

## BRIEF REPORT

# Sanctification of Sexuality: Implications for Newlyweds' Marital and Sexual Quality

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Research on the intersection of sexuality, religion, and spirituality has primarily examined whether global levels of religiousness (e.g., service attendance) deter premarital and extra-marital sexual activity. Virtually no empirical work has addressed whether specific spiritual beliefs about sexuality enhance marital sexuality. Using a community sample of 83 individuals married between 4 and 18 months, we found that greater perceptions of sexuality as sanctified predicted greater marital satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, sexual intimacy, and spiritual intimacy beyond global religiousness and demographics. The findings open a new line of research on religion and family life, and extend theories on the possible benefits of the sanctification of intimate relationships.

*Keywords:* marriage, religion, sanctification, sexuality, spirituality

Although marriage is the most socially sanctioned context for sexual activity (Christopher & Kisler, 2004), and diverse religious traditions uphold marital sexuality as sanctified (Jones & Hostler, 2005; Rosenau & Sytsma, 2004), surprisingly little scientific theory and research addresses how religion may facilitate the quality of married couples' sexual relationships. We located few peer-reviewed, published studies on the roles of religion in marital sexuality. Among a sample of 839 married Americans, Young, Luquis, Denny, and Young (1998) reported the perception of God's view of sex (favorable or not) and religious commitment were unrelated to sexual satisfaction. Other research using combined samples of married, cohabiting, and dating Americans has found that those with no religious affiliations are among the least likely to report being emotionally or physically satisfied with their sexual lives (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Some studies suggest that couples who frequently pray together experience greater sexual satisfaction

(Greeley, 1991). However, other studies have not found significant links between religious service attendance and sexual frequency (Bell, 1974).

Recent conceptual and empirical work on the sanctification of intimate relationships offers a framework to help fill the gaps in scientific research on the intersection of sexuality, religion, and marriage (Mahoney, Pargament, & Hernandez, in press). Increasing evidence from generally happily married couples supports that viewing an intimate relationship as sanctified is tied to aspects of marital well-being, including greater commitment to and investment in the relationship, access to individual and communal religious resources that strengthen the relationship, and satisfaction and happiness derived from the relationship. Among couples experiencing relational distress, an additional benefit of sanctification includes greater motivation to repair their relationship (Mahoney et al., in press). Drawing on this line of research, we examined links between the sanctification of marital sexuality and marital sexual quality among newlyweds.

Sanctification is defined as perceiving an aspect of life as having divine character and significance (Pargament & Mahoney, 2009). One index of sanctification, Manifestation of God, is explicitly theistic and involves perceiving God (Higher Power, Allah, etc.) as active and influential in a given facet of life (Mahoney et al., 1999). The second index, Sacred Qualities, is nontheistic and refers to attributing transcendence, ultimate value, and purpose to an aspect of life. Therefore, sexuality may be understood as a manifestation of one's beliefs or experiences of the divine as well as marked by sacred qualities. As a psychological process with a spiritual reference point, people with diverse religious and spiritual identities may sanctify sexuality, which helps them

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to think, feel, and act in ways that fulfill their highest ideals about their relationships (Mahoney et al., in press).

Theory and research on the sanctification of intimate relationships suggests that the sanctification of sexuality in one's marriage would be tied to marital and sexual quality (Mahoney, et al., in press). Specifically, research on marriage and premarital sexuality supports the idea that people who sanctify their relationships are more likely to invest effort in their relationship and, reciprocally, experience relational benefits (Mahoney et al., in press; Pargament & Mahoney, 2009). In national surveys as well as with community samples, greater sanctification of marriage has predicted less marital conflict and greater marital satisfaction and commitment after controlling for demographics, spouses' general religiousness, and unmeasured characteristics (i.e., fixed-effects modeling) of couples' relationships (DeMaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2010; Ellison, Henderson, Glenn, & Harkrider, in press; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Mahoney et al., 1999). Further, sanctification of sex in dating relationships has been associated with more frequent, varied, and satisfying sexual experiences after controlling for attitudes toward premarital sex and global religiousness (Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005).

