The Transformative Experience Questionnaire (TEQ): Spirituality in a Couples Context

Erik Mansager
Casa de los Niños
Daniel Eckstein
Capella University, Minneapolis

Religion and spirituality have long played important roles in the lives of couples and families within North American society. Gallup surveys repeatedly verify the relevance of religion in the lives of American men and women, noting that more than two thirds identified religion as a significant part of their lives; 94% believe in God or a higher power (Gallup, 1993). In reviewing half a century of U.S. surveys, Gallup concluded that religious beliefs of the country could be considered quite stable inasmuch as these basic beliefs and practices today differ little from the levels recorded 50 years ago (Gallup, 1995). Sirch-Stasko (1996) notes that religion and spirituality are recognized as integral parts of human lives. He believes that this warrants greater exploration of the role this dynamic plays in facilitating and maintaining mental health.

EXPLORING COUPLES' SPIRITUALITY

The Transformative Experience Questionnaire (TEQ) (see Appendix A) provides an opportunity for couples to explore the role of spirituality in their own relationship. It was designed to explore the individual pathways of theists, atheists, and nontheists alike.[1]

SCORING

The TEQ is based on the following four categories: striving, integration, self-transcendence, and ultimate value. These concepts are defined as follows.

Striving

Striving involves the individual moving toward a current, identifiable objective. But it also involves the very basics of life: movement toward any goal, in the short term or as an end state. We experience this movement toward a goal in our every desire and its temporary satiation. Humans strive not only toward that which we know consciously but also toward that which we can only hope to know. And whether we have proof of the existence of our hopes or not, we seek them "as if" they exist as our "eternal destiny." Striving is the ebb and flow of life: from thirst to satisfaction and recurring thirst; or from the desire to be loved to satisfying this through human contact, only to experience a reawakened desire.

It is this striving—whether one is theist or nontheist—that becomes, in a sense, the sacred duty of the couple to attune their striving to their ultimate value. This is the task of seeking not simply to satisfy one's immediate hunger or thirst but that desire that strives after, figuratively speaking, the eternal banquet. The realm of spirituality is entered whenever the desire to know an answer breaks through into the couple's consciousness and they find the strength and desire to search for "the" answer—wherever it might lead them and whatever that may be for them.

Couples can discern the benefit of spiritual striving by considering if it manifests as cooperation and contribution or as self-serving and of no intentional benefit to another. This aspect of couple spirituality can be observed concretely in how you each deal with the unavoidable task of contributing something useful to the culture in which you find yourselves. This is what Adler (1931/1980) considered the occupational, or work life task.

Integration

Personal integration can be considered as a conscious activity occurring within the mature individual or as a unifying activity occurring in each individual from a very early age. In the first instance, integration means eventually drawing together disparate aspects of one's life into a unifying process. In the second, each individual is understood to already experience a certain unity and integration. Recognizing the individual's unifying goal, and altering it on a conscious level, is understood as the difficult task of maturing.

The principle of holism can account for the integration early in life. Again, this characteristically unified movement

of the individual toward his or her goal is recognizable whether a person believes in a god or not. Helping you as a couple in determining the benefit of your integrated approach to life involves exploring how strictly you adhere to a unified conceptualization of the world. If one's worldview either does not allow for surprises or variation, or leads you to be offended when you are contradicted by your partner, then it represents less relative wellness. The ability to revise one's viewpoint, as more reliable data become available, represents greater relative wellness. Of course, striving for a flexible level of integration does not preclude either of you as a couple in adhering to a specific religious tradition. Adherence to a core set of beliefs does not need to manifest as intolerance. Determining whether your spiritual paths are closed, judgmental, and prejudiced or open, tolerant, and flexible can be a great service to your personal and collective spiritual growth. This is observed in how you deal with the unavoidable task of intimacy. Adler (1931/1980) called this the love life task.

