The Challenges of Interfaith Relationships

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For the degree of Master of Social Work

By

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Dedication

To Margaret and Michael Hallahan, my loving grandparents, who taught me that love has the power to overcome all odds. Your legacy is forever imprinted on my mind and my heart.
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Abstract

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Background and purpose: As interreligious relationships become increasingly common, spiritually-influenced relational conflicts are a growing concern impacting individual, marital and family life. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges of interfaith relationships through the lived experiences of mixed-faith couples. Focus of inquiry: What are the challenges faced by couples in interfaith relationships and their implications on individual and relational well-being? Methods: In a qualitative interview design, eleven individuals in interfaith relationships were interviewed about their experiences. The interview guide consisted of six major subject areas and multiple subtopics, as well as demographic information. Results: Participants most commonly faced challenges in the areas of family life and child-rearing, personal loss and sacrifice, holidays and religious customs, acceptance of religious differences, and differing levels of religious engagement. Discussion: Significance of the findings, limitations, implications for the field of social work, and future research recommendations are discussed.
Introduction

Conflict can be highly damaging, and in some cases even lethal, to relationships (Gordon & Chen, 2015), and has been linked to significant mental, physical and family health problems (Fincham & Beach, 1999). The perceived severity of these problems is correlated with higher instances of separation and divorce (Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1998). Karney & Bradbury (1997) suggest that conflict behavior corresponds to decreased relationship satisfaction, which may in turn lead to separation. Although conflict influences relationships in both positive and negative ways, it is especially important to explore the factors leading to relationship and marital dissolution, considering the prevalence of divorce in the United States. According to Kennedy & Ruggles (2014), overall divorce rates have doubled in the past two decades, with the exception of couples under age 35, who have experienced a slight decrease.

The outcomes of relational discord are important sources of reference in reviewing the effects of strained or failed relationships on human well-being. Separation and divorce cause a multitude of problems for couples and families; among these are emotional pain, negative impacts on children, and reduced standards of living (Lowenstein, 2005). Major relationship conflict is tied to greater physiological and psychological reactivity, which is experienced by both partners but even more severely by women (Wanic & Kulik, 2011). Stressed marital relationships result in a higher prevalence of depressive symptoms and functional health limitations (Choi & Marks, 2008), and can reduce access to social supports, further contributing to decreased physical and mental health (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; O’Leary, Christian, & Mendell, 1994). On the other hand, long-term relationships and marriages offer substantial
protective factors for individual health (Wanic & Culik, 2011). For better or worse, the quality of the marital relationship exerts a powerful influence on each individual’s overall well-being. While conflict is not in itself an indicator of a failed relationship, ongoing and recurrent conflicts can increase the risks of a couple separating (Gottman, 1994).

**Background**

**Why religion?** Although the types of challenges and conflicts experienced in marriages and romantic partnerships are numerous, studies have identified such frequently occurring themes as financial matters, role conflicts, female independence issues, alcohol and substance abuse, risk-taking behaviors, attitudes and laws concerning divorce, differences causing bitterness among partners, and religious differences, to name a few (Lowenstein, 2005). At an ecumenical conference, Naomi Schaefer Riley explained that couples tend to argue about three things – how to spend their time, how to spend their money, and how to raise their children – all of which are influenced by spiritual factors (National Review, 2015). While spirituality and religious faith are deeply interwoven in family life and can be a source of strength and unity, harsh or severe convictions and practices may result in pain and oppression, with deep impacts on family relationships (Walsh, 2010).

The focus of this study is the influence of religion on romantic relationships, in light of the social importance of religion in the U.S. and the currently evolving religious climate. Nearly 77% of Americans identify with some form of religion, and while the majority of these self-report as Christian, religious diversity is on the rise (Pew Research Center, 2015). Rates of interfaith marriage have risen among many religious groups, including Catholics, Jews and mainline Protestants, while the rates for more conservative
and fundamentalist Protestants have remained lower (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). Of all married American couples surveyed in 2007, approximately 22 percent had married outside of their own faith, a trend becoming more common with the increase of religious diversity and growth of immigrant communities (McCarthy, 2007). A research study conducted in 2014 discovered that four in ten Americans, or 39%, who married in 2010 or later have a spouse with a different religious affiliation; in comparison, only 19% of Americans had mixed-religion marriages in 1960 (Pew Research Center, 2015).

With the overall growth of interfaith unions, an examination of interreligious conflict is imperative to understanding the complexities of modern couples. Issues created by conflicting belief systems are just as likely among couples where one partner has no religious convictions (Glenn, 1982). As more individuals choose partners with different beliefs, changes are commonly seen in each partner’s commitment to his or her own faith (McCarthy, 2007). Marriage in the U.S. has simultaneously grown increasingly secular, with religious institutions having a diminished influence on one’s choice of life partner (Glenn, 1982). Social, personal, and familial changes occur as a result of interreligious relationships, bringing up both strengths and challenges that will continue to be seen in a society where religiously heterogamous relationships become increasingly more common (McCarthy, 2007).

**Influence of religion on couple and family life.** Although religion does not necessarily play a direct role in a couple’s decision to divorce (Lowenstein, 2002), it can have significant indirect influences on a couple’s values, practices, and decision-making processes (Walsh, 2010). Religious individuals often seek spiritual coping methods when confronted with challenges, incorporating their beliefs into decisions about whom to
marry, how to raise children, and how to address conflicts in relationships and life (Mahoney, 2010). Spirituality has been a strong protective factor for human beings during times of struggle, and is also deeply connected with cultural identity and tradition (Walsh, 2010). In this way, religious differences are often intertwined with cultural differences among partners, which can create additional sources of disagreement. Myers (2006) argues that religious homogamy, in which both partners share common beliefs and practice them together, is one of the strongest factors affecting a couple’s relationship quality; couples with similar beliefs tend to report greater relationship satisfaction and less conflict than those with differing belief systems. Religious affiliation helps to integrate a family into the larger community, increasing social supports and encouraging participation in family activities, which can serve to strengthen family relationships (Mahoney, 2010).