In the present study, we hypothesized that greater sanctification of sexuality in marriage would correlate with newlyweds' better relational quality, specifically greater monthly frequency of sexual intercourse, sexual satisfaction, marital satisfaction, sexual intimacy, and spiritual intimacy. Because religious institutions have long promoted the sanctity of marital sexuality, we expected that greater sanctification would correlate with more frequent religious service attendance, prayer, and biblical conservatism. We also tested whether sanctification would predict our criteria beyond these common, sociological indices of global religiousness.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 83 married individuals from the Midwest (61% women;  $M = 31$  years old;  $SD = 10$ ; range 18 to 64 years). The sample was 75% Caucasian, 9.6% African American, 8.4% Latino, 2.4% Asian American, and a combined 4.6% other ethnicities. They identified primarily as Christian (72% total), including Catholic (28%), Protestant (22%), and nondenominational (22%) affiliations. Religious affiliations also included 2.4% Buddhist, 2.4% Muslim, 1.2% Hindu, 6% other, and 17% none. Just over half were employed full-time (55%), with others being employed part-time (15.7%), a full-time homemaker (14.5%), unemployed (6%), a student (4.8%), retired (2.4%), or other (1.2%). Participants reported the following breakdown of annual household income in 2007: 22.9% less than \$25,000, 36.1% between \$25,001 and \$50,000, 26.5% between \$50,001 and \$75,000, and a combined 13.2% over \$75,001. The average length of marriage was 13 months ( $SD = 5$ ; range 4 to 18), with 70% being first marriages. About 43% of the sample had children living with them and 29% had children with their current spouses.

### Procedures

We obtained addresses of newlywed households from public marriage license records in a Midwestern state between January 2006 and April 2007 ( $N = 1,111$ ). We randomly selected one spouse from each couple and mailed a postcard about the study, noting the option to complete mailed, paper-and-pencil surveys or online surveys. Eligibility criteria included being 18 years old or older, currently living with one's spouse, and being able to read and speak English. A total of 88 individuals responded and completed surveys, however five cases were excluded due to ineligibility ( $N = 83$ , including 63 online and 21 mailed surveys, with no significant differences between method of completion on the predictor and criterion variables). Participants received \$20 compensation. All study procedures were approved by our institution's Human Subjects Review Board.

### Measures

**Global religiousness.** The frequency of attendance at religious services was rated on a 9-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 8 (*more than once a week*). The frequency of private prayer was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 5 (*several times a day*). Biblical conservatism was measured using two items (i.e., the Bible is "God's word and everything will happen exactly as it says" and "the answer to all important problems") rated on a 5-point scale (0 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*;  $\alpha = .90$ ; Murray-Swank et al., 2005).

**Sanctification of sexuality in marriage.** A 20-item measure (Murray-Swank et al., 2005) was modified to assess the sanctification of sexuality in marriage and comprised two 10-item subscales: Manifestation of God ( $\alpha = .97$ ; participants could substitute Higher Power, Allah, Buddha, etc. for "God") and Sacred Qualities ( $\alpha = .95$ ). The participants rated items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Because the subscales were highly correlated ( $r = .82$ ,  $p < .01$ ), all items were summed for a total score ( $\alpha = .98$ ; see Table 1 for all items).

**Average monthly frequency of sexual intercourse.** Average monthly frequency of sexual intercourse was measured with one item using 4-point options (e.g., 1–4, 5–8, etc. up to 30 or more times; used by Greenblat, 1983).

**Sexual satisfaction.** Sexual satisfaction was assessed using nine modified items from an 11-item scale used by Young et al. (1998; e.g., "My spouse makes me feel sexually desirable" and "I am satisfied with the sexual relationship I have with my spouse"). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) and summed for a total score ( $\alpha = .94$ ).

**Sexual intimacy.** Sexual intimacy was defined as the level of comfort in disclosing and acting on sexual preferences with one's partner (e.g., "I feel comfortable initiating sex with my partner"). Six items of the Physical/Sexual Safety subscale of the Intimacy Safety Questionnaire (J. V. Cordova, personal communication, October 25, 2006; Cordova & Blair, 2006) were rated on a 5-point Likert scale

Table 1  
*Sanctification of Marital Sexuality: Items and Percentages of Three Points in the Scale (N = 83)*