Self-Transcendence

Thinking of transcendence in terms of a supernatural dimension is very important to a number of believers today. To others, however, transcendence as "out there" no longer makes sense. More and more people understand all of reality to be connected in a single, holistic universe. They experience no need to conjecture another realm beside or outside it. The connection within the cosmos, as all human bonds are, is a social one. Because of this social embeddedness, connection for humans means, first and foremost, a belonging within the greater community. You as a couple represent a microcosm of the greater community; you are also witnesses to the natural movement of transcending the self.

If the striving aspect of spirituality involves striving after ultimate answers, the self-transcendent aspect can be considered in terms of ultimate connection, that is, connection with every one and every thing. Clearly, this aspect of the spiritual dimension is not separate from the social dimension. Transcendence is, above all, a movement away from radical independence and toward inter-dependence—to a feeling of oneness as a couple, and oneness with the community, feeling at home in the universe (Adler, 1933/1964). Healthy couples' spirituality is directly related to the ability of focusing on your partner and connecting with someone else, in a word: self-transcendence. The ability to attend to the needs of your partner is a precursor of being able to move beyond personal desires toward what one believes may be demanded by one's god. The degree to which either of your spiritual paths leads away from isolation and self-absorption and toward the benefit of you as a couple and to the greater community is a measure of each partner's relative wellness. This aspect of couple spirituality can be observed in how each of you deals with the task of getting along with others. As social beings, the quality of our relationship with others is a measure of relative wellness.

Adler (1931/1980) called this the association, or friendship life task.

Ultimate Value

Those who adhere to the Abrahamic religions or traditions influenced by them have little difficulty identifying their ultimate value as God, a supreme being, higher power, source of love, or some such conceptualization. But whether theist or nontheist, it is a human characteristic to live "toward" that which we most value. This is due to our human striving that always moves from incompleteness to completeness. Because it embraces the other aspects of spirituality, each partner's ultimate value, ultimate concern, becomes a meta-measure of their wellness, and that of the couple. It is this toward which their striving is aimed. Integration with this perfect goal is the goal of spirituality. Self-transcendence, too, is guided by the couple's ultimate concern. So to the degree that each partner's highest value encourages cooperative striving, the couple's integration and open-mindedness, the couple's self-transcendence toward greater community interest—to that degree, the couple's highest value is a useful criterion for measuring client wellness.

The TEQ (see Appendix A) is constructed so that five questions each relate to the consecutive four categories of spirituality described in the previous sections. Now transfer your scores to the questions and rate yourself (see Appendix B). The subscale scores of the TEQ are intended to serve as a beginning discussion point for the respective issues. Rather than higher scores being better than lower scores, the scores are described as relating to the relative importance of the statements to each partner. Extreme differences in scores between you as partners should be addressed. These can be discussed so that each of you relates to the other, the importance you put on the respective area.

THEORY

Within the counseling field, there is notable movement toward incorporating the spiritual dimension of couples' lives within a holistic framework, using what traditionally is considered a "wellness model" (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Sweeney & Witmer, 1991; Westgate, 1996; Worthington, 1989). Spirituality is recognized from a multicultural perspective as a unique experience for couples that must be treated with the same sensitivity as other areas that set individuals apart from one another (cf. American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 1998). Although each of you may share similar religious beliefs, your own personal experience within a religious or spiritual framework is individualized and dependent on interaction with other facets of your life. The Dalai Lama (Nhat Hanh, 1991) acknowledged the importance of individualized spiritual activity. He said that "the only way . . . of attempting to bring about world peace is through the internal transformation of individuals" (p. x).

Such a transformation can be fostered through the positing of, or experience with, a spiritual dimension.

Recognizing the positive potential of both religion and spirituality, the authors offer a model for understanding spirituality as the individual expression of a couple's shared search for meaning. First, we will present a broad reflection of the ambivalent nature of religion and spirituality. Then, we focus the discussion by presenting a more formal distinction between religion and spirituality, followed by a working definition of spirituality. The article concludes by offering suggestions of how this inventory can be used for working with couples.

