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Relationship-enhancing Transcendent Religious Experiences Encourage Relational Meaning, Depth, Healing, and Action

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Abstract

Research on the relationship between religion, spirituality, and health suggests that religious involvement can help people deal with various kinds of adversity. Although there has been a great deal of work on the influence of religious involvement and religious and spiritual practices on physical, mental, and relational health, there exists a gap in the theoretical and empirical literature about the potential benefits of transcendent religious experiences on marriage and family relationships. We report some findings from a study of in-depth interviews with 198 religious American exemplar families from diverse religious, ethnic, and geographic backgrounds. The religious-ethnic make-up of the sample included: African American Christian (13%), Asian Christian (12%); Catholic and Orthodox Christian (11%), White Evangelical Christian (12%), White Mainline Christian (10%), Latter-day Saint (LDS, Mormon), (14%), Jewish (16%), and Muslim (12%). Systematic group coding resulted in the findings that, during times of adversity, transcendent religious experiences reportedly (a) provided relational meaning, (b) increased relational depth, (c) healed relational hurt, and (d) encouraged relational action. We suggest implications for theory, research, clinical practice, and pastoral work.

We appreciate the editors at *Religions* inviting Dr. Dollahite to submit an article for the Feature Paper Program. *Religions* [describes itself](#) as an “international, interdisciplinary . . . journal on religions and theology.” Thus, rather than a traditional discipline-based, empirical report, we have written an interdisciplinary article that explores a possibility—that religious experiences during adversity can help strengthen family relationships. In exploring this possibility, we draw theory and research from family studies, psychology, sociology, and religious studies. While we present qualitative data from our ongoing national research project, rather than providing only a narrow empirical study, we focus on ideas, concepts, and possibilities. Specifically, we hope to contribute to discourse and practice among diverse scholars interested in connections between family relationships and what William James called “varieties of religious experiences.”

In his monumental work, *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*, William James (1902/1997), commenced to bring scientific rigor to the study of the complex and challenging phenomenon of personal religious experiences. James, credited as a founder of both empirical psychology and the psychology of religion, rigorously and systematically explored thousands of pages of written reports of personal religious experiences from hundreds of persons of various cultures, faiths, times, places, personalities, and temperaments. Space does not permit even cursory mention of all the fascinating and important findings and conclusions from his work. Here we discuss a couple of his findings and conclusions about the realities of religious experiences that pertain to our own work on how religion potentially strengthens relationships.

While it is true that transcendent experiences may seem ambiguous and are often impossible to prove, James (1902/1997) contended that an individual’s perceptions of her experiences matter more than provable facts—and that when transcendent experience influences action, it is then that “God is real since he produces real effects” (p. 400). As social scientists who study relationships, we have applied this core concept to mean that when sacred experience “becomes sufficiently important to an individual, couple, or family that decisions, actions, and destinations are changed, then we [social scientists] must pay attention to” sacred experience (Marks and Dollahite, 2017, p. 24).

James pioneered three important elements of a social scientific study of religious experience: (1) using in-depth personal accounts of religious experiences—in his case written accounts, (2) using data from highly religious exemplars rather than from a random sample of people, and (3) attending to the pragmatic outcomes of such experiences—the social and psychological fruits of religious experiences. Our work employs qualitative analyses of in-depth interviews with religious exemplars that invites the sharing of personal religious experiences. And, consistent with James’ attention to practical results, in this study we focus on relational outcomes of religious experiences rather than the nature of the experiences themselves.

James (1902/1997) not only argued that personal religious experiences should be considered real because they produce real effects in the real world but that religious experiences are arguably the most real things that human beings experience:

so long as we deal with the cosmic and the general, we deal only with the symbols of reality, but *as soon as we deal with the private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term* (p. 386, italics in original).

To illustrate, James (1902/1997) referred to the kinds of transcendent experiences that each person has at some point in life:

That unsharable feeling which each one of us has of the pinch of his individual destiny as he privately feels it rolling out on fortune's wheel may be disparaged for its egotism, may be sneered at as unscientific, but it is the one thing that fills up the measure of our concrete actuality, and any would-be existent that should lack such a feeling, or its analogue, would be a piece of reality only half made up.

. . . The axis of reality runs solely through the egotistic places The individual's religion may be egotistic, and those private realities which it keeps in touch with may be narrow enough; but at any rate it always remains infinitely less hollow and abstract, as far as it goes, than a science which prides itself on taking no account of anything private at all.

. . . By being religious we establish ourselves in possession of ultimate reality at the only points at which reality is given us to guard. Our responsible concern is with our private destiny, after all (p. 387-388).

As family scholars (Dollahite and Marks, 2020), we are most interested in the ways that personal religious experiences effect marriage and family relationships. In other words, we apply the idea of “real effects in the real world” that James mentioned to include real effects in the relational worlds of those who say they have had religious experiences. Our two-decade study of parents and their children from hundreds of diverse religious families from various faiths has certainly convinced us that, for many, an important fruit of personal religious experience is improved relationships—and, sadly, sometimes harmed relationships (Dollahite et al., 2018).

Transcending Self to Benefit Others

From James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* (first published in 1902) to our own day (Preston and Shin, 2017), most studies of transcendence have focused on the nature and effects of experiences for the individual, with little attention to relational others. This limitation is unfortunate for family and relationship scholars. By contrast, Jonathan Haidt (2017) has argued that the primary evolutionary purpose of spiritual experiences is to help individuals transcend “the self” in order to facilitate cooperation with others.¹

While most scholarship on transcendence has largely focused on the nature and effects of experiences for the individual (Preston and Shin, 2017), we concur with the desired other-oriented outcomes of transcendence articulated by Haidt (2017), and by theologian Peter Slater (1981), who posited that, “The transcending process may begin with deficiency motivations. But

¹ https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_humanity_s_stairway_to_self_transcendence

it cannot end in . . . the private comfort of deprived egos. The full process brings us beyond the strivings of ordinary Eros to expressions of a *self-with-others*" (p. 41, emphasis added).

Slater continued, "We may begin with individual being and becoming. But we cannot end there" (p. 42). Through "the transcending process . . . whether vertical or horizontal . . . we experience transition from alienation to reconciliation" (p. 46). In this view, transcendent experience involves (a) transcending the concerns of the here and now and (b) transcending the concerns for the self alone. Transcendence appears to be much larger than the self; indeed, it may often involve minimizing or even "losing" the self (Haidt, 2017). Scarry (1999) expressed similar thoughts regarding influences during and after a transcendent experience:

We find we are standing in a different relation to the world than we were a moment before. It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world (p. 112).

Transcendent experiences are experienced through and colored by the participant's perception of the transcendent. As Swenson (2009) put it, the "world view one has of the sacred will affect the results of [a sacred] encounter" (p. 105). Therefore, transcendent religious experiences are potentially helpful to others and for relationships.

Definitions of Important Concepts

Here we define five core concepts, three that we focus on in this article and two others that are heuristically helpful. The focal concepts are italicized for emphasis. While our definitions of the following concepts are somewhat similar to the way others have defined them, there are also some ways in which they differ from the way others define the concepts. We certainly do not assert that our definitions of these concepts are better than others but merely provide them for the sake of clarity.

