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Love at Home:  
Exploring Love in Religious Family Relationships

Joe Meshach Chelladurai

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

Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

### Love at Home: Exploring Love in Religious Family Relationships

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The purpose of the study was to qualitatively investigate love in religious family relationships. Participants were from the American Families of Faith Project, a qualitative study on religion and family life with participants from 198 Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families ( $N = 478$ ) across the United States. The primary research questions of present study were (a) what does love mean for families? (b) why do individuals and couples in families love? (c) how is love experienced? (d) what are the related processes of love? (e) how does religion influence love in religious families? and (f) what are the reported outcomes of love for individuals and families? Interview data was analyzed through a three-phase approach: feasibility study, codebook development, and grounded theory coding. The first phase conducted by two coders, excluding the author, concluded that there was sufficient data to conduct further analysis. The second phase was conducted by four coders, excluding the author and the two previous coders, who developed a codebook and organized data into four relational domains (marital, parental, children's, and divine) and six categories, which were based on the research questions (meaning, motivation, process, experience, influence, and outcome). In the third phase, the author analyzed the intersections between domains and categories through matrix coding and numeric content analysis. Then, using modified grounded theory approaches, themes were developed and presented as findings with illustrative participant quotations. Finally, findings, limitations, future directions, and implications for therapists and educators were discussed.

Keywords: love, religion, family relationships, marriage, parenting, qualitative

## DEDICATION

*To my family*

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### **Love at Home: Exploring Love in Religious Family Relationships**

“Love is the greatest thing in the world,” exclaimed Henry Drummond in his treatise published more than one hundred years ago (Drummond, 1918). Throughout history, a lot of paper and ink has been spent to describe the splendor and wonder, peril and pain, and the abstract nature of love (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2002). Theologians, philosophers, and poets have spent countless hours trying to understand and express the nature of love in words. In contrast, however, social researchers have largely sidelined a scientific endeavor to study love. In the 1958 opening lines of his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Henry Harlow famously stated, “Love is a wondrous state, deep, tender, and rewarding. Because of its intimate and personal nature, it is regarded by some as an improper topic . . . so far as love or affection is concerned, psychologists have failed in this mission. (Harlow, 1958, p. 673). Since then, there has been a steady interest in the study of romantic love and related concepts, particularly in the field of social psychology and close relationships.

In family studies, love has yet to be studied extensively and has been considered a “forgotten variable” (Roberts, 1992). More recently, family scholars have observed that, “the serious study of family love has been neglected by family theorists and practitioners from the beginnings of the family disciplines” (Bahr & Bahr, 2009, p. 122). Although love has not been studied specifically, related concepts such as attachment, warmth, and satisfaction have received much attention. Furthermore, antithetical concepts such as abuse, aggression, and violence have been studied extensively. Although these studies have provided significant contributions to

research literature, there is still a need to examine the concept of love itself as it exists in the family system.

Why study love in the first place? I propose three reasons. First, there is a need for researchers and therapists to be aligned with the clients' worldview (Blow et al., 2012). There is consensus among scholars that love is a social construction (Berscheid, 2010). This means, that different people may have differing definitions of love. Instead of imposing theory-driven definitions of love, there is a need to examine love through the lens of people in their everyday relationships (Daly, 2003). Second, love has been considered a basic human need – to receive, as well as to give (Maslow, 1943). People may seek to fulfill this need through enduring relationships. If this is the case, we may consider love as an important dimension of meaningful and flourishing relationships. Consequently, love, mutually experienced, can help people overcome challenges and provide purpose and a resource to cope and engage in times of conflict, stress, and loss. Third, there may be important therapeutic implications of love. For instance, in the family system, can love be prescribed in the therapeutic process? Such prescriptions first require answers to questions such as, “How love is given, received, developed, and learned?” On the other hand, there is a need to address compelling questions such as, “Why is love refused, unrequited, manipulated, or withdrawn?” Together, these theoretical, humanistic, and therapeutic concerns necessitate a rigorous and thorough investigation of love in family relationships.

For a systematic investigation of love in family relationships, I propose to situate the present study in cultural, familial, and religious contexts. First, because love is socially constructed, I aim to examine love in culturally diverse contexts. For instance, love cuts across cultures, but is also diverse within cultures (Fisher, 2004). Second, to examine love in an

enduring relational context, I aim to study strong marriage-based families. Third, I aim to study love in a religious context, because religion through beliefs, practices, and community can have a pervasive influence in relationships. In summary, I propose to explore love in a sample of culturally diverse, marriage-based, highly religious families. The specific research questions for this study are (a) what does love mean for families? (b) why do individuals and couples in families love? (c) how is love experienced in the family system? (d) what are the related processes of love? (e) how does religion influence love in religious families? and (f) what are the reported outcomes of love for individuals and families?

In the following section, I briefly review theoretical foundations and empirical research on love and relationships, and religion and family relationships.

### **Love and Relationships**

Researchers have long acknowledged the multi-dimensional nature of love and have conceptualized love in various ways (Berscheid, 2010). Lee (1973) conceptualized a color theory of love with three primary types (eros - passion; ludos - game-playing; storge - familial), three secondary types (mania - obsession; agape - altruism; pragma - practical), and, in combination, nine tertiary types of love. Hendrick and Hendrick (1989) endorsed Lee's (1973) typology through factor analysis adding that love styles can be qualitatively different from their primary or secondary combinations. Sternberg (1986) conceptualized a triangular theory of love with three components: intimacy, commitment, and passion. Varying levels of each of these components result in different triangular shapes illustrating various forms of love. Other conceptualizations include love as attachment (Shaver & Hazan, 1987), a story (Sternberg, 1995), and as a virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Considering the diversity of viewpoints of theory and taxonomies of love, Fehr (2006) advocated studying love through a prototype approach, that is, focusing on lay people's point of views. Through prototype analysis, Fehr and Sprecher (2009) found that definitions of compassionate love differed between scholars and participants. For instance, participants regarded certain features such as trust, caring, and understanding as central to compassionate love, whereas scholars defined the same construct differently. This research line of inquiry suggests that qualitative approaches can help scholars and participants to co-construct and report a more unified understanding of love in relationships.

Berscheid (2010) reviewed the state of the field of love research and summarized and categorized research into four dimensions of love: companionate, romantic, compassionate, and attachment. Companionate love is characterized by love that is manifested in friendship and familial relationships. Romantic love is passionate and obsessional between romantic partners. Compassionate love is altruistic and selfless and intended to help others. Attachment love is manifest through the presence of affectional bonds in the context of a safe and secure relationship. In families, Noller (1996) contrasted mature love with immature love. Mature love is characterized by secure attachment, commitment, sustained passion and companionship, while on the other hand, immature love is characterized by infatuation and obsession. In the same article, Noller theorized that mature love is most beneficial for healthy family relationships, suggesting that the type of love has important relational implications.

In parent child relationships, D'Cruz and Stagnitti (2010) examined the experience of love from children's point of view through stories narrated by children. Children relied on actual physical presence of parent as understanding of parental love and care. Other findings of the

study added that children experienced love through sharing special time and experiencing safety and protection. In marital relationships, Sabey et al., (2016) interviewed 63 older married couples and examined the behavioral components of compassionate love. They found 11 specific behavioral domains that included: caring for physical health, helping with chores, supporting interests, moving places willingly, attending to children's needs, supporting career or education, caring for extended family or neighbors, providing financially, giving gifts, communicating, and supporting after loss. Various experiences of these findings, although similar, suggest that the way love is experienced may differ based on relational domains.

Bahr and Bahr (2009) proposed a model of family love based on three propositions: that love is accepting, enduring, and other-oriented. First, family love is based on generosity and altruism. Love refers to the relationship rather than rewards for behavior. It is considered as self-sacrificing and experienced through altruism and attentiveness achieved in a multi-directional context. Secondly, love is enduring. It is a continuous and lifelong endeavor and not merely temporary. There is an expectation of continuity and endurance that goes beyond faltering before inconveniences. Finally, love is other-oriented. It is system-oriented and enhanced through loving others and in that process, there is a degree of selflessness. As this model points out, there may be more to love than its associations with other variables.

While existing research has found and established correlates of love, there is comparatively less research on motivations for love. To my knowledge, questions such as the following remain largely unexamined: Why do people love? What factors influence love towards marriage? How does culture influence beliefs and practices of love in relationships? For example, cross-cultural research suggests that ideas and practices regarding love vary across

cultures (Vera Cruz, 2017). Furthermore, Noller (1996) observed that, because of culture's strong influence, cognitive aspects of love may be important influences for emotional and behavioral aspects of love in relationships. As a result, cultural ideas which consider love as blind, external, or uncontrollable can have varying outcomes and implications (Dion & Dion, 1996).

Additionally, a study of beliefs regarding love may help us understand how love is experienced and what motivates love. Religion, through beliefs, practices, and community, can have a pervasive influence in the lives of individuals and families (Marks & Dollahite, 2017). Religion may have a proximal connection in families by sanctifying relationships with sacred meaning and purpose (Mahoney, 2013). With regard to the place of love in religious families, recent studies have provided preliminary support for positive associations and outcomes. Lin and Huddleston-Casas (2005) found that agape love in couple relationships was associated with religiosity and relationship satisfaction. Sabey et al., (2014) found that compassionate love partially mediated marital sanctification (i.e., perceived sacred qualities of marriage) and marital satisfaction for wives. Harris et al., (2016) found that love as emotion, behavior, and commitment was related to marital happiness and that religious beliefs and religious practices helped in sustaining happy marriages. Together, these studies suggest the possibility that love may have a unique place in religious families.

### **Religion and Family Relationships**

Recent research on religion and family has provided theoretical, conceptual, and empirical approaches that have advanced and bridged the psychology of religion with relationship processes. This has brought a better understanding of religion-family processes

indicating a complex, multilevel, and multidimensional influence of religion in the lives of individuals and families. Religiosity has been directly or indirectly linked with several relational maintenance processes such as relational virtues, marital fidelity, and propensity for forgiveness (Dollahite & Marks, 2018). To illustrate, Day and Acock (2013) found that relational virtue longitudinally mediated the association between religiousness and marital well-being. Dollahite and Lambert (2007) reported that religion promoted marital fidelity through religious beliefs and practices, religious vows and commitments, moral values, spouses' relationship with God. Relatedly, Davis et al., (2012) found that religion may indirectly promote efficient forgiveness partially mediated by empathy.

