Seeing Life through a Sacred Lens: The Spiritual Dimension of Meaning

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Abstract

This chapter reviews the growing research on sanctification, one aspect of spirituality that involves perceiving a deeper dimension in life. Sanctification can be defined as individuals interpreting aspects of life as having sacred qualities and/or as being a manifestation of God(s)/ higher power(s). Various dimensions of life can be seen through this sacred lens including life as a whole, specific life domains, and particular moments. In this chapter, we summarize the current literature on sanctification, suggesting that seeing life through a sacred lens is a common experience that has important implications for human functioning across several clinically relevant domains including family relationships, work, and personal strivings. We conclude that being attentive to clients’ experiences of sacred meaning can offer a point of contact between clients’ spiritual beliefs and their treatment goals, encouraging them to engage with their longing to find a deeper, more ultimate meaning and purpose in their lives.

Key Words: spirituality, religion, sacred, sanctification, psychology of religion, meaning, positive psychology, psychotherapy

Within the fields of social science, theology, and religious studies, definitions of spirituality abound. Advanced scholars within these disciplines have articulated perspectives on the true meaning of spirituality; however, agreement among them is low. We will not resolve these definitional debates about spirituality in this chapter. Instead, we will focus on one aspect of spirituality, sanctification, which can be understood as a way of perceiving a deeper dimension of life. More poetically, sanctification involves the capacity to see life through a sacred lens. This chapter will focus on that capacity, the ways that life as a whole, specific life domains, and particular moments may be colored by a sacred lens, and the implications of this way of seeing for the health of our minds, bodies, and relationships. After reviewing current examples and empirical research findings on sanctification, we conclude that seeing beyond the physical realities of the world to imbue life with a deeper meaning is not only central to our understanding of positive psychology and meaning making, it is also vital to the very essence of what it means to be human.

**What does it mean to see life through a sacred lens?**

Since our spiritual focus here is on the realm of sanctification, it is critical to know what we mean when we talk about seeing life through this “sacred lens.” In a theological context, the term “sanctification” has been used to connote a person being set apart by God to become holy or sacred. In contrast, our focus here is on sanctification as a psychospiritual construct. Sanctification as we use it refers to the ways in which individuals interpret aspects of life as having sacred qualities and/or as being a manifestation of their particular image(s) of God/higher powers. Thus, in moving from a theological to a psychological framework, our focus shifts from a theological understanding of sanctification as a gift handed down from God or higher powers per se to the individual’s active role in sanctifying various elements of life by viewing them through a sacred lens.

From this perspective, sanctification refers both to perceiving seemingly ordinary elements of life as being reflective of God or higher powers and/or as possessing extraordinary or divine qualities (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). One way to visualize the concept of sanctification is through the illustration depicted in *Figure 1*. This figure displays a core and ring, with the entire figure representing what we have called “the sacred” in our prior work. Thus, an experience with the sacred may include direct encounters with elements at the core of this figure – that is with theistic deities that many believe is the source of all sacredness or non-theistic transcendent reality. The sacred also includes a multitude of seemingly ordinary experiences that take on extraordinary character due to being viewed as embodying God/a higher power or sacred qualities that reflect the core (Mahoney, Pargament, & Hernandez, 2013; Pargament, 2007). Thinking about it in this way, we see that each person could have a distinctive experience of sanctification due to the different ways in which he or she perceives what lies within this core (e.g., Jesus, Allah, Mother Nature, transcendent reality) and the diverse areas of life that extend this core into his or her ring of sacred entities (e.g., family, art, nature, work, parenting). Though the content of the various objects within the ring may vary between individuals, the general psychological process remains the same. Thus, we define sanctification as the process of “perceiving aspects of life as having divine character and significance.” (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005, p. 180).

**Theistic & Nontheistic Sanctification**

Consistent with the prior paragraph, sanctification may occur theistically or nontheistically. Because an individual may view a sanctified object as a manifestation of God/the divine (theistic) or as having sacred qualities (nontheistic), sanctification is possible whether one is a theist or a non-theist (Mahoney, Pargament, & Hernandez, 2013). Returning to the image of the sacred core and ring (*Figure 1*), one can see that the core contains several different conceptualizations of the source of the sacred (i.e., God, Divine, Transcendent Reality). For theists, this source may be one God or multiple gods/divinities, and sanctification involves perceiving the manifestation or involvement of this divine source in one’s life experiences. For example, individuals may think that God was involved in how they met their spouse and/or sense God’s presence in their marital relationship. One couple described theistic sanctification in their marital relationship in the following way: “It’s a covenant to each other, but more importantly it’s a covenant to God. It’s a threesome that holds together. You take that third out and it falls apart. So that’s I think what for us has really defined our marriage” (Lambert & Dollahite, 2008, p. 601). Notably, theists are not limited to theistic sanctification, but may also perceive objects as possessing non-theistic sacred qualities. For instance, parents may view their child as a blessing or a miracle and thus regard their child as sacred.