**Operationalization of terms.** For the purpose of this study, an interfaith couple, also referred to herein as a religiously heterogeneous, mixed-religion or interreligious couple, refers to a romantic partnership (married or unmarried) in which two partners have dissimilar religious identities or belief systems. This includes couples in which one of the partners is agnostic or atheist. Religious affiliation and religious identity will similarly be used to describe the beliefs an individual ascribes to, as self-reported by the individual. These terms allow for varying levels of religious involvement and participation, and do not assume that all couples regularly attend religious services or participate in institutionalized practices, but view themselves as holding significantly different beliefs.
**Empirical background.** Previous research has found that satisfaction in relationships tends to be higher among same-faith couples than in mixed-faith unions (Glenn, 1982), implying that there may be specific challenges beyond those commonly experienced by all couples. Sociological factors associated with religious beliefs have been found to further complicate romantic relationships (Greenstein, Carlson & Howell, 1993), with many studies concluding that religiously heterogeneous marriages face higher risks of divorce (Heaton & Pratt, 1990). This subject is of particular interest in the United States with the rising rates of interfaith marriage, making the challenges of interfaith families a mainstream concern in social and spiritual life (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). Although numerous studies have drawn correlations between religious beliefs and marital quality, the evidence is inconclusive, due to a considerable amount of extraneous variables (Glenn, 1982). Qualitative data from individual perspectives has highlighted some actual benefits of interreligious relationships, including multicultural skill sets that help individuals engage meaningfully in diverse societies (McCarthy, 2007). In contrast, some commonly cited struggles arise in decision-making, raising children, and in resolving conflicts related to religious participation, social support, lifestyle and values (Maurer, 1997).

**Challenge areas.** Research on interfaith relationships has pointed to some of the difficulties that couples experience. These differences are not universally agreed-upon, and can vary widely from one study to the next, depending on the objectives of the research and the sample used. A study of interdenominational couples identified the following challenges: decisions involving children and extended family; personal and family sacrifices; differing degrees of involvement in religion; overemphasizing the role
of religion in disagreements while missing other factors; expectations about converting one’s partner; and traditions that create feelings of exclusion by one partner or the children (Maurer, 1997). Curtis and Ellison (2002) conducted a study on the relationship between religious heterogamy and marital conflict, and found that denominational differences have very little effect on the frequency of disputes, while theological differences consistently result in more conflict. These theological differences gave rise to disagreements on domestic roles, household maintenance, and commitment to the functioning of the household; it has additionally been found that couples with different beliefs tend to argue more often about financial matters than religiously homogenous couples (Curtis & Ellison, 2002).

*Decisions involving children.* Among the studies covering the experiences of individuals in interfaith partnerships, a frequently included theme involves family life and raising children, suggesting that this may be one of the most common challenges couples face. Religion can impact decisions parents must make regarding the religious education of children, spiritual practices in the home, and where children should attend school (Maurer, 1997; Horowitz, 1999). Compromising becomes more difficult when there are theological differences regarding appropriate marital conduct, values, and lifestyle (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). As a result of these differences, many couples distance themselves from official doctrines of their religious institutions (Walsh, 2010), often practicing code-switching, in which they switch back and forth between two different religious traditions (McCarthy, 2007).

*Family and lifestyle.* Religious differences have also been found to cause conflicts between partners on the issues of cohabitation, family planning, celebrating
holidays, and matters involving the extended family (Horowitz, 1999; Maurer, 1997; Kalmijn, de Graaf & Janssen, 2005). Individuals who deeply value the role of religion in their lives, who regularly attend religious services and who are strongly affiliated with religious institutions have lower rates of cohabitation prior to, or in lieu of, marriage (Mahoney, 2010). While this may not present an issue for a religiously heterogamous couple whose values align on the sanctity of marriage, it may be more a struggle for couples with a non-affiliated partner or one who holds a more secular view of marriage (Kalmijn, et al., 2005). A study on Jewish and Christian couples found that celebrating holidays presented a deeply challenging and emotional struggle, with partners feeling a loss of identity in relinquishing their religious and cultural customs and the pleasure of sharing these with family members and children (Horowitz, 1999). Curtis & Ellison (2002) also explain challenges surrounding family planning as it relates to procreation and the use of contraceptives, which are topics strictly informed by religious principles for many individuals. A couple’s struggle to cope with these differences is often exacerbated by a lack of support from extended family members, leaving individuals feeling alienated or excluded by their own families (Maurer, 1997). These topics are only a few of those which can create fierce battle grounds for capitulation or compromise in relationships.

**Gaps in literature.** There are many quantitative studies providing statistical trends on the topic of religious intermarriage; however, these studies have a limited capacity to reveal the nature and complexity of the interfaith experience itself (McCarthy, 2007). The challenges associated with interfaith relationships remain generally understudied, while a great deal of the prior research has focused on the benefits of
religious homogamy (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). Currently published studies call for additional qualitative data to explore the lived experiences of couples, which is the purpose of the present study. It is necessary to explore and understand the struggles of interfaith couples to be better prepared to meet their needs. This study will continue to explore the major types of challenges, while contributing to the body of qualitative data on the experiences of interfaith couples, noting whether the findings are consistent with the existing literature.

**Aims and objectives.** The objective of this study is to explore some of the most prevalent challenges for interfaith couples in an effort to better understand the implications of religious differences in couple and family life. It is both relevant and critically important to further research the challenges of interfaith relationships, given the increasing rates of interfaith marriage, the role of religion in the lives of individuals, couples and families, and the potentially devastating consequences of unresolved religious conflict on relationships. More qualitative data is needed to identify the specific conflicts couples face on the level of lived experience, which can inform future supports and interventions. This study will use a qualitative interview guide approach to conduct one-on-one interviews on the experiences of individuals in interfaith relationships. Interviews will explore the similarities and differences of beliefs in religiously dissimilar couples, decisions involving children and extended family, losses and sacrifices, experiences of support and inclusion, anticipated and unresolved dilemmas, and overall experiences of being in interfaith relationships. Demographic information will be collected on participants’ ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, marital status,
religious identity, religious identity of partner, and the genders and ages of children, if any.
Method

Participants

The participants in the study included eleven individuals – five men and six women – between the ages of 29 and 65 with various faith traditions. Participants identified as Jewish, Muslim, agnostic/atheist and Christian, including those who were Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, and non-denominational Protestant. The sample included both U.S. and foreign-born individuals of Mexican, Latino, Irish, Tunisian, Italian, and mixed European descent. Although the eligibility criteria did not specify sexual orientation requirements, all eleven participants identified as heterosexual.