Within the family, religious socialization has been related with important family processes. In parent-child relationships, King (2003) found that religious fathers were more involved in parenting and reported higher quality marital and parent-child relationships. Volling et al., (2009) observed that parents' belief in parenting being connected to God was also linked to mothers' and fathers' use of positive socialization and induction in discipline encounters. Furthermore, religion contributes to family identity and ideology (Pearce & Thornton, 2007) and traditions involving close as well as extended family (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001). Taken together these studies indicate the close connection between religious and family processes.

Theoretical perspectives help explain how religion brings about these processes and outcomes. Based on various theories, religion can influence family relationships in at least four ways. First, from a sociological point of view, religious and family institutions influence one another through social support (love, solidarity, values, and meaning) and social control (constraints and requirements) (D'Antonio et al., 1982). Relatedly, from an ecological standpoint

religious institutions and culture can proximally influence family processes (Loser et al., 2009).

Second, religion promotes sanctification of relationships (Mahoney, 2013). According to this theory, relationships can be sanctified by family members imbuing religious meaning onto relationships. Such sanctification processes influence ideas regarding responsibilities towards relationships. For example, viewing parental responsibilities as sacred and as religious duties may increase relational accountability and invite conscientious attention (Mahoney, 2013).

Third, religion can exert a holistic, sustainable influence through established and patterned contexts, processes, and outcomes (Dollahite & Marks, 2009). Contexts include aspects of religious involvement, namely, spiritual beliefs, religious expectations, faith community, and extended family. Processes involve specific practices and religious observations through actual lived experience of religion. Outcomes concern individual, relational, and communal outcomes that result from family processes, that can have divergent implications (Dollahite et al., 2018).

Finally, religion can exert powerful intrapersonal influences that can have relational implications (Vohs & Finkel, 2006). Additionally, relationships can influence individuals. Intrapersonally, religion can have a deep influence through identity formation, moral development, self-regulation, meaning making, and coping processes. Interpersonally, participation in joint religious practices, engaging in shared relational meaning can have intrapersonal influences (Vohs & Finkel, 2006). In summary, these theoretical paradigms facilitate an analytic and operational framework in which to study family love.

**Present Study**

The aim of the present study was to qualitatively explore love in religious families. The specific research questions for this study were (a) What does love mean for families? (b) Why do individuals and couples in families love? (c) How is love experienced in the family system? (d) What are the related processes of love? (e) How does religion influence love in religious families? and (f) What are the reported outcomes of love for individuals and families?

To achieve the research aims and answer these questions, I chose to use a qualitative methodology, which is valuable to explore understudied phenomenon (Daly, 2007). As this study is exploratory in nature, I did not require a set of hypotheses but was guided by the above-mentioned research questions. Particularly, qualitative research can help provide insights into motivations—why a phenomenon happens, and processes—how a phenomenon occurs. In family science, qualitative research offers potential to explore “negative spaces” and taken-for-granted processes (Daly, 2007). Recent advances in qualitative methodology and reporting standards have further enhanced the value and rigor of qualitative inquiry (Levitt et al., 2018, Marks, 2015).

For this study, from a strengths-based approach (Defrain & Asay, 2007), I chose a dataset of highly religious families. The American Families of Faith Project is an ongoing project exploring the intersection of faith and family life. Participants were from 198 Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families residing in various regions of the United States, and from various ethnic backgrounds. Semi-structured interviews were mostly conducted in the participants’ homes. Questions were intended to explore the influence of beliefs, practices, and community on family life, challenges and obstacles faced in practicing their religion, the influence of religion on

parenting, and the influence of religion on children and youth. An expanded list of interview questions can be found in Appendix A. In the next section, I provide a detailed description of participants, procedure, and analytic plans, to present the methodology of the proposed study.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants of this study are from 198 families ( $N = 476$ ; 198 mothers, 198 fathers, 41 girls, 39 boys) from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities. Average age of mothers was 45 and average age of fathers was 47. Average marital length was 20 years. Average age of interviewed children was 16 years (range: 10 -25). Participants were from all eight regions in the United States marked by religious diversity: Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Mountain West, New England, Northwest, Pacific, the South, and Southern Crossroads (see Silk & Walsh, 2011). Participants were from 17 states: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Utah, Washington, and Wisconsin. A little over half of the participants (51%) were racial and/or ethnic minorities including (but were not limited to) African American, Asian American, East Asian/East Indian, Latino, Middle Eastern, Native American, and Pacific Islander families. Further, one-fourth of the participant families were immigrants to the United States. A more detailed breakdown of the participants religious and ethnic backgrounds is presented in Table 1. Although not nationally representative, efforts were made to achieve rich and diverse theoretical sampling for qualitative inquiry (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

**Procedure**

Participants were recruited through purposive, referral-based sampling. Congregational leaders were contacted and asked for referrals of exemplary family members who actively participated in their religion. This procedure allowed the recruitment of participants who were regarded as highly religious through nominated expert-sampling, resulting in an exemplar sample (Damon & Colby, 2013). IRB approval was received from the university and participants provided informed consent. Participants were interviewed jointly in their homes using a semi-structured interview schedule. Where approved, children ( $N = 80$ ) later joined to answer questions directed to them in the presence of parents. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted about two hours on average. They were then transcribed verbatim and checked. Sample questions included: Does your relationship with God influence your relationship with each other? If so, how? Do faith practices hold special meaning to your family? How does your family address challenges? No specific questions were asked about love (please refer to Appendix A for the questionnaire). Thus, all coded examples of love in this study emerged spontaneously from participant responses to other questions. There are pros and cons to using such data. An advantage is that there were no “leading questions” to try to prompt discussion of love. Therefore, the coded comments were coming directly from the participants own experiences. If a concept, such as love, was frequently mentioned and discussed even when there were no direct questions about it, suggests that narratives referring to love were important to participants. A disadvantage is that this approach limits the scope of the study within the content of the available data. As a result, opportunities were unavailable for further exploration through possible follow-up questions that may have been of interest to the present study.

## **Analysis**

The analytic plan for this project covered three phases: pilot study, codebook development, and in-depth coding and analysis. These approaches helped determine if sufficient data was available to conduct an in-depth exploration, then to create a systematic coding tool (i.e. codebook), and to conduct the in-depth analysis using the systematic coding tool. I describe these analytic phases in more detail below. The three phases were conducted in Winter 2018, Fall 2018, and Winter 2020 respectively. A consolidated timeline with respective step-by-step coding phases and stages is presented in Table 2.

### ***First Phase***

The objective of the first phase was to conduct a pilot study to examine if there were sufficient data to conduct an in-depth, qualitative exploration given that no direct questions were asked about love. Two undergraduate students enrolled in a semester-long research seminar were recruited to help with the project. Coding procedures were conducted in four stages: broad coding, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1997).

**Stage 1: Broad Coding.** Broad coding refers to a coding procedure used to create a relevant subset of data in order to “close in” on the phenomenon under study. Using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software package, I conducted a text search using a wildcard term: *lov\**. This search resulted in a total of 2,010 references to the word *love* from 181 interviews (over 90% of all interviews). Using the custom context function in Nvivo, sixty words around the references were auto-coded. The coded passages were exported to a word document, printed, and given to the coders.

**Stage 2: Open Coding.** Open coding refers to the process of labeling units of information. Coders analyzed each reference to the word *love* in the context it was used. The following codes were created (number of codes in parentheses): learning love (21), defining love (7), teaching love (4), developing love (25), expressing love (36), giving love (120), attributes of love (52).

**Stage 3: Axial Coding.** Axial coding refers to arranging and organizing codes into similar groups. Codes were grouped into categories based on similarity of properties and attributes. In this stage, three categories were created: developing love, giving love, and love as action.

**Stage 4: Selective Coding.** Selective coding was the final stage of the coding process where previously identified codes are refined and organized around core concepts. In this stage, coders organized codes and categories around three thematic findings: defining love, developing love, and expressing love.

The pilot study provided confidence that there was sufficient information in the dataset to conduct an in-depth, qualitative study. As the first phase generically examined love across various relational domains, a second phase was conducted to examine love in specific domains.

### ***Second Phase***

This phase was conducted by four undergraduate coders, excluding the previous coders and the author. The objective of the second phase was to develop a codebook to prepare for in-depth, qualitative examination. Codebook development as a process and as a product is both beneficial for systematic investigation of qualitative text data (MacQueen et al., 1998). As a research process, important codes in the data may be identified and categories may be created.

As a product, a codebook works as a systematic tool and framework for in-depth coding. Therefore, codebook development may help strengthen the validity of codes, and facilitate reliability among coders. During this phase of the study, codes were also grouped into domains based on four relational contexts, namely, marital love, parental love, children's love, and divine love. Then, based on the primary research questions, the following six categories were also created: meaning, motivations, experiences, processes, influences, and outcomes.

**Stage 1: Broad Coding.** Similar to procedures detailed in the first phase, a new project was created, and passages were auto coded using the 2,010 references to love. After broadly coding the passages, the files were divided among the four coders.

**Stage 2: Open Coding.** In this phase, new codes were created by the four coders through open coding. Efforts were made to code all references to love from the previous stage. Coders worked in pairs and reviewed each other's work. During weekly meetings, coders reviewed major concerns and common issues. Coding discrepancies and disagreements were resolved through consensus.

**Stage 3: Axial Coding.** In this stage, four domains and six major categories were developed. The four domains included marital, parental, children's, and divine love. Six categories included meaning, motivation, experience, process, influence, and outcome of love.

**Stage 4: Codebook Development.** With some adaptations, procedures prescribed by MacQueen et al., (1998) were followed. The steps taken were to (a) prepare an initial code list, (b) circulate the proposed code list for review, (c) develop detailed code definitions, (d) organize codes developed in previous stages, (e) assess the categorization of codes, (f) if inconsistent, review and revise the codebook and recode all previously coded text, (g) if consistent, continue

further coding. As a result of this process, passages were grouped based on domains and categories. By the end of this phase, a codebook was developed, reviewed, and used by the team.

### *Third Phase*

The objective of the third phase was to examine each category in depth and to conduct another level of coding. In the previous two phases, I was blinded to the coding process. Thus, a third phase with an individual coding approach was necessary for reinterpreting the data at an abstract level and align findings towards answering the research questions of the study. First, I created a matrix using intersecting codes between domains and categories through matrix coding. I then conducted another level of coding through individual coding using Nvivo qualitative software. As the sole coder, during this phase, I was able to synthesize the entire research process based on objectives and goals of the project towards directly answering the research questions. I was also able to employ previous qualitative research experiences and theoretical and paradigmatic orientations through personal reflexivity. Finally, this quest allowed for a deeper theoretical explanation based on personal engagement with the data. On a cautionary note, individual coding can be disadvantageous, as it can be prone to increased subjective bias. In order to account for potential biases, I presented my codes, categories, and themes to be audited by another member of the American Families of Faith research team who was not closely involved with the present study. I also regularly conducted bracketing exercises to be aware of subjective bias. Tables were created to document and present the research process, which also provided a detailed audit trail. The following stages were used to conduct in-depth coding and analysis.