Though non-theists do not view a particular deity as being at the core, they may sense existence as possessing a transcendent dimension that reflects sacred (divine) qualities such as mystery, ultimacy, and boundlessness. One well-known example of this process comes from Albert Einstein who, though he did not believe in God, recognized and encountered the presence of sacred qualities through his study of physics (1956): “A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot penetrate, of the manifestations of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty - it is this knowledge and this emotion that constitute the truly religious attitude; in this sense, and in this alone, I am a deeply religious man” (p. 7). In a similar way, the contemporary philosopher and writer Roger Scruton describes how a religious place can be experienced as sacred by a nonreligious person: “Entering a country church… not necessarily as a believer…and sensing this stored accumulated silence…to think about it as the product of prayer, the distillation of need, anxiety, suffering and perhaps rejoicing too…you seem to be facing into the transcendental” (cited in Regunathan, 2014). Scruton notes the many avenues through which people may encounter a sacred dimension of existence. Thus, because sanctification is so flexible and potentially distinctive to each individual, the experience is open to anyone who can see life through this sacred lens.

It is also important to differentiate sanctification from constructs that address similarly deep and meaningful dimensions of life. Though related in some ways to experiences of importance and value, sanctification should not be confused with other ways of describing feelings of human significance and purpose. Rather, the definition explicitly indicates that the sanctified object is seen as *having divine significance and character*. Thus, the perceived involvement of God or a higher power and/or qualities of divine significance and character distinguishes the concept of sanctification from similar experiences of salient yet non-sacred meaning. One illustration of this point comes from the sanctification of strivings research, in which participants were required to rate the importance of their personal life goals as well as the degree to which they sanctify each striving (Mahoney et al., 2005). Though importance and sanctification were related, they were clearly measuring distinct constructs. In some cases, strivings that were considered to be highly important were not necessarily highly sanctified. Likewise, individuals’ ratings of investment in and commitment to their strivings overlapped with but were distinct from their sanctification ratings. Thus, experiencing the sacred in daily life goes beyond being highly committed to an important area of one’s life.

**How do contemporary scientists empirically study sanctification?**

It is necessary at this point to take a step back and briefly explain the methods social scientists use to measure sanctification. Given the diverse and unique aspects of life that people view as being a reflection of God/higher powers or sacred qualities, sanctification may seem an illusive construct to study empirically. However, the measures that researchers have developed to investigate the prevalence and nature of sanctification have been specific and direct, leading to a better scientific understanding of this concept. The first psychospiritual measure of sanctification was created to study the ways in which couples experience their marriages as sacred. Mahoney and colleagues (1999) created a *Sanctification Measure* with two subscales to represent both theistic and nontheistic experiences of the sanctity of marriage. The Manifestation of God (MG) sub-scale is comprised of items that refer to individuals’ perceptions of direct encounters with God in their union (i.e., “I experience God through my marriage.”) To measure the prevalence of nontheistic sacred experiences, the Sacred Qualities (SQ) sub-scale focuses on the ways that one’s marriage may take on characteristics of a sacred reality, such as transcendence, ultimacy, and boundlessness (i.e., “My marriage is holy”). Participants rate these items on a scale ranging from *Strongly Agree* to *Strongly Disagree*. Following this initial study on marriage (1999), researchers adapted the Sanctification Measure for use in other domains, including sanctification of work (Walker, Jones, Wuensch, Aziz, & Cope, 2008), social justice (Todd, Houston, & Odahl-Ruan, 2014), and forgiveness (Bell et al., 2014; Davis, Hook, Van Tongeren, & Worthington, 2012). Original and modified versions of the sanctification measures that have been developed by members of our lab to empirically study specific aspects of life including strivings (Mahoney et al., 2005), pregnancy (Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2009), marriage (Mahoney et al., 1999; Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2009), parenting (Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006), sexuality (Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005), the body (Mahoney et al., 2005), and dreams (Phillips & Pargament, 2002) can be found at our website (Mahoney, 2015).Also, Doehring and colleagues developed the *Perceiving Sacredness in Life Scale* (Doehring et al., 2009) where people reflect on how often they experience God’s presence or sacred qualities across life writ large including life in general, nature, all living things, people, ideas or actions, and abstract attributes such as love and hope. Thus, it is clear that this field of research is growing as researchers continue to investigate the process of seeing life through a sacred lens.

**Is seeing life through a sacred lens prevalent in modern life?**

**Historical Examples of Sanctification**

In the contemporary world it may seem unusual for people to sense the presence of the sacred in seemingly secular areas of life, but we find examples of this process both historically and, as we will show later, in modern times. For example, Alexander Hamilton sanctified human rights as a prelude to and justification for the American Revolution: “The sacred rights of mankind are not to be rummaged for among old parchments or musty records. They are written, as with a sunbeam, in the whole volume of human nature by the hand of the divinity itself and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power” (cited in Chernow, 2005, p. 92). Centuries later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used this sacred ideal as a foundation for the Civil Rights movement, reminding citizens that the nation’s leaders had a “sacred obligation” to uphold the rights established by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution: “When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note….that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness….Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds’” (King, 1963, pp. 1-2). These examples illustrate the way in which regarding something as sacred or as having divine significance can be a normative and powerful theme outside of overtly religious contexts.