Item	Below neutral	Neutral	Above neutral
<b>Sacred Qualities of Marital Sexuality Subscale</b>			
5. The sexual bond I have with my spouse is sacred to me.	16.8%	8.4%	74.7%
6. Our sexual relationship connects us to something greater than ourselves.	33.7%	22.9%	43.3%
8. There are moments when we are sexually intimate that time stands still and I feel like I am part of something eternal.	38.5%	18.1%	43.3%
1. Being sexually intimate with my spouse feels like a deeply spiritual experience.	31.3%	27.7%	41.0%
3. Our sexual connection is part of a larger spiritual plan.	34.9%	25.3%	39.8%
10. At moments, being sexually intimate with my spouse makes me very aware of a creative power beyond us.	45.7%	15.7%	38.5%
2. Our sexual relationship seems like a miracle to me.	40.9%	22.9%	36.1%
4. Our sexual relationship is holy.	37.3%	27.7%	34.9%
9. Our sexual relationship puts me in touch with the deepest mysteries of life.	42.2%	26.5%	31.2%
7. My sexual relationship with my spouse reveals the deepest truths of life to me.	43.3%	27.7%	28.9%
<b>Manifestation of God in Marital Sexuality Subscale</b>			
15. Being in a sexual relationship with each other is a reflection of God's will.	37.3%	15.7%	47.0%
11. God played a role in my decision to have a sexual relationship with my spouse.	45.7%	13.3%	40.9%
20. I see God's influence in our sexual relationship.	48.1%	22.9%	28.9%
17. In mysterious ways, God deepens the sexual intimacy I have with my spouse.	43.3%	30.1%	26.4%
16. God has been a guiding force in our sexual relationship.	46.9%	26.5%	26.4%
18. I feel God at work when we express ourselves sexually with each other.	49.4%	24.1%	26.4%
12. Our sexual relationship speaks to the presence of God.	50.5%	28.9%	20.5%
13. I experience God through the sexual bond I have with my spouse.	56.5%	22.9%	20.4%
14. God's essence is expressed in our sexual relationship.	56.5%	22.9%	20.4%
19. There are moments when I feel a strong connection with God when I am sexually intimate with my spouse.	54.1%	26.5%	19.2%

Note. Scores below neutral: 1 to 3. Neutral scores = 4. Scores above neutral: 5 to 7. Cronbach  $\alpha = .98$ .

(0 = *never* to 4 = *always*). Three items were reverse-scored such that higher total scores represented greater sexual intimacy ( $\alpha = .66$ ).

**Marital satisfaction.** The Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS; Schumm et al., 1986) included three items that were summed and rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *extremely dissatisfied* to 7 = *extremely satisfied*;  $\alpha = .97$ ).

**Spiritual intimacy.** Four items from a prior measure on spiritual disclosure (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008) were modified to assess the degree to which both partners disclosed their respective spiritual needs, questions, and struggles (e.g., "I feel safe being completely open and honest with my spouse about my faith"). Four items were added to assess perceived support of these disclosures (e.g., "My spouse is supportive when I reveal my spiritual questions or struggles to him/her"). All eight items were summed and rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*a great deal*).

## Results

### Descriptive Findings

**Global religiousness.** On average, our sample attended religious services several times a year, prayed several

times a week, and reported moderate biblical conservatism. These three global indices were moderately correlated ( $r$ s from .64 to .66,  $p < .001$ ). Compared to a 2006 nationally representative sample of married persons between the ages of 18 and 64 ( $n = 1,839$ ) obtained from the General Social Survey (Davis, Smith, & Marsden, 2009), our sample displayed roughly similar levels of attendance, however they prayed less often than is typical for married Americans.

**Sanctification of sexuality in marriage.** Regarding sanctification, participants reported a total mean of 74.8 ( $SD = 34.4$ ;  $\alpha = .98$ ) and utilized the entire response range (10 to 140). As Table 1 illustrates, the most highly endorsed Sacred Qualities item (i.e., score of 5, 6, or 7) was "The sexual bond I have with my spouse is sacred to me" (75%). The most highly endorsed Manifestation of God item (i.e., score of 5, 6, or 7) was "Being in a sexual relationship with each other is a reflection of God's will" (47%). Sanctification scores were uncorrelated with income, religious affiliation (dichotomized in two alternative ways, Christian vs. other and Catholic vs. other), number of marriages, contraception use, and other demographics with the exceptions of age ( $r = .26$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and number of children residing ( $r = -.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

**Marital and sexual quality.** On average, sexual intercourse occurred about 9 to 12 times per month. Typical of research with newlyweds, sexual satisfaction ( $M = 37.8$ ,  $SD = 7.4$ ), sexual intimacy ( $M = 20.7$ ,  $SD = 2.9$ ), and marital satisfaction ( $M = 17.4$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ) were slightly positively skewed, as was spiritual intimacy ( $M = 16.7$ ,  $SD = 5.2$ ). Correlations among criteria were significant, but they were small enough to analyze variables separately. The lowest correlation was between sexual satisfaction and frequency of sex ( $r = .23$ ), and the highest correlation was between marital and sexual satisfaction ( $r = .73$ ). Table 2 summarizes descriptive information and these correlations.

