Parenting and the Socialization of Religiousness and Spirituality

Sam A. Hardy

Jennifer White

Joshua Ruchty

Brigham Young University

Zhiyong Zhang

University of Notre Dame

Abstract

This study examined parenting style dimensions as moderators of relations between family religiousness and individual religiousness and spirituality. Participants were 122 emerging adults ages 17-31 ($M = 20.92$, $SD = 2.75$). Cross-sectional data were obtained through an online survey. Participants rated the frequency with which they engaged in various religious activities with their families when they were younger, the frequency with which they personally do those behaviors currently, their current spirituality, and the parenting styles used by their parents when they were younger. Family religiousness positively predicted individual religiousness and spirituality. Rejection and autonomy-support moderated the association between family religiousness and individual religiousness, while warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, and autonomy-support moderated the relationship between family religiousness and individual spirituality. Thus, religious beliefs and practices, at whatever level, may be more readily appropriated by the next generation in families characterized by authoritative parenting.

Religion and spirituality are a part of the lives of many people across the world. In fact, 95% of people in the U.S. believe in a supreme being, 40% attend religious worship services on a weekly basis, and only 6% are not affiliated with a religious community (Gallop & Lindsay, 1999). Even people who do not claim to be "religious" often identify as being "spiritual" (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009). For the most part religiousness and spirituality have positive effects on the well-being of individuals, relationships, and society (for a review, see Hood et al., 2009). However, we know relatively little about how religiousness and spirituality develop. One potentially important context for this development is the family (Boyatzis & Dollahite, 2006). For instance, the quality of parenting may affect the likelihood that youth will appropriate the religious and spiritual beliefs and practices of their parents (Myers, 1996). The purpose of this study was to examine whether parenting style dimensions moderate relations between religious participation in the family during adolescence and individual religiousness and spirituality during emerging adulthood.

Religiousness and Spirituality

Religiousness and spirituality are interrelated but different aspects of human functioning (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). Religiousness concerns involvement in practices and commitment to beliefs associated with particular religious communities or ideologies, whereas spirituality is more about the individual's quest for meaning and transcendence. While many people are both religious and spiritual, some are only one or the other.

Prior research has generally found that religiousness and spirituality are adaptive aspects of human functioning (Hood et al., 2009). For example, individuals who are more religious and/or spiritual (many studies do not distinguish the two) tend to have better mental and physical health (Lawler-Row, 2010; Rosmarin, Pirutinsky, Pargament, & Krumrei, 2009), greater life

satisfaction (Steger & Frazier, 2005), and engage in more prosocial behaviors (Gibson, 2008; Hardy & Carlo, 2005) and less risk behaviors (Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003; Toussaint, 2009). Therefore, understanding how religiousness and spirituality are fostered has potential for improving individual, relational, and societal well-being.

The Family Context for the Development of Religiousness and Spirituality

A number of factors are important to the development of religiousness and spirituality, including genetics, personality, family, peers, schools, and religious organizations (for reviews, see King & Roeser, 2009). Although families may be the most salient contexts for child and adolescent development more generally (Clarke-Stewart & Dunn, 2006), little is known about the role of families in religious and spiritual development (Boyatzis & Dollahite, 2006; Miller, 2005). Through various means such as formal teaching, informal discussions, role modeling, and co-participation in religious activities (e.g., prayer, scripture study, and worship service attendance), parents explicitly and implicitly convey religious and spiritual beliefs and practices to their children (Dollahite & Marks, 2005). At least partially because of these efforts, youth tend to develop beliefs and practices that are concordant with those of their parents (Flor & Knapp, 2001; Myers, 1996; Milevsky, Szuchman, & Milevsky, 2008; Okagaki & Bevis, 1999). But, little is known about factors that might affects the extent to which such beliefs and practices are appropriated by youth. Parenting styles may be one such factor (Assor, Cohen, Malayev, Kaplan, & Friedman, 2005; Myers, 1996). In other words, it may be that the quality of parenting can facilitate or hinder intergenerational transmission of beliefs and practices.

The Specific Role of Parenting Style Dimensions

Researchers have identified four styles of parenting: authoritative, permissive, authoritarian, and neglectful (Baumrind, 1991). Authoritative parents are warm, involved, and responsive. But, they are also demanding, have clear expectations, hold their children accountable for following rules, and are not overly intrusive or restrictive. Further, they democratically involve children in developing rules and discipline strategies and are supportive of individual autonomy. On the other hand, authoritarian parents are similarly demanding, but, do so in a way that is not warm or supportive of autonomy; rather, they are often intrusive, overly restrictive, and focused on asserting their power. Permissive parents are the "best friend" type of parent – warm and involved, supportive of autonomy, but not demanding. Lastly, neglectful parents are simply disengaged; thus, they are not involved or demanding. Generally authoritative parenting is the most adaptive form of parenting, and has been linked to numerous positive outcomes for youth (e.g., Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994), although other styles of parenting may be more effective for certain populations (e.g., African Americans; Greening, Stoppelbein, & Luebbe, 2010) or certain contexts (e.g., low socioeconomic status; for a review, see Spera, 2005).