**Modern Examples of Sanctification**

Despite these historical examples, one may doubt that seeing life through a sacred lens is a phenomenon still experienced in the 21st century, as we tend to think that American society is becoming increasingly secular. It may seem more likely that sanctification is something accessible only to those who are religiously devout. However, prevalence rates from the current studies of sanctification suggest that sanctification is indeed a common occurrence within the United States, an experience endorsed by the majority of individuals regardless of degree of involvement in religious groups or an affiliation with a religious tradition.

The high prevalence rate of sanctification is unsurprising given that the majority of Americans identify as religious and/or spiritual, suggesting they are involved in the search for the sacred (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). For example, results from the 2012 National Pew Survey show that 65% of U.S. adults identify as religious and 18% as spiritual, with 91% endorsing belief in God or a Universal Spirit (Pew Research Center, 2012). Though each person’s search may involve different pathways, which may or may not include self-identifying as belonging to a religious tradition, most individuals are searching for deeper significance and the manifestation of a divine or higher power or transcendence in their lives. Furthermore, studies of sanctification show that people also commonly report encountering the sacred in daily life both theistically and nontheistically. Various aspects of life can be colored by this sacred lens including life as a whole, specific life domains, and particular moments.

**The Sacred Meaning of Life as a Whole**

Though much of the research on sanctification has focused on experiencing the sacred in specific life domains (e.g., marriage, parenting, work, strivings), sanctification is not necessarily limited to these segregated domains, but can reflect a way of viewing life as a whole as sacred. Theologian and minister Frederick Buechner (1992) eloquently summarizes both the specific and holistic experiences of the sacred:

Taking your children to school and kissing your wife goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly. . . . Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace (p. 2).

Doehring, Pargament, Clarke, and colleagues (2009) examined this notion that “life itself is grace,” and studied the ways in which individuals experience the presence of God or the spiritual in their lives as a whole. For example, people often see life as a sacred journey, sense God’s presence in their day-to-day existence or natural creation, experience something more sacred in life than simply material existence, find God in life’s joys and sorrows, and feel that life has a sacred purpose. Such perceptions are commonplace and are correlated with, but distinctive from, other types of religious practices (e.g., frequency of prayer or service attendance). For instance, in Doehring and Clarke’s national survey (2002), most people endorsed sanctifying life as a whole. Seventy-five percent of individuals endorsed theistic sanctification, reporting that they “see God’s presence in all of life.” Nontheistic sanctification showed similar rates, with 76% of respondents endorsing that they “experience something more sacred than simply material existence” (Doehring & Clarke, 2002). Thus, it seems that people often experience a deeper meaning hidden within the ongoing flow of all of life around them.

 **The Sacred Meaning of Specific Domains of Modern Life**

Sanctification is also rather common when examining people’s experiences of the sacred in specific areas of life. Whether regarding their relationships, careers, bodies, personal strivings, or a number of other areas, a substantial number of people report seeing these domains through a sacred lens. Considering sanctified relationships, studies of marital sanctification have found that at least two-thirds of both wives and husbands report viewing their marriage as sacred to some degree, endorsing items such as “I sense God’s presence in my relationship with my spouse” and “This marriage is a part of a larger spiritual plan” (Mahoney et al., 1999; Mahoney, Pargament, & Demaris, 2009). Research has found similarly high prevalence rates in the sanctification of parenting (Brelsford, 2013; Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006; Weyand, O’Laughlin, & Bennett, 2013) and pregnancy (Mahoney et al., 2009). In these studies, the range of scores tends to be negatively skewed, suggesting that the majority of parents experience family life as sacred, sense a deeper connection to God through their spousal and parental relationships, and believe that God played a role in bringing their children into their lives.

Perceiving non-relational aspects of life as sacred is also a common occurrence. For example, a study of the sanctification of personal life strivings (Mahoney et al., 2005) had participants identify their top ten personal strivings and rate the degree to which they sanctify them. Findings revealed that the majority of individuals sanctified their top strivings to some degree, viewing those that involved spiritual concerns, family relationships, or helping others as having the most spiritual significance. Similarly, sanctification of work is also prevalent, with studies showing that the majority of people perceive God to be present in their work or see their work as a sacred calling (Carroll, Stewart-Sicking, & Thompson, 2014). Also, most people endorse viewing one’s body as sacred or made in a divine image (Benjamins, Ellison, Krause, & Marcum, 2011).

However, we do see variation among levels of sanctification across domains, particularly in the realm of the sanctification of sexuality. Studies examining the degree to which couples sanctify their marital and non-marital sexual relationships have revealed a broader range of prevalence, from 20% positively endorsing items such as “I experience God through the sexual bond I have with my spouse,” to 75% agreeing that “The sexual relationship I have with my spouse is sacred to me” (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011; Murray-Swank et al., 2005). Thus, we see that even though sanctification is indeed a common occurrence, the degree to which people perceive the sacred in their lives also tends to vary depending on individuals’ experiences and contexts.