**Stage 1: Matrix Coding.** Matrix coding refers to examining intersections of two or more codes in order to identify patterns. This coding was useful to compare, explore, and create a matrix of intersecting codes. As a result, there were 24 intersections between the four relational domains and six categories. Using NVivo 12, this procedure also provided more information on how codes were grouped and represented across categories. From this process, a numeric content analysis of codes was generated and reported in Table 4. This provided an audit trail and helped document the frequency of codes.

**Stage 2: Open Coding.** In this stage, through a modified grounded theory approach to analysis (Marks, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1997), I conducted another level of coding using the intersecting codes from the matrix coding stage. Each intersection of domain and category was coded again, and through this iteration of open coding, I arrived at about 50 open-codes (Table 5).

**Stage 3: Axial Coding.** Closely related open codes were grouped together in six categories that were adapted from the research questions. Codes were then rearranged until they appeared to have similar properties and attributes and then placed in relevant categories.

**Stage 4: Selective Coding.** In this stage, themes were developed based on the salience of the codes and categories. Representative quotes that best described the thematic findings were selected and presented for illustration.

## Findings

In this section, I present major findings in four domains: marital love, parental love, children's love, and divine love. Each domain is presented with six themes that closely represent the categories in order, namely meanings, motivations, experiences, processes, influences, and

outcomes. For example, the first theme in the *Marital Love* domain refers to a representation of a *meaning* related with marital love. This organizational structure of themes and categories is maintained throughout the entire findings section and is also outlined and summarized in Table 5. In the following sub-sections, the themes are first listed under each relational domain, and then, subsequently provided with illustrations using participant quotations with minimal interpretation.

### **Marital Love**

The following six themes respectively illustrate a related meaning, motivation, experience, process, influence, and outcome of marital love as reported by participants. They are (1) committing to enduring marriage, (2) sacralizing marital vows, (3), enduring together with love, (4) developing and growing in love, (5) observing religious teachings, and (6) looking after each other.

#### ***Committing to Enduring Marriage***

For religious couples, the meaning of love was related with a commitment to each other in marriage. Some participants viewed love as an important aspect of marriage. To illustrate, Raven, an African American wife shared:

First of all, it is a commitment to each other and holding that person with high esteem . . . love and respect for that person. A commitment to honor that person and to be with that person for eternity and not have anything that would interfere with that. It's a place of loyalty, a place of sacrifice, where you will think of that person as better than you almost. So, you give to that person selflessly . . . always trying to do your best for that person. Sacrificial love, that's kind of what it is.

Participants also indicated that love was a choice and a conscious decision. Perhaps, because of religious ideas, marriage was seen as sacred and as involving deity. For example, Brian, a Catholic husband said, “Love is a choice. We chose each other, and God chose us for each other. And then you stick to that choice.”

Mostly, couples viewed love as relational, other-oriented, and focused on their spouse. They also viewed love as “unconditional,” a “priority,” and as a “major ingredient” in family relationships and indicated that love was deep, meaningful, and constant. Importantly, some participants also mentioned what love was not, and described love as “not fireworks,” “not monetary,” and “not a superficial thing.”

This theme explored a meaning of marital love as commitment to enduring marriage. Next, we turn to a reported motivation of marital love.

### ***Sacralizing Marital Vows***

Participants reported that they held their vows to be sacred. Marital vows symbolized and reflected the commitments described in the previous theme. Marital love was sustained with sacred vows which informed how they treated their spouse. Sydney, a Latter-day Saint wife said,

I think that when you are dating, you have that euphoric love that’s exciting and fun and when you get married, you lose that because real life sets in . . . I think for us what’s different is that we went into this thinking that there is no way out. The vows we were making to each other were unbreakable.

Carlos, a Latino Catholic husband, similarly mentioned how that as their spouse was given by God, they felt responsible to love that person:

To be able to love that person by your side . . . And to try to do the best you can, not only because it's that person by your side, but that God has put [that person] in your life.

Likewise, Heidi, a Mainline Christian wife said, "So if God always loves us, then we should be, feeling like we could love ourselves and love our spouse." Participants reportedly involved God in their marriage, hence considering marriage as divinely motivated. By sacralizing marital vows, participants strived to integrate religious teachings with their relational behaviors. For example, Deshi, an Asian Christian husband said,

In the Bible the book of First Corinthians Chapter 13, I usually think of the verses about the truth of love: "Love never fails" and "Love is patient." This encouraged me a lot. And there are many teachings about marriage in the Bible . . . This is also God's will.

This theme reported how sacralizing marital vows was a motivation of love in marriage.

Next, we turn to a theme that represented an experience of marital love.

### ***Enduring Together with Love***

Couples viewed the experiential aspect of love as enduring through challenging times as well as good times. They reported that love was experienced as mutual concern and perceived as genuine. Also, the constancy of love was an important factor. Joelle, an African American wife, remarked about her husband Algernon,

The consistency, I always know that he is going to be there. And I do appreciate the love. I appreciate the active love that he has shown me. Where he's always told me that he's loved me. He's always done things and he always gives me cards. Sometimes it's five cards on my birthday. Or three cards on my birthday. It's always the consistency of

loving me. I don't ever remember a time when I thought, "Okay we're in trouble". But I ain't never thought that he really doesn't love me.

After reflecting on a major medical emergency that happened to his wife, Cameron, an African American Latter-day Saint husband, shared his feelings:

It was stronger before she got hurt, and it's still stronger. Ain't nothing changed, I still love her as before she got hurt, and after she got hurt, I still love her the same.

Ephraim, a Jewish husband said:

I think our marriage, as much as any marriage can be, is all we want it to be. I think I have married somebody who loves me as much as any person can love their spouse. And I feel the same way about her.

Others experienced love as fidelity, harmony, protection, and respect. In summary, participants felt love as an enduring experience with concern for each other.

This theme presented a reported experience of marital love. Next, we turn to a theme to present a process related with marital love.

### ***Developing and Growing in Love***

Participants described a process of love that was developmental and evolutionary with time and family circumstances. They mentioned how "love grew" over the years, and how love was learned, developed, and changed from early years of their marriage to the present. To illustrate, Jefferson and Sierra, an African American couple who have been married for over fifty years, mentioned:

Jefferson: And this thing called love is something that is something that is developed and earned.

Sierra: It grows.

Jefferson: It's not just, people quite often mistake infatuations for love. And maybe that's why I love my wife more now, than I ever loved her. It's because it's something that you work with and develop and you watch it grow, and boy after 50 years, I just say I'm glad I did it.

Sierra: Yes, 50 years.

Similarly, a Aashif and Aabish, a Muslim husband and wife remarked:

Aashif: Everything is more matured . . . We were a couple, and now we are a big family with kids. We love each other more than we have since the first Eid [Muslim holiday] definitely, as a couple.

Aabish: [We are more mature]. Our relations are stronger, we have four kids, big family, and our thoughts and opinions are [also] different.

However, love was not always linear. Some participants shared their struggles to continue loving their spouse. For example, Danielle, an Evangelical Christian wife shared:

There've been times that I've found myself getting very upset with him, falling out of love with him, being disgusted, thinking, "I do not wish to be married to this person" . . .

And so sometimes I have, I sit down and read the chapter on marriage, or I will literally make a list of all the qualities I love about him to fall in love again with those and to keep my vision clear about who it is I'm married to and why I'm committed to this.

As mentioned by Danielle, love appeared to be developmental with phases of growth and decay. Processes such as falling in love and falling out of love were within control, and sometimes culminating events caused alarm for people to do something about it.

This theme presented a developmental process related with marital love. In the next theme, a theme representing a reported influence of religion on marital love is presented.

### *Observing Religious Teachings*

For many spouses, ideas of love were often deeply connected with religious beliefs and teachings. Across all religions and denominations, religious teachings encouraged the expression of love in marriage and provided ideologies on how marital life may be lived. Loving one another was situated in the broader context of being a good person, following religious principles, and viewing marriage as ordained and sacred.

Carlos, a Latino Catholic husband said,

Forgiving and giving, which I believe come from our religious views and belief. And growing up in a religious environment, I think it has a lot to do with it. So I think that it has affected [us] to be able to accept the person by your side. To be able to love that person by your side, that is by your side.

Yusif and Asalah, an East Indian Muslim couple shared,

Asalah: Religion is not separate from our lives in any aspect, that way . . . so it applies to marriage as well, which is a great part of your life, and a very responsible part of your life . . . and that is why it is a complete way of life.

Yusif: Yeah, I think it's the central axis, there's no question about it. Of course, the ingredients of love and compatibility and all that, also play a very important role. But it's right there with the most important of other things.

Also, of particular note was the extensive use of religious texts to inform ideas of love. Participants cited scriptural references to "fruits of the spirit," "love one's wife as Christ loved

the church,” and “love one another as God loves us.” These scriptural vignettes were reported frequently and were important principles for these couples.

This theme represented a reported influence of how observing religious teachings related with marital love. In the next theme, a theme representing an outcome of religion on marital love is presented.

### ***Looking After Each Other***

Participants mentioned that expressing and practicing love in their marriage helped them become less selfish and more relationship oriented. For instance, Mark, an Episcopalian husband, shared,

Hopefully, you have two people that are in love with each other, and that that stays the whole time, even if they don't like each other at times. I just think personally that it's real easy to think of yourself first and foremost and think of what happens. . . how it affects you instead of thinking about the other person. And having some balance in there, I think that it can be very important.

Similarly, Kari, an Evangelical Christian wife observed:

Some of the ideals that Christ gives, that we're to be like Christ, putting others before yourself, and just loving unconditionally. And a lot of these things really help a marriage, I think, as opposed to just thinking of yourself, which is kind of the modern way to look at marriage these days, or relationships.

Receiving and giving love were seen as a strength to the marital relationship, and love was also mentioned as the most important value that led to their reported success of marriage. For others, feeling loved was helpful during times of loss, and getting through hard times.

On the other hand, others struggled with the concept of love in their relationship. Although, some relationships were loving, they were not without struggles or challenges.

Pati, a Native American Evangelical wife said,

Our marriage is much stronger today than it was seven years ago . . . I think we've always loved one another but, we didn't know how to deal with problems and issues.

