Prayer in relationships:
A new area of scientific research

by Frank D. Fincham, Ph.D., Eminent Scholar & Director, Family Institute,
The Florida State University, ffincham@fsu.edu

Properly understood and applied, [prayer] is the most potent instrument of action.
Mahatma Gandhi

Most people of faith, and that includes the majority of the world’s population (68.08% to 88.74% or 4.54 to 5.92 billion people)¹, would likely agree with the above statement. But when confronted by the skeptic, can this belief be justified by more than personal experience? In other words, what does science offer to support the power of prayer? Nothing it seems... up to now. But that is changing.

Noting that prayer is a form of spiritual activity common to all the “Abrahamic” traditions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) with strong parallels in most other religious traditions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Shinto), Steven Beach and I were surprised to find so little scientific research on prayer. And what we did find was disappointing. To the extent that there was any research on prayer, it was almost exclusively focused on testing whether prayer for the physically afflicted leads to better health outcomes. The mechanism implicitly studied in this work is divine intervention. Not surprisingly, studies have yielded contradictory findings that are likely due to the scientifically (and perhaps logically) problematic nature of this work.

We do not discount divine intervention but recognize that it is not an acceptable explanation in the realm of scientific research. Our work therefore started with a framework for understanding the impact of prayer that is informed by and grounded in an analysis of psychological and interpersonal processes. Our work investigates colloquial, petitionary prayer, a form of prayer that invokes God’s help in response to specific needs, using the individuals own language rather than a set prayer². Specifically, we sought to examine the impact of prayer for a partner on the relationship. Initial work focused on documenting an association between prayer and relationship functioning and showed that prayer predicted relationship satisfaction (both concurrently and over time) over and beyond positive and negative behavior in the relationship and that commitment mediated the prayer-satisfaction association³.

Encouraged by these findings (and motivated by journal rejections on the basis

We have consistently documented that petitionary prayer for the partner has a greater impact on the relationship than any of the comparison conditions.

that the data were “merely” correlational) we next turned to experimental research designs. Thus we began to randomly assign study participants to pray for a partner or to comparison conditions such as describing a partner to a parent or meditating on the partner’s positive qualities. In some studies we have even used as a comparison condition undirected prayer (“just pray as you normally would each day for the next four weeks”). We have consistently documented that petitionary

prayer in relationships continued on page F2
prayer for the partner has a greater impact on the relationship than any of the comparison conditions. Here is an example of the instructions we use in our studies and a sample prayer.

Please read the example prayer below to get an idea of the type of prayer we would like you to pray on behalf of your partner:

Dear Lord,

Thank you for all the things that are going well in my life and in my relationship. Please continue to protect and guide my partner, providing strength and direction every day. I know you are the source of all good things. Please bring those good things to my partner and make me a blessing in your partner’s life. Amen.

Now, please generate your own prayer in your own words on behalf of the well-being of your romantic partner and in the space below write a short description about what you prayed for.

The above instructions illustrate those used when participants come to the laboratory and engage in a single prayer session. A bit artificial? Yes, it is! And that is why we always replicate what we find in the laboratory using longer term, diary studies in which participants are asked to pray each day for a month. We ask participants to make online reports twice a week during the month. That way we can be confident that they are following study instructions.

One set of studies, published in Psychological Science, showed what most people of faith intuitively know, that prayer increases willingness to forgive a transgression by the partner. This is important because in relationships such as marriage one will certainly be hurt by one’s partner and that hurt is all the more poignant as we make ourselves vulnerable in such relationships. It is little wonder then that it has been said that a happy marriage is the union of two good forgivers. In these studies we documented that prayer led to high levels of agape or selfless love and that this love led to greater willingness to forgive. But, our critics justifiably argue, this is merely self report. That is why we have now shown that prayer following a partner transgression influences actual behavior in response to the transgression. Participants were exposed to a partner transgression in the lab. Then after praying (or engaging in a control activity) participants were given the chance to cooperate with or antagonize their partner in a computer game. Those who prayed were more cooperative than control participants. Furthermore, in another study we tested whether partners of participants who prayed over the course of four weeks would report the participants as more forgiving. Apparently prayer has a strong enough effect on participants’ forgiving behavior to be perceived by the partners. But the impact of prayer is not limited to forgiveness.

In another set of studies initiated by Nathaniel Lambert, we also documented that petitionary prayer for the partner leads to greater gratitude. This is important as being grateful in life is associated with better mental health which is, in turn, related to healthy marriage.