Individuals were eligible to participate if their religious beliefs differed significantly from those of their partners, regardless of the level of religious engagement/affiliation. Subjects holding some common beliefs but belonging to different denominations (i.e. Baptist and Catholic) were also included in the study, provided they themselves considered the difference to be significant. The participants were all actively involved in interfaith relationships when interviewed; six were married and five were in serious relationships. Five were raising one or more children in mixed-faith homes.

Measures

The researcher used a qualitative interview approach for the study, conducting forty-five minute to one-hour interviews with participants, based on an interview guide. The guide was written by the researcher based on published literature, and contained two sections: (1) demographics; and (2) experiences of being in interfaith relationships. As previous studies have not consistently or adequately reflected the experiential views of
interfaith couples, an open-ended questioning approach was used to effectively explore challenge areas (Rubin & Babbie, 2014).

**Interview guide.** Based on data collected in former studies, the interview guide was designed to identify challenges individuals and couples face in six general areas. Participants were asked about the following topics: (1) their beliefs, practices and customs, and those of their partner; (2) decision-making processes and views on raising children, family life, and extended family influence; (3) losses and sacrifices experienced as a result of religious differences; (4) experiences of support and exclusion; (5) unresolved challenges, coping strategies and impacts on their relationship; and (6) their overall experiences, both positive and negative, of being in interfaith relationships. Individuals were further prompted to discuss subtopics within these six general areas (refer to Appendix A, Interview Guide).

**Procedures**

This research study queried mixed-religion couples directly about their experiences in interfaith relationships, utilizing individual interviews to explore various aspects of personal, faith, couple and family life through the lens of lived experience. The subjects’ responses comprised the primary source of data, which was transcribed and analyzed according to themes.

The research process began with a detailed review of relevant literature on interfaith unions to select an area of focus drawn from gaps in the body of knowledge. The researcher obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board to work with human subjects. Once the study was approved, the researcher began recruiting subjects through snowball sampling, asking prospective participants to refer other qualifying individuals,
and providing an informational recruitment flyer. The researcher screened referrals for eligibility, and those selected were scheduled for an interview. Participants were individually interviewed in person, which took approximately 45 to 60 minutes each. Participants completed an adult consent form to be interviewed and audio-recorded. Using the interview guide, the researcher asked a series of questions related to the individual’s experience in an interfaith relationship. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and add additional information as needed. Audio recordings were reviewed and transcribed, then deleted. Information shared by participants was observed, analyzed, and organized by themes for data analysis. All personal identifying information was removed. Participants were not compensated for their participation in the study. No deception was used in carrying out these procedures. Data was analyzed and interpreted to formulate results and draw conclusions, outlined in later sections of this work (see Results and Discussion).
Results

Major Themes Identified

Participant responses collected in the individual interviews elicited information pointing to five general thematic areas (refer to Appendix B: Prevalent Challenge Areas) in which couples commonly experience challenges related to mixed-faith partnering; these include decisions involving family life and children (82%), loss and sacrifice (73%), holidays and religious customs (64%), acceptance of religious differences (64%), and levels of religious engagement (55%). Each theme provides insight on multiple sub-categories, which will be further discussed within the results by theme. There is some natural overlap in the findings across themes, as the complexities of various factors presented challenges in multiple areas of the interfaith experience. Strengths and protective factors contributing to relationship success are also included, as these factors were substantially evident in the subjects’ overall experiences.

The results are generally consistent with previous literature, which has found all of the above-mentioned themes to be common challenge areas among interfaith couples and families. Some findings provided by prior studies were not present or relevant in the current study. Individuals generally shared perspectives indicating a lack of major daily challenges, citing reasons such as having a partner who is open-minded and willing to embrace differences. Four individuals (36%) described their faith differences as a positive, desirable characteristic of their relationships, while six (55%) provided mixed reviews, inclusive of both benefits and challenges. One participant described having a more negative experience, and terminated her relationship during the data collection period. Among this group, those who remarked on the experience as most positive were
those identifying as agnostic or atheist, while individuals with more concrete religious identities generally viewed interfaith relationships from a neutral perspective.

**Family life and decisions involving children.** Consistent with existing literature, the most prominent challenge experienced by interfaith couples revealed in this study involves family life and raising children (Maurer, 1997; Horowitz, 1999), with primary emphasis on religious education. Nine of the eleven participants (82%) indicated that they have experienced challenges with decision-making in regards to children and religious instruction, which includes some participants who do not yet have children, but have faced challenges in planning for children in the future. Five participants had children at the time of the study, and four were pregnant or expecting; therefore, the discussion on children was a relevant concern for a majority (82%) of participants. All eleven participants acknowledged plans to have some form of religious instruction in child-rearing and family life, yet there were differences and uncertainty expressed in how these decisions are being, or will be, made. Six of the participants (55%) explained that they are raising or plan to raise their children in their partner’s faith, rather than their own. Conversely, five participants (45%) asserted that not being able to raise their children within their own faith – at least to some degree – would be a deal breaker. For example, a 31-year-old identifying as Baptist stated, “I want my kids to believe in God and go to church … you can’t be raised without that. You need guidance, and it comes down to believing in God. If this comes up in dating and we disagree, I think that will be a red flag”. Similarly, a 29-year-old male participant explained, “What is really important to me is that our children are raised as Muslims. Kids don’t know the truth; it’s not their fault. When they grow up, we have to tell them the truth right away. I will not
accept others teaching my kids other religions. Most importantly at home… they will think like us.”