The Ambivalent Character of Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of North Americans[2]

The concept of spirituality, although increasingly a part of the discussion between psychotherapists and those they serve, has a burdened history and a wide spectrum of definitions. Ganje-Fling and McCarthy (1996), for example, define spirituality as "a complex, multi-faceted construct that involves ultimate and personal truths that individuals hold as inviolable in their lives" (p. 253). Kolander and Chandler (1990) describe spirituality as a perspective from which everything one needs for happiness, inner peace, and contentment is already available within the individual. As such, spirituality is not something to be acquired; rather, it is an inherent component ready to be awakened in all individuals. Consequently, their emphasis on a whole-person approach concentrates on the position of spirituality as one of six parts of wellness: emotional, physical, social, intellectual, occupational, and spiritual. Within this model, Kolander and Chandler stress that the spiritual realm is the "source from which all the other dimensions arise" (p. 4).

Despite the utility of such attempted definitions, there is a need for a common term, or at least a common understanding about whether an essence of human life can be determined and described effectively today. In the generations since the world wars, North Americans have been much in doubt about what might constitute this core of human existence—and whether such a core exists at all. North Americans and Europeans have been accumulating goods and services during this period more than at any time in human history. Acquisition without satisfaction creates the perception that there is nothing at our core—nothing more than the temporary comfort and security that material prosperity brings (Gergen, 1991). Are we like fruit that contains a present yet not visible seed—core of life—somewhere under our visible surface? Or are we more like an onion, with layer upon layer whose totality constitutes the reality, but if peeled away the reality disappears?

Since the European enlightenment, the scientific approach has said, "no," to there being a core to human life. The sociologists, psychotherapists, anthropologists, philosophers, and storytellers have long been trying to reassure human beings that there is, nonetheless, some reason to live and create

(Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996). But the question is being reformulated even as it is being revisited. Rather than conceiving spirituality like religion in a dualistic manner—as if a true-self or spirit or soul exists *within* a body—many today are trying to understand the whole *as* the essence.

Freud (1927/1961) contended that once our id and ego had been reconciled, our religious sense would disappear like fog. Such was the anticipated future of the religious illusion. Conversely, Frankl (1959) saw spiritual movement as the quest for mental health, as the individual's personal search for meaning. He insisted that without ultimate meaning—without spirituality—even our sexual experiences become empty. The same is true for art, philosophy, love, family, and for life itself. Spirituality, from this perspective, allows the facets of life (emotional, physical, social, etc.) to be understood as strings of an instrument: in tension with one another, the tones from which bind life together as a single chord.

Differentiating Religion and Spirituality

It should be stated from the outset that any relationship between a couple's religion and spirituality need not be severed. Religion and spirituality can, and do, share some characterics, such as a search for what is sacred in life. The character of spirituality is such, however, that it can also be thought of as independent of religion. For example, religion frequently makes reference to the *natural* and the *supernatural*. That is, religion is often coupled with a transcendent relationship with God, higher power, or universal energy, understood as beyond-the-self (Smith, 1994). Conversely, spirituality can be a personal movement both within religious believers and also within those who assent to no supernatural realm or higher power.

Traditional religious clients in North America typically come from the religions of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All of these religions, and their various denominations, believe in a supreme being and the activity of that being in the lives of the believers. Further, each of these religions put forward a body of sacred writing in which "the word of God" can be read, pondered, and applied in the life of the believer. This defining characteristic results in their being called the religions of the book. The influence of this paradigm is so pervasive in North American society that its characteristic positing of a transcendent reality and a body of sacred literature can be observed in many New Age approaches to spirituality and in self-help approaches to personal growth and healing.

Codifying beliefs in writings and rituals that bind the believer to the beliefs and to others who share the beliefs constitutes religion proper. This binding together is the etymology of the word *religio*, from which *religion* is derived. Such a *product* orientation—providing memorizable doctrine, tangible scriptures, and replicable rituals—seems to be characteristic of religion. It may also include concern for others, comfort for oneself, and a certain control over others' behavior if

they intend to remain bound by their common beliefs. In contrast, spirituality might be said to have more of a *process* orientation. One's spirituality is how the individual uniquely manufactures meaning supplied by religion, science, or philosophy. The very individualized movement of the person's religious (or nonreligious) beliefs about ultimate answers can be understood as his or her spirituality. And even within specific faith communities, each person's perceptions bring about nuances of belief distinguishing one believer from another.