In summary, pursuing marital love lead participants to become more focused on their spouse and to look after them. For some, maintaining loving relationships were challenging and took the course of time and experience.

This theme concludes the findings section on marital love. In the next section, findings on parental love is presented.

### **Parental Love**

The following six themes respectively illustrate a related meaning, motivation, experience, process, influence, and outcome of parental love as reported by participants. They are (1) giving oneself to children, (2) modeling God's love, (3) bonding and uniting, (4) expressing love through shared activities, (5) fulfilling divine responsibilities, and (6) respecting children.

#### ***Giving Oneself to Children***

Some parents talked about parental love as consuming their whole self. In this regard, love for a child was being as part of one's self and thereby "unselfish." This idea is reflected in the following as mentioned by Sabina, a Muslim mother:

I think it is so amazing being a mother . . . Children are like a part of your body, you know, you never stop loving them, whether they do something good or not for you. It's unselfish love, you always hope that they get the best.

Grace, a Non-denominational Christian mother said, "My kids are some of my best friends and I think that's really important to me. I just love being with them. I always have, ever since they were babies. I've really poured my life into them."

For parents, the meaning of love towards their children was balanced between parenting for discipline and constant love. Consequently, parents clarified to their children that their love toward them was continuous. For example, Ezra, a Modern Orthodox Jewish father, reflected on his own mothers' conceptualization of love. He said,

My mother used to tell me when I was a kid, she said, "You know, I'll always love you. I don't like you all the time, but I'll always love you." And that says the truth right there. She may not like me all the time for the things I do. But the love is there.

Other parents mentioned that in comparison with divine love their love is "not perfect." For example, Kang, an Asian Christian father, said, "I tell her God created the world. Mom loves you, dad loves you, and God loves you. I hope someday she will know our insufficiencies; the love of her parents is not perfect. God's love is greater than ours."

In this theme, a meaning related with parental love of that of giving oneself to children was presented. Next, a theme representing a reported motivation for marital love is presented.

*Modeling God's Love*

Parents were motivated to love their children through religious ideas and modelling from divine examples. Some parents viewed themselves as needing to set examples and reflect their religious values. Grace, an Evangelical Christian mother said,

If a kid grows up having a father who is loving and kind and supportive and strong in disciplining them, I think it is easier for them to understand God and who He is. A lot of the attributes [my husband] is striving for are aspects of God, it's all connected. So the kids see in their father aspects of God, a perfect God.

An important context of love was when religious discussions were taking place at home. To share religious beliefs, parents were motivated to typify love of God through their parenting assuming that "imposition of religion" would not be conducive to their children. Raashid and Fadilah, a Muslim couple, remarked, regarding their daughter,

Raashid: What our main thing is to get in her the love of God, the fear of God, these are the most important things.

Fadilah: I think I was around ten and my sister around twelve . . . I learned imposition of religion is not the way to go. The way of religion is if it is important to you, you cannot impose it on your children.

As indicated by these parents, religion intrinsically informed how they viewed parenting. Relatedly, some participants reported that parenting as a "whole process" reflected God's love. Israel, a Jewish father said, "I would say [regarding] children . . . through that whole process from conception through now. But also . . . you see God through loving somebody. You understand God better through loving somebody, and God is revealed, especially in a family."

This theme presented a reported motivation of participants to model God's love. Next, we turn to a theme to present an experience related with parental love.

### ***Bonding and Uniting***

For parents, love was experienced as bonding and uniting with their children. Some experienced bonding in their parenthood which was offered through religious opportunities. For example, a Latter-day Saint father mentioned that he experienced bonding with his children through giving a father's blessing (laying his hands on his children's heads and praying for God to bless them). He said,

That's been a huge, tremendous relationship building aspect of our religious beliefs. I've grown closer to my kids through that exercise I think, than a lot of other things. That ability to bond in that way to show my great expression of love from a father, a way to express that love.

Others desired to be unified with their children. For example, Ron, a Jewish father talked about teachings that promoted unity from a religious leader that influenced how he approached parent-child conversations,

You can always come back and say: There'll be a tomorrow . . . Just as issues between [my daughter] and me . . . there is a tomorrow. I will love her tomorrow; and I don't know if we will be able to work this problem out, but we will be father and daughter. And that respect of her, that belief that she'll be alright. We'll try and make it alright.

On the other hand, some parents hierarchically organized their love to their children lesser to their marital relationship in order to avoid relational discord. For instance, Tucker, a Latter-day Saint father said, "As much as I love my children with all my heart, it's more

important to me to support my eternal companion [wife] and so if they come to me to try and create a divide between her [and me], it's not going to work.”

This theme presented love as parental experiences of bonding and uniting with children. Next, we turn to a theme to present a process related with parental love.

### *Expressing Love through Shared Activities*

Parents mentioned that their experience of love toward the children was mutually fulfilling. Opportunities to express love and concern were created by spending time with children. For instance, Elijah, a Jewish father reflected on a family tradition that provided joyful and unifying experiences:

Much more than a rigid observance of practices or doctrines, there would be a sense of love in the family—that the parents love and respect each other and that parents love and respect the children and the children love the parents and that their Judaism is an expression of that . . . The things that are beautiful that the children and the parents love and that we enjoy . . . That is why I love the dancing because it's something that we love doing and our children love doing. It injects our Judaism and our family with a sense of joy with the traditions.

A'ishah, a Muslim mother, expressed that love was a shared experience and it was more than individual happiness. She said, “It's about sharing and love, and it's just what, it's not just your feelings or what your desires, or what do you want in this life. It's the people around you.”

Hakim, a Muslim father mentioned that spending time with children provided opportunities for developing love and parent-child relationship:

I believe that to have a good influence on my child, I have to spend time with him, and spending quality time with him, that makes them love you and if they love you, they will listen to you. So that's how.

This theme presented a reported process of how parental love was expressed through shared activities. Next, we turn to a theme to present an influence of religion related with parental love.

### ***Fulfilling Divine Responsibilities***

Religious teachings and instruction appeared to deeply influence how parents viewed their relationship with their children. Religion provided the why and the how of parenting through general and practical instructions on being a parent. As a result, parents viewed parenting as a divine responsibility and felt accountable for their behavior towards their children. Orlando, an African American Christian father, said,

My religious faith has really increased and enlarged in the last years. So the more that I study about my Creator it really outlines my role . . . And what my responsibilities are. And what that means to me is to really embrace them with all the heart and all the love that I have.

Similarly, Yusif, a Muslim father, said,

And in Islam, the husband or the father has been given, the shepherd-hood, if you will, of the family. So, there is a great responsibility of taking care of your wife's spiritual and physical needs, and protection and love, and all of that. And also, you are accountable for the raising of your children and what they do when they grow apart.

Parents also respected children's autonomy while balancing how they parented with love and guidance. For example, Karen, an Evangelical Christian mother, said she wanted:

To bring children up in the way they should go . . . not just to let them bring themselves up. They'll make their own decisions, but to guide them, and teach them. Yeah, I think Jesus was there for people whenever they needed him. To be there to talk to them and help them through things and love them love them unconditionally through hard times that do come, and good times as well. Spend time together; and to be good examples.

This theme reported on how religion influenced parents by placing divine responsibility on parenting. Next, we turn to a theme to present a reported outcome of parental love.

### ***Respecting Children***

In addition to viewing parenthood as a divine responsibility and modeling God's love and observing religious principles in how they relate with their children, parents viewed their children as having worth, and thereby felt respect towards them. Further, this perspective informed their attitudes, beliefs, and practices towards their children.

Leah, a Jewish mother, regarding how love was an important aspect of resolving differences with her daughter, said,

You always have to, as a parent, believe that your child has great worth, and that if you continue to be supportive of the child, and look for the good in the child, and express your love and not keep it in, that that will help the relationship develop.

From this above passage, it may be inferred that through loving children, Leah viewed God's love. This indicated that parental love was viewed as divinely manifest in family life. To illustrate, Abby, an Evangelical Christian mother said,

For me I think, the words that were popping into my head are loving . . . really respecting, respecting the people in my family, the children as individuals . . . who are as worthy as me of attention, and respect, and being listened to, and being considered. And respecting myself too. Having that, knowing that we're all of worth and of value.

Parents reported positive outcomes as a result of adhering to religious ideas of love.

These views reportedly resulted in prioritizing family life and placing a high impetus on respecting and loving their children. Overall, most participants reported positive outcomes with regard to parenting with love and respect. Related outcomes included overcoming relational tension and seeking relational harmony and functioning.

This theme concludes the section on parental love. In the next section, thematic findings of children's love is presented.

### **Children's Love**

The following six themes respectively illustrate a related meaning, motivation, experience, process, influence, and outcome of children's love as reported by participants. They are (1) respecting each other, (2) sanctifying family relationships, (3) receiving support, (4) harmonizing differences, (5) honoring parents, and (6) connecting and bonding.

#### ***Respecting Each Other***

In line with previous themes highlighting the parental perspective on love and respect, in this theme, children's perspectives on love are reported. Child participants in the study also appeared to view love as mutual respect. This short vignette of a Jewish mother, father, and child exemplifies this:

Esther: I mean mutual respect is what we have.

Israel: We're also very wise and loving parents. [kidding]

Zach: Having some sort of respect for your parents is something that is not generally a common trait in this society, but . . . it's impossible to be [religiously] observant and not have respect for your parents. It's one of the cardinal [aspects].

Similarly, Chelsea, an Evangelical Christian daughter, said,

[God's] giving us guidelines for, the best possible family. It's for everybody to be the happiest for it to be working as the best functioning way . . . respecting each other and loving each other.

Finally, Miriam, a Jewish daughter, reflected on what it meant to love when trying to follow scriptural instruction:

It says you should love your neighbors as you should love yourself. Wait, I can't say it right. But, I also think of what I would do if I was in their shoes? You shouldn't just be mean to them, but how would you like it if people are mean to you? And so I try not to be mean to people. I do sometimes, but I try not to be, and I try to think about if I were them.

As explored in this theme, for some children love meant treating others with respect.

Next, we turn to a theme to present a motivation for children's love.

### ***Sanctifying Family Relationships***

Related with the previous theme, most children viewed family relationships as sacred and divine. As a result, some children also considered love in families as a fulfillment of God's purposes. For example, when asked about God's purpose for families, Levi, an Orthodox Jewish son said:

I guess the best answer for that is, it's probably the natural entity that . . . G-d intended to have humans be loved and be raised in as natural entity as possible, so I think that [family], that's one of His purposes.