Numinous or mystical experiences. Numinous or mystical experiences are transcendent, sacred, or spiritual experiences. A recent volume on the numinous by Ralph Piedmont and Teresa Wilkins (2020) uses the term numinous to refer to spiritual and religious experiences and concerns. Numinous or mystical experiences may be had by someone who considers themselves to be non-religious or religious, non-spiritual or spiritual.

Transcendent religious and spiritual experiences. By *transcendent* religious and spiritual experiences, we mean special, even extraordinary, religious or spiritual experiences that are considered sacred by and to the person. People may have non-transcendent religious and spiritual experiences (such as feeling enlightened, uplifted, comforted, or inspired) that may be meaningful and sustaining but that are distinguished from transcendent experiences because they are more ordinary or prosaic. In this article, we focus on relational effects of more transcendent religious experiences, instead of the more prosaic.

Scholars tend to distinguish between religion and spirituality by framing religion as more concerned with institutions, traditions, and communities; whereas spirituality relates more to personal practices and experiences involving connections with something transcendent or sacred (see Marks & Dollahite, 2017). Consistent with this tendency to make distinctions between these

two concepts, we think it is helpful distinguish between religious experiences and spiritual experiences.

Transcendent religious experiences. By *transcendent religious experiences* we mean sacred personal experiences in which a person believes they have experienced God (as they understand God) in some way that leads them to desire to make changes in their personal religious life. This experience may involve one or more of the following: a sense of oneness with God, a connection with God, being forgiven by God, or obtaining some kind of knowledge from God (e.g., being instructed, inspired, guided, protected). This may or may not involve sensory experience. Transcendent religious experiences typically involve a profoundly deepened sense of joy, peace, comfort, insight, harmony, purity, or purpose—and, often, a deepened sense of commitment to one's religious and relational life, including serving others. Transcendent religious experiences may come unexpectedly and/or may be facilitated by religious practices such as prayer, study of sacred texts, or hearing religious music or spoken word. Transcendent religious experiences may be had by someone who considers themselves to be non-religious or religious, non-spiritual or spiritual. But, by our definition, to be considered a religious experience, there is some sense of connection with God and some sense of enhanced religious motivation and/or moral obligation to fulfill religious and/or relational duties.

Transcendent spiritual experiences. Although we do not deal with the concept of transcendent spiritual experiences in this article, we define it here to distinguish it from the concept of transcendent religious experiences. Transcendent spiritual experiences would include experiences in which a person senses a connection with any or all of realities, forces, powers, beings, not understood to include God. These include (but are not limited to): the cosmos, nature, one's deepest self, other persons, all humanity, spiritual beings not understood as God, deeper/truer aspects of reality, or any other truths, realities, powers, spirits, or entities not understood to be God or of God. Transcendent spiritual experiences may involve a deepened sense of connection with everyone and everything, particularly with nature (e.g., animals, plants, mountains, water, earth, sky). Transcendent spiritual experiences may come unexpectedly and/or may be facilitated by spiritual practices such as exercise, meditation, yoga, mindfulness, music, or nature. Transcendent spiritual experiences may be had by someone who considers themselves to be non-religious or religious, non-spiritual or spiritual. A spiritual experience may or may not result in an increased sense of religious, moral, or relational duties or obligations.

Relationship-enhancing religious experiences. By *relationship-enhancing religious experiences*, we mean transcendent religious experiences that were reported to lead to some kind of change in a person's ways of thinking, feeling, or acting toward loved ones and/or toward relationships with loved ones. Such changes may include how one sees or understands God or a loved one, how one feels about God in ways that influence how one feels about a loved one or the relationship, or how one acts toward a loved one or acts personally in ways intended to better relate to a loved one. Previous research (Spencer et al., forthcoming) suggests that gradual transformations associated with religious involvement are much more common than dramatic transformations in persons and in relationships.

Review of Research and Theory

Transcendence as Normative

Perhaps one reason there has been relatively little research on the potentially transformative effects of transcendent religious experience on various aspects of life, including family relationships, is that these experiences are often conceived as odd and bizarre, or at least quite unusual. Halling (2008) has addressed and countered this notion:

The term “transcendence” is often used to imply something otherworldly, religious, or metaphysical, or outside of the lives of ordinary people and relationships. Thus, transcendence is commonly presented as a movement beyond the actual, the embodied, and the historical, something that should be studied by theologians or philosophers, but not by psychologists. In contrast, I argue that transcendence is a central thread in the fabric of ordinary human existence (p. 177).

Survey data indicate that Halling is correct. Nearly 90% of Americans believe in God.² Data from the Pew Research Center released in September of 2017³ indicate that 48% of Americans consider themselves “religious and spiritual” with another 27% saying they are “spiritual but not religious” (75% combined are “spiritual”). Further, according to Pew Research data, 49% of Americans and 61% of regular religious attenders report they “have had religious or mystical experiences.”⁴ Thus, Hood (2005) urged psychologists to attend to transcendent religious and spiritual experiences because they are part of life as experienced by many—if not most.

We concur that transcendent experience—including transcendent religious experience—is far more pervasive and salient than social science research might indicate. For two decades, our work has focused on relational and religious processes and meanings at the nexus of religion and family life (Chelladurai, Dollahite, and Marks, 2018; Dollahite et al., 2002, 2019a, 2019b; 2019c; Marks, 2001; Marks, Dollahite, and Young, 2019). We have explored these connections using rigorous qualitative analyses of a large and diverse sample of American families from many faiths (see <http://AmericanFamiliesofFaith.byu.edu>). Many of those we have interviewed, without being specifically asked about such experiences, have told us about times when transcendent religious experiences during times of significant adversity—including disaster, loss, infidelity, abuse, the grave illness or death of a loved one, and other difficulties—have deeply influenced them and their family relationships.

Religion, Spirituality, and Transcendence during Adversity

Despite the thousands of studies that typically correlate religion and spirituality with decreased physical and mental problems (Koenig et al, 2012), Jibeen (2017) found that “Empirical research has mostly focused on religious beliefs or practices” and that “there is a paucity of research on spiritual or exceptional *experiences* and their impact on health” (p. 3, emphasis added). Jibeen and colleagues continued, “Although the contribution of religion to

² <http://news.gallup.com/poll/193271/americans-believe-god.aspx>

³ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>

⁴ <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/#6>

psychological health benefits is very well recorded . . . a great amount of confusion exists about the process by which these effects take place” (p. 3). Jacob Belzen (2004), while serving as president of the International Association for the Psychology of Religion, wondered why there was so little academic psychological literature on religious transformation and asked, “[S]hould there not be more research on the varieties of religious phenomena as such?” (p. 294).

Research and Theory on Transcendent Experiences

Although there has been a great deal of empirical work on the influence of religious involvement and spiritual *practices* on health (see Koenig, King, and Carson 2012), there is a gap in the literature regarding the potential benefits of transformative transcendent *experiences* on mental health and the processes involved. In one of the very few studies that focused extensively on transcendent spiritual experiences (not merely spiritual beliefs and practices), Renz et al. (2015) studied spiritual experiences of transcendence among patients with advanced cancer. They found that “spiritual experiences seemed to be associated with profound and powerful reactions (physical, psychological, spiritual, and reactions alleviating suffering)” and that “the occurrence of spiritual experience seems to be associated with alleviating anxiety” (p. 183). Renz et al. further reported, “spiritual experiences were observed in patients with various religious affiliations/attitudes, with or without previous spiritual experiences” (p. 183).