**The Sacred Meaning of Moments of Modern Life**

Yet another promising area of study focuses on the sanctification of key moments in life. Pargament, Lomax, McGee, and Fang (2014) studied important moments in treatment reported by a sample of mental health providers and a sample of mental health patients. The sample then responded to items that asked about the degree to which participants imbued these moments with sacred qualities, such as transcendence, boundlessness, and ultimacy. Fifty-five percent of the mental health providers, interestingly a largely secular group, perceived their important moment in treatment as sacred. A second study examined clients’ experience of sacred moments in treatment using the same methodology. Results showed that 24% of clients perceived their important moment in treatment as sacred. Thus it seems that viewing life through a sacred lens is not restricted to general areas of life but may also be experienced in specific moments that convey a deeper meaning.

**What is the psychosocial relevance of sanctification in modern life?**

With findings showing that sanctification is a fairly common experience, we now want to highlight the implications of seeing life through a sacred lens. Though this construct is applicable to nearly any domain of life, we can identify five common implications of sanctification that cut across domains (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005):

1. People are more likely to invest themselves and their resources (e.g., time, money, energy) in sacred matters. When people sanctify objects, relationships, or actions, they tend to dedicate more of themselves to pursuing them.
2. People tend to work harder to protect and preserve those elements of life they hold sacred, especially in times of threat or conflict. This may mean devoting care to a child or spouse by engaging in less aggression and more problem solving, or it may take the form of a ritual that protects against the violation of a sacred object.
3. Sacred elements of life tend to elicit spiritual emotions. These emotions may be characterized as feelings of attraction to the sacred object (e.g., love, gratitude, and adoration) or feelings of awe in relation to the sanctified object (e.g., fear, majesty) (Otto, 1928).
4. Sanctified objects and relationships are often resources that people rely on for support and meaning throughout their lives. Across domains, sanctification is linked to greater relationship satisfaction, general well-being, positive affect, and stress-related growth.
5. When people experience a loss or violation of what they hold sacred, they are at risk for powerfully adverse outcomes. Experiences of loss or desecration of a sacred object or betrayal within a sanctified relationship tend to contribute to poorer mental health outcomes than negative life events that are not seen as relevant to the sacred.

In the following sections, we illustrate the ways in which these implications are supported by empirical research on the sanctity of life as a whole, specific life domains, and specific moments. These findings provide evidence in support of our assertion that the capacity to imbue multiple levels of life with a deeper meaning is a core component of the human experience.

**Life as a Whole**

 With the majority of individuals endorsing that they perceive God or the sacred in the daily flow of life, it is important to understand the ways this may shape other aspects of their lives. People who endorsed sanctifying life as a whole tended to have a greater sense of purpose in life and higher self-esteem. They also tended to be more committed to social and community helping and were less likely to have narcissist personality traits (Doehring et al., 2009). These findings suggest that individuals who perceive the sacred in life are able to look beyond themselves and to focus their concern on others. Findings also showed that sanctifying life as a whole was linked with individuals more frequently experiencing pleasant events and more deeply enjoying these events, indicating that perceiving a deeper dimension of life may enhance people’s daily lived experiences in a multitude ways.

**Specific Domains of Modern Life**

**Marriage**

Given the high prevalence rates of sanctification found in the initial marital sanctification study (Mahoney et al., 1999), researchers have continued to explore the various ways in which sanctification is related to critical relational factors such as commitment and communication. This first study of marital sanctification polled couples living in the Midwest, finding that greater marital sanctification was linked to greater marital adjustment and verbal collaboration, and less marital conflict and verbal aggression by both spouses (Mahoney et al., 1999). Several subsequent quantitative studies have shown similar results, suggesting that sanctification of marriage tends to enhance the relational quality and promote a positive relational process (Demaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2010; Ellison, Henderson, Glenn, & Harkrider, 2011; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Stafford, David, & McPherson, 2014). For instance, Ellison and colleagues (2011) examined the role of both general religiousness and sanctification in marital satisfaction in a sample of over one thousand married Texans. Sanctification of marriage strongly predicted higher levels of overall marital quality, relationship commitment, positive emotions, and bonding, as well as lower levels of negative emotion, fully mediating the linkages between general religiousness and these outcomes. Additionally, sanctification neutralized the negative influence of perceived general stress and financial strain on marital quality. Furthermore, a recent study using fixed effects modeling with longitudinal data gathered from 174 couples across the transition to parenthood shows that sanctification of marriage predicted more positive communication skills and warmth by both husbands and wives after taking into account stable characteristics of the partners, such as personality traits or intelligence (Kusner, Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2014). Notably, self-reported sanctification was tied to researchers’ direct observations of more positive interactions between couples when discussing topics that were likely to trigger conflict. Thus, current scientific evidence indicates that sanctification does not simply act as a proxy measure of general religiousness or other positive attributes of couples but rather is a psychospiritual construct that uniquely predicts better psychosocial and relational health. Together, these findings support the broader implication that regarding a relationship as sacred means one is more likely to invest oneself in it and make attempts to preserve and protect a union.

