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Familial Relationships Among Muslim Couples and Parents in the United States: A Qualitative Study

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FAMILIAL RELATIONSHIPS AMONG MUSLIM COUPLES AND PARENTS
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knowledge and the significance of contributing to society. Lastly, there are no words to thank my husband, Dr. Hashim Alghafly, enough. Before I married him17 years ago, I was still doubting whether I should pursue my education after high school in order to earn a Bachelor's degree. However, since he entered my life and occupied the biggest part of it, gaining knowledge and pursuing my education moved to the top of my priority list. Thank you for the support, for bearing the burden of my frustration and stress, for celebrating each milestone, for believing in me, and for being the person I have walked through this journey with, so that this dream could come true.

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ABSTRACT

Since September 11, 2001, Islam has been the center of many debates, discussions, parodies, and publications. Many Muslims feel that their religion has been portrayed unfairly in Western media. The topics that seem to generate the most criticism relate to gender roles and the treatment of women, both inside the home and in society. The purpose of this project is to employ a qualitative, in-depth interview approach to examine the perceived role of Islam on marital and familial relationships from insiders' perspectives and to present participants' reflections on sensitive issues, including gender roles, women's rights, the concept of Hijab, religious practices, and marital unity.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Religion, for some individuals, is a source of inspiration, meaning, and hope, while for others it is a major source of controversy and disagreement. In both cases, however, religion is influential; thus, in order to understand human culture, history, politics, economics, art, and literature, one should not avoid the consideration of religion and religious influence (Burr, Marks, & Day, 2012). Religion is an essential factor in understanding Middle Eastern politics: the genocide in Sudan, Egypt, and Libya; the poverty in Africa; or the event and aftermath of 9/11 in America.

Religious rituals and beliefs are also powerful forces that have shaped many individuals' lives and (in many cases) govern their relationships. Aspects of religion can form identity across generations. Historically, religion is found in almost all human societies. Even the earliest discovered societies indicate traces of religious symbols and ceremonies. Throughout history, religion has shaped humans' interaction with their environment and with each other and, for many, it has continued to be a central part of people's personal and familial lives and experiences. Leonard (1968) described the religious persons of Africa by stating:

> They are, in the strict and natural sense of the word, a truly and a deeply religious people…They eat religiously, drink religious, bathe religious, dress religiously, and sin religiously. In a few words, the religion of these natives, as I have endeavored to point out, is their existence, and their existence is their religion (p. 409).

Social scientists, therefore, study religion both as: (1) a belief system that shapes how people think and how they see the world, and (2) as a social institution that has helped to create patterns of social action organized around sacred beliefs and practices (Kingsley, 1949). Phrased

differently, people have used religion as a tool that assists them in developing answers to questions about the meaning of existence. However, across time, religion has also developed organized structures within which members can socialize. These differing expressions of belief, practice, and organized community are all of importance and are worthy of consideration.

Social and behavioral scientists several decades ago, however, tended to criticize religion in their conceptual writings (Marks, 2006). Karl Marx saw religion as ''the opium of the people'' that is used to promote oppression and stratification due to its support of a hierarchy of people on earth and the submission of humankind to divine authority (Marx & Engels, 1964; Stark & Bainbridge, 1987). Ellis (1985) referred to religion as a form of mental illness. Freud likewise defined religion as the universal psychosis and as immature thinking (Freud, 1927).

From the prospective of family science, however, studying religion is not merely about examining what people believe; rather it extends into and involves the effort and ability to carefully examine the impact religion has on family relationships. Over the past decade or so, the topic of family and religion has increased markedly as an area of interest. Empirical research on religion and family, in particular, has seen a substantial increase, and correlations between many variables of family and religion are now well established (Burr, Marks, & Day, 2012; Christiano, 2000; Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Mahoney, 2010; Marks, 2006). According to Houseknecht and Pankhurst (2000), in a time where many societies are experiencing economic and political changes, family and religion are major sources for stability and order. The connection between religion and family, however, is a complex one. Over the past 15 years, the connections between family and both *healthy* and *unhealthy* aspects of religion are receiving more comprehensive attention than ever before (Christiano, 2000; Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001;

Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2008; Marks, 2005; Marks, Dollahite, & Freeman, 2011).

Researchers, however, have recognized that research on religion and family life remains in an infancy in many ways (Burr et al., 2012; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Research on the "substantial minority" of Americans for whom religion is the most significant factor of their lives is quite limited (Marks & Dollahite, 2011; Miller & Thoresen, 2003). In addition, research that focuses on the personal, familial, and internal processes involved in the lives of highly religious families was nearly nonexistent as recently as ten years ago, and remains fairly scarce today (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman 2004; Marks, 2004).

Even following the increased attention given to religion and family over the past decade, the pronounced majority of studies in this field were carried out on Christian samples, with a few Jewish samples. A dearth of empirical research on Muslim families, however, remains— especially research addressing Muslim families in North America (Abdel-Khalek & Eid, 2011).

Importance and Purpose of the Study

More research on Muslim families in the United States is important for at least two reasons. First, research revealing insider perspectives can promote a more accurate and balanced understanding of U.S. Muslim families that can override and replace myths and stereotypes that have surrounded this population since the tragic events of 9/11. The media has created a picture of Muslim families that many Muslims disagree with. Thus, this study provides Muslim families an opportunity to add their own understanding, perspectives, and opinions to the available picture that media and other researches have already constructed. This will allow for a more accurate and more genuine understanding of the influence of religion on the life of Muslim

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families. Second, a close-at-hand examination of Muslims who live in the United States can help both insiders and outsiders to better and more clearly see both the challenges and the benefits associated with Muslim beliefs, rituals, and practices in a Western context and within their own homes. Knowing more about Muslim families in the United States will better enable therapists, educators, and religious leaders to be more effective, sensitive, and culturally competent when interacting with this population (Marks, Dollahite, & Dew, 2009). Thus, the current study aims to investigate multiple aspects of the relationship between religion and family life among the Muslim population in the United States.

The primary foci of this study will be the three dimensions of faith: beliefs, practices, and faith community (Dollahite, Marks, & Olson, 2002). More specifically, this qualitative study examines the influence of religion on various aspects of marriage, including commitment, fidelity, conflict, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Furthermore, it examines how religious Muslim couples reportedly involve God (Allah) in their life and how they strive to achieve "sacred purposes" in their marriages (Dollahite & Marks, 2005).

Muslim Populations in the United States

A considerable portion (about 20%) of the earth's population reportedly ascribes to the religion of Islam (Peterson, 2002). Islam has been a major force in human history for nearly one-and-a-half millennia, particularly in the Eastern hemisphere (Peterson, 2002). In recent years, Islam is becoming a mainstream religion in several parts of the Western hemisphere as well (Abdullah, 2007), due to immigration, high birth rates, and conversion (Peterson, 2002). Although it is hard to ascertain precise figures of Muslims in United States, Daniel Peterson has stated that Muslims may soon outnumber Jews in the United States of America (2002).

According to the U.S. Council on American-Islamic Relation (CAIR), there are an estimated 7 million Muslims living in the United States, 64% of which are immigrants ("American Muslim Community," 2012). Another study has reported that Muslim citizens and residents have increased by 66% in the last 10 years (Neal, 2012). Thus, a population as large as U.S. Muslims cannot be ignored or marginalized as people who are "far away" (Peterson, 2002).

It is important to differentiate between the two (often interchangeably) used terms *Arab* and *Muslim*. Bluntly put, they are not equivalent. It is true that most Arabs are Muslims, but not all of them are (Peterson, 2002). In fact, the largest Muslim nation in terms of population, Indonesia, is not an Arabian country. Iran and Afghanistan, which are also not Arab, are overwhelmingly Muslim nations. Further, Islam is considered to be a powerful and sometimes dominant religion in a wide range of places (such as Pakistan, India, Nigeria, and Kenya) that are not Arabian (Peterson, 2002). There are, on the other hand, a great number of Arab people who are non-Muslim. They can be primarily seen in Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, and Yemen. According to a Pew Research Survey (2009), Lebanon, for example, includes a Christian population of 35-40%. Yemen was also predominantly Christian, and then Jewish, before Islam swept south and became dominant there. Again, "Arab" and "Muslim" are terms that often overlap but they are *not* synonymous (Alghafli, Hatch, & Marks, 2015 a).

Despite the various countries of origin and ethnic backgrounds for most actively religious Muslim immigrants, they generally hold similar religious beliefs and worldviews based on the *Quran* and the Prophet Mohammed's traditions. For practicing Muslims, their religiously prescribed daily life is organized around their shared and sacred religious beliefs, values, and rituals (Ghafari & Ciftci, 2010).

For the majority of practicing Muslim people, including Arab and non-Arab adherents, Islam is central in help-seeking behavior (Abdullah, 2007). Often, Islam is their frame of reference as they cope with distress and deal with hardships (Abdullah, 2007). Thus, a better understanding of the culture, traditions, and laws of Islam (*Sharia*) (Alghafli, Hatch, & Marks, 2015 b)—one that is not based on myths and stereotypes but on empirical research-based insight and observation—is necessary for family therapists, educators, counselors, and scholars. In the next section, a brief summary of the history and theology of Islam with specific emphasis on the family is offered.

Islamic Religious and Philosophical Background

The Islamic conceptualization of religion is, in many ways, consistent with Smith's (2007) ideology of religion as a tool that provides individuals with a filter of belief that helps them form meaning. Smith also emphasizes the role of religion in providing people with schema to think, feel, and behave in order to develop significance and purpose. Similarly, Islam as a religion provides individuals and families with prescribed schemas that promote the creation of meaning through relatively structured rituals and narratives that synthesize existence (Smith, 2007).

Many practicing Muslims would likely agree with Wilber's ideology that "those who can't attain basic spiritual and/or religious translation live in a world that does not make sense at the deep levels" (cf. Smith, 2007, p. 13). According to Wilber, living in this senseless world "will ultimately lead to neurosis or psychosis" (cf. Smith, 2007, p. 13).

When talking about Islam as a religion, it is necessary to refer to individual beliefs, rituals, practices, morals, and commitment to the Islamic law (*Shari'a*) on daily level. *Sharia*,

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which refers to "the Islamic legal code that serves as an ethical, practical, and religious guide for practicing Muslims" (Alghafli, Hatch, & Marks, 2015 b) is not limited to social issues such as crime, inheritance, marriage, and divorce; rather, it additionally places clear and specific roles on prayer, fasting, good manners, and nearly every other aspect of human interaction. The two main sources most practicing Muslims agree upon as references for religious laws are the *Quran* and the Prophet Mohammed's traditions (his sayings and actions) (Alghafli, Hatch, & Marks, 2015 a).

The *Quran*, as the prominent source of Islamic law, is held as the most important and most reliable source of lawful and moral guidance for Muslims. For Muslims, the *Quran* is the foundation of Islamic beliefs, roles, and principles. The *Quran* addresses many different subjects that are arranged into 114 chapters or *Sura* (Alghafli, Hatch, & Marks, 2015 a). The *Quran's* main theme is to direct individuals toward the oneness of God that, briefly, means to understand that everything commenced with Allah and that everything is going back to Him. Thus, humans' beliefs, actions, and way of life should be subordinate to God's orders and demands. On a social level, the *Quran* calls for social justice as an ultimate goal for societies and communities to pursue and reach.

A secondary source of guidance for Muslims is the Prophet's traditions. The Prophet Mohammed's role in the *Sharia* is to elaborate and thoroughly explain the *Quran's* words and meanings through his advice, speeches, and actions. Both of the two major branches of Islam, *Sunni* and *Shia*, agree on these two main sources of Islamic guidance. In the next section, brief histories of the two groups of Islam *Shia* and *Sunni* Muslims are discussed.

The Two Major Branches of Islam

Following Muhammad's death in 632 CE, the *Umma* (Muslim nation) split into two major factions: *Shia* Muslims and *Sunni* Muslims. In brief overview, both *Sunni* and *Shia* Muslims share most fundamental Islamic beliefs, practices, and rituals. Both agree on the main Islamic pillars involving the reality and nature of Allah (God) and Mohammad's prophetic calling and mission. Both branches pray five times a day (*Salat*), fast during the daylight hours for one month every year (*Ramadan*), give money to the poor (*zakat*), and follow the same sacred book (*The Quran*). The major issue of controversy between these two sub-groups, however, involves the nature of religious authority. Disagreement arose as to who should rightfully take over the leadership of the Muslim nation after the Prophet Mohammed died. *Sunni* Muslims claimed that the *Umma* was sufficiently educated to choose their new leader after Muhammad's death and agreed that the Muslim leader should be elected by the majority. This is what was done, and Prophet Muhammad's father- in- law, Abu Bakr, became the first Caliph of the (*Sunni*) Islamic nation. By comparison, *Shia* Muslims believe that the Prophet appointed his son-in-law, Ali Bin Abi Taleb, as the most knowledgeable individual after him and assigned Muslims to follow him. For them, the Muslim leader is not only a political leader, but also a *Quran* and *Sharia* interpreter. Thus, the leader has to be the one with the most knowledge about Islamic laws, so the Islamic instructions and interpretation of the *Quran* are appropriately applied in every aspect of Muslims' lives. This group came to be known as *Shi'at Ali*, or the "Party of Ali" (Alghafli et al., 2015 a).

Today, approximately 80%of the world's Muslim population follows *Sunni* Islam and 15 to 20% (between 154 million and 200 million individuals) comprise *Shia* Islam (Pew Fourm,

2009; Alghafli et al., 2015 a). It is to the topic of Islamic teachings about marriage and family life that we turn to next.

Islamic Teaching about Marriage and Family Life

Home plays a vital role in the lives of most Muslim individuals. An individual who was born, brought up, and taught in a family atmosphere will naturally be impacted by it. Home is the place where character, habits, values, and beliefs are ideally and fundamentally developed, from the perspective of Islam. These factors influence and form the individual's future relationships. For this reason, the *Quran* places great emphasis on family life and touches even small aspects of it in elaborate forms. In Islam, as in many other religions, the role models for society tend to be those who both produce, and are produced by, good family order.

Given the collectivist nature of most Muslim communities, elders and family members provide the primary support networks and resources to assist with marriage and family issues (Abdullah, 2007).   However, consulting with a religious leader is one of the most common ways of seeking assistance and asking for advice on social and mental health issues, as well as a source for help in solving marital and family problems (Ali, Liu, & Humedian, 2004; Ali, Milstein, & Marzuk, 2005). It is important to note that the religious leader's advice is often based on their understanding of the teachings of the *Quran* and the Prophetic traditions (as well as the 12 successors for the *Shia* group). Thus, the basis of the religious leader's intervention is a component of Islamic law that provides the legal framework for regulating family and marital life as directed by *Sharia* (Abdullab, 2007). When talking about Islam in relation to family and marital life, it is important to address the roles, rights, and responsibilities of male and female members of the family. In the next section, these issues are briefly addressed.

Islamic perceptions of gender roles and equality between men and women are frequently misunderstood and stereotyped both by Muslims themselves, and by non-Muslims. According to the Islamic *Sharia,* the ideal picture of marital life in Islam is described in a well-known verse in the *Quran*: "And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your hearts" (*Quran* 30:21). This verse is used as a framework for Muslims to judge their marital relationships. Whenever their actions, decisions, behaviors, and even words are governed by love and mercy toward one another, they considered an Islamicly happy couple. To reach that ideal, *Sharia* has defined rights and responsibilities for both men and women in their familial life. These include the requirement for men to be instrumental, meaning that that they provide for the family and meet their needs in terms of shelter, food, education, and income—consistent with a structural functionalist perspective (Ingoldsby, Smith, & Miller, 2004). On the other hand, females fulfill the role of expressiveness. They meet the family members' emotional needs by being nurturing, caring, and stabilizing problems in the household (Inglodsby, Smith, & Miller, 2004). Thus, "for most Muslim women, the question of career versus family is not a choice but an attempt to determine whether any kind of employment will interfere with or somehow even supplant their responsibilities as full time parents" (Browning & Clairmont, 2013, p. 220).

Changes occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries when the Western marketplace expanded into the East and the Western legal values guided the structure of international trade and thereby influenced Muslim countries. These changes brought many challenges to Muslim families in general, but for Muslim immigrant families in the U.S. in particular. Some of these challenges included: raising children according to the Islamic traditions and morals, Islamic mate selection

and marriage, building their own Islamic community, and maintaining prescribed Islamic gender roles (Dhami & Sheikh, 2000). Encountering these challenges, practicing Muslims strive to accommodate themselves and their familial life to the dominant culture while maintaining their Islamic identity. The nature of Islamic law is based on giving its people clear lines which they know not to cross regarding each issue, while at the same time giving them freedom to manipulate different alternatives within the Islamic limits and choose the one that best accommodates their personal and familial needs. This is the milieu in which the Muslim families in the proposed project are situated. Having offered this broad and brief overview and introduction to the topic of the intersection between religion and family life for Muslim families in the United States, we now turn to a closer examination of the relatively limited empirical literature.

CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During the past 30 years, the topic of religion has witnessed a rapid growth and upsurge in academic and scientific interest (Abdel-Khalek & Eid, 2011)—especially during the past decade (Burr et al., 2012; Marks et al., 2011). The existing literature on religion and family indicates that religious beliefs, practices, and communities often seem to support various aspects of marriage and family life, including commitment, fidelity, conflict resolution, forgiveness, and reconciliation (Christiano, 2000; Dollahite et al., 2004; Mahoney, 2010; Marks et al., 2011). Studies have found that religious involvement is generally correlated with physical and mental well-being, happiness, life satisfaction, purpose in life, higher self-esteem, and greater marital stability and marital satisfaction for the majority of people studied (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Marks et al., 2011). Further, a study of African Americans has revealed that among this population one who attends religious services more than once a week lives, on average, 13.7 years longer than one who reportedly never attends religious services (Hummer, Rogers, Nam, & Ellison, 1999).

Conceptualization of Religion

In this paper, religion is defined consistently with Dollahite and colleagues' (2004) three-dimensional conceptualization of religion including: religious beliefs, religious practices, and religious community. **Religious beliefs** refer to personal, internal beliefs, meanings, and perspectives; **religious practices** reference outward, observable expressions of faith such as prayer, scripture study, rituals, traditions, and abstinence from certain practices for religious reasons; **religious communities** include support, involvement, and relationships grounded in a congregation or a less formal religious groups (Dollahite et al., 2004). These three dimensions

are used in this chapter as a framework to organize and synthesize previous research. More specifically, connections between religion (religious beliefs, practices, and community) and marriage and parent-child relationships are discussed. Muslim families in the United States will be discussed where relevant research is available.