Similarly, Natalie, a Lutheran daughter, said, "Marriage and family is the very basic unit of society . . . The security, and being able to come home and have that constant relationship, I definitely think is part of God's purpose."

Sara, a Jewish daughter, in thinking about her own future choices of a spouse regarding marriage, said,

My parents met when they were very young, and they've used that argument with me in terms of like, you never know who you're going to fall in love with and who you're going to want to marry. Which I think is legitimate. But like I feel that I'm secure enough in knowing that like being Jewish is important to me, that I don't think that I could commit to spend the rest of my life with somebody who was just as devoted to raising their children [in] a different faith. Because I, not so much that our faiths couldn't merge as much as like, if they're that set in it, . . . I think we're going to realize early on that we're not compatible.

In this theme, as described by children, marriage and family life were seen as fulfilling God's purposes and intentions. This reportedly motivated some to seek for common religious beliefs and worldviews in marital formation. Next, we turn to a theme to present an experience related with children's love.

***Receiving Support***

For children, love was reportedly experienced through receiving support from parents and siblings. As most child participants had deeply religious parents who were trying to adhere to religious teachings about parenting, children were likely to experience support given by parents through practices such as prayer and time together.

Heidi, a Christian daughter, said that she experienced love through support from her parents:

Well, when I have problems with friends, or a situation at school that has been bothering me, or is bothering me then, I know that I can go talk to my mom, or my dad, but usually I talk to my mom about it, and that she will try to help me in some way, and will comfort me and usually tell me to read scriptures or pray. So, I'm just pretty close to my mom, and my dad.

Similar to the above experience, Chelsea, an Evangelical Christian daughter, shared how she experienced family support:

The family is not a maintenance unit, it's something to ensure the most optimal outcome to achieve the greatest happiness and the greatest support system, and the key part is that God wants us to be happy. And so, having your family enables you to do that. Someone who's experienced to be able to help you out. Someone who's going to love you, who's going to support you, make you feel secure in who you are.

Nadira, a Muslim daughter, mentioned, "I think that families provide the support that's necessary. Sometimes it gets tough and you need people around you who, believe in the same thing to help you get through things."

This theme presented receiving support as a reported experience of children's love. Next, we turn to a theme to present a process related with children's love.

### *Harmonizing Differences*

Love was a process that helped parent-child and sibling relationships to harmonize differences and resolve conflict. Leah, a Jewish daughter, expressed how her parents would apologize regularly during Shabbas:

On Shabbas, you apologize to your children. You ask for their forgiveness, for if you, you know, God forbid, yelled at them any time during the week, so that they thought that you didn't love them. And I think my parents have said that to me several times. And I think that's a specific thing, in terms of trying to understand or something and we also have a concept of *Shalom bayit*, which is "peace in the house," that I think it fits.

Similarly, when asked about parent-child conflict, Ezra, a Jewish son, said, "I think if I wasn't Jewish, then I would argue with my parents more than I do now. And just be more resistant to following their commands, more than I am now."

These processes were also reported in sibling relationships. For example, Alicia, a Latter-day Saint daughter mentioned,

It makes it seem like, if we fight here, we fight and get over it in an hour. Most people don't stay mad at each other for weeks and weeks. I mean, I think knowing that we are going to be together forever, that we've been sealed as a family, that we are bound forever. We have that bond. It's like fighting here seems trivial when you think about it. Who cares? When someone has a problem, you're more willing to help them because

you're going to spend eternity with that person and you're going to love them whether or not you like it sometimes.

This theme presented a reported process of children's desires to harmonize differences during parent-child or sibling related conflict. Next, we turn to a theme to present a reported influence of religion on children's love.

### *Honoring Parents*

Religion seemed to influence and encourage children to respect their parents and love their siblings. Particularly, religious teachings such as "honoring one's parents," respect and obedience, were important principles that were taught to children. To illustrate, Zach, a Jewish son, shared how the teaching of honoring parents had an influence on the way he approached parent-child conversations which also helped avoid conflict.

Zach: Well, it says in the Bible that we have to honor our parents . . . [and] respect is derived from it. So when my father asks me to do things, if I think it's completely unrealistic, which sometimes it actually is, then I know I can't, I can't get too mad at them, because there's some things you don't say . . . I mean we're not going to walk out on our parents or run away from home or do anything violent. But there's also, there's some lines we can't cross. And, yeah, religion taught us that.

Although obedience and respect may appear to be authoritarian, children perceived this religious teaching in a relational context. Jill, a Baptist daughter, shared,

The Bible says children obey your parents, but I don't feel like I have to . . . I guess God has really given me a love and respect for my parents. So, it's less like following like what He commands in the Bible, even though I would. . . . Sometimes if it's a little

difficult you can recall that (laughter). I think what God has given me is just like a desire to, just by the way of relationship with my parents, to obey what He has commanded. So, it doesn't feel so much like I'm obeying all the rules, it actually feels like the right thing to do. And I want to do it.

This theme demonstrated how religious teachings appeared to influence children's perspective of honoring parents. In the next theme, a relational outcome of love is presented as reported by children.

### ***Connecting and Bonding***

More broadly, children expressed that religion influenced how they treat each other, and as a result they experienced more cohesion and closeness with their parents. Patrick, a Jewish son said,

Even after half an hour, we'd be back playing basketball or soccer or something. So, we'd be able to get through it without having to sit down and talk about it for like hours, and we just kind of realize, we forgive each other. And with my parents, same kind of thing. We'll just be able to forgive each other a lot sooner.

Jane, a Christian daughter, shared,

Well, we love each other a lot and we care a lot about taking care of each other and thinking of each other before we think of ourselves, and we all have the same goal to follow God's will. So we're all [heading] in the same direction.

Similarly, Jenny, a Lutheran daughter, shared,

Because living with a person definitely makes you be closer to them, and definitely love them a lot more. I think that's really true. By living with somebody, you really get a lot closer than you would just if you lived in different houses

Zach, a Jewish son, shared,

I don't know if it, if it directly has, or indirectly just based on the family, maturing as a family and growing up as a close family, because the closer the family that grows up, just the more respect they have for each other.

These quotes illustrate that love in sibling and parent-child relationships appeared to be related with outcomes such as togetherness, unity, and bonding.

This theme concludes the section on children's love. In the next section, thematic findings of divine love are presented.

### **Divine Love**

The following six themes respectively illustrate a related meaning, motivation, experience, process, influence, and outcome of divine love as reported by participants. They are (1) perceiving a benevolent God (2) seeking divine favor, (3) adhering to religious practices, (4) patterning God's love, (5) prioritizing family relationships, and (6) being prosocial.

#### ***Perceiving a Benevolent God***

Most participants mentioned that they believed in the idea of a benevolent God, and this view of a benevolent God was informed by or appeared to relate with how they viewed their family relationships. Aubrey, a Seventh Day Adventist daughter, remarked,

Your family's love for you is basically unconditional. No matter what you do, they're pretty much going to love you. You have to do something pretty bad for your family to

stop loving you. And God's love is one step higher than that. No matter what you do, God's always going to love you.

Some participants viewed God's love through how they loved. For example, an Asian Christian father said,

You have to be responsible, caring, and show love. We get angry sometimes over things you don't like. It's kind of like how God relates to love. God shows His love, and sometimes we did something wrong God shows His anger, but God is still responsible. He doesn't keep you out of the family just because you did something wrong. He shows you love.

However, others viewed divine love differently. For instance, Saul, a Jewish father, said,

In Judaism . . . it's a component kept to yourself, but there is not a sense that we externalize our thoughts about God to anyone else, whether it's my wife. And it's not because we're told not to. It's that we're not, it's not a cultural phenomenon to . . . I can't remember that my rabbi ever said, "My love of God." It's not externalized.

In this theme, many participants viewed God as loving and benevolent, while some differed in how they viewed God. In the next theme, a reported motivation for divine love is presented.

### ***Seeking Divine Favor***

Although some religious observances appeared to be rigid, participants shared that their love for God was motivated by a desire to follow religious teachings. Some participants mentioned that they performed religious practices out of love, and others wished to "please God" and desired to live in accordance to "God's will" which was also reportedly done out of love.

Mahdi, a Muslim husband mentioned,

Before we decide anything, before we set any goals, we have to base our cost to make God satisfied with us, to make God love us or help us. To achieve that, you have to give up a lot of things. So, we're going to base the way we achieve our goals, by filtering it, any idea, with does God allow that or not? Is it *Hallal*? Something that's loved by God? Running after money or working to get a lot of money or things is not love for Allah, unless you want to spend it the right way. Supporting your family is lawful way.

Relatedly, Jason, a Baptist Christian husband, said,

All things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose . . . Do I love God? Well, I say that I do. Well, if I do, then I've got to see that there is some good in this stress. So I try to find the good in it, and also try to find "Okay, God what are you trying to tell me in this?"

Finally, Bao, an Asian American father, observed,

Good relationship with God is to please God. What God wants us to do? God wants our marriage to be stable, a family should be [a] testimony for God, and this is what we can do to please God.

In this theme, a motivation related with divine love was presented. In the next theme, a reported experience of divine love is presented.

### ***Adhering to Religious Practices***

Participants expressed that divine love, including love for God and love from God, were experienced in through religious practices. These practices involved prayer, worship, and other

religious observances. Some participants mentioned that although some religious observances were inconvenient, when they were done out of love, it reduced their perception of obstacles.

Boaz, a Jewish husband said,

If you really have your faith, keeping kosher is not an issue for you, it's just something that you do . . . If you truly believe God loves you and you truly love God then the things He asks you to do seem pretty small.

Randall and Beth, an African American couple mentioned that they experience God's love through participating in worship:

Randall: I just feel like, "Whew, this is what it's all about," just to spend time with Him, worship Him, and letting God love us and to let Him know how much I know He loves me, you know, that praise and worship, every, all my cares, all my anxieties..

Beth: Yeah, anxieties just fall off, fall away.

Randall: I feel like there's power when we come together, when we worship. I feel that there's a lot of power when we're praising and worshipping God. He's just showering down His love and His blessing.

Some participants also adhered to other religious instructions. For example, Lindsay an Orthodox Christian daughter, said,

Scripture[says], first of all . . . women should be modest. And because we're made in the image of God, we're not supposed to . . . dress immodestly. And out of respect for yourself and for your own body. And out of respect and love for God.

In this theme, participants expressed that they experienced divine love through observing religious practices and devotionals. In the next theme, a relational process related with divine love is presented.