In the area of post-traumatic growth (PTG), research focusing on religious or spiritual *experiences* has been scarce, although such experiences were an important part of findings of some studies. Specifically, in 25 articles relevant to the topic of post-traumatic growth and religion and spirituality, seven reported spiritual experiences in their findings (28%). In these seven studies, spiritual or religious experiences were repeatedly mentioned as important events that were regarded as crucial turning points in overcoming trauma. Such experiences included visions (Starnino, 2016), dreams (de Castella and Simmonds, 2012), feelings of peace (Denney, Aten and Leavell, 2011), or a series of visions (Clifton, Llewellyn, and Shakespeare, 2018), that participants described as “calmer, more blissful times” or “mountain top experiences” and “healing moments” (Starnino, 2016). de Castella and Simmonds (2012) interviewed survivors of various kinds of adversity and traumatic experiences (sexual abuse, domestic violence, traumatic bereavement, car accident, serious illness), and found that, “Participants spoke of having profound spiritual and transcendent experiences which served to strengthen their religious faith and helped to facilitate the processes of meaning-making and growth” (p. 546). Further, “Most respondents described . . . transcendent experiences that were perceived as evidence of God . . . which were qualitatively different from the analogous ordinary . . . states” (pp. 552-553).

Spiritual experiences were reportedly experienced with God as well as other people. Participants reported having experienced encounters with God. They reported that these experiences as a “powerful moment of healing” or “feeling a spiritual or divine presence” were described as “very comforting” (de Castella and Simmonds, 2012). Others mentioned “healing moments” during interactions with other people (de Castella and Simmonds, p. 547).

As an outcome of such spiritual experiences, participants reported various proximal and immediate effects. These effects reportedly included healing (Starnino, 2016), feelings of

security (Denney et al., 2011), love (Ardelt et al., 2008), hope (Clifton et al., 2018; Starnino, 2016), protection (de Castella and Simmonds, 2012), gratitude (Starnino, 2016), and inner peace in the midst of difficulties (Subandi et al., 2014). Such experiences also reportedly increased faith and performance of religious practices and rituals (Subandi et al., 2014).

Adversity as a Priming Event for Transformative Transcendence

While transcendent experiences may be relatively common, these experiences seem more likely to occur at particular times. Roy (2001) stated, “It is true that the divine can be found everywhere, but if people do not find it in particular, pregnant episodes, they are likely to find it nowhere” (p. 150). We propose that profound hardships, crises, and challenges are among Roy’s “pregnant episodes” and Slater’s (1981) times of “external pressure.” Adversity can facilitate and promote transformative transcendent experiences (or at least transcendent interpretation of experiences) because during adversity, people already experience the “external pressure,” internal destabilization, and/or equilibrium disruption that, in Roy’s and Slater’s views, seem to prime individuals and families for transcendent experiences.

Additionally, adversity can prompt internal reflection, as can transcendent experiences. Family relationships are continuous, but transcendence and adversity are typically episodic. Adversity may prepare families for transcendent experiences. Experiencing the transcendent during adversity may also affect family relationships because adverse experiences often involve both disruption and reflection, and therefore introduce opportunities and potential for change as individuals and families rebuild new states of equilibrium. We next discuss these ideas in the context of three models: Roy’s (2001) six elements of transcendent experience, Swenson’s (2009) attributional model of spirituality, and Patterson’s (1988) Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response model.

Roy (2001) proposed six elements of transcendent experience: preparation, occasion, feeling, discovery, interpretation, and fruit. Adversity could be considered an element of *preparation* or *occasion*. Roy stated that the preparation period is “often marked by struggle” (p. 5). In this way, adversity could act as an equilibrium disruptor and therefore help set the stage for transcendence. On the other hand, an adverse experience could be categorized as a “trigger” occasion that “sets off the experience” (p. 5). Adversity as a setting or context fits as a *preparation* for transcendent experiences, while adversity as an event seems to fit as an *occasion* that sparks the transcendent experience. We are most interested in Roy’s sixth element (*fruit*) that, in this study, includes the fruits of relational transformation, healing, and growth reportedly facilitated by transcendent religious experiences.

In Swenson’s (2009) attributional model of spirituality, adversities could be seen as either *situational* or *motivational* factors. As a *situational* factor, a given adverse experience may inherently construct a tragic or challenging context. Comparatively, Swenson’s explanation of *motivational* factors gives richer meaning to the role of adversity in facilitating transcendent experiences. Swenson (2009) asked, “When is one likely to engage in [transcendent] attributions? They are triggered when the meaning of life is unclear [or] control of one’s world is in doubt” (p. 110). For Swenson, adverse experiences that cause individuals and families to

question the meaning of life or their control over it could therefore promote attribution of transcendence to those same experiences.

The conceptualization of adverse experiences as facilitators of transformative transcendent experiences may be enriched by the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) model (Patterson, 1988). This model, inspired by Reuben Hill's (1949) family stress theory, proposes that families constantly strive to maintain equilibrium by balancing demands with capabilities. The pileup of demands and a lack of capabilities results in crisis (or disequilibrium). When crisis occurs, families alter their demands, capabilities, and *meanings* as they strive to return to homeostasis. The result of this adaptation can either be *maladaptive* or *bonadaptive*. To map our ideas onto this model, adversity could be seen as demands that throw individuals and families into disequilibrium. A transcendent experience could stimulate bonadaptive meaning making that aids in the return to (potentially elevated) homeostasis. In this way, transcendent experiences may make it possible for family relationships to transform and improve—not only in spite of adverse experiences, but perhaps even because of them.

The Current Study

Previous studies provide some empirical evidence of the potential for transcendent religious and spiritual experience to assist people in dealing with the psychological fallout from difficult experiences. However, we know little about how and why transcendent religious experiences might positively strengthen the *relationships* of those that report such experiences. For this study, our research question was: “Do transcendent religious experiences during adversity reportedly influence family relationships? If so, how and why?”

Method

Participants

After receiving IRB approval, a total of 198 religious families were interviewed (N = 476 individuals). All families consisted of married or remarried parents who had at least one child, with the average being 3.3 children per couple. Parents had been married an average of 20 years and with mean ages in the mid- to late-40s (Mothers = 45 yrs.; Fathers = 47 yrs.). Interviews used in this study are taken from the American Families of Faith national research project. Religious families were purposively sampled in a two-stage selection process. First, clergy were contacted and asked to identify strong, marriage-based families with children who were committed to and involved in their faith. Second, recommended families were contacted to determine willingness to participate. Families were recruited through the clergy of the religious congregation to which they belonged. Once identified by clergy members, families were asked if they were willing to participate. About 90% of the referred families consented. Among more difficult-to-access faiths (e.g., Islam, Orthodox Judaism), participant referral sampling was sometimes employed. All participants signed informed consent forms before being interviewed.

Our sample consists of religious exemplars as identified by religious leaders. Religious leaders were asked to recommend families in their congregations they considered as “strong in their faith” and “successful . . . in their family relationships” to be interviewed. Most families

attended religious services at least weekly. They reportedly gave an average of 7% of their income to their religion and spent 11 hours a week in religious activities (including personal and home-based worship).