Religious Beliefs and Marriage/ Parenting

   Religious beliefs and marriage. A large body of research has shown moderate to strong correlations between religiosity and marital stability, higher levels of marital commitment, and better, more positive marital adjustment (Lu, Marks, & Apavaloiae, 2012). In a meta-analysis of religion and marriage research, Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, and Swank (2001) found that *especially when it is shared*, religiosity has consistently been associated with not only marital stability, but also with marital satisfaction and commitment. In another review, Koenig, McCullough, and Larson (2001) noted that religious beliefs and practices were found to be consistently associated with better health and increased longevity over time.

   However, according to Mahoney and colleagues, the need for more "close" and "proximal" studies is essential because most of the studies that were conducted before 2000 were mainly "distal" or "from a distance." Likewise, most of the available studies have measured religiosity by using only single-item measures. Typically, that one item has been either: (a) attendance at religious services, or (b) self-rated/self-reported religiosity (Mahoney et al., 1999). Thus, depth and breadth has been limited, especially in pre-2000 research. An additional limitation is that the vast majority of studies in this field were carried out on Anglo-Saxon and Judeo-Christian participants/subjects.

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Abdel-Khalek and Eid (2011) have indicated that many quantitative researchers have become interested in the relationship between individual-level religiosity how it correlates with factors such as happiness, general satisfaction with their life, health, and quality of life (Garrison et al., 2005). In the meantime, a few qualitative researchers have started to seek an understanding of the meanings behind the recurring correlations between the two variables of marriage and religion (Goodman, Dollahite, & Marks, 2013; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Mahoney, 2010; Marks & Dollahite, 2011).

In one attempt to understand the relationship between marriage and religiosity among Christian, Jewish, and Muslim populations in the United States, Marks (2005) conducted a qualitative study examining the influence of religion on the marital relationship. He reported that shared religious beliefs impacted marriage through several channels, including anti-divorce beliefs, similar worldviews between married individuals, and additional marital support. Similarly, Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, and George (2007) reported that commitment to most forms of religious belief is associated with a lower incidence of marital infidelity, compared to those who lack religious commitment. In a study by Mahoney et al. (1999) designed to explore the meaning of marriage more closely, researchers found that marital satisfaction and a lower incidence in marital conflicts were associated with couples' perception of their marriage as "sacred," as well as with their engagement in similar religious activities. Recent qualitative literature has also noted that couples' greater reported perception of God's involvement in their marriages is associated with marital satisfaction (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006), as well as with higher marital commitment (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). In other attempts to understand and explore important sources of strength in enduring marriages, two qualitative studies reported that

faith, especially when shared, was one of the most important resources in the strong marriages studied (Mackey & O'Brien, 2005; Robinson & Blanton, 1993).

Nevertheless, scholars have emphasized the importance of considering the couple's mental health, particularly of the male partner, when considering religiosity to be a factor for marital satisfaction and happiness. In a study by Sullivan (2001), it was concluded that religiosity seems to promote marital satisfaction when husbands are in good mental health, but could contribute to relationship problems when husbands are not mentally healthy. Having discussed several connections between the dimension of religious beliefs and marriage, in the next section the relationship between religious beliefs and the parent-child relationship is discussed.

Religious beliefs and parent-child relationship. The three Abrahamic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, have placed great emphasis on parenting in their teachings. A famous saying by the Muslim prophet Mohammed states, "No babe is born but upon *fitra* (instinct). It is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Polytheist" (Ibn Alhajjaj, 2009, p. 33). Religion influences the way parents view their roles (Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006) and parents play a vital role in influencing their children's religiosity (Boyatzis, Dollahite, & Marks, 2006). From a transactional perspective, children can influence their parent's religiosity as well (Palkovitz et al., 2002). A recent review study found that both men and women who have children tend to be more religious when compared to those who do not have children (Marks, Dollahite, & Freeman, 2011). Garland (2002) reported, based on her findings from interviews of 110 Christian families, that (again) both parents and children shape the faith of each other. A sizable portion of the parents sampled in the Garland study reported a sense of responsibility in guiding their children toward religion.

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Based on many studies, the level of parents' religiosity tends to be modestly and positively associated with children's health and well-being. Bartkowski and colleagues reported that parental, couple, and familial religious involvement were all linked with more positive behavioral outcomes in children (Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin, 2008). Another study by Dollahite, Layton, Bahr, Walker, and Thatcher (2009) similarly reported that both parent and child religiosity during a child's adolescence seems to promote social, mental, and physical well-being (see also, Laird et al., 2011).

Despite the clear evidence of the mutual influence that religious belief and family have on one another, belief needs to be embodied by practice to become optimally influential (Marks et al., 2011). For example, 95% of married American parents report a religious affiliation (Mahoney et al., 2001) but only half or less attend a religious service as often as once a month (Heaton & Pratt, 1990). Self-reported beliefs and affiliations are of less concern to social scientists than what is *done*. As Burr and colleagues (2012) state, "It is what we *Do* with the sacred that matters most." In the next section, the relationship between family life and religious practice is discussed.

Religious Practices and Marriage/ Parenting

Religious practices and marriage. "Internal beliefs are often expressed through external practices" (Lu et al., 2012, p. 15). Rohelkepartain and colleagues have stressed the importance of being actively engaged in spiritual activities in order to be a healthy spiritual being (Rohelkepartain, Ebstyne, Wagener & Benson, 2005). Spirituality involves more than just belief. Wink and Dillon (2003) have argued that spiritual development demands a deep practical

commitment to religious practice and activities, rather than a mere increase in the person's awareness of spiritual meaning over time.

Studies about religion and marital life have reported a correlation between religious practices and enhancing marital quality, particularly when at least some of those practices are shared (Lu et al., 2012). Mahoney et al. (1999) reported that couples who pray for each other, attend religious services together, and are spiritually connected to one another seem to have better marital quality. Likewise, in a study of 1,439 recently married couples, Atkins and Kessel (2008) found a strong correlation between church attendance and marital fidelity. Shared religious practice also appears to help couples with preventing, resolving, and overcoming marital conflict (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008).

Other studies, conversely, have shown negative outcomes resulting from religiosity among couples. Mahoney, Pendelton, and Ihrke (2006) have highlighted both positive and negative types of religious coping. A positive process is one that is used to facilitate healthy adaptation that enables couples to overcome hardship and become stronger beings, while negative coping is characterized by spiritual struggles that can flow into other areas of life and marriage. Conflicting, unshared, or problematic religious beliefs or practices can result in more problems within the individual's life and his/her relationships (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). Thus, religious practices have been shown to have both helpful and harmful effects (Koenig, 1998). In recent review work, Marks and colleagues (2011) reported that in marriage, when prayer is used positively by the couple, such as when they pray for the betterment of each other, it is more likely to result in desirable outcomes. Conversely, when prayer is used in a negative way (e.g., berating a spouse and/or asking God to fix or change a partner because s/he is a bad person), it tends to harm the relationship (Marks, 2008).

In terms of religious practices, prayer is a "human's way to ask and seek help about and from the sacred" (Burr et al., 2012, p.53). Prayer is a way to communicate and connect to God or the higher power. In Islam, for example, prayer is called *Salah*, which means connection (Marks, 2004). Salah is a formal worship practice that requires physical purity and cleansing. When a Muslim starts any of the five daily prayers, he or she must recite the first *Sura* (chapter) of the *Quran* that emphasizes thanks and praise of God. Next, one typically asks for guidance along the straight path. The *Quran* states, "For Believers are those who, when Allah is mentioned, feel a tremor in their hearts, and when they hear His signs rehearsed, find their faith strengthened, and put (all) their trust in their Lord" (*Quran* 8:2, Oxford World's Classics edition). It is also stated in the *Quran*: "To those whose hearts, when God is mentioned, are filled with fear, who show patient perseverance over their afflictions, keep up regular prayer, and spend (in charity) out of what we have bestowed upon them"… "[they will] have benefits" (*Quran* 22:35,33, Oxford World's Classics edition). Thus, the objective of performing *Salah* with its prescribed conditions is to keep Muslim believers turned away from committing social wrongs and turned towards and engaged in moral and charitable action.

For many religious people, prayer is a valuable resource in their life generally, and in their family and marital life specifically. Many people view prayer as a source that provides them with information that they cannot get from anywhere or anyone else (Burr et al., 2012). Prayer, for some, opens doors of possibilities and provides them with solutions that help facilitate harmony in their life. Sharing these sacred experiences with other family members is likely to inspire and increase bonds and love between them (Burr et al., 2012).

A qualitative study examining devout Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families has revealed that prayer is a central practice of all three groups that reportedly promotes a sense of

familial closeness among the family members and with God (Dollahite & Marks, 2009).

Similarly, quantitative work by Butler, Stout, and Gardner (2002) conducted with religiously

devoted couples found that prayer "enhanced experiences of emotional validation; promoted

accountability toward deity; de-escalated negative interaction, contempt, hostility, and emotional

reactivity; enhanced relationship behavior; facilitated partner empathy; increased self-change

focus; encouraged reconciliation and problem-solving; and promoted a sense of guidance from

God" (p.10). Research, both quantitative and qualitative, that examines the connection between

prayer and marital life has increased greatly over the past fifteen years, but much is still deficient

in this relatively new domain of inquiry (Marks et al., 2011).

In summary, religious practices (especially prayer) tend to offer substantial support to the

marital relationship when used in a positive way, but can do harm when negatively employed in

ways that divide rather than unite a couple. In healthy prayer, individuals and couples typically

seek and ask for personal help and support, placing them in a position of dependence, openness,

and cooperativeness. They thereby move away from arrogance, power, and control represented

by prayer which asks for a change solely in another person (Burr et al., 2012). However, prayer

seems to influence not only marriage but also parenting.

Religious practices and parent-child relationship. In 2009, the Pew Forum on

Religion and Public Life Survey polled 35,000 Americans and found that a considerable portion

of American parents reportedly engage in a variety of religious activities with their children.

More than 63% of them said that they pray or read scripture with their children at home; nearly

60% said that they send their children to religious programs for educational purposes (Pew

Forum, 2009). The same survey showed that Mormons, for example, stand out as particularly

likely to pursue religious activities along with their children—a finding confirmed in other research as well (Dean, 2010; Smith & Denton, 2005).

A large portion of presently available findings indicates a strong two-way relationship between healthy family relationships and religious practices (Marks et al., 2011). Religious practice does not have to be something as particular as praying, fasting, or attending weekly worship services. It can be as simple as consistent friendly conversation about sacred things between parents and children (Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008). One study based on surveys and diaries found that consistent discussion between Christian mothers and their children regarding matters of faith–as a simple practice–has a beneficial influence on children, even several years later (Boyatzis & Janicki, 2003). However, based on their review of related research, Marks, Dollahite, and Freeman (2011) emphasized that in order for the parent-child religious discussion to create positive emotions, the conversations should be *child*-centered because parent-centered conversation is likely to create negative emotions in both participants. The same review reported that both parents and adolescents agreed that "when religious conversation was focused on the adolescents' needs and interests, the adolescents were [more] engaged and interested in discussing religion" (Marks et al., 2011, p.22).

In addition, religious practice is likely to facilitate a better relationship between the child and both of his/her parents. Studies in the past primarily focused on the father; however, more recent studies focus on mothers as well (Marks et al., 2011). On a related note, Pearce and Axinn (1998) mentioned religious practice, as a dimension of family religious life that promotes a sense of positive mother-child relationship for both the mothers and their children. Likewise, an in-depth qualitative study indicated that some religious practices, including prayer, strengthened the father-child bond for several of the fathers in the sample (Dollahite, Marks, &

Olson, 1998).Warm and positive parent-child relationships seem to facilitate more positive views of religious faith by the children. Children who live with a loving, caring, and kind parent (and optimally, *parents*) seem to perceive God as loving, while an aggressive parenting style seems to promote a negative perception of God in children (Dollahite et al., 1998).

A related series of findings from studies on religion and youth have shown that youth and children who are involved in religious practices are typically better off when compared to non-devoted youth (Laird, Marks, & Marrero, 2011). In their national study on religion and youth, Smith and Denton (2005) concluded that adolescents who are highly religious (or "Devoted") reported having higher levels of closeness, honesty, acceptance, and understanding with their parents. Similarly, Regnerus and Elder (2003) revealed that when youth attend religious services and practice religious rituals, they are usually exposed to values that can increase their school performance.

In addition, religion seems to provide parents and children with ways to deal with each other. The *Quran* emphasizes the way children should treat their parents. It places kindness and obedience to one's parent immediately after the obedience to God in importance. The *Quran* states, "And your Lord has commanded that you shall not serve any but Him and [to offer] goodness to your parents. If either or both of them reach old age with you, say not to them, so much as 'Uph' nor chide them, and speak to them a generous word" (*Quran* 17: 23-24, Oxford World's Classics edition). In a similar vein, the Bible also places heavy emphasis on the way children should show respect and honor toward parents. The Bible mentions respect for parents in more than 40 verses. For example, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Ephesians 6:1, KJV). Similarly, the first commandment with an associated promise is "Honor

thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (Exodus 20:12, KJV).

Religions also may teach coping strategies that people can use to facilitate either a positive home environment or a negative one. Mahoney et al. (2006) discussed three religion-based coping constructs: theistic mediation, positive conjoint (coping), and theistic triangulation. While the first two (theistic mediation and positive conjoint coping) are expected to result in fewer arguments, better communication skills, higher overall quality of parent-child relationships, and positive adolescent outcomes, the third type (theistic triangulation) is expected to result in more relationship conflict and distance between the parties. The essence of this negative coping strategy is that one spouse enters into a "relationship" or dialogue with God in which that spouse pits himself or herself against the other spouse. Again, we must continue to bear in mind both the positive and negative potential of religious practices in family life—depending on the motives underlying the practices and how the "sacred" is lived out (Burr et al., 2012). We now turn from the dimension of religious practices to the dimension of religious communities.

Religious Community and Marriage/ Parenting

Religious community and marriage. The late 1960s and 1970s were a time of social change in America. Some consequences of those changes included the commitment to social justice, the feminist movement, and emphasizing the notion of personal fulfillment over devotion to traditional morals (Amato, 2004). This period of time was marked by the involvement of religious institutions' support and accommodation of these changes in some cases, and resistance to these changes in other cases (Browning & Clairmont, 2013)

As mentioned previously, the dimension of religious community refers to "support, involvement, and relationships grounded in a congregation or less formal religious group" (Dollahite et al., 2004, p.413). The positive association between religious involvement and aspects of marital relationships, such as commitment and fidelity, was referenced earlier. Here, it is important to note that many studies have shown that being an inactive or non-attending believer does *not* correlate with the same marital outcomes as active religious involvement (Marks et al., 2011). Studying 1,439 married participants, Atkins and Kessel (2008) reported fidelity to be significantly related to church attendance, but not to self-reported prayer, faith, nearness to God, and other religious attributes. Furthermore, individuals who scored high in religious importance and low in church attendance were the *most* likely to report having marital affairs (Atkins & Kessel, 2008). A related but larger study examining fidelity that involved approximately 3,000 couples emphasized that in order for religious community involvement to promote marital commitment and fidelity, couples should already be satisfied with their relationship (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). Two additional studies that have addressed pornography and domestic violence reported lower rates of pornography use (Stack, Wasserman, & Kern, 2004) and lower rates of domestic violence for men and women who attend religious services regularly (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999).

In addition, based on large-scale qualitative research, Marks and colleagues have emphasized the importance of being "equally yoked" when associating community religious attendance with the quality of marital relationships (Marks, 2005). They stated that differences in religious attendance and religious activities between couples are likely to produce more conflicts, and that can often result in marital strain and failure (Marks et al., 2011). Consistent with these same findings, a quantitative study involving 2,945 married couples found that when

couples attend religious services *togethe*r, they are likely to have fewer arguments over faith, housework, money, how time is spent, and over their sexual relationship (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). In contrast, when they are religiously different, the risk of violence and discord increased (Curtis & Ellison, 2002).

In summary, religious attendance and involvement can be a strong predictor of marital stability and satisfaction when this involvement is shared, when levels of religiosity between husband and wife are comparable, and (ideally) when a stable marriage has already been established. Conversely, high levels of religious difference between couples correlate with increased instability and conflict. We now shift from the relationship between religious community and marriage to the relationship between religious community and the parent-child relationship.

Religious community and parent-child relationship. Studies indicate that the relationship between parents' involvement in religious community and their role as parent can be reciprocally beneficial. Interestingly, from the outset, women who are engaged and involved in a religious community are more likely to have children (and more of them) than women who are not religiously involved (Marks et al., 2011). Similarly, those who are voluntarily childless are more likely to have a lower level of faith community involvement (Pearce, 2002). Also, children who have parents who are involved in and committed to a religious community tend to have closer relationships with their parents, as well as better social, behavioral, and emotional well-being on a personal level (Crawford, Wright, & Masten, 2006). Studying the influence of faith community involvement on the parent-child relationship, Marks, Dollahite, and Freeman (2011) concluded, based on the strength of recent research, that religious involvement seems to provide one of the strongest available social forces to promote and strengthen father-child relationships.

In another study, Dollahite (1998) offered a reason behind this support by stating that "religion is not merely a social force acting on fathers from the outside, but…a set of personal beliefs, practices, values, commitments, and relationships that help fathers from within" (p.11).

Research addressing mothers has noted that the more frequently mothers attend religious services, the more their adolescents attend (Laird et al., 2011). The same study concluded that "religiosity may be more effective at promoting [and maintaining] good self-control than at elevating poor self-control" (p. 83). The findings of the same study also provided evidence that religious importance may be a stronger predictive factor for several positive outcomes during adolescence than religious attendance, although this pattern does not hold in adulthood—perhaps because many adolescents who do not value or hold religion as important are forced to attend (Laird et al., 2011).

Scholars have also emphasized the importance of religion and faith in building a moral community (Rohelkepartain, Ebstyne, Wagener, & Benson, 2006). Erikson embraced this ideology by stating, "Religion is the institutional confirmation of hope and can serve throughout the life span as a source of hope," stressing that "religion not only provides a transcendent worldview, moral beliefs, and behavioral norms, but religious traditions also embody these ideological norms in a community of believers" (cf. Roehlkepartain et al., 2006, p.7). Scholars have further argued that the serious damage caused to children who are exposed to a cruel type of adversity or violence is due, not only to the stressors of the specific events, but also due to a lack of support and protection ordinarily gained from the primarily positive involvement of family, friends, neighbors, school involvement, and ties to one's religious community when these support systems are severely damaged (Crawford, Wright, & Masten, 2006).

It is essential to note that although the faith community can be rewarding for both parent and child, the costs are often substantial. Marks (2004) has outlined several of these challenges and costs that result from being a religiously involved member in a faith community, which include prejudice from outsiders, money spent, time and effort expended, frequent scheduling conflicts between religious activities and other life responsibilities, and constant conflict between cultural and religious roles (Marks, Dollahite, & Dew, 2009; Marks, Dollahite, & Baumgartner, 2010).