Nine of the eleven participants described having unresolved conflicts related to how they will provide religious instruction and make decisions for their children. Several participants expressed the following:

Since we don’t have kids yet, I guess it hasn’t come up. We’d have to talk later. I don’t know if he’d want that [for children to have a bar/bat mitzvah]. (Jewish female, age 38, recently pregnant with atheist husband).

It will be crunch time once this baby is born. He loves my daughter to death, but he’s also strict with her. You know, I have my daughter from another relationship, so he doesn’t really interfere in church activities since she’s been in church clubs since she was born. He can’t really take that away from her, but with this baby, we’ll see. I don’t know if I’ll be able to do the same things from day one… take him to church, present him, dedicate him, give a blessing over the baby… the things that I feel are really important. (Christian female expecting a baby with her Jewish partner, age 34).

He feels like we should just have one belief as a family and raise our children under the same belief. We haven’t talked about it yet, whether they would go to school to learn more about the religion. I’m not sure what he grew up doing. For me, I had Bible study and Catechism every Sunday… I’m just not sure what that would be [in Islamic faith tradition]. But for boys, there’s some kind of ceremony where they get circumcised when they’re a little older. I haven’t talked to him
about it yet, but that’s something I wouldn’t want to do, to put my child through that. (Female Catholic age 32, pregnant with first child with Muslim husband).

One concern highlighted in prior research which did not surface in this study is that of differences impacting the use of birth control (Curtis & Ellison 2002); nine of eleven participants expressed that religion was not an influential factor in family planning. However, two participants indicated that they were open to having abortions while their partners were not, three individuals disagreed with their partners about having children before marriage, and four disagreed about cohabitation before marriage. In all of these cases, decision-making power was yielded to the partner with stronger religious convictions:

If we had to come to a decision about her becoming pregnant again, I would have to respect her faith which does not believe in abortion, but I would not object to it. But being Catholic, she would have strong feelings about not aborting a child. (Male, Methodist, 65).

He wanted to move in together after we had been dating for about a year, and I was like, “not without a ring on this finger”! So I guess that’s sort of something I was brought up with; it was instilled in my faith. (Female, Jewish, 38).

For one participant, the faith-based decision of waiting to have sex until marriage was a primary area of concern:

One of my biggest things is my virginity. That always comes up… but it’s sacred to me and I don’t want to give it to anybody. So the religion plays on that. That is something very strong for me. It’s a huge thing I see coming. And I know that’s something important for him [my partner]. (Female, Baptist, 31).
**Loss and sacrifice.** Eight of the eleven participants (73%) identified with experiencing losses and/or sacrifices which they deemed significant or meaningful as a result of being in an interfaith relationship. These losses included differences in the reality of family and marital life versus their ideals, sacrifices made in passing their faith on to their children, worries about estrangement from the families of origin, loss of important holidays, customs, and religious symbols, decreasing religious engagement, and experiencing feelings of exclusion. These are similar findings to the experiences of sacrifice explored in other studies (Maurer, 1997). Four participants described not being as engaged in their own religion as they would like to be, adversely impacting their perception of self and faith identity:

> It’s my own internal worries… do they care that he’s not Jewish? Or that I don’t have a Jewish last name since I took his name? It’s something that plays in my head. It’s like I can never feel Jewish enough….I suppose the greatest challenge is that I’m on this journey of reclaiming my own faith. I hope to make my Jewish faith stronger, and I feel like that needs to happen for the girls [two children] to be engaged. (Female, Jewish, 42).

Feeling excluded or alienated from the faith community, social circle or family of origin were other common sentiments depicted in the participants’ stories:

> The Jewish community is pretty exclusive. People he knows from the temple or college, they know I’m not Jewish and completely ignore me. They act like I’m not there. They call me “shiksa”, or other derogatory words because I am with a Jewish man and I am not Jewish…the ones who intermarried pretty much all
converted their wives. I think I’m only one of one or two who haven’t converted. (Christian female, 34).

It’s my family that has been more narrow-minded. They’ve talked to me about it, and they don’t agree with me about converting. My aunt talked to me and wants me to stay Catholic, so that’s really important for them. I don’t think they would be accepting if I started covering myself. It’s probably pretty hurtful too, that after all these years of being raised a certain way, that I would change my belief. (Catholic female age 32, contemplating conversion to Islam for husband).

The loss of sentimental childhood traditions and religious holidays was another trend among participants, with four participants noting difficulties in this area:

We celebrated Christmas; I liked to see my mom-in-law happy, but I’ll be honest. I’ve gone back and forth. I want to dull down Christmas and Christian holidays. I have to start telling them Hanukah is the best, because Christmas is more fun… I think I felt a little hurt because I want Hanukah to be more fun to them [children]. (Female, Jewish, 42).

The Christmas tree was a considerable loss for some, with a female Christian participant describing, “I can’t get to him… that’s one thing I can’t break… no Christmas tree. During the holidays, I wanted to get stockings, a tree, but he wouldn’t allow it. I just really miss that smell of pine, the lights… I miss Christmas.” An Episcopalian man similarly explained, “If I was living anywhere else, I would at least get a little tree. Even if the cats hated it. That’s something I miss… My grandma used to always have one. I’m working on it.”
Participants commonly shared concerns about the future, which many describe as remaining unknown:

I do wonder how the future will be for us… marriage and kids… if we’re going to grow into this hybrid family, or if one of us will have to adapt, or our third option, not work out at all. (Male, 30, agnostic).

Other losses and sacrifices included the lack of being able to share and discuss religion with one’s partner, which six participants described as a source of arguments. This finding is consistent with a study by Curtis and Ellison (2002), which stipulated that theological differences present a major subject of relational disputes. Participants expressed loss in not being able to discuss their faith with their partners, as these conversations were frequently avoided altogether. In addition, three participants deeply missed having a partner equally committed to their children’s religious education and willing to contribute their share of time, effort and support.

