherent in what you do. They do not achieve status through family work and decision-making authority is not based on marital role structure. Rather, it is important to highlight that the traditional couples in this study do not associate gender roles with power but discuss equality no matter how their roles are organized. This finding may suggest that roles and power remain separate constructs when applied to the experience of religious couples. Previous research has attended solely to nontraditional couples who share power and traditional couples who implement hierarchal power, while failing to capture the experiences of traditional couples with shared power and nontraditional couples with hierarchal power (Ozorak, 1996). Role-sharing couples, who practice similar roles but implement hierarchal marital power in decision-making and collegial couples who practice separate gender roles but equally divide marital power might be considered as alternative couple descriptions in future research (see Table 4). This study suggests that there might not be an excess of couples belonging to these distinct groups, but they do exist. Previous one-dimensional power theories do not offer consideration of these couples (see Table 4). Furthermore, those who implement hierarchal decision-making do not report unequal marital power, suggesting that decision-making may be too simplistic to measure religious couples’ marital power.

**Resource Value**

One explanation for traditional couples’ reports of marital equality may be the value that they place on each individual’s relationship inputs. Women’s resources, such as home-keeping
ability and child caring capacity may be valued more highly among religious couples, establishing balance with men’s economic resources. For these couples, it is not what you do that gains advantage but how your resources are valued that earns power. This implies that belief and perception are intrinsically more important to religious couples’ relationships than behavior (Rosenbluth, et al., 1998). When families value the woman’s role equally with the man’s they may be more effective at balancing power (Zimmerman, 2000).

*Unique Gender Experience*

The findings in this study align closely with an often ignored approach to feminism that has been developing since the 1980s. “Difference feminism” or “cultural feminism” as it is termed, has been devoted to the search for women’s unique moral voice with its focus on nurturing and compassion while reconceptualizing the androgynous principles of feminism that labels women as inherently oppressed (Gilligan, 1994; Van Leeuwen, 1996). Applying this approach to the findings of this study suggests that many religious couples who designate separate gender roles may not experience power inequality because their individual needs to be recognized as uniquely important are being fulfilled.

Wilcox and Nock’s (2004) research found that women’s distinct needs are being fulfilled in traditional roles because they receive more positive “emotion work” from their husbands. Emotion work involves the “enhancement of others’ emotional well-being and provision of emotional support” (Erickson, 1993, pp. 888). Wilcox and Nock (2004) suggest that traditional couples report higher marital quality and traditional women benefit from increased happiness because the marriage relationship of traditional couples is deemed a transcendent covenant in which both partners are committed to the greater good of the relationship rather than self-interest. Couples’ reports of selflessness, communication, and appreciation may coincide with
the ideas of unique needs proposed by these studies and explain the sense of equity that
traditional religious couples are able to achieve. Results indicate that traditional marriage may be
much more complex than previously noted (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999).

Limitations

Sample. Purposive sampling limits this study in that it prevents generalizing findings to
the population at large. This sample was atypical in that it included only highly religious couples.
However, it was not the aim of this research to produce findings that were numerically
representative of the religious population. Rather, this study attempts to address what gender
practice might reveal about religious couples’ relationships in order to build theory on religion
and gender in marriage. Sampling was conducted to collect a richness of data that provides
greater depth of understanding and to achieve conceptual clarity.

Bias. Irene Blea (1995) suggested that although truth exists, it will always be colored by
our interpretation of it. Qualitative studies are not without bias. This study was certainly no
exception, however, I used utmost caution in drawing conclusions in an attempt to prevent
eliciting preconceived notions. One way I did this was by using the data to attempt to contradict
emergent findings (Gilgun, 2001). By contradicting my own conclusions, I was able to better
realize whether my reasoning was based on my own internal assumptions or sound logic. As a
highly religious feminist, I attempted to capture the implicit meanings of participant responses.
However, because I am not a member of all the faith groups studied (with the exception of the
LDS religion) it is likely that I missed intrinsic meaning reported by couples that might have
been captured by a researcher of the same faith or a more perceptive scholar.

Implications

There are limitations for how far any research analysis can venture. However, it is my
hope that this study has created opportunities for future research to build up new conceptualizations of marital power. Further studies should attempt to capture religious couples’ operationalization of gender roles so that they can be measured quantitatively to determine suitable indicators of marital quality. It may be appropriate to ask participants how their spouse meets their individual needs, and if they believe this influences marital power or perceptions of role fairness.

Although for the purposes of this study participant responses were categorized into “traditional” and “non-traditional” couples, respondents often did not clearly fall into one or the other category completely. The findings of this study may even indicate that a more complex continuum of gender ideologies exist including role-sharing and collegial couples (see Table 4) and should be considered in future research (Lavee & Katz, 2002).

Additionally, because less information was obtained through non-traditional respondents’ brief replies, future researchers may want to address this gap by gearing questions toward non-traditionalists, such as “How do you work out task allotment in your roles?” or “What influences have helped you decide to structure your roles as you do?” It is my hope that with further research, family scholars will more accurately be able to identify how and why religious couples believe their relationships are power balanced.