In conclusion, religious community can be a valuable resource for families –a resource that helps them find success and avoid failures (Burr et al., 2012). However, individuals, couples, and families need to be wise, careful, and intentional, so that balance between sacred activities and other aspects of life is achieved, and so that harm to familial relationships is avoided (Dollahite et al., 2002).

Recent Social Science Research on Muslims

A majority of the research studies on religion and family have been based on Anglo-Saxon and Judeo-Christian participants/subjects (Dollahite et al., 2004). Very little social science research is available on Islam or Islamic families, with the exception of recent emerging work by Abdel-Khalek (e.g., Abdel-Khalek et al., 2011). The few studies that have been conducted on Muslim samples have found that Muslim people who are religiously active tend to be moderately happier, healthier, and less depressed than those who are not religiously active and involved (Koenig, 1998).

Abdel-Khalek, a professor at Kuwait University, has commenced an a research program to understand the relationship between religiosity and subjective well-being, happiness, self-

esteem, quality of life, and life satisfaction among Muslim populations. More specifically, Abdel-Khalek has conducted a series of studies using Muslim samples from several different Islamic countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, and Algeria.

In 2006, Abdel-Khalek tested the association between, and gender differences in, physical health, mental health, and religiosity using a sample of 2,210 male and female Kuwaiti undergraduates. His findings showed a significant positive correlation between happiness and high levels of reported personal religiosity. The study also provided strong evidence that among the sample of study (Kuwaiti Muslim undergraduate students), religiously active people were happier than their less religious counterparts.

In 2007, Abdel-Khalek explored associations between religiosity and happiness, mental health, physical health, anxiety, and depression using a sample of 6,339 Muslim Kuwaiti adolescents whose ages ranged from 15 to 18. As with his previous study (Abdel-Khalek, 2006), all the correlations were significant in both genders; positive relationships were found between religiosity, happiness, mental health, and physical health, and negative relationships were found between religiosity and both anxiety and depression.

In 2011, Abdel-Khalek and Eid investigated the relationships between religiosity and happiness, life satisfaction, mental health, physical health, and depression. The samples for this study were drawn from among Kuwaiti and Palestinian Muslim children and adolescents. Kuwaiti males scored the highest in religiosity, the highest in mental health, and the lowest in depression. Among all four groups, the correlations between religiosity and well-being were positively significant, and negatively significant with depression. Abdel-Khalek (2009)

duplicated the same study on 7,211 Saudi school children and adolescents whose ages ranged from 11 to 18. The results were generally similar to the study conducted in Kuwait. Males obtained significantly higher mean scores on both religiosity and subjective well-being than their female counterparts, whereas females reflected a higher mean score on depression than their male counterparts. The latter study concluded that among the present sample of Saudi Muslim children and adolescents, religiosity is an important element in their lives and that religious persons (men and women) in the sample were happier, healthier, and less depressed than their less religious counterparts.

In a recent study not involving Abdel-Khalek, researchers Indent, Tiliouine, Cummins, and Davern (2009) similarly explored the relationship between Islamic religiosity (religious practice and religious altruism) and satisfaction with a diverse range of life and health domains in a sample of 2,909 Algerian males and females. The result yielded a strong positive relationship between religiosity and subjective well-being and this relationship was not affected by health deficiencies, although this deficiency generally had a negative effect on subjective well-being scores.

In 2010, Abdel-Khalek examined the relationship between religiosity and both subjective well-being and neuroticism. A sample of 487 Muslim Kuwaiti undergraduate students whose ages ranged between 18 and 31 was employed. The data indicated a strong positive correlation between religiosity and subjective well-being, whereas the correlation between religiosity and neuroticism was significantly and negatively correlated. The study also showed that those who considered themselves religious were healthier, obtained higher subjective well-being, and scored lower on neuroticism than their less religious counterparts.

Abdel-Khalek (2010) further observed that the majority of social science and medical studies that have addressed the correlations between religiosity, subjective well-being, and quality of life have sampled Western populations. Thus, he aimed to conduct a study using an understudied Arabic, Muslim sample. Abdel-Khalek recruited a convenience sample of 224 undergraduate students of Kuwait University whose ages ranged from 18 to 28. The study concluded that religiosity, for the studied sample, was a significant element that apparently contributed to their quality of life. Hence, he posited that "Islamic beliefs and practices may have the potential to be integrated in the psychotherapeutic procedures among Muslim clients" (p.1).

In 2012, Abdel-Khalek conducted three studies that extended his work of examining the associations between happiness, health, and religiosity. Two studies drew their samples from the countries of Kuwait, the USA, and Egypt. In the third study, a cross-sectional sample of Kuwaiti Muslims was used. The three studies that were conducted in Kuwait (N= 674), Egypt (N=577), and the USA (N=159) yielded results that were relatively similar to those in his previous studies. Again, he concluded that individuals who are happier, healthier, and experiencing better mental health tend to be more religious than their counterparts.

In an additional cross-sectional study, Abdel-Khalek (2012) recruited three samples; Kuwaiti Muslim adolescents, college students, and middle aged adults (N=1,420). The results were again consistent with the previous studies he conducted. Regarding sex differences, the differences were significant on both physical and mental health, favoring men in general. Also, the subjective well-being of all the three groups was significantly correlated with religiosity.

Here, it is important to mention that in the above studies by Abdel-Khalek and others, a specification of what branch of Muslim people is being studied is lacking. The present paper seeks to be more precise by including and specifying the two major groups of Islam: *Sunni* and *Shia* Muslims.

Summary of Review of Literature

Evidence from roughly 100 previous studies has indicated a generally positive and salutary association between: (a) religious beliefs, practice, and community, and (b) more positive family relationships, including the wife-husband and the parent-child relationships (Koenig et al., 2001; Mahoney, 2010; Marks, 2006). On one hand, if spouses are sharing the same faith and beliefs, practicing their religious rituals together, and are equally involved in their religious community, it is more likely that their relationships will flourish. Conversely, if they are conflicted or unequal in their levels of involvement and/or divided in their religious community commitment, then marital conflict, dissatisfaction, and instability are more likely (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Dollahite et al., 2004).

Previous researchers have indicated several costs and challenges associated with being a highly religious individual and family member. Examples of these challenges include money, time, effort, and prejudice (Marks et al., 2009; Marks et al., 2010). In sum, couples that are united in their religious approach and involvement are more likely to experience family and marital harmony. This is likely true for Muslim families as well, but little directly related research is available.

Abdel-Khalek joins and leads small body of researchers who have conducted empirical studies on the Muslim population. However, most of these studies have primarily focused on

individual religiosity and wellbeing (e.g., Hassouneh-Phillips, 2001, 2003; Manganaro &Alozie, 2011). Further, many of them examined gender-role attitudes among Muslim women (Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Piela, 2010; Read, 2003) or women's roles in society (Read, 2002, 2004). Very few research studies have examined the **relational** aspects of Muslim families and how Islam influences marriages. While the field of religion and family, especially pertaining to Islam, remains open to additional psychological studies and research that approaches families and individuals from a pathogenic approach, the field is hungry for research on family relationships from a salutogenic or strengths-focused approach as well. This paper adds to the nascent field of Muslim family life, as it examines the relational aspects of Muslim couples and the perceived role of Islam on their marriages. As a result, the present study is novel in a number of ways, including: **content** (*Sunni* and *Shia* Muslim families), **race/ethnicity** (a variety of minorities are represented), **unit of analysis** (marital/familial/relational instead of solely individual/psychological), **perspective** (strengths-focused instead of deficit/pathogenic), and **research method** (in-depth qualitative instead of quantitative). In the next chapter, the focus turns to a discussion of the latter issue, research method.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Research about families and religion has been dominated by demographic and quantitative approaches (Marks & Dollahite, 2011). By contrast, the proposed study is an attempt to understand the connection between family and religion using a qualitative method. In qualitative methods, the purpose is not to identify structural or demographic trends in families, but rather "the focus is on the processes by which families create, sustain, and discuss their own **family realities**" (Daly, 1992, p. 4, emphasis added).

Immersion in the field/culture being studied can assist the researcher in making a way into the family life of the participants in order to understand beyond superficial appearances and to uncover meanings behind participants' experiences. Therefore, interview-based qualitative methods (including home-based interviews) used to establish fruitful communication and relationship with the participants to address the research problem in depth. [1]

Sample

Generalizability is an ideal of most quantitative research, but obtaining random and/or representative samples is not a concern in most qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Instead, the primary focus in qualitative research is obtaining data with richness and depth. Thus, the sample in qualitative research is likely to be intentional and purposive instead of random (Gilgun, Daly, & Handel, 1992). Therefore, when conducting qualitative research, researchers usually look for participants who would most likely offer data that is both relevant and rich. In the next section, a detailed description of the study's purposive sample is defined.

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[1] A portion of the current study has been published in the journal *Religions*. The author has contacted the journal for permission to use part of the article in her dissertation, and was informed that *Religions* uses an open access policy where the author is allowed to use his/her publication whenever she wishes without need for permission from the journal.

Criteria for participant selection. The sample of this study includes only religiously involved Muslim husbands and wives[2] who reportedly view their religion as a meaningful aspect of their marital and family relationships. Therefore, the author assumed that they would share stories and narratives that involve meaning making and provide data that reveal connections between their family life and religion.

The author recruited only married couples who have been married for at least seven years and self-reported that they have a happy marriage. Gilgun, Daly, and Handel (1992) claimed that the participation and presentation of both husband and wife during the interviews provide us with multiple perspectives of one reality.

Consistent with Marks's (2002) research about family and religion, this study will define "religiously involved" participants based on the following criteria:

➢ In response to the question, "On a scale of 1-10, '1' being 'unimportant' and '10' being 'very important,' how significant is your religious faith in your personal and family life?" participants rated an '8' or above.

➢ Participants responded affirmatively to the question, "Does your religious faith highly influence other aspects of your life?"

➢ Participants responded affirmatively to the question, "Is your religious faith highly influential throughout the week?"

The approach to collecting the sample and inviting the participants to participate in the study is discussed in detail in the next section.

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[2] All women that were interviewed are practicing *Hijab*.

Invitation to participate. The current study employs both primary and secondary data as a part of the national American Families of Faith Project. The secondary data was collected by Marks and Dollahite (2011) who interviewed 14 *Sunni* Muslim couples (n=28). The primary data was collected by the author (2012) using six *Shia* Muslim couples (n=12) for a combined sample of 20 couples (n=40).

The *Shia* Muslim couples were invited to participate by the author who is herself part of the *Shia* Muslim community in Baton Rouge. On the day of *Eid Alfetar* (an important Islamic event where most Muslim families gather to celebrate communally) the author, with permission from the faith community leader, gave a short speech for the community informing them about her research and asked them to participate if they believed they met the criteria mentioned above. A written summary about the research and its objectives was given to every couple, with an invitation form to fill in and return to the author if they agreed to participate. Within two months, six forms were received.   The author then telephoned the potential participants and screened them based on the three criteria-related questions. Both husbands and wives in participant couples identified themselves as highly involved in their faith, consistent with the aforementioned criteria.

Sample size and characteristics. The total sample consisted of 40 individuals (20 married couples) which is typically a sufficient number to provide or approach theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Participants varied in age, race/ethnicity, and SES (for more specific details, see Appendix E). This diversity was important in terms of sample richness. Likewise, the wide range of ages allows for a subsequent examination of the influence both religion and family have on one another at different stages of life (Elder, 1998; Hareven, 1996).

The combined sample was diverse in terms of: (a) age (early 20s to early 60s), (b) race/ethnicity [including African/African American, Arab/Arab American (from Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine), European American, Indian (India), and Iranian participants], and (c) socioeconomic status (education levels ranged from – completing **some** high school to completing Ph.D./M.D. degrees).

All participants were parents of at least one child between two and eighteen years of age. The number of children in the participants' families ranged from one to six (with a mean of about 3.5 children). The presence of children in these families allows the researcher to examine both marital and parent-child relationships.

Design and Procedures

The foundational approach the author integrated is the emergent and open design of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Unlike many quantitative research studies where the emphasis is on testing theory, the grounded theory approach is an initially atheoretical approach that allows for the emergence of themes and core concepts while analyzing the data and that can be used to build micro theory and conceptual models (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The qualitative long interview. Due to the notion that "the use of a long, qualitative interview offers the power to reach into the life-world of an individual [or family]" (Dienhart, 1998, p. 204), I employ this tool (the long, qualitative interview) to provide deep understanding of the participants' life stories and their meanings. The information obtained through stories and narratives is usually less accessible through surveys, observations, or the reports of other persons (Marks & Dollahite, 2011).

Interview schedule. After obtaining the participants' written consent form (Appendix B) and Demographic Summary (Appendix C), a 90-150 minute semi-structured interview with open-ended questions (about 30 questions) was scheduled (Appendix D). The questions were based on significant elements of faith and family life, including: "(a) Origins, Costs, and Benefits of Religious Involvement, (b) Positive Parental Role Types in Comparison, (c) Religion and Identity Formation and Role Construction, (d) The Influence of Family on Religious Involvement, and (e) Religion as a Meaningful Familial Influence" (Marks, 2002, p. 32).

Interview procedure. Interviews were conducted with each couple with both the husband and wife present. The length of the interview varied from couple to couple with an average time of about two hours. With each question, both husband and wife were given an equal opportunity by the researcher to answer. In some cases, due to the nature of the interview, follow-up questions were used to clarify and understand the ideas, concepts, or events.

A narrative approach is another critical element that was used in this study. The interviewer encouraged the participants to relate real life experiences that would assist in revealing meanings. Participants were asked to recall specific events, situations, and episodes. For example, after a participant talked about the significance of *Ramadan* in bringing family members together, the researcher could ask the follow-up question, "Can you tell me about a specific *Ramadan* that you, as a family, enjoyed together?" and then "What made that experience meaningful to you?" These narratives and requested explanations helped take the participant close to that situation and assist him/her in revealing insights regarding **why** and **how** meaning was created. As opposed to snapshot answers, narratives enable individuals to present and illustrate meanings that are more dynamic (Marks, 2005). Narratives can take the researcher into

the participant's past and sometimes to his/her future, which offers the researcher a more "fluid motion picture of meaning-making" (Marks, 2002, p.33).

The dilemma of conjoint interview. Conjoint interviewing involves interviewing two persons together for the purpose of collecting data about the same event, concept, or idea (Arksey, 1996). Some researchers claim that interviewing couples together may not provide the researcher with the quantitative and qualitative information desire. This is partly due to the concern that one spouse might dominate the setting of the interview while the other is kept silent in part or whole. Second, couples may try to look good in the eye of the researcher (social desirability effect), so the insights they provide are not valid and accurate. Third, conflict between the couple may occur after the interview due to the revelation of unpleasant information, feelings, or attitudes by one of them (Arksey, 1996).

On the other hand, conjoint interviewing can be very beneficial and can provide a project with data that would probably not be obtained by interviewing individuals. Joint interviewing helps to establish connection and an ambiance of confidence (Edgell, 1980) by shedding light on the different kinds of knowledge held by each spouse (Seymour, Dix, & Eardley 1995). Conjoint interviewing can also produce clearer and more complete pictures as interviewees fill in each other's gaps and memory lapses (Seymour, Dix, & Eardley 1995). In addition, joint interviewing offers (to the observant interviewer) insights into the nature of the relationship and connections between couples through observation of non-verbal communication (Arksey, 1996).

Transcription of interviews. All the interviews were digitally recorded then transcribed and saved as Microsoft Word documents by the author or researchers from the American Families of Faith project. Copies of the transcripts were given to the participants as a member

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check. Performing the transcriptions of the interviews enabled the researcher to hear what the participants had to say and convey a second time. Listening to the interviews for a second time and typing every word they said facilitated familiarity with and understanding of the data.

Qualitative Data Analysis

After completing the transcriptions, I analyzed each interview from a standpoint that Marks (2002) describes as a "combination of analytic induction and grounded theory, looking for important themes and concepts" (p. 34). With the analytic induction, I started the analysis, keeping in mind the three dimensions of religion: religious beliefs, religious practices, and religious community (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). These three dimensions are based on an in-depth review of existing literature about faith and family. These dimensions were used as a clear, organized framework for subsequent analyses. For the grounded theory portion of my analyses, I used an "open coding" approach in order to determine the emergent themes that are related to each of the three dimensions.

In order to give each interview the emphasis, focus, and understanding it deserves, as well as to understand each participant as an individual in context, the initial analysis began on an interview-by-interview basis. Then, in order to formulate common themes from the whole sample, data from all the interviews, along with their themes, was compared and contrasted (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These emergent themes provided insight as to what things that most matter to the participants, why they matter, and precisely how that significance is expressed.

A Discussion of Qualitative Rigor

In qualitative research the issue of adequate rigor is often raised and addressed in connection with the standards of **credibility**, **dependability***,* and **confirmability** (Denzin, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this section, a brief discussion of each of these standards is discussed.

Credibility. Credibility refers to the similarities between what the participant tries to convey and how the researcher interprets it. Thus, credibility in qualitative research is concerned with whether the researcher is correctly communicating what the participant is telling her (Gilgun, 1992). Some qualitative researchers have suggested the employment of *persistent observation* as a way to increase credibility in qualitative research (Dienhart, 1998). Marks (2002) argued that **persistent observation** is a standard that can be used in two different ways. First, during the interview the researcher needs to ask questions to ensure that her understanding of the participants' interpretation and comprehension-related messages and constructed meanings are valid. Second, in an effort to increase accuracy in both the written and interpretive product, the researcher should personally transcribe the interviews, so she can listen carefully and attentively to the participants' explicit and implicit messages. Further, in order to increase the credibility of this study, three researchers have read and coded the written interviews, and they have agreed on the three major themes that emerged from the data. When the researcher attentively addresses the issue of credibility, dependability, which is addressed in the next section, should be taken into consideration.

Dependability. Dependability in research refers to the consistency, stability, and accuracy of an instrument over time. For this study, a semi-structured instrument was used as a framework throughout the project to assist the researcher to concentrate on the research problem,

and to guide the researcher and participants back to central issues when follow-up questions were raised or verbal detours were taken.

Confirmability. Confirmability is a concept that is comparable to the standard or ideal of objectivity in quantitative research. Confirmability concerns the ability of the researcher to keep her own perspectives, feelings, and opinions about the problem from unduly tainting the research. Although some qualitative researchers argue against the concept of objectivity and promote researcher "reflexivity" instead, most researchers agree that data reports should be clearly and definitively confirmable to the original source (Farnsworth, 1997; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Riessman, 1993). To fulfill this standard, the original data from all the interviews are available in their original form via digital recording and transcribed hard copy.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the potential of the researcher's biases and predispositions to excessively influence the result of the study when collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data (Daly, 1992b; Dollahite et al., 1998; Farnsworth, 1997). I agree with the practice of revealing biases and experiences that relate to the data being considered, and in the spirit of transparency and authenticity share the following: I am a religiously involved *Shia* Muslim and (like the participants) I am involved in a marriage that has endured for more than seven years. Further, I am also a parent to four children.