**Holidays and religious customs.** The subject of negotiating about religious holidays resurfaced frequently, with seven of the eleven participants considering it a significant challenge. As noted earlier, the symbolism of holidays often held sentimental value for subjects, who regretted these losses at their respective times of the year. Several partners in relationships involving one individual of Jewish tradition commented on the overlap of Christmas and Hanukah which occurred in 2016, making the holiday crisis that much more difficult to reconcile.

This year it was Hanukah and Christmas at the same time, so we just did something ourselves and completely disconnected from our families, which is normally the tradition for us both. He said, “let’s make it even. I don’t do
anything, and you don’t do anything.” So we all went away to Ensenada, but we didn’t really celebrate anything. (Female, Christian, age 34).

The biggest issue is what we do for the holidays. My not very covert dislike for Christmas is kind of a challenge, because my husband is really into Christmas and I’m not. So this year, Hanukkah was on Christmas Eve, and I didn’t want to step on his mother’s toes, so we went to her house and watched Christmas movies. And I absolutely hate Christmas. (Female, Jewish, age 38).

Other issues surrounding holidays and religious customs included the dislike of commercialism associated with holidays, discomfort or dislike of the partner’s religious services, and dietary or clothing regulations. Some of the participants describe these situations:

We did Ramadan together, which was really hard, because you can’t eat or drink all day until sundown for a whole month. Especially when you’re working… and then I would have to prepare five course meals while I’m starving. Other things, such as how Muslim women cover themselves. He’d like if I did that, but I don’t think I would feel comfortable. And I don’t want to give up eating pork, either. We’ve had some heated discussions on that, but I don’t think it makes me a horrible person… (Female, Catholic, 32).

I feel uncomfortable going to Jewish synagogue, it’s just awkward, and I have no idea what I’m doing. But then again, I’m also uncomfortable in churches! (Male, 41, Christian).

The Catholic religion seems too repetitious. They drum it into your head, saying the same stuff over and over. The Church is a business, and I look at ministers
and preachers as good performers. A lot of it to me is phony. I’m not real fond of the church or the pope. (Male, Methodist, 65).

**Acceptance of religious differences.** Seven of the eleven participants discussed difficulties with accepting their partner’s faith or in reverse, being accepted as having a different belief system. This resulted in feelings of pressure to convert, misunderstandings, or the minimalizing of one partner’s beliefs.

We had some discussions and disagreements about the higher power. I know God is more important for my wife than any religion is for me. She says she can’t get anything out of me, but she doesn’t like what I have to say. I believe in the universe and energy around us. Love is religion. (Male, 41, Christian).

I challenged her religion and she didn’t want to give it up. We disagree over some things. The biggest one was convincing her to convert. I have high expectations of conversion. It is needed for her to get to the safety zone of trust. (Male, 29, Muslim).

Honestly accepting her views has been hard for me. It just doesn’t make sense in my head how anyone can just decide where to apply logic or not apply logic in life. If one of us critiques an ideology, then we are critiquing the other’s faith, so maybe it’s not something I can fully explore. And sometimes I wonder if she will accept me in the future when kids come up, because kids change everything. (Male, 30, Agnostic.)

Other findings on the subject of acceptance included experiences of prejudice in relation to religious identity. Five of the eleven subjects reported having experienced prejudice based on religion, or based on being involved in a religiously heterogeneous relationship.
This was particularly noticeable among Jewish participants and those who found themselves in the religious minority. Participants shared experiencing the impacts of anti-Semitism, concerns about perceptions of religious identification, and falling victim to hurtful stereotypes:

People come to me and make comments about cheap Jews. Or they ask me if I’m really Jewish, because I don’t have a big nose. There are these offensive jokes and it’s a cultural thing, but it’s only okay if I say it. My grandmother was a Holocaust survivor, you know… and my dad, he would get beat up for being Jewish and called slanderous names. (Female, Jewish, 38).

I am really concerned about being in America and having to identify myself as Muslim. I feel like people are very judgmental here and Muslims don’t have the best reputation. It’s something I’d be embarrassed or shy to tell people. It would be different if we were in Tunisia. (Female, Catholic, 31).

There’s been a lot of animosity, and we always get stuck between that. There’s a reason we [Israeli Jews] needed a safe haven, and now in this country, with Trump at the top of it all, it’s really scary. I didn’t think I would have to explain it to my children. I never thought we’d go backwards. (Female, Jewish, 42).

Levels of engagement and the role of religion. Nine of the eleven participants found that they were more engaged in religion during childhood than adulthood, and attributed this shift to reasons of religious differences among romantic partners (78%), competing forces of different practices to achieve family balance (67%), social problems in the faith community (56%), or lack of interest in religion, as it was more of a family tradition (78%). Six participants expressed that they would take issue with their partners
becoming more engaged in religious beliefs and practices, arguing that part of what enables the success of the relationship is the flexibility and lack of adherence to religious orthodoxy. Seven of eleven participants identified their partners as flexible and “not very religious”, and seven individuals participate in their partner’s practices to some extent. Four participants felt that a requirement to convert would be a deal breaker. They explain their thoughts further:

Deep down, he would like it if I would convert to Judaism. His friends are strictly Jewish boys who marry Jewish girls. They date around, but at the end of the day, they marry Jewish girls. He’d like it, but it’s not going to happen. I’m Christian and I’m pretty happy being Christian. (Female, Christian, 34).

It [religion] would have been a consideration before getting married if she was super religious, like if we were doing Jewish Shabbat on Fridays or something. I have a coworker like that, who observes the high holidays. For my wife, it’s more cultural. I think if she started getting too into it that would really change things, and I wouldn’t be willing to get involved. (Male, 38, atheist).

She has mentioned things about me participating more in the future, and she wants to get more involved. That would be more concerning to me, because I don’t have the desire to be part of a religious community. (Male, 30, agnostic).