In a third series of studies, Lambert was able to demonstrate that prayer influences satisfaction with sacrificing for the relationship. In this series of studies we videotaped participants after the month-long intervention. Specifically, participants were asked to, “Please describe something you have given up, or would be willing to give up, for your partner or for your relationship.” Responses to this question were coded by a group of five trained research assistant coders, blind to study hypotheses and the condition to which the participant was assigned. Observer responses showed that those randomly assigned to the prayer condition were rated as more satisfied with sacrifice than those who had daily recalled positive partner characteristics but had not been asked to pray. Clearly such findings show that prayer has a protective effect on relationships, but does it also help when it comes to risk factors?

The answer to this question was serendipitous. As some of the research has been conducted with university students in romantic relationships, data on substance use is routinely collected given the prevalence of substance abuse among undergraduates. I thought it was a mistake when Nathaniel Lambert, one of my students, told me that prayer for the partner had decreased alcohol intake by 50%. So we did the study again to make sure and we obtained the same result almost to the same decimal point! This finding is important as we have documented that drinking increases the likelihood of casual sex among undergraduates, especially women.

A critical risk factor for relationship dissolution is cheating or infidelity. In the general population 2 to 4% of spouses are unfaithful each year with wives and husbands now cheating in equal numbers (and extramarital affairs are the leading cause of divorce across 160 cultures) and among students in committed relationships, rates are even higher (up to 65% of couples by one estimate). In a recent set of studies that will appear in Journal of Personality and Social Psychology we were able to show that colloquial, petitionary prayer for the partner also decreased infidelity. Moreover, “sanctification of the prayer in relationships continued on page F13
prayer in relationships continued from page F2

relationship” or the process by which secular aspects of life (in this case their relationship) become perceived as having spiritual significance, and character was shown to mediate this effect. Again, in one of the studies in this series, we were able to show that those who were randomly assigned to pray were rated differently by trained research assistant coders, blind to study hypotheses and the condition to which the participant was assigned. Specifically those who had prayed for four weeks were rated as more committed to the relationship which helps explain why there was less cheating during this period even when taking into account baseline rates of cheating.

oxytocin continued from page F12

REFERENCES

It has commonly been said that ‘couples that pray together, stay together,’ and in another study we assessed the effect of praying for a partner’s well-being together with that partner. Participants that prayed with a partner for four weeks reported a greater level of unity and trust with that partner, compared to participants assigned to a positive interaction condition. Unity mediated the relationship between praying and the increased level of trust.

And what does all this mean for families? Steven Beach and I have also just finished a randomized clinical trial with 393 African-American married couples in which we added prayer to a well researched preventive program (Prevention and Relationship Education Program) to see if it increased the effectiveness of the program. As anticipated, there were no differences immediately at program completion but differences did emerge 6 and 12 months later. Those in the prayer supplemented intervention showed great intervention gains over time. Our team has published a paper to illustrate how prayer can be used in couple counseling as an alternative to, or adjunct of, traditional skills based interventions. Our analysis, showing how prayer achieves the same goals of widely used skills-based interventions, but unlike skill-based interventions, is maintained by “natural” reinforcers, and unlike human social support, “knee-mail” is available 24/7. This evoked immediate commentary and criticism (see Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 2008, vol 27, issue 7).

What is next? We are now looking at the boundary conditions under which these effects occur. We have also begun a study to document the potential negative impacts of prayer. Our research shows effects for a particular type of other-directed prayer that focuses on the wellbeing of a partner. Critics of our prayer research point out, and rightly so, that praying is not like working a candy machine. We agree. When prayer reflects selfish concerns and focuses on changing the partner, we believe that it is likely to exacerbate relationship difficulties rather than improve the relationship. There is so much more to do here. We are also currently working on a study to show that prayer influences attention at the nonconscious level. We are testing the hypothesis that prayer influences the ease with which a partner in a committed relationship can disengage from looking at an attractive person of the opposite sex.

It has been interesting to research something that is an automatic red flag for some scholars. These experiences are grist for a different article.

Editor’s note: Dr. Fincham has a website at www.fincham.info. Coming to the NCFR conference? Dr. Fincham will be a participant at an invited symposium on Wednesday, November 3rd sponsored by the Religion & Family Life Section.

FOOTNOTES


2 In the USA 92.6% of people believe in God, see U.S. Religious Landscape Survey (2008). Accessed on July 30, 2008, at http://religions pewforum.org/pdf/reportreligious-landscape-study-key-findings.pdf


6 This does not mean that they did not pray. As we use participants who report that they pray at least occasionally as our comparison conditions are stringent ones allowing us to be confident when we find differences.