Author’s Personal Reflection

It was obvious to me as the researcher, upon beginning the analysis, that I had previously established ideas because the complexity of participant responses surprised me. Once I attempted to organize the coding into a coherent structure, I realized the magnitude of couples’ perceptions. I found that in many ways couples’ responses did not seem to fit any particular pattern. Sometimes husbands and wives did not have the same ideas about their gender practice, and even
more often couples consistently reported ways in which religion both did and did not influence their gender roles. It was a challenge for me to identify and conceptualize the most relevant information and the ideas most frequently referred to because couples’ responses were so complex and varied. At times, couples would come to the same conclusion through differing means. For example, many women claimed religion was an influence in their decision-making about marital roles. However one Jewish woman who reported that religion was an influence explained that it was an influence because she intentionally contradicted her religious teachings about gender. Additionally, many couples reported that they fulfilled traditional gender roles but their explanations varied. Some said they “fell-into” gendered divided roles because it was more easily managed; some felt that gender roles were divinely assigned; others structured their lives that way because that was the way they preferred it. During the analysis process I had a difficult time knowing where these couples fit into the overall structure.

I gained the most information from the couples who said that religion was a significant factor in their structuring of marital roles. These couples were much more willing to discuss how religion was an influence, reveal their beliefs, and make their own discoveries during the interview process. It may have been my own bias influencing this interpretation, but to me it seemed that couples who did not see religion as a player in their role organization spoke much more briefly. They typically reported that they did not let religion “get in the way” of making choices regarding gender practice and often defended their position as equals.

The writing process was the most beneficial part of concluding my analysis of the data. My own theory and explanations developed the most during the writing process and I found myself re-analyzing the data several times during each section of the paper. My conclusion
solidified once I began writing and examining my analysis to determine what findings were the most relevant to my research questions.

Overall, my expectations did not represent the intricacies I discovered during the analysis process. However, the learning process was well worth the outcome, and hopefully the findings of this study will lead researchers to better understand the complexity of religious couples’ conceptualization of marital power and will encourage further exploration of gender practice within diverse denominations.
References


Hillsdale, N. J.


Appendix A

Interview Questions on Faith and Family Life

Faith and Marriage (Married Couple)
I'd like to ask some questions about links between your faith and your marriage or between your relationship with God and with one another. I am also interested in personal experiences that illustrate your ideas.

1. What are God's purposes for marriage and how does this fit into God's purpose for life?
2. What role does God play in your marriage? (comforter, guide)
3. How central is faith to your marriage? (commitment)
4. Has God ever directly intervened in your marriage? (Have either of you had a spiritual experience that directly influenced your marriage or have you ever had a spiritual experience together as a couple?)
5. To what extent do you think of God as gendered (male/female) or familial (parent)?
6. What are some of your deepest spiritual beliefs relating to marriage? (commitment, shared vision)
7. Does the concept of covenant have meaning for you in your marriage? (If so, how?) (commitment)
8. Which faith practices/traditions hold special meaning for you as a couple? (Prayer, scripture, Sabbath)
9. How has your relationship with God influenced your relationship with each other?
10. How has your relationship with each other influenced your relationship with God?
11. Does your faith bless or strengthen your marriage? (How? Example?)
12. How devout do you consider yourselves in relation to other members of your faith community (scale)?
13. What are the greatest obstacles (external/internal) to your marriage being all you and God want it to be?
14. Does your faith in God help you be more selfless and help you have a shared vision in your marriage? (How?) (commitment)
15. All couples have some conflict. Are there ways that your religious beliefs or practices help avoid or reduce marital conflict? (commitment, shared vision)
16. In trying to maintain a strong marriage do you seek guidance mainly from religious or secular sources?
17. What values are most important to the success of your marriage? How has your faith contributed to these values?
18. Does your faith influence how you think about gender roles in marriage? (How?)
19. Do you feel there are any religious beliefs or practices that, if misunderstood or misapplied, can be harmful to marriage? If so, what are they?
20. Are there ways you would like to strengthen the links between your marriage and your faith?
Appendix B
Consent to Be a Research Subject
(Parents or Young Adult >18)

This research study seeks to understand the relationship between faith and family life among religious families with at least one older adolescent or young adult child (15-25). The questions focus on the aspects of religious beliefs, practices, and community believed to be most meaningful for marriage and family life and relationships and how and why religious beliefs and practices assist family members with personal and family stresses and challenges. Husband, Wife, and Child will be interviewed together. Dr. David Dollahite, a professor at the BYU Family Studies Center, is conducting this study. Your name was provided by the leader of your religious community.

The interview consists of 20 questions on marriage (couple only) and 30 questions on parenting (couple and child) and should take a total of about two hours (which we can divide into two interviews if you desire). There are minimal risks to participation in this study which could include some potential discomfort in discussing the personal issues of religion and family life. There is no benefit to you as a research participant. Other religious leaders and families may benefit from the knowledge gained from this research regarding ways to strengthen faith and family life.

Participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate and the right to withdraw before completing the interview without penalty. Strict confidentiality will be maintained. No individual identifying information will be disclosed. All interviews will be stored in a secure area and access will be given to only people associated with the study. You are free to decline to answer any question you do not wish to answer and at any time you wish you can end the interview with no penalty.

The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. Each spouse will receive $20 and adolescent or young adult children who participate will receive $10.00 as a token of appreciation for their participation (adults interviews will be longer time as part of study deals with marriage). If you decide to end the interview early you will still receive the full amount of money.

If you have any questions regarding this study you may contact Dr. David Dollahite at 801-422-4179 (office) or 801-372-8005 (cell). If you have questions concerning your rights as a participant in a research project, you may contact Dr. Shane S. Shulthies, Chair of the Institutional Review Board, 120 RB, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah 84602; phone (801) 422-5490.

I ___________________________ acknowledge that I have had the purposes of this project explained to me and I hereby give my consent to be interviewed for this research project. I understand that the research project I am involved in is interviewing families to better understand the connections between religion and family life. It has been explained to me that there are minimal risks and no benefit to me from my participation in this research. I understand that my privacy will be protected by the researchers in the following ways: (a) my name and the name of my family member will never be used when the experiences I share are discussed in written publication based on this research (unless I specifically and in writing request that my name and child's name be used), (b) during the interview, I may request the interviewer to delete from the written transcript of the interview any statements I make that I would prefer not be part of the transcript. I understand that I am free to decline to answer any question I do not wish to answer and that at any time I wish I can end the interview without penalty. I understand that I will receive $20.00 for my participation in this research project.

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent, and desire of my own free will and volition, to participate in this research study.

Research Subject _______________________________  Date __________
Table 1

Theoretical Explanations for High Marital Satisfaction Among Religious Couples
Attributes and Assumptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Religious Costs</th>
<th>Religious Benefits</th>
<th>Coping Mechanisms</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>Sacrificing marital equality</td>
<td><strong>Social support</strong></td>
<td>Decide to ignore costs and focus on benefits</td>
<td>Contentment with religious affiliation</td>
<td>Couples are sacrificing marital equality when they function in different roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Spiritual enhancement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Restructuring</td>
<td>Church doctrine that decreases marital equality</td>
<td><strong>Comfort</strong></td>
<td>Restructure beliefs about religious doctrine so that costs become benefits</td>
<td><strong>Empowered</strong></td>
<td>Church doctrine emphasizing different family roles indicates reduced power balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Belonging</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Security</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Personal Growth</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Negotiation</td>
<td>Need for two income family</td>
<td>Religious doctrine consistent with personal ideals</td>
<td>Support religious beliefs in theory but practice equal roles</td>
<td>Social forces and internal beliefs about gender are both satisfied</td>
<td>Implementing equivalent roles suggests equal power balance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Concepts are bolded
Table 2

Report of Participant Couples’ Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Characteristics</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
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<td>32</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>50 - 59</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
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<td>Malaysian / Caucasian</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-19</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
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<td>30 &gt;=</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Protestant –Traditional</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protestant - Evangelical</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>New Religious Traditions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jewish</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Religious Attendance</strong></td>
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<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
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<td>Monthly</td>
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<tr>
<td>More</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Hours per week in faith based activities</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>0-9</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-29</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 &gt;=</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percent of income donated to faith</strong></td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 – 5%</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 – 10%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 – 15%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 3
Couples’ Reported Marital Roles, Role Design, and Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Male Shepherd</th>
<th>Socialization</th>
<th>Role Design Influences</th>
<th>Role Design Considerations</th>
<th>Role Design Processes</th>
<th>Role Design Explanations</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female Caregiver</td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preference</td>
<td>Availability</td>
<td>Potential Harm</td>
<td>Individual Strengths</td>
<td>Priorities</td>
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<td>Non-Traditional</td>
<td>Equal Leaders</td>
<td>Socialization</td>
<td>Role Design Influences</td>
<td>Role Design Considerations</td>
<td>Role Design Processes</td>
<td>Role Design Explanations</td>
<td>Outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td>Preference</td>
<td>Availability</td>
<td>Potential Harm</td>
<td>Individual Strengths</td>
<td>Priorities</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Table 4
Couple Categories in Power Balance and Gender Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marital Power</th>
<th>Shared</th>
<th>Hierarchal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Similar Roles

- **Egalitarian Couples**
- Role-Sharing Couples

Different Roles

- Collegial Couples
- **Patriarchal Couples**

Note. Couple groupings that are the focus of the religion literature on marital power are bolded.
Figure Caption

*Figure 1.* Model of the Proposed Relationship between Couples’ Reported Marital Roles, Role Design, and Outcomes
Influences (Socialization, Religion)  Considerations (Preferences, Availability/Practicality, Individual Strengths, Priorities)

Processes (Communication, Unintended Habituation)

Marital Roles (Traditional, Non-traditional, Mixed discourse)

Explanations (Gender Differences)

Outcomes (Benefits, Difficulties, Power Balance)