**Strengths and protective factors.** In spite of the wide array of challenges they may face, individuals in mixed-faith relationships also shared insights on some of the factors, practices, and characteristics which contribute to their success. These included practicing mutual respect and openness to share practices and traditions, emphasizing common values, using spirituality to improve well-being, and receiving social support.
**Sharing traditions.** With declining religious engagement a trend that has been found among many interfaith couples (McCarthy, 2007), cultural and faith-based traditions are often more important and central to an individual’s faith identity. Joint participation in religious customs has been shown to have a positive correlation to happiness (Heaton & Pratt, 1990). This trend was similarly evident in the current study, with participants expressing their satisfaction in being able to share their rituals with their partners. Individuals generally found it easier to engage in their partner’s faith customs when the partner identified more strongly with the cultural aspects of their faith, as these allowed for inclusion even when belief systems differed. Six of the eleven participants identified more strongly with the cultural and ritualistic elements, such as food, weddings, symbolic practices, holidays, ceremonies, and a personal sense of spirituality, with less emphasis on regular attendance and theological doctrine. Parallel to the findings of other studies, interfaith couples often cope with the complexities of spiritual differences by participating in one another’s practices and improvising new, shared traditions (Walsh, 2010). Couples find this is more easily accomplished with openness and flexibility:

It’s been fun. I don’t think she has a strong faith, and I certainly don’t. I have friends who are Atheist and sort of militant about the whole thing. But I’ll light the candle… if there’s a Seder dinner, I’ll sit and participate. I like it in the sense that we’re all coming together, breaking bread together. She comes to my family’s Christmas, and we did say some religious stuff in our wedding ceremony that made the family happy. So we do each other’s things and we’re pretty flexible about it. (Male, atheist, 38).
I think Roman Catholicism is very ingrained in Mexican background, the Mexican culture. It feels very much as one. Those that surround me… they’re Catholic by culture, religion and tradition. I would say I’m okay with the traditions, especially Christmas. Singing carols, setting up the nacimiento [nativity], meeting with the family… I like tradition. I like how it brings people together. I’m for it. (Male, agnostic, 30).

I feel like I identify as more culturally Jewish than religious, but Judaism is rare in the sense that the religion is also a culture. I guess you could say I’m Jew-ISH [with emphasis on the second syllable]. I think if I was really religious, then we probably wouldn’t be together. But here we are, and he now craves pastrami sandwiches and matzo ball soup! (Jewish female, 38).

**Common values.** Participants frequently discussed their ability to compromise on religious differences through shared worldviews and value systems. Subjects were most commonly aligned with their partners on the values of being a good person and respecting others (100%), prioritizing marriage and family (91%), celebrating holidays and cultural traditions (82%), and sharing similar views on politics, social responsibility, and gender roles (91%). 63% of participants expressed that having a sense of community was important, and found the cultural exchange to be a benefit of interfaith unions.

My wife and I are really similar in terms of our political ideologies and the way we see the world. We are both Democrats and social activists. We are both pretty political people, so I think it would actually be harder for us if we didn’t have that common thread. (Male, Christian, 41).
I feel like our values and morals are very similar. Family is really important to us. We’re getting married soon, and neither of us believe in divorce… we would like to have children and raise them in a good environment, to be good people, help others, be generous, thoughtful and caring… (Female, Catholic, 32).

Marriage is important to us…. and fidelity. Getting together with the family, and raising children… that was a really important part of our life, raising a family. We’ve been the typical husband and wife from a different age when male dominance was more common than today, but we’re happy the way it is. (Male, Methodist, 65).

**Spirituality.** Spirituality in itself was seen as a source of support and hope, improving the quality of the couple’s relationship and their ability to recover from conflict. Participants explain how their faith has been a source of support and encouragement in trying times:

We lost our first baby before she was born, and we were going through money problems… that was really hard, and we were on opposite sides of the country at the time. I think that could’ve been a major problem. It put stress on everybody, and caused some arguments. But I would say my faith helped me get through that time. (Female, Catholic, 64).

We all make mistakes, and I’m not always doing that great, but it helps to have something keeping me aware and on track. I always pray to God to become a better person every day. (Male, Muslim, 29).

**Social support.** Couples frequently spoke of the helpfulness of support they received through experiences of acceptance in their social circles. Those who felt
accepted by their families cited family unity and inclusion as a strong indicator of support within their relationships.

My parents told me to live my life with my heart… it was never frowned upon in my family to date outside the religion. And same with his family, his mom has always been super supportive. She’s always jumped in… I invited her to temple, and she came to my daughter’s baby naming ceremony. So I feel very lucky in that. (Female, Jewish, 42).

When we got married, her dad did the ceremony, and he’s a rabbi. At the very end, my mom went up to him and said she really liked the prayers and she was really touched by it. So it was a little bit of bonding, and I think it brought us all closer. I give it to them, because her parents are very religious, but they’ve always been accepting of me. (Male, atheist, 38).

While many individuals were able to identify friends or family members who supported their relationships, 82% felt that they would not feel comfortable going to family members for help in resolving conflicts, nor would they seek assistance from an individual in the faith community. They generally expressed a preference for counsel from a secular source, feeling that a member of a faith community would tend to be biased towards one partner’s beliefs. Although all but one of the participants (91%) were receptive to seeking help from outside their relationships, they were unsure of whom they could turn to for assistance in resolving a dispute, and did not know of any specific resources available to interfaith couples in their communities.
Discussion

Interpretation of the Findings

This study explored challenges among a sample of individuals in mixed-faith relationships to gain further insights into the intricacies of the lived experience. A large majority of the group felt that being in an interfaith relationship came with both benefits and drawbacks, but that the rewards outweighed the challenges. Among the most challenging areas of compromise were decisions involving children, feelings and experiences of loss, negotiating observance of holidays and religious customs, accepting differences in beliefs and issues of conversion, and differences in the levels of religious engagement. These themes were generally consistent with the findings of a study by Maurer (1997), particularly in the areas of conflicts regarding children, loss, partner acceptance and differing degrees of engagement. As suggested by Whitehall (2000), experiencing loyalty issues with the family of origin is a common dilemma which resurfaced in this study, with participants often finding it difficult to explain to family members their decision to intermarry or potentially convert to another faith. Participants also discussed difficulties compromising on decisions affecting children, lifestyle, holidays, and religious education, engaging in code-switching as was previously reported in the research (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; McCarthy, 2007). This study also strongly supported the previously discussed trend that couples in interfaith relationships may distance themselves from religious institutions and doctrines (Walsh, 2010), which was viewed as an adaptive strength and protective factor in this study.