When religion addresses how one relates to the sacred or divine, it involves an organized social institution with prescribed beliefs. Many people, however, experience spirituality as a highly personal matter, focusing on intangible elements that provide vitality and personal meaning in their lives (Miller & Thorensen, 1999). Where religious factors focus more on prescribed beliefs, rituals, practices, and social-institutional features, spiritual factors are concerned more with individual subjective experiences, sometimes shared with others (Zinnbauer et al., 1997).

Maslow (1976) similarly differentiated the institutional organized religions from subjective and naturalistic religious experience and attitude. Religion, for him, was characterized in many ways by its boundaries, whereas spirituality was best characterized by the difficulty in defining its boundaries. Spirituality is concerned with what Maslow termed peak experiences. When an individual has such an experience, he or she frequently interprets it as encountering the luminous, otherworldly, or mystical element of life. Although this type of spiritual experience was once thought to occur only within the framework of the church, Maslow contended that everyone is capable of achieving peak experiences regularly, within both the secular and the sacred dimensions. "Apparently, every baby has possibilities for self-actualization, but most get it knocked out of them," Maslow conjectured (Lowry, 1973, p. 90). "I think of the self actualizing man not as an ordinary man with something added, but rather as the ordinary man with nothing taken away" (Lowry, p. 90).

Working Description of Spirituality

Whether oriented toward a higher power or not, it is the seeking of ultimate meaning, answers to the perennial problems of human existence, that demarks the realm of human being commonly understood as spirituality. This is the development, in part, of what is sometimes called our personal philosophy of existence, or what Allport (1950) called the religious sentiment. Spirituality, as an aspect of this, is distinguished from science and philosophy not so much by their questions or search for meaning. These are shared with the other disciplines. Rather, what distinguishes them is the direction of striving, or that toward which they address their questions, that from which they anticipate answers (Küng, 1987/1988). Within this seeking of answers, or making of meaning, can be distinguished four characteristics. These, in turn, characterize an individual's spiritual movement:

1. The universal human activity of *striving*;
2. The effort of personal *integration*;
3. The pursuit of *self-transcendence*; and
4. The resulting conceptualization of one's *ultimate value*.

Schneiders (1986) captures the interconnection of these characteristics in her definition of spirituality: "the experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption, but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives" (p. 266). It is this broad-based definition that undergirds the TEQ.

CASE EXAMPLE

Lawrence and Mariani (not their real names) were referred for marriage counseling by a professional friend of Mariani's. Lawrence is a successful ophthalmologist in town; Mariani is a book editor with a successful publishing company. This is the only marriage for both of them. They have three children, two girls and a boy, ranging from 11 to 15 years of age. The couple came to the first author for marriage counseling because they were looking for a Christian counselor. Lawrence is a deeply fundamentalist Christian who trusted that God would be the Healer of their marital relationship. "He has seen us through hard times before," Lawrence insisted, "and He will do so again." Mariani, also a devout if less fundamentalist Christian, insisted that, "God can work through counselors as well." Both were asked to complete the TEQ as part of the intake information.

Lawrence had insisted early in the sessions that God spoke to him clearly enough and confirmed that Lawrence's priorities for family life were right. These included his insistence that Mariani give up her job and devote her attention to their children on a full-time basis. Mariani stood her ground, insisting that their children, especially the girls, benefited from seeing their mother responsibly balance motherhood and a career. In the course of the counseling, Lawrence became more and more reserved and measured in his interaction. He clearly felt challenged beyond his comfort level by the counselor's unwillingness to side with him against his wife.

As the communication in-session became more strained—both admitted the counseling had become almost the only time they spoke with one another—the counselor suggested that their unique spiritual outlooks be given greater attention. As strongly as both Mariani and Lawrence held their spiritual convictions, it seldom had been a topic of discussion between them. Lawrence viewed Mariani as disobedient to the will of God and Mariani felt Lawrence's oppression could not be of God. The following approximate the discussions that were generated as a result of reviewing the couple's TEQ responses.