### Direct and Unique Links Between Sanctification and Marital Sexuality

**Bivariate correlations.** As expected, greater sanctification of sexuality was correlated with greater sexual satisfaction ( $r = .33$ ,  $p < .001$ ), sexual intimacy ( $r = .26$ ,  $p < .01$ ), marital satisfaction ( $r = .25$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and spiritual intimacy ( $r = .37$ ,  $p < .001$ ). No significant association emerged between sanctification and frequency of sex. Correlations were found between sanctification and each global religiousness variable ( $r_s \leq .5$ ,  $p_s \leq .001$ ), however global religiousness did not correlate significantly with the criterion variables.

**Hierarchical regressions.** Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted separately for sexual satisfaction, sexual intimacy, marital satisfaction, and spiritual intimacy. Demographics (i.e., those correlated with sanctification or commonly controlled for in marital research) were entered in Step 1, the three global religiousness variables (i.e., those typically included in past research on the interface of marriage or sexuality and religion) were entered in Step 2, and the sanctification score (i.e., main variable of interest) was entered in Step 3. Table 3 displays results from the final step. Overall, models accounted for a total of 23% to 39% of the variance in criteria. Sanctification of marital sexuality uniquely accounted for 11%, 14%, 9%, and 11% of the variance in sexual satisfaction, sexual intimacy, marital satisfaction, and spiritual intimacy, respectively. Global re-

ligiousness was not tied uniquely to criteria with the exception that greater frequency of prayer was linked to lower marital satisfaction.

### Discussion

This preliminary study opens a new chapter in empirical research on religion and sexuality, and it was used to examine the prevalence and implications of viewing sexuality in one's marriage as sanctified. Regarding prevalence, about three fourths of our newlyweds ( $N = 83$ ) agreed to some extent that their sexual relationship was "sacred," and about half indicated their sexual bond was "a reflection of God's will." Notably, our participants prayed less often and attended religious services about as often as is typical of married Americans. Regarding the implications of sanctification, the more newly married individuals perceived their sexual bond as having a spiritual dimension, the greater their reports of sexual satisfaction, sexual intimacy, marital satisfaction, and spiritual intimacy. Further, after controlling for demographics and global religiousness (i.e., attendance, prayer, and biblical conservatism, which have been tied to less premarital and extramarital sexual behavior; Donahue & Nielsen, 2005), sanctification uniquely accounted for 9–14% of the variation in these relational benefits.

These results are consistent with emerging theory on sanctification (Pargament & Mahoney, 2009). Specifically, newly married individuals who view sexuality as possessing sacred qualities and being a conduit of God's presence may invest greater time, energy, and resources into their marriages. Reciprocally, the cross-sectional design of the study raises the possibility that more satisfying marital and sexual relations may reinforce the belief that the sexual bond with one's spouse is spiritually significant. When newlyweds become more acquainted with the various challenges of married life, they may then prioritize their sexual bond because it simultaneously offers them an avenue of spiritual, emotional, and physical connection. Although longitudinal research is necessary to help untangle this causal ordering, this

Table 2  
Descriptive Information and Correlations for Sanctification and Criteria ( $N = 83$ )

Variable	Average freq. of sex <sup>s</sup>	Sexual satisfaction	Sexual intimacy	Marital satisfaction	Spiritual intimacy	Sanctification of sexuality
Average freq. of sex <sup>s</sup>	1	.23*	.24*	.30**	.12	-.11
Sexual satisfaction		1	.63***	.73***	.56***	.33***
Sexual intimacy			1	.51***	.41***	.26**
Marital satisfaction				1	.53***	.25**
Spiritual intimacy					1	.37***
Sanctification of sexuality						1
<i>M</i>	4.40	37.75	20.72	17.36	16.71	74.76
<i>SD</i>	1.94	7.42	2.85	4.48	5.19	34.37
Range	1–9	14–45	13–24	3–21	5–24	20–140

Note. Freq. = frequency.