Social research on religion has been criticized for repeatedly employing predominantly White Christian samples (Alghafli et al., 2014; Mahoney, 2010). We strived to address and overcome both of these limitations with intentional sampling (Daly, 2008). Ethnic and racial minority families and new immigrants were oversampled such that they comprise over half (51%) of the total sample. Minority families were oversampled both because they are understudied and are generally more religious (Perry, 2016).

Of the 198 families interviewed, religious-ethnic make-up of the sample included: African American Christian (13%), Asian Christian (12%); Catholic and Orthodox Christian (11%), White Evangelical Christian (12%), White Mainline Christian (10%), Latter-day Saint (LDS, Mormon), (14%), Jewish (16%), and Muslim (12%). Families who participated in this study were from 17 states, representing all eight socio-religious regions of the nation identified by Silk and Walsh (2011), including the Mid Atlantic (DE, MD, PA), Midwest (OH, WI), Mountain West (ID, UT), New England (MA, CT), Northwest (OR, WA), Pacific (CA), the South/Gulf Coast (FL, GA, LA), and Southern Crossroads (KS, OK). Socioeconomic status varied widely, as indicated by housing situation and educational experience that ranged from GED to PhD/MD. In summary, the sample was characterized by: (1) high level of religious commitment, (2) rich racial and ethnic diversity, (3) religious diversity, (4) geographic and regional diversity, and (5) socioeconomic diversity.

Interviewing

This study is part of a broader research project about the nexus of religion and family relationships. In our in-depth interviews, we asked about 30 broad questions about religious families' views and experience regarding the nexus of the sacred and the familial (the full interview schedule is available upon request). Questions were open-ended and asked about participants' religion and family life. Questions included but were not limited to: How has your relationship with God influenced your relationship with each other? What are some of your deepest spiritual beliefs relating to marriage/family? How central is your religion to how you are as parents and children in this family? Can you think of a time when you believe God directly influenced your family in some way? Follow-up questions were asked for clarification including asking participants if they had any experiences that illustrated the ideas they shared. Interviews were semi-structured and averaged about two hours in length.

Coding. Our team-based coding included: (a) developing a detailed audit trail for sampling, questionnaire usage, and qualitative coding that demonstrate and provide a “replicable method of inquiry” (Marks, 2015, p. 499); and (b) coding the data as a team with a focus on inter-rater reliability in a way that allows for multiple voices but “tempers the idiosyncrasies [and biases] of any single member” (p. 502). Ultimately, only outcomes that achieved consensus were “designated with the carefully reserved appellation” of core outcome (p. 503). The average inter-rater agreement among the coders was above .90. This coding resulted in 119 accounts of

transcendent religious experiences. In the final phase of coding, the third and fourth authors focused only on 72 accounts that were related to both relationships and adversity. They engaged in extensive, systematic coding processes to explore and categorize these relationally-oriented accounts of transcendence during adversity. Four core outcomes emerged regarding how transcendent experiences during adversity affected family relationships. The findings reported below are the result of this phase of coding.

Findings

Here we present four outcomes found in the data, using illustrative participant quotes. Our focus is how transcendent experiences influenced relationships, not the details of each transcendent experience. Numeric Content Analysis revealed the following number of codes for each area: Provided Relational Meaning (41 coded occurrences), Encouraged Relational Action (40 coded occurrences), Increased Relational Depth (25 coded occurrences), and Healed Relational Hurt (16 coded occurrences).

Outcome 1: Provided Relational Meaning

Transcendent experiences during adversity reportedly gave participants an increased awareness of the “sacred” nature of family relationships. Referring to a transcendent experience, one father⁵ said, “It completely changed my life . . . it really motivated me to be able to see [our]⁶ kids in a different manner.” A mother shared similar feelings about her children. Her feelings were reportedly intensified through a transcendent experience during a time of infertility:

[My husband and I said], “We have been trying all these years and we haven’t been able to have any kids, [so] let’s adopt kids.” . . . We [prayed], “Lord, give us some kids.” That next week, . . . my aunt said, . . . “I got a baby you can adopt.” [Later, we were blessed with more]. . . . So, I always say that [my children] are a gift, they are special to me.

In addition to this mother’s story of adoption, several experiences referenced “miracle” children who “should not” have been able to be conceived. One such mother explained, We were told that we would never have children . . . that it was medically impossible. So, God definitely intervened. And when I was delivering [my child] . . . [the doctor] cut me open and saw all this endometriosis, and she said, “It is a miracle you have any children.”

In addition to adoptions and births, experiences of family members facing the possible death of a loved one also helped participants appreciate relationships more. One husband said,

⁵ In most of our published work, we identify participants using pseudonyms and demographic information such as race, religion, and occupation. However, for this study, we want to emphasize participants’ inner experiences and their identity as family members. Thus, we have chosen not to attach social labels to our participants but instead refer to them with familial relational titles, for example, as “a mother” or “a husband” or “a daughter.”

⁶ As is typical in qualitative research, when providing direct quotes from participants, in order to improve clarity and concision, quotes may be edited by the authors. Ellipses reflect removed words that included verbal pauses, extraneous thoughts, redundancies, thinking out loud, and other words not directly relevant to quote. Brackets within quotes indicate additions by the authors for clarity or concision, or to protect participant anonymity. The authors strove to retain the original meaning of the fuller quotes and to reflect the original phrasing as closely as possible.

I think a challenge that has changed me was when our first child was born. . . . [My wife] went into labor . . . and then 22 hours later, she still hadn't given birth. . . . We needed to have an emergency C-section. The fear of losing my wife, the person I had loved from the first time I met her, was humungous. . . . [Realizing] that [she] might not survive was an experience that changed me for the better. It made me realize . . . that I needed to be more aware of the gift that was given to me and not just take it for granted.

Some participants reported that when life seemed to hang in the balance, this caused them to rethink family. A father recalled: "I got sick in 2007, and that was probably the most stressful part of our marriage. She had death in her family, I had death in my family, but [when] I got [very] sick . . . I learned the importance of my [life to] each one of [my daughters]."

For several participants, transcendent experiences during challenges gave deeper meaning not only to family relationships but also to their relationship with the divine. One father said: Having kids and becoming a father has helped me understand what my Heavenly Father must feel and go through watching me. You . . . would do everything for your kids if you could . . . [but] there are times that you can't . . . and [they need to] learn from experience. . . . When [my son] was sick, I felt how our Heavenly Father must feel whenever one of us is sick. . . . It's . . . made me appreciate what being a loving father is like. It's made me appreciate that aspect of God as a father and the sacrifice He made for his Son to come to Earth. I can't imagine what that was like.

For this father, greater sanctification of his relationship with God seemed to engender sanctification of his relationship with his son, and vice versa. Having discussed *relational meaning*, we now turn to a second observed outcome, *increased relational depth*.

Outcome 2: Increased Relational Depth

In addition to providing meaning and sanctification to relationships, transcendent experiences in adversity also deepened participants' relationships, as reported by this father:

It was certainly a wonderful and humbling experience . . . to realize that no matter what we do, it [could be God's] will . . . that this baby may not live. . . . [T]here was a greater power who was . . . mindful and understood [and] helped me to just trust . . . that even if our baby died, that was not the end, that we [would] see the baby again. . . . [L]ooking back, I am grateful for that. It made me a stronger person . . . it made our family stronger.