### ***Patterning God's Love***

Divine love was an important process between parents and children. Children were aware of parents' patterning of religious role models including deity and scriptural examples. For instance, Aubrey, a Seventh-day Adventist daughter, said, "You're supposed to learn about God's love for you through your families love for you. And I guess that's kind of your parents' job to show you how God loves you by the way that they love you."

In the following dialogue, a Latter-day Saint mother and daughter expressed their feelings about process of patterning of God's love in their relationship:

Heidi: As you have such intense love, such amazing attachment and love to your children, you start to see the love your Heavenly Father has for you. It just starts to connect. You can, [feel] the unconditional love. No matter what these kids ever do . . . we will just love them beyond belief. And so you can see how [God] can have that love for you.

Hailey: And similar with me is, when I see how much my parents love me and care about me, then I can just, I can't even imagine how much [God] loves me, because it's probably like three times more than how much they love me; and it's just a great feeling to know that [God] loves me so much, and [that] they do.

Grace, a Non-denominational Christian mother, said:

They need to be able to look up to him and see the God in his life . . . [so] that they'll want to pattern their lives after him. I think it's important for fathers and mothers . . . that the respect and the love and the friendship need to come first.

Diana, Evangelical mother said, "I really feel like God has set out a pattern of how we should live, things that we should follow . . . "love is very patient and kind, never jealous or envious."

In this theme, participants indicated that religion encouraged possibilities to pattern God's love in their family relationships, thereby influencing family processes. In the next theme, a reported influence of religion on divine love is presented.

### ***Prioritizing Family Relationships***

As religion was central to their lives, religious teachings reportedly influenced participants to prioritize family relationships. Furthermore, for many, following religious beliefs and teachings were a shared family pursuit.

To illustrate, an Asian Christian couple, mentioned,

Bik: The whole Bible is talking about love and righteousness. God is love.

Jiang: The main principle of law is love.

Bik: We should show God's love in our family.

Jiang: I am the opposite of [my wife]. I didn't have enough love, mercy and patience. But now I am the reverse. In the last two years, I am different from before, I am improved a lot about my patience, thank God.

Bik: We both keep balance.

Similarly, prioritizing family relationships influenced how parents viewed child expectations. For instance, Paul, an Evangelical Christian, shared,

I think though that we see that as a reflection of an Infinite Being, not as necessarily all of our own personal likes and dislikes, but as a reflection of God and that spiritual qualities like love and caring and patience and those sort of things are a high priority to us as opposed to I don't care how you get straight A's, just get them."

Finally, an Asian Christian father contrasted divine love and "worldly love." He said, "for me, love is the foundation for most relationships. That doesn't sound . . . concrete, but if you don't have the love of God, then family life would be different when you have only worldly love."

In this theme, religion encouraged participants to prioritize family relationships. In the next theme, a reported outcome of divine love is presented.

### ***Being Prosocial***

Participants mentioned that the idea of a loving God, and the experience of feeling loved by God, encouraged them as a result to express love to their family and to others. Amy, a Baptist mother said,

I think, especially early in our marriage, 1 Corinthians 13, talking about what love is, what God's love is, really had an effect on us when we behaved ourselves with one another. Sometimes, probably when we didn't feel like it, we behaved in a way that was loving even though our emotions may not have been loving at the time.

Javier, a Latino father, mentioned,

I have learned that if I love God, I have to love my neighbor, or the person that I am living with. So if I say that I love God, I have to love the others. It's very important to learn what God wants for me and so that way I can pass it to my family. That's how God helps me to have a vision for my family, for my own life, and for the others.

Aurelia, a Latina Catholic wife, said:

Through God, faith in God . . . you learn how to love people, even people who don't love you, even people who hate you. You learn to love them, and learn to understand people with more love, rather than just saying, "That's a bad guy." You can understand and love people.

As illustrated by these quotations, divine love reportedly influenced how participants treated others. Related with previous themes, these findings on divine love suggested that participants perceived a benevolent God which reportedly encouraged them to be prosocial and treat others kindly.

This theme concludes the findings related with divine love, and this section concludes the findings of the study. As minimal commentary was offered in this findings section, a more expanded commentary and connections of these findings with previous research is discussed in the following section.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore love in religious families. Through a systematic approach, a qualitative exploration was conducted with data from 198 Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families. The research questions that guided the study were (a) What does love mean for families? (b) Why do individuals and couples in families love? (c) How is love experienced in

the family system? (d) What are the related processes of love? (e) How does religion influence love in religious families? and (f) What are the reported outcomes of love for individuals and families?

Data was analyzed using a three-phase analytic process. The first phase investigated the feasibility of a qualitative study by examining the nature of available qualitative data, and whether there was sufficient data to conduct a deeper level investigation. Results from the first phase of the study did provide evidence for enough data to investigate love in these religious families and indicated that love was an important element in family relationships. Moreover, three themes emerged from this phase of the analysis: (a) defining love, (b) developing love, and (c) expressing love.

However, these findings were generic and did not fully take relational context into account during the analysis. Hence, the second phase of the study looked at examining love in the context of different relational domains; namely, marital, parental, child, and divine. Using a content analysis approach, text queries were conducted to extract references to the word *love* and similar words. Then, through a team-based approach, references were coded according to various domains and categories. With these codes, a codebook was developed. The findings from the second phase indicated how love was defined, influenced, and experienced in various relational contexts.

In the final phase, I used matrix coding to organize the codes by intersecting domains and categories. Then, I conducted another stage of coding using the intersecting codes by domains. Findings from this phase were then organized under (a) domains, (b) themes, (c) categories, and

(d) associated codes as presented in Table 5. In this section, I briefly discuss the findings to answer the research questions of this study.

### **What Does Love Mean?**

Participants appeared to have unique and varying meanings and definitions of love that were grounded in their own experiences. As a result, love meant different things for different people (Lasswell & Lasswell, 1976). For instance, participants defined love as an expression of service, a divine attribute, and a defining characteristic of religious adherence. This finding is consistent with the prototype theory of love which suggests that love is subjectively defined (Fehr, 1988).

For couples, marital love meant love as a commitment and a conscious choice. It was clear that study participants had conceptualizations of love that closely resembled companionate love (Bersheid, 2010) and mature love (Noller, 1996). Some participants contrasted various conceptions of love and also referred to what love is not such as infatuation, euphoria, or uncontrollable experience. Participants did not talk much about romantic or passionate love. This may be due to the nature of questions. For parents, love meant something that consumed their whole self, and thereby seemed unselfish. Some parents viewed their love towards their children as imperfect and limited when compared with divine love. Finally, children viewed love as mutual respect for their parents, in addition to being obedient and honoring them. For many participants with some exceptions, God was seen as a loving parent with concern for their overall well-being.

**Why Love?**

Consistent with relational spirituality theory, religious individuals viewed their relationships as sacred and divinely sanctioned (Mahoney, 2013). In connection with this theory, findings from this study indicated that religious individuals viewed their relationship with each other as sacred. This view was predominant across participants and across Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religions. Based on religious teachings and beliefs, participants reported that religion required and reinforced the need to treat their family members with respect and love.

Motivations for love informed various marital stages. First, many couples mentioned that they were motivated to marry someone of their own faith. In some cases, this appeared to be a prerequisite for establishing a marital relationship, which has been found in previous research (Ellison et al., 2011). Moreover, participants mentioned they were able to experience a mutually fulfilling relationship based on shared religious values. For parents, motivations for love included a desire to follow religious tenets, particularly divine examples of parenting. As most participants viewed God as a loving parent, they were motivated to reflect that sentiment with their children. Parents also wanted to pass on their religion in a less imposing way and therefore practicing and setting religious expectations for their children were informed by love. This finding reflects research that showed how parents balanced their desire for religious continuity while respecting children's choices (Barrow et al., 2020).

With regards to divine love, some participants wished to "please God" and live according to "God's will." This motivation to feel God's love and gain God's approval was intrinsically related to personal and family decisions. Finally, religion often reportedly provided sacred purpose for marriage and parenting. Some viewed the purpose of religious involvement in

relationships was to express and experience divine love. This, in turn, appeared to motivate highly religious individuals to seek to develop divine qualities and follow religious teachings.

### **How is Love Experienced?**

Participants expressed that love was experienced as a continuous and enduring aspect of their family life. This may be explained by the deep commitment to religion that was, for many participants life-long and multi-generational, and for nearly all, deep and meaningful. Such an emphasis on commitment was reflected by sacred marital vows, religious beliefs and doctrines regarding marriage, may have provided substance for love as commitment. These findings resemble the idea of commitment love (Kelley, 1983). In examining conceptualizations of love and commitment, Fehr (1988) found that love and commitment were neither independent nor synonymous concepts, but intersected with shared features such as responsibility, devotion, respect, long-lasting, and supportiveness.

For parents, religion provided an established context for a consistent reinforcement and a sense of security for marital and parental love. For children, this security was experienced as love. By being available to meet children's needs, parents provided and expressed love akin to secure attachment (Bowlby, 1988). Parents experienced their love as a mutual and shared experience. Divine experiences of love were related with feeling God's love and approval. These have been found to have important clinical implications as found by previous studies finding a connection between loving and feeling loved by God on perceptions of health (Levin, 2001).

### **How Does Love Work?**

As the scope of the study was limited, findings from this study do not provide a conclusive and comprehensive process view of how love works. There were, however,

interesting processes that appeared to be a part of how love worked in the family system. Based on thematic findings, processes of love included (a) developing and growing in love, (b) harmonizing differences, and (c) modelling divine love. Religion facilitated processes to develop love. These processes included modeling from religious narratives, fulfilling divine expectations, and overcoming hindrances that counter love. Apart from being religiously motivated, love had a practical place in family interactions manifest through verbal, emotional, and behavioral expressions. Furthermore, love was a positive family process that facilitated warmth, kindness, and compassion. Familial love and divine love were continuous in a way that endured through challenges. These findings are consistent with Bahr and Bahr's (2009) model of family love that posited love as other-oriented, involving sacrifice, and enduring; and similar to Noller's (1996) conceptualization of mature love.

Particularly, religion reportedly helped in conflict resolution processes. Based on commitment to marital vows and long-term visions regarding married life, religious couples tried to endure difficult times and embrace good times through maintenance and expression of love. Moreover, religious couples relied on receiving help from God through prayer and individual and joint religious practices in order to reduce their distress and renew their love commitments. Finally, religion provided ways to resolve conflict in a peaceful manner that involved relational softening.

### **What Influences Love?**

Religious beliefs and religious practices reportedly influenced what love meant and how it was experienced. For couples, of particular importance was loving each other as God loves them. This religious tenet applied almost universally across all three religions in the study.