Several additional studies have found similar results indicating that perceiving one’s marital relationship as sacred may serve as a resource for spouses that enhance both their marital bond and their individual well-being. For example, in a study of married couples expecting their first child, greater marital sanctification buffered the effect of perceived inequality between spouses to create marital dissatisfaction, conflict, and anxiety (Demaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2010). In a national sample of low-income couples with children, greater marital sanctification was linked to greater commitment, satisfaction, communication, better conflict resolution, and greater commitment to their children, after controlling for other demographic and general religiousness variables (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). A recent study of highly educated married couples found similar results, with marital sanctification linked to greater marital satisfaction, forgiveness, and more willingness to sacrifice for the relationship (Stafford et al., 2014). Overall, these findings suggest that individuals who perceive their marriage to be sacred often rely on the relationship for support and meaning, invest more of themselves in the relationship, and take steps to preserve their marriage. Thus, those with greater marital sanctification tend to have an enhanced marital experience marked by greater relational happiness and healthier relational processes.

**Parenting**

Given the noteworthy results emerging from marital sanctification studies, the question arises whether similar findings might emerge in the parent-child relationship. Certainly many parents are highly committed to and invested in their children. Could sanctifying this relationship further strengthen their parent-child bond? To answer this question, researchers modified the original scales to apply to parenting, creating items such as “God is present in my role as a parent” and sampling mothers of 4-6 year-olds in the Midwest (Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006). Findings showed that viewing one’s parental role as sacred was significantly linked to less parental verbal aggression and more consistency in parenting. A similar study showed links between greater parenting sanctification and greater use of positive parenting strategies (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006). These findings further illustrate that when people hold some aspect of life sacred, they are more diligent in their efforts to do what they believe is necessary to protect it and preserve it from harm. Also, those who view their parental relationship as sacred may be willing to invest more time and energy in their children. Sanctification may be particularly salient in the parent-child relationship, as parents commonly view their children as gifts from God and their parenting as a sacred calling, and thus may simultaneously sanctify their children and their parenting role.

More recently, Weyand, O’Laughlin, and Bennett (2013) investigated the relationship between sanctification of parenting, child behavior problems, and parental stress. Their findings suggest that viewing one’s parental role as sacred moderates the link between behavior problems and parental stress. Thus, for parents with low levels of sanctification, the greater their child’s behavior problems, the more stress the parents reported experiencing. However, for parents with high levels of sanctification, greater child behavior problems were not linked with greater stress. These findings suggest that viewing one’s parental role through a sacred lens may buffer parents from distress when coping with more challenging behavior problems.

**Sexual Behavior**

Another domain closely related to the area of marital sanctification is the sanctification of sexual intercourse. A satisfying and healthy sexual relationship plays an important role in overall relationship satisfaction for both married and unmarried romantic partners. Would viewing sexual intercourse as sacred or a connection to the divine make a difference in the quality of sex within a committed relationship? Two initial investigations have examined sexual sanctification in two distinct samples: a community sample of newlywed couples (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011) and sexually active college students in non-marital romantic relationships (Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005). The results were quite similar across studies. First, it is notable that viewing sex as sacred was less prevalent than the usual rates of sanctification in other domains such as marriage or parenting. However, despite this lower prevalence, findings showed that those who did more often attribute sacred qualities to their sexual behavior also reported having greater sexual satisfaction and sexual intimacy, more frequent sex, and greater relationship satisfaction (Hernandez, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011; Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005). These results have also been shown longitudinally in a sample of newlywed couples (Mahoney & Hernandez, 2009). Individuals who endorsed greater sanctification early in the marriage had more frequent sexual intercourse and greater sexual and marital satisfaction one year later, and they had smaller declines in sexual functioning over the year.

Given the general tendency for more religious individuals to have less frequent premarital sexual intercourse (Haglund & Fehring, 2010), the findings with unmarried college students were the opposite of what researchers expected -- that unmarried people would engage less in sexual intercourse when sanctified as a way of protecting and preserving its special value. However, surprising as they were, these findings underscore the ways sanctification distinguishes itself from more global religious variables. In contrast to the more constraining implications of general religiousness for sexual functioning, sanctification appears to relate to greater investment in and satisfaction with sexuality. To put it more succinctly, sanctification appears to enhance the experience of sexuality within a committed union.

**Strivings**

One of the most noteworthy domains of study so far is the sanctification of strivings. By strivings, we mean the general goals that people are drawn to in their daily lives; these are the pursuits that tend to receive the most time, commitment and resources (Emmons, 1986). Just as what one holds sacred is distinctive to each individual, every person has his or her unique configuration of personal strivings. Of course, a few goals tend to be most common- for example, family relationships and career development often rise to the top of the list; nevertheless, people demonstrate considerable variability in their strivings.