When her husband was near death, one wife recalled,

I just remember sitting there in the hospital room thinking, "I'm too young to be a widow." . . . [T]he [congregational leader] . . . showed up and . . . I literally saw the power of Heaven descend. I tell you it was just amazing. . . . Everything turned out well. . . . I think it made us stronger together and just really made us appreciate life a lot more.

Sometimes extended family members were also unified by these experiences. A father explained,

One of our children was . . . born with gastroschisis . . . his bowels were formed outside of his body. . . . It was the greatest stress. . . . I think we had to rely on each other more. I think that's why we became closer. We were going through it together. . . . It extend[ed] to the rest of the family too, not just [my wife] and I. . . . We had people back home [gathering together] for prayer. Even [my wife's] grandmother who wasn't [in] our religion was lighting candles and asking her priests to pray for us. It was unification for the family to come together.

Many transcendent experiences during adversity reportedly strengthened relationships while simultaneously strengthening faith. A wife said, "I remember asking God . . . to bring my family and me closer. . . . I still wanted some [closeness] with Him. And the [serious car] accident did that." An adult daughter similarly reflected,

I go back to my mom's death. I think that was the most difficult situation that I've ever, ever had to contend with. . . . We're still dealing with it and struggling with it, but I think knowing that I can lean and depend on God and go to Him in prayer has sustained me and my family, and I think it helps to bring my family closer together and brings some members of my family closer to Him.

A husband shared,

We had a still-born child several years ago. I look to that experience, just how painful that was . . . and the comfort and the strength that we found. . . . [W]e really went through [it] together. . . . We really had to rely on each other during that time. . . . It was . . . an experience that . . . really strengthened our faith and . . . brought us closer together.

We now turn from reports of deepened relationships to the outcome of healed relational hurt.

Outcome 3: Healed Relational Hurt

Transcendent experiences also reportedly helped some participants heal from the pain and even lasting wounds that family members or others had inflicted. A young daughter shared, When I was younger, I had an experience with an extended family member that was border-line sexual abuse. . . . [I]t was a traumatic experience for me. . . . the power of prayer really helped me get through it. Talking to [God] about it every night, . . . having that listening ear, and knowing that He cared about what had happened definitely helped me get through that difficult time.

Indeed, family-induced pain was sometimes extreme. One remarried wife recalled,

My [first] husband . . . had extramarital affairs. . . . I was so unhappy, one time I wanted to just jump out of a window. . . . It was like I didn't have nothing to live for. . . . I started going to this church . . . [and] learned about God. That was the greatest life changing experience that I had . . . when I got saved and filled with the Holy Ghost.

Other participants described how transcendent experiences helped them recognize hurt that they had caused. For example, a wife explained, “[One time] I did not want to pray together [with my spouse] when I was unhappy. But we did pray together, [and] when I began to pray, God let me [see] my weakness.” Other participants reported that, whether during transcendent or mundane experiences, recognition of their faults led to healing. One husband said,

There have been several times where . . . the sacrament [of the Lord’s Supper] . . . will humble [my wife and me]. [I ask myself], “How can I be upset with [my wife] when the Savior sacrificed His life for us?” It humbles you, and it makes you realize that [the] little thing that we were arguing about at home [isn’t] that important in the whole scheme of things. It’s more important to forgive and to move on and have a strong relationship.

Similarly, a mother acknowledged, “I had spoken to [my daughter] much too sharply . . . and I went into [my] bedroom full of self-condemnation and remorse. . . . I thought, ‘. . . God is love. Love is all-powerful [and] ever-present.’ . . . [So I went] back and [apologized].” For some, a connection with the divine reportedly helped their marriage. One wife said, “The closer I feel to my Heavenly Father, . . . [the more] I receive inspiration from Heavenly Father to know what I need to be working on [in marriage].”

In the three preceding accounts, “thoughts” or “inspirations” attributed to a divine source reportedly stimulated personal and relational course corrections that included reports like “it humbles you” and heightened realizations such as (a) “we were arguing about [things that were not] important,” (b) “I had spoken much too sharply,” and (c) “I receive inspiration from Heavenly Father to know what I need to be working on.” Again, in this study, our main interest is not the transcendent experience or inspiration itself, but rather the subsequently positive relational influence. This phenomenon is discussed in more depth, next.

Outcome 4: Encouraged Relational Action

Finally, transcendent experiences during adversity reportedly helped participants take specific action in their relationships. Sometimes these actions were inspired by transcendent experiences that involved major life decisions. For example, when praying for divine guidance about a potential move and feeling inspiration toward a certain decision, one father recalled,

I let God lead where I was going to go. . . . One of our sons had some real difficulties, and if we had moved away and he had stayed here at [the local university], we might have lost him completely. He went through severe depression and suicidal thoughts. . . . In retrospect, I can go back and see major [job] disappointments [were] turning me to something else that ended up being much better.

Another participant’s transcendent experience in an unusual setting prompted him to turn his life around in order to be a significantly different and better husband and father:

I [was] misusing my family, . . . but when I accepted God that night, my life . . . began to change. . . . I was at a strip club one night. [I was] high, had been drinking, high as a kite, me and my buddy, and he was sitting just like me and you. . . . I heard a voice [tell me to

leave], and I said [to my buddy], “Man, stop playing.” He said, “I ain’t call[ed] you.” . . . I heard that voice three times, and it was so soft. . . . I told my buddy, . . . I said, “I love you, but I can’t roll with you no more.” That was the challenge of my life, to give up the streets in order to come to where I needed to be. I thought it was a challenge, but it really wasn’t no challenge. . . . God had to change my life . . . and once God lined my priorities up, then everything started working the way it was supposed to . . . in my marriage.

Sometimes seemingly small relational actions reportedly spurred major life decisions. One husband explained his experience after his previous marriage ended in divorce—and his connection with the woman who was to become his partner in a lasting, happy marriage.

I felt that . . . I should make contact with [my current wife] after my . . . divorce. . . . It was sort of a manifestation to me while I was sleeping [that] I should check this out, so I did. . . . It was pretty loud in my ears the direction I was [to go].

While this man’s decision to reach out to an old friend eventually led to their marriage, another person’s transcendent experience after her divorce prompted her to end a relationship:

My [first] marriage had fallen apart and I had been praying . . . to feel whole again. . . . I had been sort of dating somebody . . . it hadn’t been going anywhere. I finally just asked God in prayer if this was the relationship for me, and the answer was immediately, “No.” And I thought, “Oh, well I didn’t ask right. . . .” So I tried again. . . . And the answer came, “No.” And I . . . burst into tears.

Later, this wife felt spiritually led to (and subsequently married) a different person. She cited this experience, upsetting at the time, as the catalyst for the actions that led her to a “right” partner—a partner with whom she built a lasting, healthy marriage.

Other relational actions—smaller, everyday decisions—were also framed in sacred language. One wife’s transcendent experience moved her to see her husband as God “saw him”:

I had to be patient and try not to be too judgmental. . . . to see him again the way that Heavenly Father saw him. . . . [I had this feeling] that Heavenly Father was very pleased with the efforts that [Ben] was making, [and that God] was happy that [my husband] was trying to make the right decisions, and He didn’t expect [Ben] to be perfect The Savior taught us to love each other as we love ourselves and to be kind to each other That has been an important part of our marriage, to try to follow these teachings.