<sup>s</sup> Spearman rank correlation coefficient. Otherwise, Pearson product moment correlations. Two-tailed tests.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 3  
Hierarchical Regressions on Sanctification and Marital and Sexual Quality

Variable	Sexual satisfaction			Sexual intimacy			Marital satisfaction			Spiritual intimacy			
	$\beta$ in step 3	$\Delta R^2$	$\Delta F$	$\beta$ in step 3	$\Delta R^2$	$\Delta F$	$\beta$ in step 3	$\Delta R^2$	$\Delta F$	$\beta$ in step 3	$\Delta R^2$	$\Delta F$	$P$
Step 1		.11	1.87	.110	.24	4.84	.001	.12	2.02	.085	.10	1.64	.159
Demographic variables													
Age	-.01			-.38**									
Gender	-.16			-.17			-.12						
Income	.03			.08			-.02						
#times married	-.04			.00			.09						
#children residing	-.11			-.08			-.01						
Step 2		.02	1.36	.639	.01	3.04	.849	.08	2.18	.087	.02	1.19	.695
Global religiousness													
Freq. attendance	.09			-.14									
Freq. prayer	-.29			-.10			.12						
Biblical conservatism	-.10			-.16			-.50**						
Step 3		.11	2.48	.002	.14	5.02	.000	.09	3.19	.003	.11	2.32	.002
Sanctification of sexuality	.43**			.49***			.40**						

Note. # = number; Freq. = frequency. Standardized beta coefficient reported. Degrees of freedom for each model: Step 1 (5, 76), Step 2 (8, 73), and Step 3 (9, 72). \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

novel study with newlyweds brings to light the potential benefits of sanctification of sexuality for marital and sexual qualities. More research is needed to determine if the positive associations of sanctifying sexuality extends to cohabiting and same-sex couples, and couples seeking therapy.

Unexpectedly, greater sanctification of sexuality was unrelated to the frequency of sexual intercourse for newlyweds. This null finding contrasts a prior study that focused on viewing premarital sex as sanctified (Murray-Swank et al., 2005) and found that undergraduates, who were involved in romantic relationships, reported more frequent premarital sexual activity when they viewed sex with their partners as sacred. On the other hand, for both unmarried college students (Murray-Swank et al., 2005) and our newlyweds, the cognitions of sanctification related to a greater sense of sexual satisfaction and pleasure derived from the sexual relationships. Given the cross-sectional design of this study, an interesting question that our findings cannot address is whether sanctification of sexuality may help sustain the frequency of newlywed couples' sexual activity over time by facilitating sexual satisfaction and intimacy. Because we utilized a newly married sample, and the newlywed period is often regarded as idyllic (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001), participants could be experiencing the maximum benefits from a sanctified sexual relationship during this transition from dating partners to spouses.

Our results support the notion that sanctification of marital sexuality is distinct from, but connected to, global religiousness. In fact, religious institutions and teachings often instruct believers in the sanctity of sexuality within marriage, which in turn may inspire individuals to perceive their own marital sexuality as sacred or connected to God. Therefore, we cannot overlook the potentially helpful role of general religious involvement in marital sexuality. Yet unexpectedly, our regression results found that more frequent prayer predicted less marital satisfaction. We speculate these cross-sectional findings reflect some newlyweds' efforts to cope with marital distress. In other words, greater prayer may be tied to less satisfaction because participants were turning to prayer to deal with unresolved marital or sexual difficulties. Prior research reports that prayer is often utilized as a religious coping mechanism during times of stress (Pargament, 2007). Global or more institutionalized aspects of religion may therefore play positive and enhancing as well as negative and restricting roles in sexuality. In seeking to further understand the role of religiousness, global religious indicators may tap into the impulse control function of religion, whereas sanctification taps into a deeper spiritual function.

In terms of limitations, our study relies on a small community sample where respondents were primarily Caucasian and Christian with relatively high levels of education. We also had a small response rate and were unable to determine the number of eligible individuals with accurate addresses via public records. Additional studies are needed to generalize findings to individuals with diverse cultural, religious, and educational backgrounds. Further, data from both

spouses is needed to assess whether (dis)similarities in sanctification predict better or worse relational functioning. Research should also address circumstances when sanctification may set the stage for debilitating spiritual struggles. For example, couples may often perceive serious marital difficulties, such as infidelity, as a desecration of the sacred sexual bond, and such perceptions may raise the risk of divorce or chronic marital distress (Mahoney et al., in press).

In spite of a small sample, we obtained significant findings that suggest strong associations between the sanctification of sexuality and aspects of marital and sexual quality, particularly beyond the role of global religiousness. These findings thus begin to unlock new avenues for researchers to pursue that can also inform premarital and marital psychoeducation and interventions that attend to healthy sexuality.

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