In studying this domain, Mahoney et al. (2005) were sensitive to the highly personal and varied nature of personal goals, and had participants generate a list of their own top ten personal strivings (Mahoney et al., 2005). Participants then indicated the degree to which they sanctify each of these strivings as well as the amount of time, commitment, and investment they spent on each striving. Overall, participants reported that they saw their top ten strivings through a sacred lens. Unsurprisingly, the most sanctified strivings were overtly religious or spiritual (e.g., prayer). However, many strivings that are not directly religious/spiritual in nature such as altruistic and family-related strivings (e.g., work on my marriage) were frequently sanctified (Mahoney et al., 2005). Regardless of the type of striving, the two most sanctified strivings were also the ones to which individuals devoted the most time and energy and the ones to which they were most committed and considered to be most important. These findings directly support that people dedicate and invest more of their resources in aspects of life that are held sacred. Also, those strivings that people imbued with more sacred qualities tended to elicit more meaning, joy, and happiness, illustrating how sanctification can elicit spiritual emotions that increase the attraction of the individual to the sanctified object (Mahoney et al., 2005). However, in this case, sanctifying one’s strivings did not relate to greater life satisfaction or better physical or mental health outcomes. Thus, perceiving important personal life goals as manifestations of the divine and imbuing these strivings with sacred qualities related to greater commitment and pursuit of these goals. The lack of positive connection between the sanctification of strivings and health-related outcomes suggests that the pursuit of sacred goals may also be accompanied by sacrifice and some pain.

**Work**

Given the way in which sanctifying key strivings relates to greater commitment and dedication, it seems plausible that sanctification would function similarly in the workplace. Many people invest a great deal of themselves and their time in cultivating a successful career. An important question follows: does viewing one’s work as a sacred calling further enhance this commitment? Anecdotally we see many instances of this process both among religious and nonreligious figures. For example, many of the saints described a sense that they were called by God to do sacred work or complete a holy mission. Mother Teresa was Albanian by birth but moved to Ireland to answer a divine call to become a missionary sister. Several years later, she reportedly received a strong call from God to start a mission to serve the dying in Calcutta, India, where she worked tirelessly for nearly fifty years despite both practical and spiritual struggles (Teresa, 1995).

Outside of a religious framework, the concept of work as a calling or vocation is also fairly common. The Oxford English dictionary (2015) defines *vocation* (derived from the word *to call)* as “a person’s employment or main occupation, especially regarded as particularly worthy and requiring great dedication.” Thus, we hear people express a vocation or calling to the field of medicine, education, and other such professions. Leider and Shapiro’s (2015) popular new book on career planning speaks to this deeper sense of meaning in work: “Each of us, no matter what we do, has a calling. Of course, some jobs fit more naturally with our calling, but every working situation provides us with some opportunities for fulfilling the urge to give our gifts away. Satisfaction on the job-and ultimately in life- will in part depend on how we take advantage of these meaningful moments” (p. 149). Sanctification in the context of work is closely related to the concept of calling. The theoretical framework of sanctification predicts that those who perceive work as sacred may be more deeply invested in and committed to their work.

 Researchers have generated support for this hypothesis. Sanctification of work has been measured with items such as, “God is present in my work,” and “My work is sacred.” Results of studies show that greater work sanctification relates to greater job satisfaction, higher organizational commitment, and lower intention to leave one’s job (Carroll et al., 2014; Walker et al., 2008). Though these findings do not demonstrate a causal relationship between these variables, they are consistent with the theory that perceiving work as having a deeper meaning and purpose than simply generating an income leads employees to invest more in their job duties than would be otherwise expected.

**Body**

What happens when individuals view their bodies as sacred or perceive God to be involved in their physical health? Though this is a relatively new area of study within psychology, various religious traditions have promoted the idea that the body serves as a dwelling place for the soul and thus should be regarded as a kind of sacred temple. Within the handful of studies that have investigated the role of sanctifying one’s body, interesting patterns have emerged. Researchers have tested the theoretical prediction that those individuals who regard their bodies as sacred would be more invested in caring for their physical health. However, studies have found mixed results. On the one hand, some studies have found that greater body sanctification is related to more frequent physical exercise, greater body satisfaction, and greater disapproval of illicit drug use (e.g., Homan & Boyatzis, 2009; Jacobsen, Hall & Anderson, 2013; Mahoney et al., 2005). These findings suggest that if individuals perceive their body as sacred, then they are more likely to care for their body in an attempt to preserve and protect it from disease or harm.

However, other large-scale studies in this area have shown different results. For example, Ellison and colleagues (2008) found that as endorsement of body sanctification increased, rates of completing annual medical checkups decreased. Similarly, Benjamins et al. (2011) found that body sanctification was largely unrelated to individuals’ use of preventative health services such as cholesterol screenings, flu shots, and colonoscopies. Thus, the perception that the body is a sacred object may encourage people to take better care of themselves physically and respect their bodies mentally. However, the perception that the body is sacred may also encourage the belief that God is able to protect bodies from illness, and thus reduce concerns about utilizing services to detect the warning signs of disease. We are hopeful that future research in this area will clarify this complex and important relationship.

**Environment**

One study has also examined the sanctification of the environment (Tarakeshwar, Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2001), polling a large national sample of Presbyterian Church members, elders, and clergy. The majority of the sample agreed that “Nature is sacred because it was created by God,” and higher endorsement of this item predicted greater participation in nature-preserving activities. Also, individuals who more highly sanctified nature tended to have lower endorsement of the belief that humans take precedence over nature, stronger beliefs that human actions hurt nature, and greater willingness to invest in protecting the environment (Tarakeshwar et al., 2001). These findings further support the broader theme that holding something sacred means one is more likely to take actions to preserve and protect it from harm.