With the above noted, in an effort to avoid imposing a potential bias highlighting benefits of religion and family life, questions related to the challenging and difficult aspects of life that a religious Muslim encounters were also included in the instrument, and related data will be

reported in an effort to achieve a more balanced picture of religion and family life, as promoted in recent work (Burr et al., 2012; Garrison et al., 2005; Marks, 2008).

Limitations

The participation of members of my own *Shia* Muslim community has been a great strength to the study. It facilitated my access to these individuals and couples. They carry trust and a feeling of belonging for me as an insider that likely made it easier for them to open up and speak with more confidence due to my cultural and religious understanding. However, being an insider also presented potential weaknesses. There is a tendency to overlook some issues or give less explanation to others due to the "knowing insider" position I have towards the Muslim community. Also, the fact that I am an insider with whom they meet every week may have caused them to emphasize the positive influence of religion on their marriage and parenting, while hiding challenges they were embarrassed to share.

Another issue that may be considered a limitation of this study (and of most qualitative research) is the fact that focus tends to narrow when striving to deepen understanding as much as possible, thus allowing the researcher to overlook or minimize the broader picture (Marks, 2002). As Marks (2002) pointed out, another major limitation of a study like the present one is that it involves only "religiously involved" couples who are married and have children. Additional limitations include the exclusion of children's perspectives regarding their family relationships and their religious involvement, as well as the dependence on one interview with participants rather than several interviews over different periods of time (Marks, 2002). Despite the existence of these limitations, I am confident that with the combination of the specific questions

used and the strengths of the sample, design, and methodology, this study can provide better

understanding of the connection and the influence of both religion and family life on one another

for these diverse Muslim families in the U.S. With this context offered, we now turn to the

emergent themes that comprise the findings.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

Although the topic of religion is not one of the major variables social scientists have studied and paid attention to when studying the development of family life, faith is still for many individuals the most important thing that exists (Marks, 2005; Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Highly religious Christian, Jewish, and Muslim individuals/subjects in Marks (2002) work were willing to encounter all the costs, challenges, and, sometimes, the pain that comes from being religious in a largely non-religious society. Marks attributed their courage and boldness to the fact that, "The costs, the tension, and the pain were often inseparable from the joy and generative meaning of faith" (p. 41). He explained, "The profound duplicities of stigma and self-knowledge, sacrifice and gain, and pain and joy often seemed to meld together" (p. 41).

The participants' reports in the present study, based on qualitative data including stories, narratives, and experiences the participating Muslim couples shared, seem consistent with Marks' findings. Interviewing 20 Muslim couples, three major themes have emerged from the present data, including: (1) gender roles and treatment of women, (2) the importance of *Hijab* as a religious practice, and (3) the significance of religious practices in coping with family crises and in unifying family members.

Before presenting the findings and going through the stories, narratives, and lived experiences the participants of the current study shared, it should be emphasized that the purpose of this study is to explore the unique qualities of devout Muslim families, rather than the intricacies of the Islamic religion itself. Thus, it is critical to keep in mind that what participants shared about Islam and their opinions about certain issues represents their own understanding of the application of Islam in their lives as individuals, which is open to both the interpretation and

disagreement of other practicing Muslims. In the coming section, an in-depth analysis of the three themes is discussed.

Theme 1. Gender Roles and the Treatment of Women

This theme discusses issues primarily relating to women and their roles in the family within Islam. The issue of women in regard to family life was among the most frequently mentioned of topics in the interviews, although none of the interview questions directly addressed this issue. The female participants, in general, were assertive on this matter, and they spoke plainly and passionately about it. Many of them shared their understanding of Islam's teachings about gender equality and gender roles in lengthy reflections. They also commented on many misconceptions about the treatment of Muslim women within both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities. However, as Alghafli, Hatch, and Marks (2014) mentioned, "Gender 'equality' is a difficult topic, because it forces those in dialogue to define their terms" (p. 824). The definition of equality varies among cultures and religions, and (as the present study shows) it also varies among people within the same religious background. Participants of both genders offered their perceptions and understandings of gender equality within the context of Islam.

Maytham[3], a *Shia* Muslim husband, explained, "We are equal, but we have our own responsibilities to fulfill." The word "responsibilities" was used by several participants, especially when talking about the individual roles that husbands and wives play in the family. Janna, an American-born convert to *Sunni* Islam, offered a detailed and illustrative comment about the different "roles, rights, and responsibilities" men and women have in the family life based on her understanding of her faith:

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[3] All names are pseudonyms.

He has **rights** over me and I have **rights** over him, so as he has the **responsibility** to provide for the income, I have the **right** to be provided for. And I think there is a good balance in that… Sexual things are [also] guided in Islam, we have **rights** on each other, **responsibilities** on each other, time spent with each other is also a **responsibility** and a **right**… You have **rights** and **roles** and **responsibilities** that are very much written about in Islamic religion. So, if you adhere to your **rights**, **roles**, and **responsibilities** in a perfect world, you avoid all the conflict. [Women] have prescribed **rights** and **responsibilities** and men have prescribed **responsibilities**. So, if a woman knows her **right**, it's going to alleviate the oppression, the persecution, the things that happen to women commonly in machismo societies. So, don't try to tell me I cannot do this when I know I can [laughter]. Example: I want to go to work. If I am maintaining my household in the ways that I have **responsibility** to do, then I can go to work and when I come back from work I don't have to give 50% of the rent and 50% of the utilities, or buy the food. My money is mine, 100% of it [laughter]. If I want to contribute to the house then I can, but my personality type is that if you tell me that I have to, I get tight, tight, tight [laughter]. If you ask me nicely I'll give you anything, anything, anything. So, if a woman knows her **rights**, then in Islam, you are protected, you really are… American women understand equal **rights** [differently], and I am a member of…the burning bras…generation. I don't want [American] equal **rights**. Equal **rights** means that when the draft comes in, then I'm a part of it, and I don't want to do it, quite personally. In Islam, I have my **rights**, but they are my **rights** as a woman, and they are different than **rights** as a man. But in asserting those **rights** it prevents many bad things from happening to women, [like they do] in so many machismo societies.

Janna's perspective may be considered somewhat exceptional and unique. This is due to the fact that she is a converted American who lives and experiences Muslim life in a non-Muslim society. Janna's unique position gives her the opportunity to compare and contrast her lived experience as a Muslim with that of her non-Muslim past. The way Janna talked about the "roles" and "responsibilities" that Islam afforded her, as a wife, seemed to make her pleased to be a Muslim. Moreover, she criticized American women's understanding of the term "equal rights" between man and woman – during her pronounced focus on "rights." Indeed, she mentioned the term " rights" seventeen times in her above response. Janna also mentioned her rights in a variety of contexts as a Muslim woman, including sexuality, employment, and finances.

One husband also commented on the misconceptions about the oppression of Muslim

women in some Islamic communities, as well as the belief that women are banned/forbidden

from entering the workplace:

> Omar (*Sunni* husband): There is a saying and this goes like: "The Heaven is under the
> feet of the mother." So, try to please your mother if you want to go to Heaven. But, you
> know, in some Arab countries or Muslim countries, we see a lot of [disrespect]. At times,
> [we see disrespect] even in the West. I think there is such a misinterpretation that men are
> superior to the women. I don't know exactly where it comes from, basically from the
> misinterpretation of Islam, of the verses or some of the sayings of Prophet [Muhammad];
> but I think it's completely wrong. One of the most basic misinterpretations that can lead to
> some problems in the marriage is that if man believes it is his right to be superior to the
> women, then it can definitely lead to problems… Some people believe that Muslim
> women should not work, or should not go outside in the society. It's a misinterpretation
> too. For example, the wife of the Prophet was leading an Army, and his previous wife
> was actually a merchant, she was actually a boss of several hundred men. I mean the
> practice at the time was very different. But [throughout] the centuries it got
> misinterpreted, things changed, not always in the correct way.

There is a consistency in perspectives between the two previous comments and the

research of Read (2002) who found that the issue of Muslim women's participation in the

workforce is frequently overstated and stereotyped in the media. He declared that nearly 40% of

Muslim women surveyed were employed full-time. Read posited that it is true that the number of

Muslim women engaging in the labor force is lower than their non-Muslim counterparts but that this

discrepancy between the two populations is likely due primarily to differences in acculturation, not

necessarily to oppression that is caused by the Islamic teachings (Ghazal, 2004). As previously

stated, Browning and Clairmont (2013) have similarly observed that, "for most Muslim women,

the question of career *versus* family is not a choice but an attempt to determine whether any kind

of employment will interfere with, or somehow even supplant, their responsibilities as full time

parents" (p. 220). In other words, it is true that Islam encourages women to put their family life

as their highest priority, raise their children, and maintain a home. However, it does not forbid

them to work outside the home, nor does it forbid them to engage in social activities. Kalthoom, a *Shia* Muslim wife, echoed this notion in her interview:

> My marriage is my first priority. Prayer is very important and fasting is very important…. You have to pray, it is mandatory, and you have to fast; but I think after doing all of that, marriage comes as priority. For woman, marriage and family should come first. Doing social things is very good. Enhancing social life is part of religion, but some people tend to engage in social life so much that they forget about their family. And that is very harmful.

Tamara, a *Sunni* wife, also spoke about the misconception many people have that Islam forbids women to participate in social activities or engage in jobs outside of the home, especially in the presence of non-kindred men:

> Sometimes there is a misconception and misunderstanding [about Muslim women in general or a Muslim woman in particular]. People may think she is oppressed, that she can't do what she wants to do [and that] she can't function as any other woman in society. That is not true. Within boundaries, you can do whatever [you want]. I mean, I go and workout. I know some of the women in our community go to the woman wellness center because it is only women. I go and workout at the YMCA with both men and women and I still cover. I still wear my long sleeves and my scarf, and I do the aerobics…. I am dressed properly. I am not wearing anything revealing. That [idea that we are homebound seems to] be a misconception.

Several participants also stressed that misconceptions people have about women and gender roles in Islam are not only limited to non-Muslim communities, but that such misconceptions are also common among Muslim communities, as well. Burku, a *Sunni* husband, stated:

> Prophet [Mohammed] used to do housework, he used to cook, he used to make his [clothing], but [in] today's Muslim countries and Muslim families, you don't see that at all. Women do almost everything. And they tie this to religion, but religion doesn't say that. The problem is that Muslims today don't read very much, and they don't listen very much. So, when the people who speak give the wrong information, everybody has the wrong information. It used to be that Prophet treated his wife [equal], they used to do sports together, …they ran together, they did horse riding. Today you don't see that very much.

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In order to convey the more complete picture that participants drew in regard to the topic

of gender role and treatment of women inside the family, it is important to talk about the concept

of *Qaymoomah*. This is a concept the *Quran* uses in reference to the husband, which implies that

the husband is the maintainer or the leader of the family. In chapter four, verse 34, the *Quran*

states, "Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to excel others

and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding

the unseen as Allah has guarded." Participants talked about this concept as a critical issue that,

when understood inaccurately, can greatly damage familial relationships. The participants in

general appeared to have little if any disagreement on the issue that the man is the leader of the

house according to the Islamic law, *Sharia*. Nevertheless, most of them mentioned that when the

Muslim husband/father abuses this position and uses it to impose his power and control over his

women, he is committing a serious sin and harming the whole family. Gulam, a *Sunni* Muslim,

and Mohammad, a *Shia* husband, illustrated this notion in the following excerpts:

> Gulam: I think that the issue of the husband leading [the family] is a big danger in Islam.
> The man is supposed to be the head of the family, and he's supposed to provide for the
> family. But if that is taken in the wrong context where he is using his bossy attitude, that
> can hurt the marriage more than it can help it. [In Islam] there is always that fine line.
> This rule in Islam, over the man, means lots of responsibility. But if you just use the
> power, you can abuse the marriage.

> Mohammad: You know when man gets too power hungry and start[s] to say, "You have
> to do this and that," they could make life hell for their wives. If the man is fully
> [financially] supporting his wife, he can stop his wife from going outside and say, "You
> can't leave the house." She has to get his permission to leave the house and I think that
> has a tremendous ability for the abuse to occur.

Some participants believed that this harm is more likely to occur when people use their cultural background and personal desires to interpret the *Quranic* concept of male leadership. Anisa, a 16 year-old daughter[4], stated:

> I think a lot of times culture can misinterpret religion. A lot of times when people hear about Muslim countries, they think you're talking about Islam. So Islam tells you what you should do, and not do, and how to handle a family, so that you have a normal way of life. But a lot of times cultures can intercede. Like if, for instance, the guy is the head of the household. That can be understood that he has the power not to let his wife or his daughters do anything, or get educated. But, that's just culture. That can cause family pressure. I think that happens everywhere, wherever you are. [That's why] Middle-Eastern Muslims are different from Asian Muslims, and they're different from South American Muslims. So it…depend[s] on where you live, your environment, and how you've been brought up.

Participants' acceptance and application of the notion of *Qaymomah,* or the leadership Islam has given the man, seem to vary from one couple to another. Qudseyah, a *Sunni* wife, who is strongly in favor of the concept, stated:

> The man is a protector and provider, so whenever he says that it is not safe for you to go at this time, I would really listen, I would not argue about it because it's his duty, that's his responsibility, and I should listen.

On the other hand, Ali, a *Shia* husband, thought that the man's leadership in the family is very limited and should not be applied to every situation. He stated, "The only place where there is gender issue is in the prayer. In prayer, generally in Islam the man has to lead." By contrast, Ali made it clear that when it comes to decision-making within the marital relationship, "We collaborate and decide. Sometimes I plan, and sometimes she plans; we do not have any particular role in that and it depends on what we focus on more." Ali's wife, Kalthoom, with humorous tone and laughter, commented:

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[4] In a few interviews, adolescent children were also interviewed.

You know, to be honest, I like to say that the husband is the leader but when I think of it honestly, I think a lot of things go my way. [Both laugh loudly]. But I like to say, "You [are] the boss [and] you decide," and then when I look, this worked my way and this worked my way.

Some of the participants emphasized that leadership, as a position given to men by Islamic law, is a responsibility rather than a privilege. They explained that because men are physically stronger, they should protect and provide for the family, and because they are less emotional, in general, they can be better in finalizing serious family decisions. Hassan, a *Shia* husband, illustrated this notion:

[Men] are physically stronger, so that is why men are in charge of protecting their families. But they are not the only one who makes decisions. [Men's leadership in Islam] may mean that the man has the responsibility to bring in the income. So, in fact, if the man is the leader, that means he should not ask his wife to go and work and make money. It is his responsibility to work and provide to his family. The second thing is that because men [in general] are physically stronger than women, they have the responsibility to protect the family. And the third thing is that women usually are more sensitive and emotional. Sometimes, instead of following the reasoning and the logic, they follow the emotions. In these situations, maybe men can help to make a better decision that [is] based on logic.

From the above excerpts, participants made it clear that the issue of gender roles in Islam require Muslims to be critical, sensitive, and careful when applying religious beliefs to their lives, so that the religious guidelines (*Sharia*) serve the family and enhance relationships, rather than causing harm and abuse to family members.

Another commonly criticized Islamic tradition, previously mentioned by Tamara and addressed by several other participants, is the command for Muslim women to wear *Hijab* (*i.e.*, a veil that covers the hair, neck and chest). In theory, this practice also involves modestly covering their entire bodies. The idea of *Hijab* was one of the most emergent notions that appeared in the data of this study. Thus, the next section presents the participants' perceptions of *Hijab* and its role in their marriage and family life.

Theme 2. The Importance of *Hijab*

The notion of *Hijab* was mentioned in all of the 20 interviews with variations in detail

and understanding among participants. Three major points or subthemes emerged during the

interviews regarding the issue of *Hijab*: 1) *Hijab* as a symbol of religious commitment, (2)

Hijab as a tool of protection rather than oppression, and (3) Muslims' understanding of the

reasoning behind *Hijab*.

Subtheme 1. *Hijab* as a Symbol of Religious Commitment

The majority of the participants in this study either explicitly or implicitly mentioned that

how a Muslim woman dresses in public is an indicator of her religious commitment. According

to the Islamic law, *Sharia*, *Hijab* is one of the major precepts a woman has to follow. Some of

the participants interviewed expressed the belief that a Muslim woman who does not wear a

Hijab is not appropriately committed to her religion. Several participants directly addressed this

idea, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

> Maytham (*Shia* husband): I think [my wife's *Hijab*] is a really good sign for me in two
> ways. One way is what indicates the general [religious] belief of my wife. So when
> someone such as my wife is ready to take the burden and take the hard time [to wear the
> *Hijab*] when it is hot in summer, especially here in Baton Rouge, and you need to wear
> extra clothes and be careful about that, this is not something that you naturally want to
> do. In winter you can say, "That is ok, I can wear extra clothes." But when it comes to
> summer and someone is happily obeying what she is seeing [as] part of religion, and part
> of faith, it makes me pleased with her. And she has no complaint about it. Nothing. And
> she does it. It is a good indicator of the depth of faith in someone, which makes me
> happy. This is one thing, which is in general. And [another] particular [benefit] about
> covering up: This is also pleasant for me to see that she is observing the chastity by
> wearing modest clothes and covering herself. So I think if I can put it in this way, one
> part of me which is more related to religious and faith is happy with it and the other part
> of me as a man is also happy with it. So in both aspects I am happy with it. . . As long as
> I am doing the right thing or someone that I care about, I do not care what others think.
> So if I was not like this, maybe I would think twice about dealing with the matter of
> *Hijab* because, as you may have experienced, when you are covering yourself, you are

showing some difference. And this difference becomes more apparent when you are interacting with people with several backgrounds.

Similarly, Moayed, a *Shia* husband, expanded the same notion to thought of *Hijab* as major character man should consider when looking for his life-long partner and the mother of his future children.

> When I was looking to establish a family and to get married, I was looking for a lady who wears *Hijab*, and this is one of the things I was looking for in the woman I propose to . . . It is not that she is committing to me; it is something between her and Allah. It is not committed to me; it has-been ordered that as a woman in Islam she should wear *Hijab*.

Hassan, a *Shia* husband has also mentioned that *Hijab*, for him, was the "number one feature" when selecting his wife. Hassan justified his strong belief in *Hijab* saying, "When a woman has a *Hijab*, the other things would follow, too."