Several participants noted that because of transcendent experiences they spent more time with family members. One wife said,

There was a point a few years back where there was a lot of stress . . . in our marriage . . . we were just so busy all the time. . . . [W]e were able to see that we needed to . . . spend more time together. [So] we started going out on dates more frequently and putting a lot more emphasis on our relationship. . . . It was just very clear that God was trying to help

us understand that we had to put our relationship first and make sure we were strong before we could give what we needed to [give] to the kids.

An adult son similarly described God's involvement in his relational decision to spend time with his mom. In his case, this proved to be shortly before and during her passing. He said, I saw God working when I was with my mother. . . . And that for me was a tremendous thing because . . . I got to spend that time with my mother, and most people just . . . call someone and say, "Oh, she's not well" and a month goes by and . . . she's gone. But I was there.

In another family facing a similar trial, a husband's mother-in-law died, prompting a transcendent experience that reportedly encouraged him to spend significant time with his wife: [My wife] felt like she had nobody . . . like she lost her closest [friend]. She just didn't feel like she could go on, and I was just at a loss. I didn't know what to do. And the Lord said, "Just be there. Just be there." That's all I had to do, just be there.

Through various adverse experiences and transitions, transcendent religious experiences, ranging from simple to profound, reportedly encouraged participants to improve, heal, or even transform family relationships.

Discussion

Transcendent religious experiences facilitated relationship-enhancing changes as they (a) provided relational meaning, (b) increased relational depth, (c) healed relational hurt, and (d) encouraged relational action. That is, transcendent religious experiences during difficult times inspired deep, meaningful, healing, and active relational transformations.

Did Religious Experience "Cause" Relational Effects?

In our study, many participants used language that suggested they believed there was a heavily influential or even causal relationship between certain transcendent religious experiences and certain kinds of relational outcomes in their marriages and families. In the narratives we reported, participants used phrases like: "it completely changed my life"; "it really motivated me"; "God definitely intervened"; "an experience that changed me for the better"; "it made me realize"; "I learned the importance of . . ."; "it's made me appreciate"; "helped me to just trust"; "it made us stronger together"; "that's why we became closer"; "it helps to bring my family closer together"; "an experience that really strengthened our faith"; "knowing that [God] cared about what had happened definitely helped me get through that difficult time"; "when I began to pray, God let me [see] my weakness"; and "once God lined my priorities up, then everything started working the way it was supposed to . . . in my marriage."

The above examples reflect instances where participants reported an influential or even causal relationship in a single sentence or phrase. Other narratives included statements of heavy influence or causality that took longer to relate. In additional cases, participants clearly implied a heavily influential or causal relationship between their religious experiences and a relational

effect without stating it directly. Many of those we cite in this study reportedly believed their experiences resulted in important changes in their marriage and family relationships. We can refer to this kind of causal relationship as “stated causality” because in these verbal reports of causal connection between experiences and effects were plainly stated.

One could reasonably ask whether it really transcendent religious experiences that caused relationship-enhancing effects or were people wrongly attributing causality to the religious experience perhaps because of social desirability, faulty memory, inability to discern causality in their own lives? Of course, any of these reasons—and others as well—may be put forward to argue that people are unlikely to be able to make accurate attributions of causality. Even so, having listened to hundreds of religious people relaying their experiences—often with deep emotion and evident sincerity—we suggest that the best approach is to take people’s explanations at face value, unless other evidence suggests that is unwarranted.

This study was neither experimental nor longitudinal so we can make no definitive statements about statistical causality in the scientific sense. Social scientists typically reserve the idea of a causal relationship between variables for quantitatively measured variables in longitudinal design studies. This “measured causality” is the gold standard in survey research, while the gold standard in social and behavioral research is often held to be experimental design. Although most of our quantitative colleagues likely will disagree with us, we would like to suggest that qualitative, cross-sectional data has the potential to identify what we are calling stated causality. Indeed, this study has established that a number of participants stated that they believed there was a causal relationship between Religious Experience X and Relational Effect Y. Our colleagues can reasonably argue that no cross-sectional study—much less a qualitative one—can establish a causal relationship between *variables*. We propose that qualitatively-established “stated causality” involves a subjectively salient relationship between reported experiences and reported effects even if it is not viewed as scientifically causal by most scholars.

We think there are strengths and limitations of each form of causality. Stated causality has the strengths of involving *direct causality*—a perceived causal relationship between experiences and effects of those experiences, and involving a *contextualized causality* because such causal statements typically include specific details of what experience or idea caused what effect. Stated causality has the limitation of coming from non-randomized data so it is more difficult to generalize to broader populations. Quantitatively-oriented, longitudinally-based measured causality has the strength of being based in widely accepted, rigorous statistical methods that can test the strength of relationships between variables. Measured causality has the limitation of somewhat less specificity and contextualization relative to stated causality.

Thus, we certainly recognize that stated causality may be considered “softer” or “weaker” than measured causality. Nonetheless, we maintain that stated causality can serve a meaningful and important role in social and behavioral research. We invite our quantitatively-oriented friends and colleagues to consider the potential merits of recognizing stated causal relationships between reported lived personal experiences and lived relational effects.

Connections with Previous Research and Theory

Concerning psychological and emotional functioning, Shiota et al. (2017) argued that throughout the Twentieth Century, psychological research on negative emotion dominated the field and “comparable analyses of specific positive emotions were rare” but that “now, the tides are shifting” (p. 618). They proposed a theory of positive emotions serving the adaptive function of helping people positively respond to challenges and coordinate adaptive processes in prosocial ways. Of the nine positive emotions they identified, “awe” was the least researched. Awe was defined as “an emotional response to the opportunity presented by a vast, information-rich stimulus that is not accounted for by one’s current knowledge, thought to promote schema construction or accommodative cognition” (p. 630). Consistent with this, our data suggest that family members can have religious, “awe-inspiring” experiences that may facilitate a transformation of their schema regarding their family relationships.

Our findings are also consistent with research by McAdams et al. (2001) who found that “people who perceive benefits in adversity tend to show better recovery from and adjustment to the negative events that brought them the adversity in the first place” (p. 476). We hope that more social scientists will consider the potential benefits of exploring relationship-enhancing transcendent religious experiences in relation to a range of human phenomena.

Our findings connect with previous research and theory in other ways. First, Slater (1981) contended that one goal of transcendence can be a “freedom which leaves room for the growth of individual persons *in relationship with others*” (p. 50, emphasis added). Our data suggest a common experience at the nexus of religion and family relationships that we call *Relationship-enhancing Transcendent Religious Experiences*. Related integrative processes include (a) personal religious experiences involving or influencing couple and family relationships, or (b) couple or family religious experiences involving or influencing their relationships. Second, our findings support Roy’s (2001) final element of transcendent experience, *fruit*. For many of our participants, relational change was a reported “fruit” or outcome of transcendent experience. Roy also distinguished between “fruit that comes right after the [transcendent] experience, and . . . fruit that requires time to ripen.” Our retrospective data allowed us to “take into consideration the time factor” as Roy recommended (pp. 8-9).