**Social Justice**

Another promising line of research involves the role of the sanctification in the area of social justice attitudes and activities (Todd, Houston, & Odahl-Ruan, 2014; Todd, McConnell, & Suffrin, 2014). Researchers have asked whether imbuing social justice efforts with a sense of the sacred relates to more commitment to these endeavors. Results indicate that this may indeed be the case, as sanctification of social justice positively predicted social justice interest and commitment in ways that were not predicted by other religious variables such as being biblically conservative. These are promising findings that illustrate how a theoretical framework of sanctification can contribute greater understanding of a wide range of important life domains.

**Sacred Moments in Therapy**

Pargament and colleagues’ study of sanctification of key moments in life (2014) revealed how important moments in treatment identified by both mental health providers and mental health patients may have pivotal implications. Perceptions of important moments as more sacred by the providers were linked with reports of greater treatment gains, a stronger therapeutic alliance, and higher levels of provider well-being and work motivation. Similar findings were reported by the mental health patients. Sacred moments then may be an important spiritual ingredient of therapeutic change. More generally, sacred moments appear to be a potentially valuable resource, not only for people seeking out help but people providing that help. Findings such as these underscore the importance of extending studies of sanctification to the context of caregiving.

**Sacred Loss & Desecration**

 Up to this point we have been focusing on the benefits of viewing life through a sacred lens; however, we must also point out some of the potential risks that accompany sanctification. Though imbuing parts of life with sacred meaning tends to enrich people’s life experiences when these objects and relationships remain intact, if sanctified aspects of life are lost (i.e., sacred loss), violated, or harmed (i.e., desecration) the consequences tend to be more severe (Pargament, Magyar, Benore & Mahoney, 2005). For example, a sacred loss might be the death of a loved one with whom one had a sacred bond, whereas a desecration might be the bombing of a religious space such as a church or temple or discovering a spouse’s infidelity in a marriage one held sacred. In each of these cases, the deeper spiritual meaning attached to the object or relationship translates into a greater depth of loss and pain when it is lost or damaged.

 Though similar to sanctification, sacred loss and desecration are distinct constructs and have been studied as a separate line of research. One of the first studies in this area (Mahoney et al., 2002) examined the attitudes of college students in Ohio and New York following the 9/11 World Trade Center attack. When asked to rate the degree to which they viewed the attack as a desecration, nearly half of the students endorsed that “this event was both an offence against me and against God,” and a third agreed that “something sacred that came from God was dishonored” (Mahoney et al., 2002). In order to better understand the prevalence and implications of these concepts, Pargament and colleagues (2005) asked individuals in a Midwest community sample to identify the most significant personal negative life event they had experienced in the past two years. Individuals then rated items that assessed the degree to which they perceived this event to be a sacred loss (e.g., “Something that gave sacred meaning to my life is now missing”) or desecration (e.g., “This event ruined a blessing from God”) (Pargament et al., 2005). Thirty-eight percent of individuals perceived the negative event as a sacred loss to some degree, whereas 24% perceived the event as a desecration.

This line of research has also been applied to study the dissolution of romantic and marital relationships. Initial studies have found that over half of college students who experienced a romantic breakup and 74% of divorced couples perceive the dissolution to be a sacred loss or desecration (Hawley & Mahoney, 2013; Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2009). Results across studies have shown a significant link between greater desecration and sacred loss and more emotional distress including greater depression, anger, and intrusive thoughts (Hawley & Mahoney, 2013; Krumrei et al., 2009; Pargament et al., 2005). Also, individuals who experienced a sacred loss tended to report more spiritual growth following the event; however, those who experienced a desecration reported less spiritual growth. Thus, for a significant number of people, perceiving negative events through the lens of sacred meaning has a powerful impact.

It is important especially in clinical settings to recognize that experiencing life as sacred makes facing negative personal events more challenging and painful. However, this does not mean that these negative implications of sacred loss or injury outweigh the benefits of perceiving life through a sacred lens. Faced with a painful event, some individuals are able to rely on spiritual and religious coping to enter into a period of spiritual growth that may lead to deeper insights in the months and years to come. Others may benefit from recognizing that while the object or relationship that manifested the sacred is no longer able to fulfill this role, the entire sphere of the sacred has not been lost, and new and different pathways to experience God/higher powers and/or sacred qualities can be found. Overall, it seems that people who imbue life with sacred meaning experience both the joys and sorrows of life at a deeper level that touches them at the core of their being.

In summary, the research to date suggests that seeing life through a sacred lens is a common experience, one that holds several key implications for human functioning across several domains. People who imbue a dimension of life with sacred status are more likely to show: (1) greater investment of resources in and commitment to the sanctified domain; (2) greater motivation to protect and preserve sacred objects; (3) stronger spiritual emotions; (4) greater support and satisfaction derived from sanctified areas; and (5) heightened risk of adverse outcomes if the sacred is lost or violated.