Maryam, Hassan's wife, agreed with her husband on the importance of *Hijab*, and considered it to be one of the top behaviors/customs a Muslim woman should honor in order to show commitment to her religion. However, for Maryam, *Hijab*, in its literal term, "is not everything." She explained that *Hijab* should not be limited to covering the head and the body and that in itself is not enough. She believes that *Hijab* "is not the only thing that can protect [a woman]. I have to have some other characteristics to protect myself, not just the *Hijab*. It includes even the way I talk to men."

As illustrated in the above three quotes, a woman's *Hijab* and the way she dresses in public communicates a great deal about her commitment to her religion, but for some it runs much deeper than clothing and covering. For Hassan, Maryam, Maytham, Moayed and many other participants, *Hijab* is more than a body and head cover. It is rather an indicator of how important Islam is to the lady herself. When the participants of the study were asked about the connection between *Hijab* and family life, the common answer among most of them was that

Hijab is "a protection." This view of *Hijab* as a protective force is exemplified in participants'

words and opinions in the next section.

Subtheme 2. *Hijab* as a Tool of Protection, Rather than Oppression, for Women, Men, and Families

This theme depicts the connection participants have in mind between the concept of

Hijab in Islam and their marital familial relationships. They clearly stated that *Hijab* can

positively influence various family members, including the wife, husband, and their children.

Special emphasis was given to *Hijab* as a tool of protection for people who live in a "permissive"

society like America. The following interview excerpts by Maytham is illustrative:

> Maytham (*Shia* husband): In a permissive society like American society, you need some extra barriers between you and things that happen there. I am not saying that you need to separate yourself from society itself, but [you must stay away] from bad things in society. . . . Having the *Hijab* is helping us – not only her, but also me – to keep away from things we do not like and stick to things we do like.

> Hameidah (*Shia* wife) explained that *Hijab* places a positive social expectation on a

Muslim woman and her family that prevent them from engaging in inappropriate behaviors. She

stated:

> With the *Hijab*, it will be so awkward [to go to bars]. Everyone will start saying, "Oh, my God, look at this woman! She is with this *Hijab* and with this covering, [and] she came to this place!"

> Mokthar, Hameidah's husband, added to what his wife started, saying that:

> Sometimes my friends come and tell me, "Let's go and see the bar in New Orleans." I can't go, it is not a place for us. That protects us, the *Hijab* or our practice. For example, when we went to St. Louis, some places we could not eat. We had to be in certain places to perform our prayer. I mean [*Hijab*] is really helpful for us.

> Other participants stated that the way a woman dresses communicates her intentions to

the other gender. Thus, *Hijab*, which is a sign of modesty, would be more likely to create a

barrier between her and men in society, so that she is more protected. Participants told some of

their life experiences and stories, conveying their perceptions that the *Hijab* has protected them

from being sexually harassed. As a result, *Hijab* for these participants means protection rather

than oppression, as portrayed in the following examples, including this one from Jane, an adult

convert to *Sunni* Islam.

> Jane *(Sunni* wife)*: I cover my head. Why do I cover my head? Because in our religion, I do not want men to flirt with me. Let's face it, if I were standing next to a woman in a bikini, men would lust over her and not over me. I don't want men to lust over me, whether I'm married or not. One of the ways to prevent that is to cover up. . . I don't call this a sacrifice. Think about all the women who spend hours and hours doing their hair, I don't have [to do] that. . .   I used to have to get up at the crack of dawn to style. [Now] I can get up and wash it, dry it, braid it, and go. I don't have that pressure or the pressure of wearing fad clothes. I don't think it's a sacrifice in any way. I think I gained beyond my wildest dreams. . . I feel that in Islam, I have **more** rights than I did before.

> Alya, a convert to *Shia* Islam, reflected how she thinks non-Muslim Americans perceive

her *Hijab* and body covering by stating:

> A lot of [my American, non-Muslim friends] have not really grasped the concept of wearing *Hijab*, like [my] scarf and being modestly dressed. They are like, "Aren't you [feeling] hot? We have never seen your hair, what your hair looks like." I think they think that I have lost my freedom to just show myself off, and to me [it] is not a loss. It is more freedom to know that I do not have to primp and [be shown] off for the rest of the world.

> Like Janna (referenced earlier) and Alya (above), Jane, a *Sunni* converted wife, a

mentioned "rights" and expressed that Islam provides her with more rights than before her

conversion. Similarly, Nadia Malik, a writer for the *Daily News Herald* in Illinois, remarked that

Hijab made her feel liberated and commented, "How can I explain to people who see *Hijab* as a

tool of oppression that [deciding to wear it] was one of the most liberating experiences of my

life?" (Alghafli et al., 2014, p. 38).

Talking about *Hijab* in most of the interviews led to the idea of gender separation. Some

of the participants thought that the concept of *Hijab*, which is a physical cover, and gender

separation, which a social issue, should be completely connected in order to protect family relationships. Many seemed to believe that the purpose behind *Hijab*, which is protection, could not be achieved by separating the two issues.

> Ali *(Shia* husband*):* Something we have grown to agree about [is] that there has to be a gender separation in the sense that she would not communicate with as much across gender and [that] she would [dress] conservatively. That keeps the woman away from a strange man and by covering half of her face or more. What this does is block identity, because if you have many people who dress that [modest] way, the woman is not going to be talked about. So if they dress that way there is a barrier and I think that is what *Hijab* is in Islam.

Several participants expressed the idea that gender separation is a key factor for a healthy marriage, and the lack of it would likely lead to marital infidelity. Alya compared her marriage, which is based on Islamic law (*Sharia*), with her non-Muslim brother and thought that most of her brother's marital problems would likely be prevented by following the Islamic rules, especially the issue of gender separation. Alya stated:

> You know, when I look at my brother's relationship, a lot [of] where their problems come in are things that are solved by our religion. You are not allowed to be with "non-*mahrams*" [any man other than father, brother, husband, son, grandfather, grandson, uncle, and father–in-law] in one room without someone else. There is drinking, and acting in certain ways, you know. When woman are modestly covered, it fixes a lot of problems that affect other marriages, [this is] how it is in Islam. . . . [When you mix too much with the other gender] there is infidelity [in thought], you know, even if you are not cheating [in action]. In our religion, it's cut off, I guess, the opportunity. A man and woman who are not "mahram" or who are not family [are not allowed] to be just chitchatting and just seeing each other [without the woman modestly] covered. So you are supposed to lower your gaze, so you are not staring or making the connection. So I think it kind of corrects that situation because it kind of takes a lot of the opportunities [to form opposite-sex relationships] away.

The majority of the wives in the study explicitly stated that their husbands' opinions and comments about their *Hijab* and the way they dress up in public neither bother them nor make them feel oppressed or controlled. Some of them report feeling protected and cared about when

their husbands support them in their efforts to dress more modestly. The following excerpts

illustrate this notion:

> Horyiah (*Shia* wife): When my husband asks me to dress up modestly, I would feel that he wants to protect me. When sometimes my hair is showing and he tells me it is showing, I appreciate it. I like it. I ask him, "You are a man and you can see me from a man's perspective, so please tell me," and if he does not tell me, I will be sad.

> Entisar (*Shia* wife): *Hijab* is part of our faith. So, if he asks me to wear *Hijab* or to wear more modest clothes, that make me happier because he wants to protect me more, he loves me more. I feel I like that.

Furthermore, Kalthoom, a *Shia* wife, expressed her frustration with her husband who

used to ask her not to cover her face in America. She reported that by convincing him of the

importance of the face covering, she achieved a great deal of satisfaction. Kalthoom shared her

story, saying:

> I actually do not wear the *Niqab* (face cover) [when we are in our car traveling] on the road because the way I see it is that in America, nobody looks inside the car [when you are driving]. It is not like back home (India). That is why if I go back home, I would wear it all the time [when I am outside the house, even in the car]. In America, when we go somewhere in car, I do not wear it. But when my husband is reaching a slow point, I usually wear it. Sometimes, I do not and my husband would say, "Do not you think you should wear it now?" For me, that is such a satisfying moment.

The same notion emerged even with a converted Muslim woman, Alya. When she was

asked, "How would you take your husband's inputs and opinion on your *Hijab*?" she answered:

> When my husband gives his opinion of my *Hijab*, it does make me feel more protected. . . . I think it does make me feel like he cares. But then, on the other hand, because of the culture I grew up in and that I came from, and the way my mother is and everything. The way I learned from her is I am going to dress the way I am going to dress! It is none of your business! But the way in Islam, knowing why and the reason behind the *Hijab*, I can take a step back and tell myself, you know, you've been a little too reactionary. So, but it does make me feel that he loves me more and he is trying to protect me. . . It really does. But, being raised by a feminist-type woman who is like, "Do not tell me what to wear," [I still hear her voice]. But, as the rational woman I would hope I am... I can see that [*Hijab*] has its place in society and in marriage.

Despite the agreement most participants have about the positive influence of *Hijab* on their marriages and relationships, the way they understand *Hijab* and define it seemed to vary from person to person. Two different views about *Hijab* and how it should be understood and applied in Muslims' lives emerged in these twenty interviews. The two views are presented in detail in the next section.

Subtheme 3. The Two Different Views of *Hijab*

Although the data indicate an agreement among participants about *Hijab* as a tool of protection for women, rather than oppression, a unique difference emerged regarding their understanding of it. The majority thought that the reason behind *Hijab* is to protect women from being harassed, "hit on," annoyed, or irritated by men. Therefore, Muslim women with *Hijab* should be involved in society with unlimited interaction with the opposite gender while deriving protection from the *Hijab*. This idea was clearly illustrated by the following three comments:

> Ahamd (*Shia* husband): If a lady has *Hijab*, that does not mean she does not go to school, or she can't go to work. [To think that way] is hurting you. If you have *Hijab*, you have to go and get more education. Now you are protected. You have more duty.

Likewise, Maryam (*Shia* wife) even criticized the behavior of some Muslim men who show disapproval of their wives interaction with non-kin male by saying:

> Some men like their women and their wives not to talk to any man. I do not agree with that. I believe [a Muslim] woman can talk with men and discuss with them and interact with them. A woman can talk to men with confidence to show who she is and [know] who they are. That can help and it is also part of *Hijab*, for me. But I know lots of Muslim men [who] do not believe in that.

Alya (*Shia* wife) sees Muslim women's interactions with non-Muslims of both genders as a way to respectfully project Islam. She explained her notion by saying:

I do go out a lot and I have cultivated friendships. . . people who are in the store or cashiers, just people who you see out regularly, teachers for the kids' school. So I see people and I guess because we are Muslim women, we have to project Islam. There is no way around it. By wearing the *Hijab*, we are the flag bearer for the religion. So the way we act, the way we interact with people [is important], So for my understanding, I can't cut myself off. I have to be out there, I have to be able to talk. People see me interacting with my kids, and I have to be nice to people. I mean not necessarily nice, but I have to cultivate friendships. Like you see somebody you know and you talk to them, "How are your kids? How is your mom? How did your vacation go?"

On the other hand, several participants talked about *Hijab* as a symbol of something deeper than just covering women's hair and bodies. They emphasized modesty and shyness as the real concepts that *Hijab* reflects and that the *Hijab* is not exclusively for women; it is for men as well. Therefore, this second set of participants emphasized a complete gender separation as a major part of *Hijab*. They stressed that under the physical *Hijab* there should be a spiritual shyness that prevents not only women, but also men, from being too open with the opposite gender, unless there is a real necessity. Moreover, when it is essential for a man and a woman to communicate, their interaction should be limited to what is important, without being distracted from the topic superficial appearances. The following quotes demonstrate this group's point of view.

Ali (*Shia* husband): We do not believe in the issue of *Hijab* as [strictly an item of clothing as] a main thing. *Hijab* is a [way of] dress [but] we believe in a more general concept of *Hijab*, which is "*Hayaa*," shyness. We believe that *Hayaa* is precedent over *Hijab* – and *Hayaa* is the principle. *Hijab* is one of the implementations of this principle and we think that the concept of *Hayaa* has been misused. The principle has to be the shyness and the way it is separated commonly is that a lot of people think that *Hayaa* does not exist and they think that the Islamic principle is *Hijab* where you dress in a certain fashion where you cover your hair and then you do whatever you want to do and then you go on and you violate a lot of the principles of modesty and principles of shyness and separation. So we believe in the reverse. We believe that *Hayaa* and shyness is the most prominent thing and *Hijab* is one of the implementations that come under that [more important principle].

Maytham (*Shia* husband) thought that by understanding *Hijab* as merely a piece of clothing that covers the woman's body, we oversimplify the deep meaning behind it. He stated:

One thing that many other brothers and sisters may have talked about is how much you can extend the concept of *Hijab* into other aspects of life. We all know what *Hijab* means. It means covering up your body, basically if you want to simplify that. . . [But] is it only covering your body and then do whatever you want? Or is it something that needs to be extended and become a culture in how you behave and how you talk, how you think, and how you interact with other people in society? The amount of that extension is something that I really like talking to her [my wife] about… When we first met, we had some common project [at school]. And we had a really good time talking to each other and discussing things and working together. But that was quite pure. Like two people working. There were no extra feelings involved and we both have lots of observations of each other being quite careful and quite distant and sticking to the topic. It is not like movies they make [where people are far apart when it starts], then they get friendly, and then they marry. Nothing like that. We were too cautious… although occasionally we had some long meetings but whatever we talked about was what we are supposed to do [in] that environment. Nothing more than that. You know, no joking, no extra talk, no personal talk, nothing about ourselves or about our families…no looking, nothing. So I think if I want to answer your question, I think that God has guided me to the right point and then has made everything work out really fine. The ceremony we had was really good, the life we have is really good. I would say that God has favored us, favored me with this marriage.

Likewise, some participants emphasized the extension of *Hijab* to be a matter of behavior

rather than a way of dressing. Hassan presented this view.

Hassan (*Shia* husband): You know, I do not think that *Hijab* is just covering the head and your body; it is part of it. *Hijab* is a behavior. So, covering is part of it, not all of it. It should come with suitable behavior that matches with *Hijab*. And as she said, makeup is part of that or you can't have a good *Hijab* and go with men and say things and laugh with them . . . That is not *Hijab*. *Hijab* must come with behaviors that match with it . . . To have *Hijab*, women should stay as far as possible from men unless they have something very necessary that causes them to be together.

Kalthoom, a *Shia* wife, similarly has expanded her understanding of *Hijab* to encompass

a complete separation between both genders. She explained:

In my opinion, *Hijab* is not just about clothes. It is a whole institution of separation [between men and women] that was made by the creator of everything. God has set certain standards. According to my religious belief…one of the things is modesty at a level where you have to totally ignore the other gender… That is a sacrifice, especially when you are a teenager.

For these men and women, *Hijab* seems to be a major factor in their marital and familial

life. Despite the difficulties of covering up the whole body, especially in the summer, and

dressing different than the majority of the USA's residents, many Muslim women still view *Hijab* as a functional element, as it promotes protection for their relationships. They seem assertive and deeply persuaded in doing it. For them, *Hijab*, which seems to enhance modesty and shyness, represents their commitment to their faith. It never emerged in any single interview by any participant that *Hijab* is oppressing women or taking away their freedom. Rather, participants, both male and female, seem to have special respect and admiration for *Hijab* as a concept. Further, they believe that *Hijab* adds value and benefit to their relationships rather than harm or damage when the concept is applied properly. The disparity in views expressed in this study about the application of the concept of *Hijab*, however, makes it clear that researchers and clinicians both must be certain of a subject/client's personal interpretation. As detailed above, some women (and men) tend to be more liberal and perceive that the reason behind *Hijab* is to protect women from being harassed and annoyed by some men. By extension, many believe that women with *Hijab* should be able to interact with society with more comfort and ease.

The other group extended and interpreted the concept of *Hijab* and covering to significantly limit Muslim women's interaction with non-kin males in non-essential situations. It is interesting to note that this difference in view was not specific to *Sunni* or *Shia*, but was seen *within* both groups of Islam. For example, both Maryam and Kalthoom are *Shia* women, but expressed very different stances on the proper application of *Hijab*. Maryam, who stressed the importance Muslim women's engagement in society and confidence when dealing with the other gender, is sharply contrasted by Kalthoom, who emphasized the importance of the complete separation between men and women for *Hijab* to be considered proper. Therefore, this difference in views does not seem to result from being either *Sunni* or *Shia* Islam. Again, as we close with the theme of *Hijab*, we see that the *Hijab* provides both a literal and figurative

boundary of modesty, which some participants directly associated with a decrease in marital infidelity. Other religious practices, in addition to *Hijab*, have also emerged in the interviews as tools that enhance family bonds and relationships. The third theme represents the way these religious practices are used by the participants to reduce marital problems and to help them bond and turn to each other in times of difficulty and crisis.

Theme 3. The Significance of Religious Practices in Coping with Family Crises and in Unifying Family Members

Most of the participants explained that when the Islamic law (*Sharia*) is genuinely and positively applied by couples, it can be a powerful force that reportedly reduces conflict and unifies married couples. Further, most of them portrayed Islam as a unifying force that connects wife and husband and binds them together not only in this world, but also in the life hereafter. This theme emphasizes that a positive application of Islam in the life of a married couple can lead to less conflict and oppression, as well as more happiness and closeness. In addition, this theme stresses an accurate adherence to and understanding of the Islamic rules and guidelines in order for husband and wife to reach not only a satisfied marital relationship in this life, but also to increase the rewards by the Divine for the entire family in the afterlife and eternities. Such a belief seems to give couples a unique and salient perspective that helps them endure through hardships while generally strengthening their relationships (Alghafli et al., 2014). The following excerpts capture this idea:

> Bruku (*Shia* husband): If [couples] really are touching each other['s lives], especially in spiritual way, they are really continuing their life together in [the] hereafter. If spouses are in [the] same place and spiritual level, they will be allowed to continue their life **together in [the] hereafter**. I think this is the deepest thing that influences my marriage, that we both believe in. If I am going to mention one thing, that will be the one.

> Mohammad (*Sunni* husband) emphasized the idea that husbands and wives should build

their relationships as endless saying:

Marriage or the family should be like a heaven in this world, you know. It should be like living a heavenly life, and also to prepare for the hereafter. When we marry each other, we think our *togetherness* is not limited to this world. We are like the soul mates, and even after we die we will be **together**.

Most husbands and wives in the study pointed to religion as a major factor that helps couples to avoid marital conflicts to begin with, and an important resource to deal with marital problems when they do occur. All of the *Shia* couples that were interviewed (6 couples) and most of the *Sunni* couples (at least 8 of the 14) mentioned religious practices (mainly prayer and fasting) to be an important factor that unifies family members and helps them deal with crises and conflicts. In the next section, the roles that religious practices play in the lives of Muslim couples, both *Sunni* and *Shia*, are addressed. These practices include prayer, fasting, *Hajj* (pilgrimage), and religious discussion.