Finally, our findings support other ideas about transcendent experiences proposed by Roy (2001), who stated that transcendent experiences can “shed light,” “transform,” and “motivate” (pp. 8, 149). We propose that (a) providing relational meaning is a way that transcendent religious experiences during adversity might *shed light*, that (b) healing relational hurt and increasing relational depth are ways in which transcendent experiences during adversity might *transform* personal and relational perspective, and that (c) encouraging relational action is a way in which transcendent experiences during adverse experiences might *motivate* and sustain positive change. Again, for these families, relationships were sometimes strengthened, not in spite of their adversity but as they religiously and relationally transcended adverse experiences.

Strengths and limitations. Our findings clearly document that some religious people report that transcendent religious experiences during adverse experiences help strengthen their couple and family relationships and we propose that this establishes stated causality but not

measured causality. For a qualitative study, the sample was unusually large ($N = 476$) as well as racially/ethnically, religiously, and geographically diverse but it was neither random nor representative, preventing generalizability. Further, only families in the Abrahamic faiths were interviewed so we cannot generalize the findings to those of non-Abrahamic faiths.

Implications for Future Research and Clinical Practice

We now explore some potential implications of our findings on transcendent religious experience for future research (including clinical research), clinical practice, and suggest some tentative ideas for clergy.

Can Transcendent Experiences Transcend Even Traumatic Experiences?

Daniel Gilbert (2006) has offered a book-length review on research addressing memory, perception, and emotion, and how these domains unite (or fail to unite) in our search for happiness. In his review, Gilbert concluded that “*the least likely experience* is often the *most likely memory*”—a reality that “can wreak havoc” on our futures (p. 220, emphasis in the original). This finding later received further contextualization as Gilbert explained that while anomalies seem to work their roots into the soil of our memory, it is both anomalously “good” and “bad” experiences that seem to sink their taproots deepest. In a play on Dickens’ line of entrée from *A Tale of Two Cities*, Gilbert explained that “we tend to remember the best of times and the worst of times instead of the most likely of times” (p. 222). If “bad” is stronger than “good” (Baumeister et al., 2001; Tierney and Baumeister, 2019) and then Gilbert’s mnemonic power of anomaly regarding “bad” experience (e.g., severe trauma, sexual assault, natural disaster) is added to the load, the outlook can seem bleak at best.

If we try to draw comfort from the thought that traumatic experience is rare, a closer look at the empirical record revokes that comfort. A dated but seminal and rigorous meta-analysis of 68 studies on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) noted that in the National Comorbidity Study, “the best epidemiological study to date” (at the time), 60.7% of men and 51.2% of women had reported a traumatic event “outside the range of normal human experience” (Ozer et al., 2003, p. 54). In short, the prevalence of traumatic experience led to the deletion of the trauma criterion “outside the range of normal human experience” from *DSM-IV* (Ozer et al., 2003). More recently, Benjet et al.’s (2016) multinational review and found that 70% of adults in a sample over 60,000 had experienced a traumatic event. Those exposed to interpersonal trauma were the most likely to experience further trauma. Interpersonal traumatic events have been shown to frequently happen in childhood and have more deleterious effects than events which are not interpersonally traumatic and are also common. In short, traumatic experiences (at some point in the life course) is the lot for most (70% or more), not just an unlucky few.

As clinicians and as people, what can we hope for and work toward in the wake of profoundly bad experiences engraved on our minds? Despite the apparent pervasiveness of adversity and even traumatic experiences, and a strong argument for the power of negative experience, it has also been found that most are resilient to adverse experiences over the life course. Even in the wake of disasters only a minority of individuals develop lasting psychological difficulty. Indeed, “accidents happen, loved ones die, health gives out, money

disappears, or property is damaged. These events can be distressing and, for some, debilitating. Fortunately, most people are usually able to survive isolated aversive events with no lasting psychological damage” (Bonanno et al. 2010, p. 2).

The Positive Potential of Transcendent Religious Experience

Research on the relationship between religion and health reviewed earlier suggests the possibility that, in some cases, transcendent experiences may be stronger than adverse experiences. Is it possible that transcendent religious experiences might be one of the very few exceptions to the general psychological meta-finding that bad is stronger than good (cf. Baumeister et al., 2001)? We do not suggest that transcendent religious experience—in and of itself—typically can solve or obliterate the problems caused by a particularly painful or traumatic experience. However, perhaps transcendent religious experiences can be facilitative or catalytic in more cases than social scientists realize.

We propose that the positive potential of relationship-enhancing transcendent religious experiences to sometimes transcend adversity—and possibly even trauma—has largely eluded social scientific study, particularly in the area of family relationships. In this article, we certainly do *not* provide a clear test of this hypothesis, but rather we provide some data that we think provides *some initial and exploratory support for this possibility*. This article deals mainly with how relationship-enhancing transcendent religious experiences can help families during times of adversity. Our study focused on identifying the processes whereby relationship-enhancing transcendent religious experiences during family adversity (e.g., serious illness, death of a loved one, infidelity, substance abuse, divorce, and conflict) can help improve family relationships.

In Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the assumption is that a loss of a certain size is more deleterious than a gain of a comparable size, and yet gains *during a time of loss* are more salient than gains when all is well. So perhaps, all things being equal, bad may be more impactful than good and can spiral into long-term negative consequences through processes such as rumination (Raes and Hermans, 2008). Even so, our study suggests that good may be more powerful than we think when all things are not equal. In other words, the impact of good can be highlighted, underscored, and galvanized in times of crisis. Many participants described their transcendent experiences not in the everyday walk of life, but during trying times. This is telling. Bad is typically stressful but is more stressful when we are already low. By comparison, perhaps good is always good, but good may have its greatest impact when we are at our lowest.

Clinical Practice: Transcendence as Treatment?

The Hindu practice of yoga and the Buddhist practice of mindfulness are increasingly promoted and prescribed in various secular settings. Perhaps yoga and mindfulness are popular *because* they can provide a kind of non-religious transcendence that many find meaningful and helpful. Even if it were empirically demonstrated that transcendent religious and spiritual experiences can be a profound positive power in human life and family relationships, it may be asked whether transcendence can or ought to be promoted in non-religious settings. In a clinical setting, some might argue that transcendence is too complex, too sensitive, too diverse, or too sacred to explore, much less recommend and that clinicians should stick to prosaic interventions.

These caveats aside, there may be ways in which clinicians and others working with families who seek therapy or help of various kinds can bring the power of transcendent experiences to bear. We propose three potential avenues for further exploration of the ways in which transcendent experiences may be helpful in therapy: Induce, make use, and introduce.

Induce. As we noted previously, adverse experiences may find value for families in the sense that they may interrupt typical functioning states and generate the opportunity for new ways of being. The field of marriage and family therapy or MFT was founded on principles of disrupting rigid or unhelpful interaction patterns and through sustained support, in order to help a family organize into a new equilibrium that is more functional (Nichols and Davis, 2017). From this perspective, family therapists and others working with family systems may view their work in challenging existing family patterns as an opportunity to stage a crisis for the family in which they may experience the transcendent. In this way, clinicians and other helpers or even other family members cannot produce transcendent experiences for an individual or family; however, they may generate a therapeutic context in which families are poised to examine and are motivated and supported to take the quintessential leap of faith into a new pattern of interaction. Such systemic shifting may serve as a priming ground for the transcendent.