**Broader Implications and Conclusions**

How might we understand the great versatility of sanctification and its manifestations in such diverse areas of our lives? Eliade (1961, p. 12) writes, “For those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into supernatural reality. In other words, for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality.” In this sense, it seems that the power of sanctification lies less in its particular focal point than in the deeper reality revealed through this different way of seeing and experiencing the world. Thus, whether it is a sacred relationship, object, role, or ideal, this way of infusing that which appears to be ordinary with extraordinary meaning and purpose amplifies individuals’ experiences of these domains.

Sanctification involves the search for the deeper meaning within everyday experiences and objects. Regardless of the spiritual or religious beliefs underlying this process, the very impulse to look beyond the conventional view to experience a deeper, more nuanced and meaningful dimension is highly valuable in contemporary culture that is rather materialistic and leaves many people persistently dissatisfied and de-moralized. Unfortunately, rather than engage this inner sense of dissatisfaction and uneasiness by facing the challenging existential questions about ultimate meaning and purpose, individuals often distract and numb themselves in order to enjoy the present moment. These distractions can take the form of serious problems, such as addictions. One source of this disillusionment may be the sense of personal disconnection from the deeper dimensions of life, which we propose is an essential part of the human experience. As psychologist Viktor Frankl (1985) asserted: “For too long we have been dreaming a dream from which we are now waking up: the dream that if we just improve the socioeconomic situation of people, everything will be okay, people will become happy. The truth is that as the *struggle for survival* has subsided, the question has emerged: *survival for what?* Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for” (p. 121).

How might individuals today reengage with this underlying struggle to find a deeper, more ultimate meaning and purpose in their lives? Though there are many beneficial approaches (e.g., mindfulness or meditation), the process of sanctification may help to frame the seemingly mundane activities of daily living within a deep spiritual dimension. By seeing life through a sacred lens, any moment becomes a potential opportunity to encounter and rediscover something of divine character and significance, fulfilling the human longing for genuine meaning and purpose. Overall, findings in this area of study show that the capacity to sanctify life corresponds with an enriched lived experience of healthier and more satisfying relationships, greater investment and commitment to one’s goals, and more satisfaction in pursuing one’s most important personal strivings.

These findings also have clinical implications. There is a potential power within sanctification to provide a point of contact between clients’ spiritual beliefs and their treatment goals. A critical task for clinicians is to guide clients in identifying their core values and beliefs in order to define their most deeply desired goals and the pathways they take to reach these desired destinations. Helping clients identify those areas in their lives that they hold sacred can facilitate this process (see Pargament, 2007 for illustrations). And as we have stressed, because sanctification can occur theistically or nontheistically, questions about what people perceive as sacred are relevant not only to traditionally religious clients but also to those who define themselves as non-traditional, agnostic, or even atheist. Historically, psychologists have been reluctant to examine spirituality or the sacred dimension of life, perhaps because they themselves are less religious than the general population (Shafranske & Cummings, 2013). Yet, it is becoming clear that many people do see life through a sacred lens and that in many ways imbuing life with sacred meaning is often beneficial. At the same time, the loss or violation of that which is seen as sacred can exacerbate pain, suffering, and violence among individuals and collectives. To appreciate and assist clients in their full humanity as psychological, social, physical, and spiritual beings then, practitioners must also become more facile in seeing life, particularly the lives of their clients, through a sacred lens. Without that spiritual acumen, we overlook a vital dimension of life, one that makes us more deeply human.

Potential implications for therapy/helping professionals:

* Assist clients in fostering the capacity to see more deeply, asking clients about what aspects of their life they hold sacred.
* Help clients to prioritize and incorporate what they hold sacred as they formulate therapeutic goals.
* Consider the deeper meaning of problems that involve what clients regard as sacred. For example, in marital therapy with a couple that holds their marriage sacred, encourage spiritual conversation to strengthen intimacy between partners.
* Foster acceptance of diverse spiritual and sacred expressions, recognizing that this construct is relevant not only to traditionally religious clients but also to those who define themselves as non-traditional, agnostic, or even atheist.
* Be open to sacred moments within therapy, recognizing them as an important spiritual ingredient of therapeutic change.

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Figures



*Figure 1.* Sacred core and ring of sanctification.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Sanctification of… | Nontheistic  | Theistic  |
| Life as a Whole | I feel reverence for all living things. | I see each day, good or bad, as a gift from God. |
| Life Domains |  |  |
|  Marriage | My marriage reveals the deepest truths of life to me.  | I feel God at work in my marriage.  |
|  Parenting | Being a mother feels like a deeply spiritual experience. | I sense God’s presence in my relationship with my baby. |
|  Body | My body is holy. | My body is created in God's image.  |
|  Sexuality | Our sexual relationship connects us to something greater than ourselves.  | God’s essence is expressed in our sexual relationship.  |
| Moments | -I felt a deep sense of mystery.-This moment felt set apart  from everyday life. | N/A |

*Figure 2.* Example sanctification items.