Moreover, to be religious appeared to be synonymous with commitments to and efforts at being kind and loving. For parents, religious beliefs in a benevolent God and religious experiences of feeling God's love further influenced how they saw their own parenthood. Children were also reportedly influenced by religious teachings in the same manner as their parents. Particularly, honoring their parents was seen as an important value. Apart from influencing their relationship with their parents, some children mentioned that religious teachings on love influenced how they treated their siblings. These findings support the positive uniting influence of religion in families when practiced in helpful ways (Kelley et al., 2019).

### **Where Does Love Lead?**

For couples, regular acts of respect, kindness, and compassion were both expressed and received. Many couples perceived that their spouse loved them and narrated examples of difficult times when they received comfort and support. Participant expressions of consistent love suggested that support was given and received over a regular period of time. As most of the participants were married for more than twenty years, with some who were married for more than fifty years, this form of constant compassionate love appeared to indicate higher levels of marital satisfaction. Previous research among older couples, found that compassionate love was a mechanism that linked perception of sacred qualities of marriage and marital satisfaction (Sabey et al., 2014).

Parents hoped to set examples for their children by modeling love in their marital relationship, thereby creating a loving environment in the home. Children reportedly felt safe to communicate their challenges and receive comfort during challenges, and thereby experienced positive personal and relational outcomes. Consistent with these findings, previous research has

found that marital love mediated the relationship between parenting and adolescent outcomes (Baril et al., 2007). Together, findings from this study and previous research indicate that there may be important crossover implications for children and parents as a result of love in marital and parental subsystems.

When religious beliefs and teachings influenced children for good, it appeared to extend to sibling relationship quality. Previous research has found that sibling relationship quality was negatively related with delinquency, particularly for older siblings (Buist, 2010). Moreover, positive sibling relationship quality has been related with prosocial behavior (Pike et al., 2005). In this regard, as a positive resource, religious values with a focus on brotherly and sisterly love among siblings may help religious parents encourage better individual and relational outcomes for their children, as well as less anti-social behavior.

Finally, the implications of viewing God as benevolent on family relationships cannot be overstated. As this study shows, participants were motivated and influenced by their religion to provide care, show concern, and have respect towards their family relationships. This finding supports previous research results which reported that participants were more willing to forgive when they were reminded of a benevolent God, when, on the other hand, beliefs of an authoritarian God actually increased aggression and decreased forgiveness (Johnson et al., 2013).

## **Implications of the Study**

### ***Implications for Therapy***

Love was an important element of their family relationship for most participants. For couples, love in the marital system was a visible and experiential indicator of relational functioning. Particularly for religious couples, love held special meaning as it was sanctified by

religious beliefs and teachings. Religious practices provided unique opportunities to express love in indirect ways to each other. Furthermore, cultural ideas of love were overshadowed by religious ideals of love, creating a space for various meanings and motivations for love.

Therapists can explore the beliefs, meanings, and motivations regarding the idea and ideals of love as understood by the couple as a unit and by each person individually. Understanding and exploring the ideas of love can provide a necessary step towards a harmonious, conceptual paradigm. For example, in a relational context where love is seen as important, when one person believes in love as uncontrollable, blind, and abstract, while the other considers love as commitment and without euphoria, they may experience love differently within the relationship. As a result, interventions that seek to promote love in the marital system may fall short without establishing cognitive and emotional consonance and mutual understanding of love in the couple system. Therapists may adopt a developmental framework for couples who desire to sustain and develop love in their relationship.

When working with parent-child and sibling systems, therapists can evaluate and assess whether meanings and expectations regarding love are congruent or incongruent, enabling or disabling. Such exercises can help clients examine systemic challenges that they may work to overcome, which may hopefully lead to satisfying and functional family relationships. With regard to working with religious clients, therapists may help clients identify their conceptualization of deity. When appropriate and with client's consent, therapists may suggest changing harmful concepts of God by respectfully using own client's own religious resources to assist in that change towards a more benevolent representation of deity.

***Implications for Educators***

In contexts where religion and spirituality are important for clients, practitioners can help clients understand the intersection of religious and relational systems using assessments such as spiritual ecomaps (Hodge, 2000). These assessments can help clients navigate the underlying systemic framework in their relationships, and then situate how religiously-motivated, relational love can be channeled for positive outcomes. Practitioners may also emphasize the importance of warmth, compassion, respect, and kindness as embodiments of love, when clients experience love as abstract. Developing clients' views of love and where possible, bringing couples and families towards a mutual, harmonious understanding of love, can help with creating a well-functioning, relational environment. Outside of religion and spirituality, as cultural ideas about love are pervasive in popular culture and broader public systems, family practitioners (including family life and relationship educators) have extensive opportunities to provide services that directly address cultural conceptualization of love. As love be a developmental process, children and adolescents may benefit from relationship education that focuses on understanding the developmental nature of commitment, companionate, and compassionate love, rather than just a focus on romantic or passionate love.

***Implications for Research, Theory, and Measurement***

Aspects of love can be systematically and empirically investigated through qualitative and quantitative approaches. Qualitative research provides needed exploration into contexts and experiences that can be used for developing theoretical propositions and generating questions for empirical testing through quantitative research. This study points out the need to examine love based on relational contexts including the nature and direction of relationships (parent, child,

sibling), while also acknowledging cultural and religious contexts that influence ideas and experiences surrounding of love. Theoretical advances are therefore needed to develop explanations and paradigms to situate, organize, and examine love. While some theories such as attachment and interdependence provide structural frameworks, there is a lack of experiential and process-level theories to explain love in family systems. Finally, this study points out the benefits of a multi-informant participant report on how love is experienced. In like manner, dyadic and triadic approaches to data collection and analysis using constructs that examine each of the categories can provide a systemic constellation of variables for further investigation.

### **Limitations**

The study employed a sample of highly religious, marriage-based exemplar families obtained from third-party referrals. As a result, the data that were collected reflected strength-based family processes that included strong family functioning and relationship stability. Although participants were from various economic and educational backgrounds, findings from this study are not meant to be generalizable. Additionally, as the scope of the study was limited to examining broader and overarching phenomena of love across religions, I did not examine potential differences among religions and denominations. Moreover, the lack of a non-religious group of participants further limited comparative inferences.

Methodologically, the study was limited by how the data was collected and thereby restricted which data were analyzed. As no questions were asked directly about love, there were no direct responses to specific questions regarding love. On one hand, this may be seen as a methodological strength because no leading questions were used by the interviewers. Answers with reference to love were most likely grounded in participant's perception and worldview. On

the other hand, this approach severely restricted thorough, in-depth, phenomenological investigation with the possibility of follow-up questions and participant descriptions. Addressing this issue would be an important future direction.

### **Conclusion**

Considering the broad cultural implications for understanding the developmental and experiential aspect of love in everyday life in the context of family relationships, the field of family science offers rich prospects for a systemic examination of family processes. Learning the developmental and relational aspects associated with meanings, motivations, experiences, processes, influences, and outcomes of love can help people to enjoy fulfilling and meaningful relationships. Studying love will also help understand processes and experiences of love that can help explain not only culturally popular phenomenon such as “falling in love,” but also, and more importantly developmental patterns that influence “growing in love,” “remaining in love,” or counterfactors that influence “falling out of love.” Together, a better understanding of love at home can help couples, parents, children, and siblings to experience meaningful and flourishing relationships in the family circle.

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Table 1.

*Number and Percentage of Families by Ethnicity among Major Religious Groups*

Religious-Ethnic Community	Number of Families	Percent of Families
<b>Black Christian</b>	26	13
African American	26	13
<b>Catholic &amp; Orthodox Christian</b>	21	10
African American	1	1
Hispanic	7	4
Native American	3	2
Caucasian	10	5
<b>Evangelical Christian</b>	48	24
African American	1	1
Asian American	24	12
Hispanic	1	1
Native American	6	3
Caucasian	16	8
<b>Jewish</b>	30	15
Caucasian	30	15
<b>Latter-day Saint Christian</b>	28	14
African American	2	1
Hispanic	3	2
Pacific Islander	1	1
Caucasian	22	11
<b>Mainline Christian</b>	20	10
Asian Christian	1	1
Native American	1	1
Caucasian	18	9
<b>Muslim</b>	25	13
African American	2	1
East Asian	6	3
Middle Eastern	17	9
<b>Total</b>	198	100

*Note:* These religious-ethnic communities include over 20 Christian, three Jewish, and two Muslim denominations.

Table 2.

*Outline of Phases, Stages, and Steps of the Coding Process.*

<b>Phases</b>	<b>First Phase</b>	<b>Second Phase</b>	<b>Third Phase</b>
Name	Pilot Study	Codebook Development	In-Depth Qualitative Study
Purpose	To examine if there is sufficient data. If so, what are some preliminary findings	To create a codebook and group kinds of love in various categories	To systematically code data to arrive at thematic findings
Coders	2 undergraduate coders	4 undergraduate coders	myself
Timeline	Conducted Winter 2018	Conducted Fall 2018	Conducted Fall 2019/ Winter 2020
Stage 1.	<i>Broad coding</i> A text search of “lov*” was conducted. A total of 2010 references to the word love was found in 181 interviews (90% of all interviews). Then, 60 words were coded around the references through auto-coding.	<i>Broad coding</i> Passages coded in the first phase were used and were divided among coders in Nvivo	<i>Matrix coding</i> Identify overlapping codes and examine patterns of interaction between codes and categories.
Stage 2.	<i>Open coding</i> Codes included: learned love, defining love, teaching love, developing love, expressing love, etc.	<i>Open coding</i> Coding frame was expanded to identify more attributes and properties. Major domains were identified.	<i>Open coding</i> Each relational domain and category was examined in-depth to answer the research questions.
Stage 3.	<i>Axial coding</i> Three categories were created: developing love, giving love, love as action.	<i>Axial coding</i> Major domains and categories were created. Examples include: Familial love, parental love, children’s love, divine love etc.	<i>Axial coding</i> Organize categories and sub-categories based on similarity and context.
Stage 4.	<i>Selective coding</i> Categories were converted into thematic findings	<i>Codebook development</i> Codebook was developed and reviewed by team members.	<i>Selective coding.</i> Create integrated but distinct thematic findings

Table 3. *Codebook with Description, Criteria, and Examples*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Beliefs</b>	<b>Children's Love</b>	<b>Influence of Love</b>
<b>Description</b>	Ideals or beliefs about what love is and what it does or should look like.	Love that children feel for their parents or other people in their lives.	Actions or consequences that result from an individual feeling love or loved.
<b>Inclusion criteria</b>	Beliefs about love that are unique or universal, perceptions and theories about love, beliefs about love from personal experience, religious beliefs related to love.	A child's love for other people, God, religion, practices, other children or other things. Love for parents, even when it is from adult children.	Changes that happen in a relationship as a result of love's influence, love for God that influences how an individual interacts with others, feelings of love that inspire action, and love that guides decision-making and lifestyle choices.
<b>Exclusion criteria</b>	Personal or religious beliefs that are not related to love	The love that others have for children.	The experience of feeling love or loved alone without effects included.
<b>Typical exemplars</b>	"[My religion] says you should love your neighbor as you should love yourself" . . . I believe that my faith made me love my wife a lot more."	"... she came over running after and said, 'Daddy, I love you'." "Now, my daughter, she's starting to wear it [Kay'jad}, because she loves me."	"I have learned that if I love God, I have to love my neighbor." "This is like the worst people in the world, but they love each other, and they work through the hard times""...because he loves the Lord, he'll correct me when I need to be corrected...."
<b>Atypical exemplars</b>	"A good mother has that tender loving care where the man might not have..."	"I would say my parents were my example all my life."	"He works tirelessly. He's at the nursing home; he goes out to the invalids at home, he goes to the hospitals... cakes show up unexpectedly on his doorsteps they love him so."
<b>Close, but no</b>	"... if someone can speak to me and change my life, then I can do it for someone else"	"I want to show that I love my kids. No matter what."	"I don't know why the people always love the irregular. All the people love the irregular."