While the findings are aligned with prior research, there were also several areas of divergence. As has been discussed, qualitative studies on interfaith relationships have
presented diversity in research results, making the findings of such studies more inconclusive based on the limited number of qualitative, experience-based studies currently available. Earlier studies had noted that couples overemphasized the role of religion in disagreements, and experienced exclusion based on their children being raised in a different faith than their own (Maurer, 1997). These findings were not evident in this study; however, these may be areas for further exploration. Other differences include higher reports of happiness among interfaith couples than prior research has described, as statistical research on interreligious marriages has previously found lower levels of satisfaction among couples in interfaith partnerships, particularly when one partner had no religion (Glenn, 1982). Based on the accounts of individuals in this study, atheist/agnostic individuals and/or their partners described the relationship to be a positive learning experience providing benefits for both the couple and their children. Although the small sample size does not provide a generalizable conclusion to replace the findings in earlier studies, it does suggest that impersonal statistical reporting may not be congruent with the actual experiences of individuals living in the interfaith context. In addition, while previous studies have found that individuals may experience exclusion or feel like outsiders in their own families when their children belong to a different faith (Glenn, 1982), this was not reported by this study’s participants, who expressed appreciation for the cultural enhancement to their children’s upbringing.

In accordance with its original intent, the research focused on religious differences due to the growing rates of interfaith marriage in the United States, in conjunction with high rates of divorce, potentially making interfaith couples and families a vulnerable population (Greenstein, Carlson & Howell, 1993). The results supported
prior claims that interfaith couples do in fact face additional challenges beyond the common issues experienced by most couples, and highlighted the most pressing concerns as reported directly from the individuals who are currently facing them. While religion is a factor contributing to relational conflict, researchers must also consider how conflicts beyond religious differences may play an equal if not greater role in family disputes. It is difficult to isolate religious heterogamy as a risk factor for separation when the majority of couples find that they are able to successfully mediate differences through mutual respect, shared values, communication, willingness to compromise, and support from family and friends. Additional studies should be conducted which compare the findings of studies on religious challenges to the results of studies on the most significant challenges affecting the general the population.

Although none of the participants had ever found that their challenges put their relationship at risk of dissolving, one individual experienced a breakup within the timeframe of this study due to religious differences over sex before marriage. She had previously described feeling hopeful about the future and about the prospects of her partner considering conversion; however, multiple misunderstandings surfaced as a result of a lack of communication and respect for one another’s values. This suggests that couples’ risk perceptions may be distorted by feelings of love and romance, which can deteriorate unexpectedly once they reach a point where a dispute cannot be resolved. Similarly, a number of discrepancies in reporting were noted when both partners in a couple participated in the study, as partners tended to misrepresent or inaccurately interpret their significant other’s views, which was a considerable finding when comparing their responses. Some had a tendency to de-emphasize the partner’s
experiences of sacrifice and loss, projecting their own ideals and perspectives onto the understanding of their partner’s experience. This suggested the common occurrence of misunderstanding and miscommunication in relationships, with inaccurate assumptions potentially leading to future disagreements.

Although this study examines the challenges posed by values and preferences stemming from theological beliefs, a couple’s ability to successfully navigate these challenges may also depend on their ability to problem-solve, communicate, and arrive at compromises based on mutual understanding. With many of the participants avoiding difficult conversations about their children’s religious education, future expectations of conversion, and other unresolved dilemmas, these are issues likely to surface and become major challenges later on. Since participants often reported feeling uncomfortable going to family members for help and were unaware of support available in the community, this is an area of unmet need. Couples lacking the ability to communicate and resolve disputes are likely to experience more challenges over longer periods of time, and religious disagreements may only be a symptom of a larger issue (Reiter & Gee, 2008); the importance of direct communication over more avoidant strategies was supported by the findings, with couples acknowledging that differences were best tolerated and integrated after allowing time for adjustment.

Limitations

Research limitations should be considered in applying and interpreting the conclusions of this study. The sample size of the study was small due to time constraints and limited access to interfaith couples in the local community. In addition, the sample lacked some diversity in religion, as participants were generally either Jewish, Muslim,
atheist, or Christian, of various denominations. The questions asked in the study focused on challenges, which presented a type of forced-choice question, which may have guided the subjects to focus on particular aspects of the interfaith experience more than others. However, individuals had detailed reasons for the views expressed, and interview questions were loosely structured in order to allow the subjects to focus on areas most significant in their experiences.

**Areas for Future Study**

There is a vast number of areas calling for further exploration in order to better understand the experiences of interfaith couples. While the single interview is able to provide deep insights at the time of the study, it would be more enlightening to conduct longitudinal research on the topic, due to the many changes that may occur over the course of a relationship; phases of dating, marriage and child-rearing, and aging into older adulthood all bring their own unique challenges in addition to the challenges of religion. It may be even more useful to conduct multiple longitudinal studies focusing on various populations and age groups which utilize more diverse and larger sample sizes, to note additional risks and protective factors as applied to specific populations. The present study included individuals of multiple faith traditions and highlighted similarities and common struggles; however, individual religions have their own nuances that may present additional challenges. For example, Jewish individuals in the study had more defined faith identities with less room for flexibility when there was a family history of involvement in the Holocaust. This should be further explored to discover whether descendants of Jewish Holocaust survivors experience a greater number of challenges in interfaith relationships than individuals of other faith backgrounds. Another area for
investigation may be to further explore the effects of merging Muslim and Christian ideologies, particularly when there are expectations of conversion and significant cultural differences to negotiate. It would be beneficial to make comparisons across several faith combinations, and to discover the reasons partners may provide discrepancies in their answers about one another. The degree of acceptance and exclusion within the faith communities and by religious institutions would be an area for further exploration, as this was perceived to be another area of conflict and has been presented as a source of resistance in integrating the faith traditions of interfaith couples. Although some individuals mentioned this topic in their personal accounts, it was not an area of focus. The general lack of qualitative research in this vein of study leaves many questions to be further investigated. Additional qualitative studies are needed to draw more consistent conclusions which can be applied to larger populations.