Subtheme 1. Prayer

Prayer in Arabic terms is called *Salat,* which means connection. Indeed, *Salat* is, for many practicing Muslims, a way to connect and communicate with the creator. *Salat* consists of rituals that include reading verses from the holy *e*, reciting supplications, and performing certain movements such as bowing to the Almighty. According to the Pew Research Center (2011), almost 48% of Muslims pray five times per day, and two-thirds pray at least once every day. Both the holy *Quran* and Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) have placed great emphasis on consistent and accurate performance of prayer so that its purposes of connection and reflection are achieved. The *Quran*, in many verses, implies that the reason behind the five daily prayers is for Muslims to remember the Lord in order to be restrained from the social wrongs and moral deviancy (*Quran*, 29:45). Participants in the present study agreed that prayer influences the way

they deal with their marital problems and familial conflicts. In the next section, participants'

reflections about the way prayer is used to reduce their marital conflicts is discussed.

Prayer is a unique tool to reduce family conflict. Many of the participants discussed

their perceptions of prayer and its effect on their marital and parental relationships. Participants

frequently mentioned prayer as an activity mandated by Islam that tends to bond family

members. Some participants also discussed prayer as a specific means of reducing conflict, as

illustrated by the following reflection:

> Mohammad (*Shia* husband): In any crises we go through, the first thing we do is to pray
> to Allah for help. And I mean, [is] there. . . something that our religion **does not** help in?
> It is all aspects of our life. . . If there is a time when we were arguing because so much
> [grated on] us, we stopped. . . We have that patience and the hope that things will get
> better, and they always do. There have been times when I was mad and I have to go and
> pray to calm down. When you pray you have to center yourself and…submit to Allah.
> You can't be angry and submit. It just does not work.

Other participants explained that prayer provides opportunities for frequent family

interaction. As Jane stated, "Prayer in Arabic is called *Salat*. What does *Salat* mean? It means

connection." Alya (a *Shia* wife), also shared her feelings about the importance of family prayer

by reflecting that:

> [Prayer] is something we do as a family. You are worshipping as a family and it gives
> everybody time to stop and *interact with each other* afterwards. And you know, you're
> teaching your children something that is good. You are worshipping God and that, to me,
> is heartwarming because we are all there… So to me, it's good. It seems like a **family
> time.**

Likewise, Hameidah (a *Shia* wife) thought of family prayer as a family time that brings

joy and satisfaction as well as increasing spirituality and connection with the Creator:

> [Prayer] connects us somehow . . . I think doing the *Salat* [with] our children **is also a
> family time; we do this with each other**. Talking to God in front of each other at the
> same time.

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Some participants explained that prayer teaches them how to deal with each other and how to better understand how to keep their spouse satisfied. Some reported their belief that by knowing how to please God and doing what He asks, we better learn how to please each other. Mukthar, a *Shia* husband, talked about this idea saying:

> Prayer is a way to please your Lord, to please your Creator. If you know how to please your creator, you can please others. So if she can please her Lord, she can please others. . . Prayer means a lot. If Allah accepts our daily prayer, He will accept everything else.

> Hanya, a *Shia* mother of four, also explained that "by doing the *Salat* every day, we try to please *Allah* [which] helps us also learn how to please each other."

Further, for some participants, prayer is reportedly a tool they use to enhance the quality of the family members' lives. They ask Allah to "interfere" or intercede in the lives of their beloved ones in order to make life better. Anisa, an 18-year-old Muslim daughter, explained this notion by stating:

> We use [the] daily prayer, whether it [is] in congregation or by ourselves [to] support each other and pray for each other. When we pray on our own, I would always wish something for my parents or my brother or my sister-in-law, just something. And then I would wait and see if it comes true, and if it does, [there is] so much self-satisfaction. And then you know it works. So you do it again. So it's just an ongoing pattern of goodness.

> On an individual level, prayer reportedly provided many of the Muslims interviewed with inner peace and calmness. Couples in this study declared that this spiritual experience is a major factor that helps them function at their best level during crises or conflicts. The following excerpts illustrate this idea. Mohammad, a father of four, explained:

> Especially after prayer…the whole house [will be] settled down. There is no TV, there is no Internet, there is nothing, and there is pureness of communications there and it comes straight from the heart. You know, you just can't get that any other way.

Hamida (*Shia* Wife): For me when I am stressed, I go and read the *Quran* and pray and that makes me little bit released. I can talk to [Him] who can solve all of my problems and I get so satisfied with myself. I say, "Okay, right now I talked to Allah and I am mentally released, ahhh." You know, you need to go away from all the pressure and those things. So by praying and reading *Quran* you just get calm.

In addition to calmness and inner peace, some participants expressed that prayer is a source of hope and optimism that keeps them functioning without anxiety and wariness.

Hameida, a *Shia* wife, explained the influence daily prayers have on her life:

I think prayer is very powerful in our life. Allah did not put prayer just for us to talk to him. It is for us to remember He is there, by [praying] five times a day. [In the] morning we're just starting our day so we are reminding [ourselves] that Allah is there, and [when] you wake up, Allah is there. So remember that. And in the middle of the day at noon, we again remind ourselves, "Do not worry about anything in your life, Allah is there." And by reminding ourselves that someone is there for us, we get that hope in life and live our life again and again with that hope.

Hameidah continually emphasized the power that daily prayers have in a practicing Muslim's life. She came up with historical Islamic stories to show how Islamic role models proved with live examples that during crisis, difficulties, and hardships, a Muslim should keep connecting to God through prayer, so he/she is saved, protected, and filled with hope, tranquility, and calmness. One of the stories Hamiedah brought to my attention was about the grandson of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), Imam Housain Bin Ali. She said:

Imam Housain, in the last moment of his life, he stopped the war and did his prayer. He wanted to remind [himself] and his companions, "Do not worry. If you even get killed today, there is Allah. He is seeing all the things that are happening to you. So do not worry about anything." In that stressful situation where no one would go and pray in such a time, [Bin Ali still said], "Let's go and pray." That was in the middle of a war. But they pray because at this situation we have to remember Allah. It was not because they wanted just to please Allah, they wanted to remind themselves that "He is the goal and do not worry about anything. As long as he is satisfied with our duties and jobs, do not worry and do not be scared." So for us, whenever we are fighting and we remember it is the afternoon prayer now, we have to pray with each other. I tell him [my husband] go take the children and make your son ready for prayer and I start talking to him or something happens and that makes us back to our regular life again.

Indeed, for Alya, Mohammed, Aneesah, Moktahr, Hameida, and many other Muslim families, *Salat,* on a familial level, seems to enhance connection not only with Allah (God), but also among people with whom they interact (Alghafli et al., 2014). On an individual level, *Salat* also seems to provide Muslims with inner peace, calmness, hope, and optimism. In the next section, the power of praying *together* in a congregation is illuminated, as well as its value in family life.

Praying together as a group has more religious value than praying individually. Muslims are taught to believe that when religion (especially prayer) is practiced with the family, it is worthy and deserving of **mor***e* reward, blessings and benefit in the afterlife than when it is practiced individually (Alghafli et al., 2014). This principle seemed to motivate several of the participant couples to worship together. The three following comments provide insight into this spiritual teaching and its influence:

Orhan (*Sunni* husband): We believe that "together-prayer" has more rewards than just praying individually. So, this is one thing husband and wife can do together to increase their rewards [both now and]…in the afterlife.

Hashim (*Sunni* husband): It is statutory in our family that if you pray by yourself, you get some [benefit], but if you pray **with your family**, you get more [benefit]. It's also social, you know, you feel more comfortable when you pray with your wife and when you pray with your children. It [provides] a unity, you feel more comfortable when you pray together.

Rehkah (*Sunni* wife): Marriage is one of the most virtuous or most spiritual foundations in society. It is a very religious thing for me. And we think of it as one of the traditions of our Prophet, so it's a very spiritual thing. We have a lot of traditions that say when a man and wife get **together,** [when] they marry, they have actually started a foundation. And both of their faiths become complete. For example, the worship that you used to do when

you were single [is] so much more, worth more, after you are married. So [it] really increases the value of your faith, when you are married. We think of it as a way to progress spiritually. We become partners in growing religiously.

In the above examples, we can see the perceived power prayer has in the lives of some Muslim couples. Prayer seems to provide them with the tools they need (tranquility, calmness, peace, and hope) to deal with family crisis, marital conflicts, and individual differences and to enhance adjustment to new situations and family challenges.

In terms of balance, it is important to also acknowledge and present the difficulties these participants may encounter because of prayer. There is, perhaps, no need for proof or stories from them to know that praying five times a day is a challenge that requires some personal sacrifice in today's society. For parents to put away home chores, personal responsibilities, and all other tasks and activities at assigned times of the day in order to perform prayer is no doubt a challenge. Parents are also religiously obligated to teach their children, from the age of seven to the age of nine, how to pray accurately, as Muslim prayer has so many detailed tasks that include *Quranic* memorizations, specific physical movements, and precise ways of pronouncing Arabic words, all of which children need time to master. Also, for the couples who reported praying together as a family, it is often a challenging task for both husband and wife to free themselves at the same time and gather their children in order to pray together. Anisah, a 16-year-old daughter implicitly mentioned the challenge of committing to prayer and performing it five times a day saying;

> I know that if I get lazy and if I don't want to pray for a week or not open up the *Quran* , I literally feel some sort of restless sensation, like something is missing in my life. It's basically like taking a dose of our daily medicine. When we don't take it on time, properly and religiously, you just feel emptiness and you don't feel self-control at all.

Despite the challenges Anisah mentioned when talking about prayer, her subsequent words illustrated that the benefits of prayer seem to overcome the costs. Besides prayer, fasting

is another religious practice most participants brought up when talking about the connection between faith and family life. In the next section, the bond participants articulated between fasting and family life is examined.

Subtheme 2. Fasting

Fasting in the Islamic sense of the term refers to the complete abstinence from food, drink, and sexual intercourse during the daytime hours. However, restricting the understanding of fasting in Islam to this literal definition, without accounting for the spirit of the practice, is an apparent oversimplification from the perspective of many of our participants – in the same sense that, for many, *Hijab* is much more than a cloth covering. Muslim texts referencing the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) state, "Whoever does not give up forged speech and evil actions, Allah is not in need of his leaving his food and drink (i.e., Allah will not accept his fasting)" (Khan, 1971). Thus, regarding the topic of fasting, participants in this study have mainly discussed two points: (1) fasting as a gate to a deeper self-discipline and self-control, and (2) fasting as a means of bringing family members closer to each other. Both phenomena are discussed and illustrated, next.

Fasting is a way to enhance self-control. This notion clearly and frequently emerged in the participants' data of this study, as the following excerpts illustrate.

> Maryam (*Shia* wife): The reason behind fasting, for me, is very important. Fasting is one of the best practices in our religion. Fasting does not mean that you hurt yourself by not eating anything or drinking. It means, for me, that when you are so strong [as to] not to do something, it makes you strong with other things. Fasting has just two obvious things, not to eat, and not to drink. If you keep yourself thirsty and not drinking water in a time that you are so thirsty, [you] control yourself and handle your body's desires, it helps you control your other attributes… For me as a woman, we have lots of different Muslim families in our Muslim community. Some women do not even go out of their homes. Some women do not talk to any man, who is not *Mahram* (family). But some women, they have many social activities. Especially in our culture, Iran, women are more active

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than men. I am not only a Muslim lady, I am an Iranian. I am a social lady. I work outside the home and, for sure, I have lots of acting and interacting with men. I believe when I am fasting, I am practicing self-control. When you need something or you feel you want it, but [you] stay away from it, it keeps me safe from men. I believe it is in our instinct – all human beings, men and women – it is in our instinct [that] we are attracted to each other…so, fasting helps me develop self-control against everything. So, I can say, "This man is attractive, but I am [a] Muslim, he is just my partner, it is just work, and I have to have those boundaries."

Likewise, Anisa, Jamila, and Gulam all emphasized the notion that fasting should be a

gate to better self-control, rather than just abstinence from food and drink.

Anisa (*Sunni* daughter): [Fasting] is not just abstaining from food, it's abstaining from worldly things like keeping track of your temper, whatever you do. It's a time to clean yourself from within, as well. It's not just about [not] putting harmful food in your mouth or putting pure food in your mouth. But it's abstaining from other things. And hopefully what you do in *Ramadan* carries out. It's a lesson. Every *Ramadan* you learn something new and you carry that through.

Jamila *(Sunni* wife*)* and Gulam (*Sunni* husband) expanded the meaning of fasting to

include a self-modifying tool. They affirmed:

Jamila: *Ramadan* is probably [for me, mostly about] self-control. Control with everything. It's hard to get angry with anybody, because we are hungry. We can't do that.

Gulam: [Fasting] is not just abstaining from food. The whole idea behind *Ramadan* is [that] you try to live a pure life, you know, you stay away from anything that's not good. All the bad things. Even your behavior, you're not supposed to tell any lies, even unintentionally. You're not supposed to speak badly about anybody, the backbiting type thing. And all your behavior, you're supposed to go out of your way and help other people, your neighbors, and the poor.

The above excerpts embodied the participants' understanding of the concept of fasting.

They showed that the fundamental reason behind abstaining from their natural human desires, for

limited periods of time, is to enhance self-discipline and control. Muslims in this study also

drew a clear connection between fasting as a shared, familial event and their familial

relationships, as captured in the next section.

Fasting brings us closer to each other. It is mandatory for Muslims all around the

world to fast in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, which is called *Ramadan*. Participants

used the words *Ramadan* and fasting interchangeably when expressing the influence of this event

on their familial relationships. In almost every interview in which *Ramadan* was mentioned, both

husband and wife talked excitedly about it as a time when family members get closer to each

other more than perhaps any other time. The following examples represent this observation.

> Gulam (*Sunni* husband): The thing that we really enjoy and cherish is the month of
> *Ramadan* because we do so many things together as a family. We wake up in the middle
> of the night. We sit together, we eat together, and we pray together. [We] go to
> [mosque] and bring food. And we get together as a family.

> Like Gulam, Muhammad (a *Shia* husband) talked about *Ramadan* as a family time that

everyone looks forward to, parents and children. He stated, "[Our] boys are looking towards

Ramadan all year. We look forward to it as a family, we all fast together as a family."

Some participants mentioned *Ramadan* as a sacred, spiritual journey the whole family

experiences together. Gulam shared his family's journey during *Ramadan* saying:

> [*Ramadan*] is a very, very good experience for us. I think what fasting does is [that] it
> makes everything else so insignificant. Seeing the family, the marriage, human life –
> really the most important things in the world – because everything else means nothing,
> really. [During the year] we do get carried away with worldly things, you know, the
> houses, the cars, and all of that, I think, [but *Ramadan*] really brings you right to the
> ground and [gets you] grounded with God.

> John (*Sunni* husband): *Ramadan* has been prescribed to us where every Muslim is
> supposed to [fast]. It's one of the five pillars of Islam. So what we do is we get up early,
> very early in the morning [to] have a meal together, like a breakfast. We have a meal
> together, and then after the meal, we read *Quran*, our scripture. And after we do that, it's

time for prayer. We pray together. . . . [Then], in the evening (after sunset), which is the time of breaking [our] fast, again, the same thing happens as during the morning. We all come together as a family, and we eat together and we thank God together, we pray together. After [that] we break the fast. And then we do more prayers. So the whole month of *Ramadan* is a very unique experience. We do a lot less of the worldly things and a lot more of godly things than we normally do. . . And especially, you know, when you do those kinds of things together every day, from day to day, **it tends to bring people together** and it strengthens our beliefs and family.

Noreen (a *Sunni* wife), while generally discussing the role of Islam in her marriage,

mentioned fasting as one example of religious arrangement between herself and her husband.

She stated:

I think that religion affects our married life because in this point **we** can **agree**, and **we** spend some time without arguing. For example, when **we** both fast, **we** do our activities **together**. **We** break the fast **together** [and] **we** wake up midnight and eat before fasting. So **we** do these types of things **together**… At this point **we** again agree and that's how religion is making our life going **together** and growing **together**.

In the above excerpt by Noreen, it is interesting to note that although she started her talk

mentioning "argument" between herself and her husband, she quickly shifted to talk about the

harmonious time she and her husband spend together during *Ramadan* and the shared religious

activities they have. In these few lines, Noreen uses the word "agree" twice and "together" five

times when talking about her marriage in connection with fasting. It also seems worth

mentioning that Noreen begins her response by using the first person singular "I", but then shifts

to the plural and marital "we" which she uses at least eight times in four lines. Similarly,

Maryam, a *Shia* wife, talked about the fasting experience that she and her family jointly go

through during the month of *Ramadan*, saying:

I think my children, my husband, and I **altogether** at the same time **we** are trying to control ourselves and avoid doing some things. It is like **we** are playing a game **together** and when you are playing a game with other friends, you have fun with them… **We** are breaking our fast **together** and **we** think, "Oh, **all of us** are playing a game, ahhh!" **It gets us closer to each other.**

Maryam, like Noreen (above), injects at least eight collective terms (e.g., "altogether," "we," "together," and "us") into a few brief lines, emphasizing the unity that pervades during the time of *Ramadan*.

Mohammad, a *Shia* husband, mentioned that *Ramadan* is **the** best family event for him. When asked about the reasons why, he stated that in *Ramadan*, "We have more family discussion." For example, Mohammad mentioned that when breaking their fast, his family talks to each other: "'How is your day? How are you doing?' and this and that, and then you sit and eat. **We all break the fast together**." Mohammed's wife, Alya, continued, "We all have to sit and eat. It is not like, 'I will eat now.' I will grab something later. We all sit down and eat." Mohammad agreed with his wife, saying:

> It is really the first day [of *Ramadan*] that gets me the most, for some reason, I do not know [why]. The first day of *Ramadan* is more than *Eid* or any other day of the year. The first day of *Ramadan* is important to me. . . The first month that my daughter had to fast and at the end of the day, we were sitting next to each other, that was the best. I was proud of her.

The above narratives show an association between fasting and the participants' family lives and relationships. On the individual level, fasting seems to enhance self-control and self-discipline. Participants claimed that the improvement of these attributes within themselves has a positive influence on the way they deal with life challenges, as well as the way they treat each other. On the familial level, the event of *Ramadan* seems to bond family members and draw them, physically and spiritually, closer to each other. The fact that they fast and break their fast at specific times and in unison seems to tangentially enrich family members' interactions, connections, and communications. In addition to the consideration of *Ramadan* as a sacred month where Muslims are encouraged to improve their religious beliefs and practices, the sacred month of fasting seems to set the environment for more pure, peaceful, and calmer interactions

between the family members. However, as with prayer and *Hijab*, fasting is not all about

advantages to the individual; it is full of challenges and hardships. Not eating and drinking for 8

to 10 hours (depending on the time of the year) every day is very difficult and requires restraint

and discipline, especially for beginners. Additional hardships are experienced by people who

live in non-Islamic countries, like the participants of this study, where practicing Muslims are

surrounded by people who eat and drink in shared school and work environments.