Table 3. (contd.)

<b>Code</b>	<b>Experience of Love</b>	<b>God's love</b>	<b>Love towards God</b>
<b>Description</b>	The experience of feeling love or loved through experiences or people.	Love that God has for individuals and families.	Love that individuals and families have for their God.
<b>Inclusion criteria</b>	Situations, feelings, people, opportunities, or other experiences that bring the feeling of loving or being loved. Love that is experienced through observation.	Love from Jesus Christ, love from gods of other non-Christian faiths, God's love, gifts of love from God, Love from Heavenly Father, love from Godhead, defining God as love.	Love towards God, commandments to love God, obeying commandments to show love to God, love for Jesus Christ, love for gods of non-Christian faiths, actions to show love for God, giving lives over to God, gratitude towards God, trust or faith towards God, prioritizing God first.
<b>Exclusion criteria</b>	Love without association to the emotion or experience.	Affection towards God without reference to His love or the nature of His love.	Reference to faith gratitude or love when its not referencing God.
<b>Typical exemplars</b>	"She really helped me a lot then. And I love her for that."	"God loves us unconditionally . . . The experience of being loved by God influences their ability to forgive and accept forgiveness and to love."	"I thank God for everything that's going on in my life and my kids' life. He knew two things: love of God, and he knew what he wanted to do in life, where he was going"
<b>Atypical exemplars</b>	"He loved his family hard. He loved his wife hard. But sometimes I thought that he, his love, he let things that hurt him, he didn't show his emotion."	"God is love. Man's love is short, and God's love is eternal." "Allah [will] see you beautiful for what you are doing right now."	"A strong marriage is built on a righteous foundation, your faith in God, and shared values with your mate. Make God above all."
<b>Close, but no</b>	"For me, love is the foundation for most relationships."	"A family would be blessed if the husband and wife came to believe God together, and serve God together at church."	"My religious faith has really increased and enlarged in the last years."

Table 3. (contd.)

<b>Code</b>	<b>Marital Love</b>	<b>Maybe Relevant</b>	<b>Meaning of Love</b>
<b>Description</b>	Love that a married couple has for each other.	A reference to love that is not directly relevant to one of the categories, but it increases understanding about the virtue of love.	The explanation or understanding of what love really means to an individual or family.
<b>Inclusion criteria</b>	A husband and wife's love for each other, closeness in marital relationship, service for spouse, symbols of marital love, physical affection towards spouse, children witnessing their parents love.	When the interviewer talks about love, and it is relevant to what the people being interviewed are talking about. Love for things and people that aren't relational.	The meaning of love. The emotions, symbolic meaning, expectation, understanding, and interpretation of love. Deepness of love defined through other words.
<b>Exclusion criteria</b>	Familial love that isn't explicitly referencing the marital love.	When the interviewer talks about love, but it isn't relevant to the response of people being interviewed.	Feeling the sensation of love without an emotional or interpretational aspect to love.
<b>Typical exemplars</b>	"I mean I love him to pieces, but I want to love him even more..."	When participants talk about love directly	"We still liked and still loved each other. We cried a lot, but then we always forgave each other"
<b>Atypical exemplars</b>	"I want my wife to love me but I also want her to respect me."	"If the mass helps us, then we worry more about the people we live with"	"Something I tell my wife a lot is 'I love you.' I want to let my kids know that if I'm leaving, I'm leaving on a positive note. I want to let them know that I love them.
<b>Close, but no</b>	"working together, and sticking together through hard times in life..."	"I love reading my calculus book."	"I liked to play sports. I loved that sensation.

Table 3. (contd.)

<b>Code</b>	<b>Motivations for Love</b>	<b>Not Relevant</b>	<b>Parental Love</b>
<b>Description</b>	The reasons why individuals and families choose to love.	References to love that do not increase understanding of the virtue of love.	Love that is felt from any parent to their children.
<b>Inclusion criteria</b>	The reasons behind love. Motivation from the following things: loving God, self-worth, being loved, caring for humanity, faith, investment, connection, and other reasons to motivate love.	The interviewer's use of the word love as a figure of speech. References to love that do not increase understanding of the virtue of love.	Parents expression of love for their children currently or from the past, parent's emotion over a new child, talking about a mother's and father's love, the desire for children, comparing parental love to God's love, comparing parental loves, learning how to better love children, love for family where children are implied.
<b>Exclusion criteria</b>	Any talk about love where the motive isn't mentioned.	Non-relational experience of love, even if they talk about love.	Children's love for their parents, God's love without reference to earthly parental love.
<b>Typical exemplars</b>	"I think, the first thing that comes to mind is just looking for ways to express God's love . . . To actually model that." "I'm a Christian, I should be loving, the Word said, loving. You know, so if I'm harsh, I'm not being loving."	(The people being interviewed do not respond with reference to or building on love).	"Family time is important . . . you create an environment of trust and love and support."
<b>Atypical exemplars</b>	"I think God wants us to think about the essence, you know, love, and the fruits of the Spirit. Not on the specific details."	(The people being interviewed do not respond with reference to or building on love).	"In order to order for me to love my kids, I must first love myself."
<b>Close, but no</b>	"We pray for understanding, to be better"	"I love, I played form little league football all the way up through college and I love football."	"God shows his love, and sometimes we did something wrong God shows His anger"

Table 3. (contd.)

<b>Code</b>	<b>Practices</b>	<b>Process of Love</b>	<b>Religious &amp; Relational Love</b>
<b>Description</b>	The traditions, acts, practices, or rituals that individuals do to show love or create love.	The way that love develops over time.	The way that religious texts, practices, or religious influences their experience with love in the context of relationships.
<b>Inclusion criteria</b>	Love towards religious practices or worship, religious practices that create love, prayer to show or give love, love for activities, practices like forgiveness that foster love.	Increased love, the way love changes over time, development of love, increased understanding of love, the way that marriage deepens expectations of love	God’s influences on behavior in relationships, doctrine or culture impact on relationships, religious practices that affect relationships, looking to God for an example of how to interact with others
<b>Exclusion criteria</b>	The traditions, acts, practices, or rituals that individuals do not associate with or refer to love. Beliefs that do not refer to practices.	Love that is stagnant rather than developed or changed over time.	Love for or from God that doesn't affect the love of another relationship. Relational love that isn't influenced by God or religion.
<b>Typical exemplars</b>	"So we don't put the TV in our house . . . you leave everything in this world, to make God love you. This is contract between them."	I loved him, but it was very different than what I had envisioned I would be raising.	We are trying to do according to the Bible's teaching, for example, how to love her husband as a wife and how to love his wife as a husband.
<b>Atypical exemplars</b>	"I think that's important, my religion or my relationship with friends who love the Lord as well."	"All things work together for good to those who love God." . . . “And sure enough, that year is probably the most beneficial of years that we've ever had, spiritually and for our family.”	"I find I like the security aspect of family. I like my children to know they're going to come home to a mom and a dad . . .we can get through anything with."
<b>Close, but no</b>	“I want them to always be mine, but we love them for who they are, not a false pride.”	"I always loved the word of God so reading the word has never been an issue for me.	“Completely loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God of the universe”

Table 4.

*Numeric Content Analysis of Matrix Coding of Domains by Categories*

	Marital Love	Parental Love	Children's Love	Divine Love
Meaning	39	17	31	35
Motivation	35	13	29	16
Experience	52	30	55	39
Process	47	23	30	22
Influence	75	43	73	61
Outcome	33	25	29	35

Table 5.

*Summary of Findings with Domains, Themes, Categories, and Associated Codes*

Domain	Themes	Categories	Associated Codes
Marital	Committing to lasting marriage	Meaning	choice, commitment, definition
	Sacralizing marital vows	Motivations	vows, decision, sacrament, covenant
	Enduring together with love	Experiences	constant, consistent, deep
	Developing and growing in love	Processes	changing, strengthening, learning
	Observing religious teachings	Influences	equality, commandments, loving as God
	Looking after each other	Outcomes	selfless, coping, sharing
Parental	Giving oneself to children	Meaning	attention, respect, caring
	Modeling God's love	Motivations	example, aspects of God
	Bonding and uniting	Experiences	bonding, unity, togetherness
	Expressing love by spending time	Processes	time, support
	Fulfilling divine responsibilities	Influences	scripture, purpose
	Respecting children	Outcomes	realizing child's worth
Child	Respecting each other	Meaning	respect, consideration
	Sanctifying family relationships	Motivations	purpose, function, marriage
	Receiving support	Experiences	support, care, security
	Harmonizing differences	Processes	conflict, forgiveness,
	Honoring parents	Influences	scripture, obedience, friendship
	Connecting and bonding	Outcomes	togetherness, unity, bonding
Divine	Perceiving a benevolent God	Meaning	merciful, helping, kind
	Seeking divine favor	Motivations	teachings, commandments
	Adhering to religious practices	Experiences	devotion, worship
	Patterning God's love	Processes	loving as God, modeling
	Prioritizing family relationships	Influences	teachings, sanctifying
	Being prosocial	Outcomes	respect, selfless, consideration

## 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?
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. To children: When you talk about religion as a family, how does the conversation go?