Striving. This dimension for the couple, in spite of their differences, was found to be an area of surprisingly peaceful agreement. Lawrence rated the questions on necessary spiritual advancement (5) and sharing spiritual knowledge (13) quite highly, whereas Mariani rated these low and the others

(1,9,17) in the mid-level range. In our discussion of the striving that constitutes spiritual movement, each understood the longing of their partner because each of them experienced it themselves, albeit in different ways. Just as they chose to share themselves in the professional world differently, they considered seriously the idea that their response to God's call in their lives could also be accomplished differently. Because both were successful in their professions and appreciated this in the other—at least until the children arrived—they had before them a model of mutual success and cooperation rather than a win-lose arrangement as in the presenting problem.

Integration. Again, Lawrence rated the questions involving belief in one true path (6,14) higher than Mariani. But their responding similarly to the question about not losing sight of their paths even if accepting of others (18) led Lawrence to experience some cognitive dissonance. We pursued a discussion about "guiding lines," beliefs that lead us surely toward our goals. The couple could see clearly how different their goals were from one another—Lawrence to be "right before God" and Mariani to be a mentor in whom her children would recognize God's love. Although quite uncomfortable with the other's goals, both acknowledged that their behavior toward one another was directly in line with their own goals. They also considered for the first time in a concrete way just how disparate their personal goals were. Lawrence admitted his intolerance toward what he considered Mariani's "mistaken priorities." With this admission, Mariani was both thankful for his insight and sad at what she perceived as his "too little God." It brought her to reflect on how completely she denied the possibility of such a narrow view of God and how this must be experienced as intolerance by Lawrence. It became less mysterious as to why, after all their resolved disagreements in the past, this one problem had so deeply influenced their affection for one another.

Self-Transcendence. Although their rating totals were similar, they rated as highest precisely the opposite questions: Lawrence rated perfectionism (7) and determinism (15) as "5," and Mariani rated social contribution (3) and belonging (19) as "5." They found that both rated personal betterment as (11) "4," and they discussed at length what help they experienced from their spiritual paths as well as what being a better person meant to each of them. Although aware of one another's backgrounds—both came from divorced households—Lawrence's experience of his parents' bitter divorce and subsequent loss of contact with his father was discussed anew. Mariani's experience of her parents' divorce when she was older left her feeling as if she were a part of a family that dissolved approximately when other parents experience an empty-nest anyway. Lawrence commented tersely, but in a straightforward manner, that he had not felt part of anything worthwhile until finding his way to God within his religious community.

Ultimate value. Mariani and Lawrence found they were able to predict one another's answers to these questions with a high degree of accuracy. Especially on the question of just punishment (16), Lawrence understood that this had no place in Mariani's conception of God. Mariani did not argue as Lawrence explained the tragic result he saw awaiting those who did not "entrust themselves to the will of God." The fact that both rated the question on spiritual giving and receiving (20) as "5" especially affected Mariani. She was touched by Lawrence's heartfelt appreciation for having a place—a home within which he felt he was a gift—something she was aware he did not feel keenly elsewhere.

The different routes available for exploration and discussion as a result of sharing the findings of the TEQ are practically endless. For Mariani and Lawrence, it provided an exploration of something important to both of them, but something that had eluded them earlier. In the course of counseling, the couple explored the possibility of separating temporarily, something they had never considered before. This was done cooperatively and with seemingly great understanding of the other. Ultimately, they decided against it. Instead, Mariani felt she had gained insight into how Lawrence looked at life and felt empowered both to show him greater affection and to stand her ground, especially with regard to her career, but also in her conceptualization of God in which she instructed their children.

SUMMARY

This article has focused on specific ways couples can explore the spiritual component of their relationship. The TEQ has been introduced to facilitate discussion of the increasingly important aspect that the spiritual dimension plays in couples' lives.