Although prayer and fasting were the most prevalent religious practices participants

brought up, other practices seem to have clear connection to some participants' marital and

family life as well. The two main ones are *Hajj* (pilgrimage) and family religious discussion.

The topic of *Hajj* is discussed next.

Subtheme 3. *Hajj*

Hajj, or Pilgrimage to Mecca, is a religious journey that takes place annually. All

Muslims who are physically and financially capable are obligated to perform this journey at least

once in their lifetime (Cavendish, 2010). *Hajj* is considered the fifth Islamic pillar for *Sunni*

Muslims, and the third ancillary (after praying and fasting) for *Shia* Muslims. The roots of this

ritual trace back thousands of years. It started in 2000 BCE when *Ibrahim* (Abraham) was

ordered by God to leave his wife, *Hajar* (Hagar), and his son, *Ismael* (Ishmael)*,* in the desert of

ancient Makah (Haykal, 1994). Therefore, the rituals Muslims perform during the time of *Hajj*

are all based on the story of *Ibrahim* as conveyed to them by Mohammad (PBUH).

Although *Hajj* was explicitly mentioned by only a few participants in this study, the

connection these participants drew between *Hajj* and family life was qualitatively rich and

salient. It is also worth mentioning that *Hajj*, as a religious practice, is financially expensive and

therefore very difficult for low- and middle-income Muslims to perform. The process of

obtaining visas and getting admitted by the Saudi government to enter Saudi Arabia are

additional barriers for non-Saudi citizens to perform *Hajj*. Therefore, the majority of Muslims

usually perform *Hajj* later in their life when they are more financially stable. Given these

factors, the low number of participants who mentioned *Hajj* as a spiritual familial experience can

be readily understood, especially given that the families interviewed for this project still have

children at home. Nevertheless, the families who mentioned *Hajj* professed a profound influence

of *Hajj* on their life in general and marriage in particular. They talked about *Hajj* as a spiritual

journey that has shifted their attention from worldly, materialistic matters toward sacred, divine

ones; and couples discussed this journey and awakening as an experience which brought them

together in profound ways. Gulam (*Sunni* husband) reported*:*

> [*Hajj*] was such a great spiritual experience. In *Hajj*, the **husband and wife do
> everything together**. You hold hands and **you do all of the things together**, like going
> around the *Kaaba*[5] and a lot of different religious practices, **you do it together**. You
> know, when you go through that spiritual experience, when **you are close to each other,**
> you begin to realize how important marriage is, and how insignificant some of the things
> you get carried away with [are]. When you are in the presence of Allah, [and] we're close
> to Mecca and *Kaaba*, although Allah is everywhere, [in that place,] you feel that
> closeness... It touches your heart when you do that. You really realize that marriage and
> the whole institution of marriage is so important. It's the kind of feeling I never had
> before… Actually, that's the only place where **men and women pray together and do
> all of the things together**. It's just amazing what affect that has. . . I think, what [*Hajj*]
> does is **it makes everything else really so insignificant.**

From the above excerpt by Gulam, an interesting point emerged. Gulam talked about

Hajj as a journey that enhanced not only the spiritual connection between Muslim couples, but

also the physical one. Holding hands in public, for example, is not terribly common, even among

married, Muslim couples. However, in *Hajj* this practice (holding hands) is strongly encouraged.

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[5] Kaaba is a cuboid building at the center of Al-Masjid al-Haram, Islam's most sacred mosque, which is located in the city of
Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Kaaba is the most sacred point in that mosque, making it the most sacred location in Islam. Wherever
they are in the world, Muslims are obligated to face the Kaaba whenever they are performing *Salat* (prayers).

A man is obligated, during *Hajj*, to physically protect and take great care of his wife due to the

hardships and difficulties they have to go through to complete the pilgrimage. These difficulties

include going around the *Kaaba* seven times facing a specific direction in a limited area where

thousands of Muslims, men and women, are performing the same action at the same time.

Therefore, it is highly recommended for each woman to be accompanied by a male relative who

can provide her with the protection needed.

The transformation Gulam experienced after performing *Hajj* is consistent with the

experience of Malcolm X, the civil rights activist who described the change he felt within

himself and the way he thought and saw things during and after returning from *Hajj* in 1960. He

explained, in his Autobiography:

> There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all
> colors, from blue-eyed blondes to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating
> in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in
> America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white.
> America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its
> society the race problem. You may be shocked by these words coming from me. But on
> this pilgrimage, what I have seen, and experienced, has forced me to rearrange much of
> my thought patterns previously held (Haley, 1999, p. 346).

Likewise, Clingingsmith, Khwaja, and Kremer (2009) studied the impact of *Hajj* on

Muslims and reported that *Hajj*:

> Increases belief in equality and harmony among ethnic groups and Islamic sects and leads
> to more favorable attitudes toward women, including greater acceptance of female
> education and employment. . . [and that Muslims] show increased belief in peace, and in
> equality and harmony among adherents of different religions (p.1).

Neither the physical nor the financial challenges Muslims encounter during *Hajj* can be

ignored. The journey is long and full of hardships. Millions of Muslims leave their countries,

families, and friends a few days before *Hajj* starts in order to arrive in Mecca and look for a

place to settle. They stay there for almost two weeks to complete all the required rituals. Mecca

becomes incredibly crowded at this point in time, and the only way to accommodate everyone is to share. Indeed, Muslims share houses, meals, and transportation with other Muslims whom they have never met or known before, as the majority of them join caravans for the facilitation of the journey. The words and stories of Gulam, Malcolm X, Kenny, and many other people who have lived this spiritual experience, however, reveal a great deal of enjoyment, contentment, pleasure, and satisfaction which simply cannot be understood outside the context of a similar shared experience.

The stories and narratives participants shared, as shown above, have illustrated the importance of religious practices in the lives of these couples. The nature of these practices seems to bond family members together and bring them closer to each other. Several couples remarked that in addition to prayer (*Salat*), fasting, pilgrimage (*Hajj)*, and other practices, family religious discussions contribute a great deal to the marriage. Discussions, as some couples declared, develop and facilitate a better understanding of Islam among family members. Hashim (*Shia* husband) illustrated this in the following excerpt:

> When **we** get a chance **we** pray together, that is important for both of **us**… I think that is the most important thing . . . [Also], after prayer **we** would have a religious session . . . Whenever something comes to my mind or to her mind or something is brought up by others, **we** talk about it. That is also really good for both of **us**. What I can say is that although **we** have lots of similarities in general ideas, sometimes our minds act [in ways that are] complementary. So she looks at things in a specific way that I don't. And I look at things in a totally different way, although **we** have the same belief, our ideas sometimes are different and complementary. So that also has a good effect on [**us**] . . . When **we** talk about [different ideas], I think most of the time *we* can convince each other and come to an agreement.

Like other participants earlier, Hashim repeatedly selected the words "we" and "us" (11 combined times) when describing the importance of the shared religious practices for both husband and wife.

Summary of Findings

It is interesting to note that wives and husbands in previous qualitative works that studied highly religious Mormon and Greek Orthodox families have also referenced the positive influence of religious practices on marriage and family life (Alghafli et al., 2014). In the present study, however, the attempt was to communicate responsibly and respectfully these emergent themes with precision and authenticity with the focus on religious Muslim couples in the USA. As illustrated above, most of our participants represent the perceived impact of Islam on their relationships in a positive light. Several participants, however, commented that there are some Islamic beliefs and practices that, when mistakenly understood and applied, can greatly harm the marriage and the whole family environment.

Far from becoming stuck on generic, philosophical ideals of a marriage in which religion plays a central role, participants of this study discussed both the positive and negative influences that faith has on their relationships in real-world terms. In particular, participants discussed their understanding of the roles that Islam has assigned for man and woman in the family.

They emphasized their understanding of the (perceived as appropriate) position Islam has given the husband in leading the family in order for the family to function at its best level and the point at which harm, abuse, and damage are avoided. In addition, in almost every interview, the issue of *Hijab* was discussed as a tool of protection for the familial relationships. *Hijab,* as the participants declared, is not limited to the way a woman dresses, rather, it is a deeper concept that aims to spread modesty, shyness, and purity to the whole Muslim community. Thus, women in this study have rejected the common media portrayal of *Hijab* as a tool of oppression. Most of the men, also, believed that forcing their women to cover is neither the right thing to do for the

marriage, nor part of their Islamic obligation. In addition to *Hijab*, participants talked about other religious practices, such as prayer, fasting, *Hajj*, and religious discussion as factors that enhance the familial relationships. They expressed the belief that these practices make the family's atmosphere a better place for calm, pure, honest, and friendly communication.

Several studies, in addition to the current one, that explored the relationship between faith and family life in the USA have indicated that faith for millions of American families is a major factor that enlightens and guides their relationships and many aspects of their lives (e.g., Stark & Finke, 2000). Thus, being cognizant, informed, and sympathetic of the influence religion has on these families can contribute a great deal to the fields of education and counseling, as well as to the family and social sciences. A more informed understanding can facilitate religious leaders' missions in both Islam and other faiths, improve the Islamic community's way of treating and dealing with one another, and also facilitate the building of non-Islamic extra-community relationships that are based on honesty and genuineness. The significance of this topic, however, expands beyond increasing the public awareness and information.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

The current study attempted, in sum, to investigate the relationships between religion, marriage, and family among an under-researched population – Muslim families who live in the USA. In particular, the aim of the study was to demonstrate how Muslim couples apply Islamic beliefs and practices in their lives in general, and how Islam influences their married and family relationships in particular. Specifically, the study explores the influence religion has in the lives of highly religious, happily married Muslim couples from a close-at-hand perspective.

Despite the fact that the study is mainly a strengths-focused approach, the intention is not to represent only the bright side of the life of Muslim families while disregarding the challenges, conflicts, and difficulties they encounter (as opposed to the typically highlighted representation of the deficit model of Islam by the media). The aim, rather, is to add the voice and perspective of first-hand insiders to the available portrait that media and other researchers have drawn so that a newer, broader, and more accurate perspective of Muslim families and their relationships is available. Beyond examining the importance of faith in the lives of these families, this study attempts to explore and explain why and how their lived religion matters to the participants. In summary, the study reveals that participants view the Islamic commands and prohibitions not only as sacred duties, but reportedly perceive the commands and prohibitions as guidelines that show them how to live their lives for the best, as they reported personal and relational advantages that resulted from their devotion and faith-based actions.

The variety of the sample added value to the study, as it was drawn from a religiously and racially diverse population of married *Shia* and *Sunni* Muslim couples living in various regions of the United States. The fact that couples originated from several nations and currently reside in

four different regions of the U.S. provides us with a variety of perspectives about the application of Islam in family life.

The majority of the currently available studies on the religion-family connection focus mainly on white Christians raised in the U.S. (Alghafli et al., 2014). Muslim families who live in the U.S. are rarely studied and when they are, the samples are usually limited in scope. However, through the effort of Abdul-Khalek and colleagues, high-quality research on the influence of Islam has begun to emerge. However, the major focus of the Abdul-Khalek research has been on the individual and psychological outcomes, such as individual happiness and well-being, rather than familial connection and relationships. The focus of the present study, by contrast, has been on familial and marital bonds through the use of in-depth qualitative interviews.

Interviewing both partners together, as stated in Chapter III, was both a handicap and a benefit to the study. Bluntly, some couples are less likely to open up and freely speak about sensitive topics, such as marital conflicts, in the presence of each other. They may not clearly explain their thoughts and opinions regarding potential harm caused by certain religious beliefs and practices (e.g. one spouse's over-engagement in the religious community). On the other hand, interviewing couples together can also "provide a rich context for learning about marriage, marital interaction, and marital processes. . .[and also] provides the researcher with a front row seat as couples create meaning through narratives" (Marks et al., 2008, p. 175). Throughout the interview process, couples agree, disagree, support, and refine each other's thoughts. Although the sample of the study is not generalizable or sufficient for someone to draw an accurate, comprehensive picture of Muslim families, the hope is that the participants' stories, narratives, reflections, and opinions will offer a valid picture of some Muslim families in the USA, providing a useful and facilitative picture to clinicians, therapists, counselors, teachers, and

religious leaders of other faiths that will aid their efforts to respectfully interact with Muslim individuals and families. More specifically, the participants indicated their perceptions that: (1) Islam outlines clear roles and responsibilities for man and woman to fulfill inside and outside the house. These guidelines seem to be largely appreciated by the involved sample of both husbands and wives; (2) Islam does not oppress women by requiring her to wear a *Hijab*. Rather, participants of both genders report that *Hijab* is a tool of protection for men and women on both individual, and familial levels; (3) Islam assigns practices (e.g., prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage) in order to keep Muslims continually connected with their Creator. This connection with the higher power seems to assist participants during crisis and hardships, as they feel protected, cared for, and surrounded by mercy and blessings. A few additional insights regarding the three identified themes (the gender roles and treatment of women, the importance of *Hijab*, and the significance of religious practices in coping with family crises and in unifying family members), as well as suggestions for future research are now offered.

Gender Roles and Treatment of Women

The study has indicated that religion, for highly religious couples, operates as a guideline that assigns both men and women roles and responsibilities to fulfill. These roles and responsibilities, as Muslims in this study expressed, are suitable for their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. This perception seems to contradict the image commonly presented by the media, as well as that of some researchers, that Muslim women are universally oppressed by a male-centric religious culture (Read, 2002; Read & Bartkowski, 2000) and prevented from engaging in public activities (Haddad & Smith, 1996; Read, 2002). Rather, the guidelines provided by Islamic law show men and women what their responsibilities and roles are, and are reportedly helpful for and meaningful to the sample of this study. Participants

implied that religious obligations, if applied properly, operate in ways that promote a happy, balanced, and secure life for Muslim individuals, families, and communities. However, when theses guidelines are misunderstood and used to serve personal desires, harm and damage for the whole family is likely to occur (Lu, 2012). Participants have mentioned a few actions, including the abuse of the concept of *Qaymomah* (man leadership) by some Muslim men to impose their power and control over their wives; the misunderstanding of the concept of *Hijab* that leads some Muslim women to be dysfunctional human beings in their society; and the misuse of some religious practices (e.g., prayer, fasting, charity), particularly when they are performed in a way that harms the family time together, finances, or other resources.

For these families, the picture the media tends to draw of the lives, relationships, and social obligations of Muslim women does not seem accurate or complete. Participants emphasized that the popular notion of the oppressed and abused Muslim woman, forbidden to act within or interact with society, is an inaccurate conception of their religion.

Although the sample of the current study was purposively, not randomly, selected – participants were merely chosen after being identified as highly and religiously committed members of the Muslim community – the findings can add value to the discussion of the impact of religion on gender roles within family life, especially as this topic has been the center of numerous debates centered on contemporary American life (Bartkowski, 2001; Gallagher, 2003; Sherkat, 2000). Further, studying highly religious couples, in particular, would assist scholars in distinguishing between the rules of religion and the rules that result elsewhere (e.g., culture). As the participants of the current study expressed, religion is the major motivation for their actions and beliefs, whereas, culture is more likely to be the driving factor in non-religious families. In the next section, the theme of *Hijab* and its contribution to the topic is briefly discussed.

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The Importance of *Hijab*

Based on previous research that has studied the concept of *Hijab*, the author hypothesized that the female sample of the study would favor *Hijab* and view it positively. Besides supporting this assumption, the present study has shown that the male sample possess a profound consideration for their women's *Hijab* as well. For both husbands and wives that have been studied, *Hijab* serves as a tool of protection in both their communal and familial lives. Commitment to *Hijab* reportedly costs those in the sample a great deal, in terms of both social and physical comfort. Obviously, covering the head and whole body outside their homes is uncomfortable for women who practice *Hijab*, especially during the summer. More significantly, covering her head distinguishes a practicing Muslim woman as being different from other women in American society. Study participants, however, were rather minimalist when talking about these social and physical discomforts. On the other hand, when framing the perceived benefits they received from being committed to *Hijab* and modesty, their words seem to reflect pride, passion, devotion, and gratitude. Noted benefits included creating a tangible barrier between themselves and what they called "the dark side of the society," and, for women in particular, *Hijab* is a shell that reportedly protects them from being harassed, annoyed, or harmed when engaging and interacting with society.

The issues of gender roles and treatment of women as well as the *Hijab* that are discussed in theme one and two are especially significant. Westerners tend to view Islam in general and Muslim women in particular negatively (Mahmud & Swami, 2010), perhaps because the media seems to focus on terrorism and perceived negative customs that affect women in Muslim communities (Alghafli et al., 2014). One problem, however, with the various portrayals of the treatment of Muslim women in Western media is that these portrayals do not differentiate

between oppression that results from social customs, cultural law, or community education, and oppression that results from Islamic law itself. Two Muslim converts in the present study reportedly felt that they have more rights as a woman after converting to Islam than they did before converting to Islam. The field seems to be in need of more studies that allow Muslim women themselves to talk, express, and explain the roles and responsibilities Islam places on them and how they feel about it, instead of having the media speak on their behalf (e.g., Gilligan, 1982). This study is novel because it examines the issue of gender roles and the treatment of women as well as the issue of *Hijab*, in a U.S. context. The present findings may reflect the perceived reality of Muslim couple relationships more accurately than a journalistic investigation of Islam in a poor, tribal, African context, for example. Researchers must conduct more rigorous studies, both inside and outside of North America, in order to properly address the issues of gender roles and the oppression of women **vis-à-vis** Islam.

The Significance of Religious Practices in Coping with Family Crises and in Unifying Family Members

For this highly religious sample, religious practices, especially structured daily prayers, were described as helpful in dealing with everyday challenges. Prayers offered five times a day in Islam reportedly provided a sense of stability and promoted positive coping with significant life challenges and profound loss. Prayer was the most frequently mentioned ritual participants brought up when discussing the connection between family life and religious practices. They mentioned prayer as a coping technique when coming through family crises, conflicts, or hostility; and reported that prayer promotes a feeling of peace and tranquility within the individuals. At a different level, participants also talked about prayer as a shared family activity that gets them closer to one another in a peaceful, calm, and stress-free atmosphere.

Fasting was another commonly mentioned topic in the interviews, although this topic was not raised by the interviewer. Even though fasting is a physical and mental challenge, prohibiting eating or drinking throughout the daytime hours, its long-term rewards appear to be worth the challenge and holds both individual and family-level benefit. This finding seems to be consistent with research literature addressing sacred rituals and practices that are home-based and/or which involve the whole family (Doherty, 1997; Marks, Dollahite, & Barker, 2012; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Increased self-control and family closeness were the most frequently reported rewards participants gained from fasting together during the month of *Ramadan*.