Make use. Mental health professionals including psychologists, social workers, and family therapists are not strangers (in theory) to inclusion of the sacred and transcendent in therapy. Many scholars across mental health disciplines have written about the skilled, ethical and effective use of spirituality in therapy (Carlson and Erickson, 2002; Crisp, 2010; Weiler et al., 2015; Young, 2017; Zinnbauer et al., 2015). In this way, we further suggest that therapists can normalize not only adversity in its pervasive presence in our lives but can also normalize and promote examination and awareness of the transcendent (e.g., Lomax and Pargament, 2011). Ultimately, traumatic and transcendent experiences are pervasive; they are often painted as abnormal but are, in fact, modal, even in therapy (Pargament et al., 2014). They often complement each other. Just as it may be helpful for a client, congregation member, or even family member to recognize the scope and devastation of the traumatic event, it may additionally be helpful to frame, point out, and explore the possibility of transcendent experience and potentially enhance the potency of those experiences by framing them in that way. In doing so, we may activate a recognition of a hope-promoting experience or stimulate the neurobiology of anticipation that can expand endurance and continued moving forward with daily functioning in the midst of protracted or intense stress of adversity (Richter, 1957).

Another way in which clinicians and other helpers, including parents, might make use of transcendent experiences is to highlight (a) their potential relational implications and (b) their sometimes developmental and time-bound nature. Our findings suggest that transcendent religious experiences urged some of our participants toward relational action of various kinds. Helpers may be fruitful in working to frame and make these connections between experience and action overt to help clients sustain positive behaviors in their relationships. Another pattern we observed in the data was that some transcendent experiences were immediate in their effects and scope while others unfolded over time. Reviewing those experiences in hindsight, many

participants interpreted their course as divinely influenced. However, in the trenches of unfolding experience, clinicians and helpers may provide support, understanding and motivation for continued searching of the transcendent during periods of uncertainty along the path.

Introduce. Again, there is much excellent scholarship available on the ethical, effective, and skillful use of spirituality in psychotherapy. While the use and place of transcendent spiritual experiences in the therapy room is still being discussed within some disciplines (e.g. Williams-Reade, Lobo, and Gutierrez, 2018), we suggest that within the guidelines of effective spiritual integration in therapy, there may be a place for clinicians and other helpers to introduce or invite others toward transcendent experiences of their own. One example of this work is found in the body of literature on examining God as an attachment figure (Buri and Mueller, 1993; Granqvist, 2020; Kirkpatrick, 1992; Reinert and Edwards, 2014). Just as attachment-based clinicians invite comfort-seeking and understanding from one partner to another, there may be potential for such clinical invitations toward deeper attachment with the divine in the context of spiritual relationships to provide inroads toward the transcendent and thus toward potential healing from trauma.

We have suggested some ways in which clinical settings and other helping interactions may be shaped to potentially set the stage for transcendence. However, whether transcendence can be pursued or can perhaps only ensue from profound devotion is an important question. Some might argue that authentic transcendence cannot be pursued in the same way as physical fitness or weight loss. They might argue that true connection with the divine and/or transcendent cannot come from ultimately selfish motivations but only when one is willing and able to transcend the self by forgetting self-oriented needs and desires. Such paradoxes are found in all religions (Dollahite, Marks, and Dalton, 2018; Dollahite, Marks, and Wurm, 2019) and transformative transcendence may not be as malleable a process as social scientists and behavioral practitioners might hope. Even so, transcendence is experienced by a majority of people, including many non-religious people, and, perhaps, by an even larger proportion of those who have experienced or are experiencing especially difficult adverse experiences (Gillum, Sullivan, and Bybee, 2006). So, although there is caution about the theological and psychological ethics and efficacy of “directed transcendence” there is cause for some hope.

Support from Clergy

Given that we are social scientists and clinicians, not clergy, we are quite hesitant to prescribe any potential applications for clergy from our study. With that caveat in mind, given our findings, it may be that clergy can support families in their faith community who are dealing with adversity by inviting such members of their congregations to consider how their own transcendent religious experiences might help them strengthen their relationships. Pastoral counseling or education that explores the potential of personal transcendent experiences to provide relational meaning, increase relational depth, heal relational hurt, and/or encourage relational action might be helpful to some people. Of course, some people would have difficulty identifying any transcendent religious experiences, others would be uncomfortable discussing transcendent religious experiences, and others would have difficulty making connections

between their transcendent religious experiences and their family relationships. Therefore, such conversations or pastoral education would not necessarily be smooth or even welcome. But, clergy deal with all kinds of challenging and complex issues and our sense is that most clergy can discern the best ways they might approach such interactions with members of their faith communities.

Conclusion

We are profoundly grateful to those persons we interviewed who generously shared some of their most sacred religious experiences with us. Based on our examination of participants' in-depth interviews, many reported transcendent religious experiences that led to closer or more meaningful relationships with loved ones. We posit that for these participants, these experiences were sacred, transcendent, and transformational and led to real effects in their real world. Indeed, based on their own lived experience, perhaps some would concur with William James (1902/1997) that those religious experiences dealt with "realities in the completest sense" that filled up "the measure of [their] concrete actuality" and that they felt "in possession of ultimate reality" (pp. 386-388).

Adverse experiences in life are a certainty for all people and "more than half . . . will experience a trauma" (Gilbert, 2006, p. 166), perhaps 70% or more (Benjet et al., 2016) and those adversities and traumas impact people's closest relationships. Happily, transcendent religious experiences can positively effect relationships even, and perhaps especially, during adversity. It is likely true that many people keep both traumatic and transcendent experiences secret because they feel that sharing such experiences may result in being misunderstood, judged, or otherwise harmed. Thus, one important effort family members, friends, clinicians, and clergy can make is to create a safe environment for the sharing and honoring of sacred experiences. Wise and compassionate response to the sharing of adverse and potentially traumatic experiences, as well as potentially relationship-enhancing transcendent religious experiences, may help more people find additional meaning, depth, and healing in their family relationships.

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Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview on Beliefs, Practices, and Community

1. What are some of your *beliefs* relating to marriage/family?
2. *Are there practices or traditions* that hold special meaning for you as a couple/family?
3. Has your *relationship with other important people in your lives* influenced your relationship with each other? If so, how?
4. What are the *greatest challenges* (external/internal) to your marriage and family being all you want it to be?
5. All couples have some conflict. Are there ways that your beliefs or practices *help avoid or reduce marital conflict*?
6. In trying to be a good marital partner and a good parent, from whom or where do you seek guidance?
7. What values or beliefs are most important to the success of your marriage/parenting?
8. As parents, do you strive to *share your deepest beliefs* with your children? If so, how?
9. Have your *deepest beliefs helped you when your kids have struggled* for meaning or guidance?
10. Has your *relationship with others influenced* your relationship with your children? (vice versa, example?)
11. *How important* to you is it that your child(ren) *follow in your beliefs*?
12. What are your *deepest hopes for your child(ren)* in relation to their future family life?
13. To parents: What do you consider to be the *most important things* for you to be or do as a mother/father?
14. What do your most meaningful conversations with your child center on?