**Implications for the Field of Social Work and Social Science Research**

With common struggles surrounding decision-making and communicating about religious differences, it is imperative that couples engage in dialogue on their preferences, future expectations, and feelings about interfaith partnership early in the relationship. This communication should be emphasized in couples and family counseling by social workers and therapists, encouraging couples to explore areas of misunderstanding, assumptions, and subjects of strong disagreement in order to improve understanding, while exploring and developing creative solutions. This also calls for practitioners to be familiar with the common challenges of interfaith couples, which can impact not only the well-being of the relationship but also the developmental trajectory of their children (McCarthy, 2007). Training on the challenges and protective factors of spirituality and
Religiosity should be provided for any professionals working with couples and families of diverse backgrounds, as this will better inform recovery processes and allow for interventions that draw from the strengths associated with intermarriage. While many couples do not seek counseling in the early relationship stages, this communication can be encouraged more consistently in society by community leaders, including those within religious institutions, political organizations, education, and social or recreational settings, as well as by individual members of the couple’s social circles. Organizations offering counseling and support to interfaith families should improve outreach efforts so that more couples are aware of the resources available to them.

The strengths of shared values, religious tradition-sharing, spiritual support, and acceptance from family and friends should be utilized to further provide support to couples in interfaith relationships. Education on religious diversity may help to bridge gaps and fears of the unknown, improving family and social acceptance, which will help couples feel included in their natural social systems. Another important area for further development must occur within the religious institutions themselves, as many faith systems have traditionally contributed to experiences of exclusion and alienation among the interfaith community. While religious leaders fear the further weakening of religious institutions, ignoring the needs of modern couples and shaming interfaith marriage can discourage engagement and lead to further separation of people and faith (National Review, 2015). Faith leaders must work together to bridge misunderstanding and promote acceptance of the growing numbers of interfaith families, which will help to provide the community-level support needed to navigate challenges they face. Some considerations for useful programs and services include the development of interfaith
marriage preparation classes, support groups, and trainings on diversity awareness to promote interfaith dialogue and prevent religious discrimination. With global religious conflicts and tensions raising fear and concern for many individuals, religious inter-mixing may provide a tool for promoting peace, unity and stability. Cooperation among diverse religious institutions is critical in successful inclusion efforts, which should continue to shape interventions addressing the specialized needs of diverse families, as this helps to support the well-being of larger communities around the world.

Conclusion

The research question guiding this study sought to explore the challenges and types of conflict commonly experienced by couples in interfaith romantic partnerships. This question was answered by interviewing the sample, which resulted in five primary areas of conflict and multiple subtopics. Although strengths were not part of the original focus, the research illuminated four major categories of protective factors which will be instrumental in promoting acceptance and recovery as interfaith couples and communities work to mediate their challenges and sources of disagreement. While the findings of the study cannot be universally generalized to all interfaith couples, they do provide rich insights about the experiences of an ever-growing and changing community whose needs are increasingly significant and relevant in social science research and practice. Relationships, family, and religion make up some of the most meaningful aspects of the human experience, and it is critical that social service professionals, researchers, religious organizations, and political leaders work together to meet the growing needs of the diverse global community.
References


http://ann.sagepub.com.libproxy.csun.edu/content/612/1/187.full.pdf


Appendix A: Interview Guide

The Challenges of Interfaith Relationships

Research Question: What are the challenges experienced by couples in interfaith relationships?

Participants will be asked to provide the following demographic information:
- Age
- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Marital Status
- Religious identity
- Sexual orientation
- Religious identity of partner
- Gender and age of children, if any

Primary Question Areas and Sub-Questions

1. Please describe your overall experiences and challenges of being in an interfaith relationship.
2. Please describe your religious beliefs and your level of engagement in religious practices, and those of your partner.
   a. In which ways do your partner’s beliefs align with your own? In which ways do your partner’s beliefs differ from your own?
   b. How important is your religious faith and identity to you?
   c. What rituals, customs, and values are important to each of you?
3. Can you discuss decisions involving children and extended family? These may include raising children, providing religious instruction to children, family planning, celebrations, schooling, traditions, and family influence, etc.
   a. How do your religious beliefs impact these decisions?
   b. Which of these areas do you agree and disagree on?
4. What are some of the losses or sacrifices you and/or your partner have experienced as a result of your religious differences?
   a. What changes, if any, have you and/or your partner experienced over the course of your relationship as an interfaith couple? (Religious views, practices, participation, lifestyle)
   b. What is the role of each partner’s beliefs in the relationship? Do one partner’s beliefs play a more dominant role? If so, please explain.
   c. What are your feelings surrounding the experience of loss?
   a. Do either of you expect the other to convert or alter your views, beliefs, or practices?
   b. To what extent does your partner support your religious beliefs and practices, and to what extent has it caused conflict in your relationship?
   c. Are there any conflicts related to differing religious world views on race, gender or sexual orientation, such as views on gender roles? Have either of you faced prejudice?

6. What is the greatest challenge you have personally experienced in an interfaith relationship? This may include unresolved or anticipated future dilemmas. Please explain.
   a. What strategies do you have for overcoming these challenges?
   b. Have you ever felt your relationship was at serious risk due to religious differences?
   c. What are some of the resources and/or sources of support you would turn to for help?
## Appendix B: Prevalent Challenge Areas

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic Area</th>
<th>Participants Experiencing Challenge</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family life and children</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Losses and sacrifices</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holidays and religious customs</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acceptance of religious differences</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>Levels of engagement</td>
<td>6</td>
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