APPENDIX A

The Transformative Experience Questionnaire (TEQ)

(by Erik Mansager)

Each member of the couple is asked to rate the following 20 statements from 5 = *strongly agree* to 1 = *strong disagree*.

_____ 1. People's spiritual path can be mistaken and unhealthy for them.
_____ 2. Men and women's pathways can be different yet supportive of one another.
_____ 3. My spiritual path strengthens my resolve to be helpful to others.
_____ 4. That which I most value helps me be cooperative in the tasks life presents me with.
_____ 5. It is important to advance in my spiritual path no matter what.

_____ 6. Acceptance of others' spiritual pathways can detract from the right way.

_____ 7. It is important that I attain perfection.

_____ 8. That which I most value would be fitting for others if they would only be open.

_____ 9. Advancing on the spiritual path is done alone, but need not be a lonesome undertaking.

_____10. Acceptance of others' spiritual pathways can enhance one's own path.

_____11. My spiritual path helps me to be a better person.

_____12. That which I most value allows me to be firm in my spiritual pathway as well as open to others' pathways.

_____13. It is important to share spiritual knowledge with those who have none.

_____14. My spiritual path would be very fitting for the majority of my acquaintances.

_____15. I can do nothing about my circumstances other than accept my fate in peace.

_____16. Those who do not follow the right spiritual path will suffer justly in the end.

_____17. My spiritual path necessarily includes contributing to the welfare of others.

_____18. It is important to accept others' spiritual pathway without losing my way.

_____19. I generally feel at-home among others though we all travel different spiritual pathways.

_____20. That which I most value affirms my place in the larger picture as one who gives and receives.

APPENDIX B

Striving	Integration	Self-Transcendence	Ultimate Value
1. _____	2. _____	3. _____	4. _____
*5. _____	*6. _____	* 7. _____	* 8. _____
9. _____	10. _____	11. _____	12. _____
*13. _____	*14. _____	*15. _____	*16. _____
17. _____	18. _____	19. _____	20. _____
Total _____	_____	_____	_____

(* = Inversely scored. 5 = 1; 4 = 2; 3 = 3; 2 = 4; 1 = 5)

NOTES

1. This questionnaire is based on the work of theologian Sandra Schneiders (1986) and psychologist Alfred Adler (1933/1964).

2. The authors wish to thank Rev. Daniel Scott of Phoenix, Arizona, for his inspiration in developing this section of the article.

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Erik Mansager, *Ph.D., is the residential director of Casa de los Niños, the nation's first crisis shelter for infants. He was formerly the director of psychological services at St. John's Seminary College in the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles and clinical supervisor of the U.S. Army's Adolescent Substance Abuse Counseling Services in Frankfurt, Germany. He is a clinical mental health counselor who has worked for 20 years in the areas of child physical and sexual abuse, divorce mediation, and substance abuse treatment. He is married and the father of two teens who are busily exploring their contributions to life. Erik is a diplomate in Adlerian Psychology (North American Society of Adlerian Psychology) and a faculty member of the international Adlerian summer school, Icassi. He is the author of several training manuals, monographs, and numerous articles on the critical collaboration between Adlerian Psychology and spirituality. He did his undergraduate studies at St. Thomas Seminary College in Denver, his graduate studies in marriage and family counseling at the University of Arizona, and his doctoral studies in the psychology of religion at the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium.*

Daniel Eckstein, *Ph.D., ABPP, is an adjunct faculty member in counseling psychology for Capella University, Minneapolis, as well as the Adler School of Professional Psychology, Toronto. He is the author or coauthor of 11 books including* Raising Respectful Kids in a Rude World, A Life-Style Primer, *and* Relationship Repair: "Fix It" Manual for Couples and Families. *He is a diplomate in counseling psychology (American Board of Professional Psychology) as well as a diplomate in Adlerian Psychology (North American Society of Adlerian Psychology). His e-mail address is deckstein@juno.com, and his Web site is www.encouragingleadership.com; it contains other relationship articles that can be downloaded at no charge.*