The journey of *Hajj* (pilgrimage) was also a significant life experience reported by some participants. *Hajj* involves Muslims from all around the world traveling, often with their immediate and/or extended families, to gather in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, to worship and fulfill a once-in-a-lifetime religious obligation. The main effect of that journey, according to the participants, included a related motivation to replace concern with a materialistic life with instead a focus on spirituality. Although many participants had not yet experienced *Hajj*, some of those who had referred to the pilgrimage as life-altering. With specific respect to family relationships, such an experience seemed to narrow the space for conflicts, arguments, and disagreements in the home. Rituals and practices, including *Hijab*, prayer (S*alat*), and *Hajj* were deeply imbedded in the family life of the sample of this study. On the whole, these practices reportedly facilitate a better family atmosphere and prevent negativity.

Awareness of the importance of these practices in the lives of Muslim families can open a door for educators, counselors, and therapists to understand and to effectively assist Muslim couples and families. Also, such awareness can aid researchers in identifying specific laws and customs practiced by Muslims and subsequently support an examination of how these laws and

customs may influence marriage relationships, parent-child relationships, and parenting styles. Furthermore, the current study can add valuable information about family life, marital relationships, and parenting, as well as expand the family-related horizon of religious leaders within Muslim communities, as these leaders are the main source of advice and consultation for many Muslim members (Abdullah, 2007). Finally, while the present samples was purposive and not generalizable, the sample was large enough to suggest that, if Islam is as influential in the lives of our participants' and their families as they claim, the likelihood is high that it is equally crucial in the lives and families of other Muslims – particularly in the context of Muslims with whom public and healthcare professionals may come into contact. In this case, further research on the outcomes of this influence or perceived influence can only be beneficial, whether or not the premises set forth in this publication are borne out.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that beliefs and faith are an essential component of understanding ourselves and others (Wright, Watson, & Bell, 1996). Thus, clinicians who are aware of and sensitive to their clients' fundamental beliefs are more likely to positively influence and effectively enhance their clients' lives. This is true when dealing with any type of client, regardless of their religion and cultural background. Unfortunately, despite the sizable body of research, including this study, that indicates the importance of religion as a coping factor in the lives of many clients, an anti-faith point of view still exists in some therapy settings (Marks, 2002).

Recommendations for Future Research

Marks (2002) has strongly suggested that more research exploring the connection between religion and family life among Muslim and Jewish families is needed due to the scarcity of research illuminating these populations. In particular, the field of family studies is in need of

research that explores the life of individuals and families with high levels of faith commitment, so the connection between faith and family is brighter, and questions such as how, when, and to what degree religion influences family life may be better answered (James, 1997).

For those in this study, faith was reportedly a key in the struggle to answer significant questions about the purpose of life, reasons behind many behaviors, and how relationships in this world are connected with the hereafter. Thus, for these families faith has a profound impact on the way they see things, the decisions they make, and how they prioritize their life matters. As a result, marriage, parenting, and other familial relationships are often influenced both directly and indirectly. As family scientists, there is much more for us to learn about the impact of religious faith on the lived experience of those around us, particularly from understudied groups such as racial and religious minorities.

To summarize, studies addressing the correlation between religion and family life are increasing in quantity and quality, but are far from complete. Data from available studies indicate that religion has a generally modest but positive influence on both the relational (marital satisfaction, quality, and stability, as well as family satisfaction) and individual (e.g., physical health, longevity, mental health, psychological coping skills, and well-being) levels. Unfortunately, deep information exploring the hows and whys of this influence is often not a characteristic of most of the available research in this area. Thus, research that extends its questions beyond the admittedly important mechanisms driving these outcomes to investigate the processes behind these religious and family correlations is needed. Although this study has attempted to uncover some of these deeper faith-family connections, important issues are still in need for extension, clarification, and better understanding. The sample of the current study included five converted individuals who reported that Islam has added value, meaning, and

freedom to their lives. Further research is needed to see whether studying a larger sample of converted Muslims would still reveal the same findings. Also, all the women that have been interviewed in this study are practicing *Hijab*. Thus, it would add a better understanding to the impact of *Hijab* on Muslim families to study Muslim wives who are not practicing *Hijab*, so an opportunity for comparison and contrast is available.

Of all that has been said here, an important conclusion is to be drawn. Religious faith for Muslim couples in this study, and perhaps for a significant portion of the 1.2 billion Muslims globally (cf. Miller & Thoresen, 2003), Islam is a significant element in their life that reportedly guides their decisions, perspectives, opinions, and the way they live their lives. It teaches couples how to treat each other and it guides parents in raising their children. Therefore, as scientists, therapists, educators, and counselors, in order to accurately understand the participants' lives, analyze their behaviors, and interpret their familial, social, and communal laws, we should carefully consider the benefits of adequately understanding their faith, so our results, conclusions, and interventions with such families can be more effective. Cornelious-White (2015) stated that in order for counseling to be successful, counselors should pay attention to all the potential resources that a client brings to the counseling. These resources include the client's social status, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and religion. White continued to explain that such awareness and respect to who the client is and what he/she values "should lead to a more nuanced understanding of the client and the sometimes-hidden strengths that he or she possesses" (Cornelious-White, 2015, p.4). Likewise, one of the participants in Marks (2002) work shared an opinion similar to White's, who states:

> I think it is important to address faith [as a counselor], especially with someone
> who has brought it up… To at least ask questions regarding how important faith
> is [to the individual or couple] and then to treat them sensitively. I think from my

own experience, if I was going to a counselor, faith is so much a part of who I am that I couldn't separate faith and family, and when a counselor is treating a person, they should be treating the whole person and [be aware] of the issues they're dealing with.

With that said, it is important to note that the goal here is not to have the therapist share the client's beliefs, rather it is to promote understanding and sensitivity to what the client values. Understanding simple practices that Muslim individuals and families perform as well as how these practices are translated into their daily life experiences can facilitate a better, more effective relationship between the Muslim population and people they interact with on a daily basis. The issue of shaking hands, for example, which is a common way in American culture to show respect and welcome, is a religiously banned practice for non-relative Muslims of the opposite gender to do. Another example is the prolonged eye contact, which is also a sign of respect in American culture, between a man and woman who are not related. This practice is one that is highly discouraged in the Islamic law. Thus, deeper understanding of this population and their customs by their therapists, counselors, neighbors, and friends can promote an environment were comfort and effectiveness is facilitated.

In the final consideration, the author concludes this project with the hope that the voices of the persons in this study who opened their homes, as well as their hearts, in order to share their stories, opinions, and lived experiences will be conveyed with both depth and validity via findings presented here. If one lesson from these families is to be learned it is that, despite the tremendous corruption, the violence, the oppression, and the cruel killing being perpetrated today by individuals who use the name of Islam to justify their vicious and merciless actions toward innocent human beings, there is still another, brighter, shining face of the same coin which faithful Muslims, like the participants of this study, use to unite their families, to teach those

within the faith community how to love one another, and to strengthen and invigorate their

relationships with each other.

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APPENDIX A. LETTER TO RECRUIT PARTICIPANTS

My name is Zahra Alghafli. I am a doctoral student at Louisiana State University. I am working on a research project that is part of the Faith and Families project which has been established by Dr. Marks, a professor at Louisiana State University. The purpose of the project is to report the findings of a major qualitative study of religion, marriage, and family life. It aims to provide in depth understanding of why and how religion and family life are connected.

It is important to note that by participating in this interview, you are not a representative of your faith. There will be accurate, detailed, and valid information about the Islamic faith from reliable resources. Therefore, you are an insider who will open a window to help researchers see and understand how different Muslim people apply the Islamic principles into their marriage and family life. You are helping us understand why and how marriage and religion influences one another. Your stories and live examples will enrich us with a descriptive view on how Islamic faith colors your marriage as well as how your marriage influences your faith.

Participation in this study may require approximately 90 minutes of your time. If you agree to participate, you will both (husband and wife) be asked together to complete an interview with the primary researcher. Questions I will ask will include topics such as, the influence of religion on commitment, fidelity, conflict, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Furthermore, questions are formed to examine how religious couples involve God in their life and how they strive to achieve a sacred purpose in their marriage.

Please know that your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your responses will be digitally recorded and immediately saved into a secured laptop that will place all your information under an identification number, eliminating any identifiable information such as your name. All information will be kept strictly confidential. We will combine your responses along with those from other couples who participated in the study. When reporting the findings, only pseudonyms will be used.

Your participation in the study is important to us. Please contact me if you are interested in telling your story.

Looking forward to speaking to you,

Zahra Alghafli

Consent Form for Participation in a Dissertation Research Study

Louisiana State University

Researchers: Zahra Alghafli (402)213-4949, zalgha1@lsu.edu

Study Title: Familial Relationships among Muslim couples and parents in the U.S:

A Qualitative Study

This letter is intended to give you information about the study. Above you will find the contact information for the research investigator who will be able to answer any of your questions about the research itself, research procedures, your rights as a participant, and research related risk at any time.

Participation in this study may require approximately 60-90 minutes of your time. The researcher will interview husband and wife together. Interviews will be conducted at an agreed up neutral location with access to private facilities (such as the LSU campus or a public library).

As with all parts of this research study, you have the option to decline. Your answers to the questions will be recorded digitally and will immediately be saved into a secured laptop that will place all your information under an identification number, eliminating any identifiable information such as your name or your spouse's name. All information obtained from you will be kept completely confidential, within the limits of the law. All data will be stored in the researcher's office in a locked file cabinet. Only the researcher and her research assistants will have access to the data.

When reporting findings only pseudonyms will be used. Your feelings and experiences are valuable to us. While you may not directly benefit from this research, your participation in the

study may help us to improve the quality of other marriages that are experiencing similar situations.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate in the study. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or Louisiana State University, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. We believe there are no known risks associated with this research study; however, a possible inconvenience may be the time it takes to complete the study.

You may ask any questions concerning this research and have those questions answered either before agreeing to participate in or during the interview. You may also call (402)213-4949, the researcher, Zahra Alghafli, at any time if you want to voice concerns or complaints about the research.

The Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board has approved this research for human subject participation. Please contact the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board at (225) 578-8692 if you wish to talk to someone other than the research staff to obtain answers to questions about your rights as a research participant, to voice concerns or complaints about the research, or to provide input concerning the research process.

Participants*:*

_____   _____

Signature of Interview Participant   Date

_____   _____

Signature of Interview Participant   Date

Researcher:

_____   _____

Signature of Researcher   *Date*

APPENDIX C. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Familial Relationships Among Muslim Couples and Parents- Demographic Questionnaire

Age: Wife_____   Husband _____

Race: Wife_____   Husband _____

Number of Years Married _____

Children: yes/no:

      If yes, how many?

      Ages of children:

Highest degree of Education completed
Wife:	Husband:
Less than high school	Less than high school
Complete high school	Completed high school
Some college	Some college
Two year technical degree	Two year technical degree
Four year college degree	Four year college degree
Graduate/professional degree	Graduate/professional degree

Occupation:

Wife_____   Husband_____

1) If you feel comfortable responding, approximately what percentage of your income do you spend or donate in direct and indirect ways that involve your faith community?

2) Approximately how many hours a week do you spend in faith-related activities?(including worship services, faith-related meetings, prayer and meditation, scripture study, family worship, youth or children's organizations, service to other congregational members, etc.)

APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

<u>Faith and Marriage</u>

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

1. Did your religious beliefs and values influence how you met and decided to marry?

2. What are some of your deepest spiritual beliefs relating to marriage? Can you give an example of how these beliefs have influenced your marriage?

3. Which faith practices/traditions hold special meaning for you as a couple?

4. How do these practices/traditions influence your marriage? (EXAMPLE?)

5. How has your relationship with God influenced your marriage?

6. Have you influenced each other's initial or ongoing involvement with your faith?

7. All couples have some conflict. Are there ways that your religious beliefs or practices help avoid or reduce marital conflict? (EXAMPLE?)

8. What do your non-religious friends or family members think you give up because of your faith?

9. What does your wife's *Hijab* tells you as a husband? How it affects your relationship?

10. How does *Hijab* influence your marriage?

11. Tell me about the impact of your *Hijab* on your marriage as a couple who live in U.S.?

12. Do you feel there are any religious beliefs or practices that, if misunderstood or misapplied, can be harmful to marriage? If so, what are they?

13. What are the greatest obstacles (external/internal) to your marriage being all you and God want it to be? (EXAMPLE?)

The second part of the interview asks about connections between your faith and your family life; that is between your relationships with God and with family members. I would also enjoy any personal experiences that might illustrate the influence of your faith in your family life.

<u>I. Religious Practice and Community and Family Life</u>

1. Which faith practices/traditions hold special meaning for you as a family?

2. Can you recall a particular time when these practices/traditions really helped your family?

3. Is your religious congregation important to your family? Your Marriage?

II. Religious Beliefs and Family Life

4. Which of your religious beliefs have the most influence on your family life?

5. How central is your religion to how you parent your children?

6. Can you think of a time when you believe God directly influenced your family in some way?

III. Faith and Parent-Child Relationships

TO PARENTS:
7. As parents, how do you share your faith with your children?

8. How important to you is it that your child(ren) follow in your faith?

IV. Faith and Surrounding Culture
9. Do your religious beliefs influence what you let in or keep out of your family life?

10. What challenges arise from being a religious family in the surrounding culture? How do you respond to these challenges? (EXAMPLE?)

V. Challenges of Faith and Family Life

11. Has your family experienced any major stressors or challenges that your faith has helped you deal with?

12. Is there anything else about your faith and your family life you consider important or interesting to mention?

APPENDIX E. PARTICIPANTS' DETAILED INFORMATION

COUPLE	AGE	YEARS OF MARRIAGE	RACE/ATHNICITY/ NATION OF ORIGIN	DENOMINATION	EDUCATION LEVEL
1-H. 1-W.	33 33	9	Iran	*Shia* Muslim	Ph.D. M.S.
2-H 2-W	38 26	12	Afghanistan	*Shia* Muslim	M.D. High school
3-H 3-W	33 28	9	India	*Shia* Muslim	B.S. High school
4-H 4-W	50 42	13	Iraq	*Shia* Muslim	M.S. B.S.
5-H 5-W	37 38	16	White American	*Shia* Muslim	High school High school
6-H 6-W	N/A	20	Iran	*Shia* Muslim	Ph.D. Ph.D.
7-H 7-W	32 46	10	Pakistan Whit American	*Sunni* Muslim	B.S. M.S.
8-H 8-W	48 46	20	India	*Sunni* Muslim	M.D. B.S.
9-H 9-W	34 32	5	Bangladesh	*Sunni* Muslim	Ph.D. Ph.D.
10-H 10-W	46 46	20	African American	*Sunni* Muslim	High school High school
11-H 11-W	46 46	21	Asian White American	*Sunni* Muslim	High school High school
12-H 12-W	58 54	30	India	*Sunni* Muslim	Ph.D. High school
13-H 13-W	31 28	3	Turkey	*Sunni* Muslim	Ph.D. B.S.
14-H 14-W	34 26	4	India	*Sunni* Muslim	Ph.D. B.S.
15-H 15-W	34 31	5	Turkey	*Sunni* Muslim	Ph.D. Ph.D.
16-H 16-W	63 58	30	India	*Sunni* Muslim	Ph.D. M.S.
17-H 17-W	37 32	9	White American	*Sunni* Muslim	B.S. M.S.
18-H 18-W	51 44	20	European	*Sunni* Muslim	M.S. B.S.
19-H 19-W	N/A	N/A	N/A	*Sunni* Muslim	N/A
20-H/W	N/A	N/A	N/A	*Sunni* Muslim	N/A

APPENDIX F. IRB APPROVAL DOCUMENT

IRB #: _2768_   LSU Proposal #: _18946_   Revised: 03/24/2004

LSU INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) for   578-8692 FAX 6792
HUMAN RESEARCH SUBJECT PROTECTION   Office:203 B-1 David Boyd Hall

APPLICATION FOR EXEMPTION FROM INSTITUTIONAL OVERSIGHT

Unless they are qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from
Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/projects using living humans
as subjects, or samples or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or
without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form
helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

Instructions: Complete this form.
Exemption Applicant: **If it appears that your study qualifies
for exemption send:**

(A) Two copies of this completed form,
(B) a brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects
and to explain your responses to Parts A & B),
(C) copies of all instruments to be used. If this proposal is part of a
grant proposal include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment
material.
(D) the consent form that you will use in the study

to: ONE screening committee member (listed at the end of this form)in the
most closely related department/discipline or to IRB office.

If exemption seems likely, submit it. If not, submit regular IRB
application. Help is available from Dr. Robert Mathews, 578-8692,
irb@lsu.edu or any screening committee member.

Principal Investigator   _Loren Marks_   Student? Y/(N)

Ph: _8-2405_ E-mail _lorenm@lsu.edu_ Dept/Unit _HUEC (FCCS Division)_

If Student, name supervising professor _____ Ph:_____
Mailing Address_____ Ph_____
Project Title _Faith and Families_

Agency expected to fund project _Grants will be submitted to B.RSF, NSF, C.R, and Louisville Institute_
Subject pool (e.g. Psychology Students)_Religious Two-Parent Families_
Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the
mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with
incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.
I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project
scope or design is later changed I will resubmit for review. I will obtain
written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU
institutions in which the study is conducted.

PI Signature _Loren D. Marks_ Date _10/13/04_ (no per signatures)
===
Screening Committee Action: Exempted _√_ Not Exempted ____ Category/Paragraph _____

Reviewer _Mathews_ Signature _Robt C Matt_ Date _9/8/05_

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VITA

Zahra Alghafli earned her B.S. in Early Childhood Development from King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. She later taught Pre-K at Al-Riyadh School in Saudi Arabia for one year and worked as a teacher assistant for one year and a half at Creighton University Child Care. Due to her high GPA as well as enthusiasm and hard work as a teacher, Zahra was awarded a scholarship to earn her Masters degree in the United States. By the end of spring 2010, she had earned her Masters in Community Counseling from Creighton University in Nebraska, Omaha. After obtaining her Master's degree with a high GPA, Zahra was awarded an extended scholarship to pursue her PhD in Family and Child Consumer Science at Louisiana State University. At the beginning of the program, Zahra joined Dr. Loren Marks Research Group to become a part of the group's research progress and achievements. Zahra's research interest focuses on the relationship between religion and family life. The aim of this study is to provide in depth understanding of why and how religion and family life are connected. The study examines the influence of religion on various aspects of marriage including commitment, fidelity, conflict, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Furthermore, it examines how religious couples involve God in their life and how they strive to achieve a sacred purpose in their marriage.

Zahra currently is a member of the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR). She is a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Ecology, which will hopefully be awarded at the May 2015 commencement.