As can be seen above, underlying the four parenting styles are three parenting style dimensions: warmth, structure, and autonomy-support. Each parenting style has a different profile in terms of levels of these three dimensions, with authoritative parenting being high on all three. As such, authoritative parenting should facilitate children's internalization of parental beliefs and practices (Grolnick, 2003; Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997). *Warmth* involves showing interest in and knowledge of the child's life, and demonstrating an investment in their choices and activities. Such positive relatedness induces children to be more willing and motivated to

attend to, accept, and comply with parental values and expectations. *Structure* entails information and guidelines to help children successfully self-regulate. Providing appropriate structure involves delineating clear expectations, conveying the importance of those expectations, outlining consequences associated with meeting or not meeting the expectations, and consistently following through with those consequences. *Autonomy support*, which involves the extent to which parents encourage a strong sense of agency in their children, helps children feel they can choose and initiate their own actions.

While the three parenting dimensions described above are positive, they each have their negative counterparts: *rejection*, *chaos*, and *coercion* (Skinner, 2005). Rejection is an active disliking of the child that may include characteristics such as hostility, irritability, over-reactivity, criticism, and disapproval. Chaos refers to a parenting environment that is non-contingent, inconsistent, erratic, arbitrary, or otherwise obscures for children the paths by which they can achieve desired outcomes and avoid negative outcomes. Coercive or controlling parenting is rigid, intrusive, and focused on strict obedience. Such negative aspect of parenting may inhibit adolescents' desires and abilities to attend to and accept parental messages about religion and spirituality (Grolnick, 2003; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994), and could negatively color religious and spiritual experiences for adolescents still in the process of forming their own beliefs and practices.

Less work has been done on these negative aspects of parenting. Skinner argues that they may not be exactly the opposite ends of the continuum from the positive dimensions. Thus, parenting in a particular family might only weakly include warmth, structure, and autonomy-support, without it necessarily being rejecting, chaotic, and coercive. As an empirical example, although psychological control (or coercion) includes parental behaviors that invalidate,

manipulate, and hinder the expression of the child's thoughts and feelings, Barber and colleagues (Barber, Stolz, & Olsen, 2005) noted that it should be considered a relatively independent dimension from autonomy-support. Still, autonomy-support is hypothesized to promote prosocial and competent behaviors, while psychological control is hypothesized to lead to risk and detrimental behaviors (Barber et al., 2005; Grolnick, 2003). Other work has similarly found that positive and negative aspects of parenting do not always perform in tandem in statistical analyses (e.g., Soenens, Vansteenkiste, & Sierens, 2009; Verhoeven, Junger, van Aken, Deković, & van Aken, 2010).

Little work has been done to examine the potential role of these six parenting dimensions (warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, autonomy-support, and coercion) on the intergenerational transmission of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. More particularly, although some studies have looked at parenting styles or parenting style dimensions as predictors of adolescent or young adult religiousness and spirituality, only one that we know of explored parenting as a moderator (Myers, 1996). In other words, only one study looked at whether the strength of links between beliefs and practices of parents and adolescents depended on the style of parenting, and it only examined support and structure as moderators, and religiousness as the predictor and outcome. They found that support and structure both moderated relations between parents' religiosity and that of their adult children.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study was to examine relations between family religiousness (level of family religious involvement in one's family of origin) and current individual religiousness and spirituality, and then to assess whether this relation is moderated by the parenting style dimensions. To this end, we first hypothesized positive associations between

family religiousness and individual religiousness and spirituality. Second, we hypothesized that family religiousness would interact with the parenting style dimensions in predicting current individual religiousness and spirituality. Specifically, higher levels of the positive dimensions of parenting (warmth, structure, and autonomy-support) will strengthen relations between family religiousness and individual religiousness and spirituality, while higher levels of negative dimensions of parenting (rejection, chaos, and coercion) will weaken these relations. This study extends prior research by looking at how religious practices families engage in predict transmission of religiousness and spirituality, and how this is moderated by parenting style dimensions.

Method

Participants

Participants were 122 emerging adults ages 17-31 ($M = 20.92$, $SD = 2.75$) recruited through four universities. The sample was 83% female and 89% European American (3% African American, 3% Latino, and 5% other). By religious affiliation, the sample was 26% LDS (Mormon), 25% Catholic, and 25% Protestant, while 11 % identified with various other affiliations, and 13% claimed no religious affiliation. While 96% were currently enrolled as college students (59% at public universities; 37% at private universities), only 13% were married.

Procedures

Data for the present study came from a larger project on religiousness and spirituality. Recruiting took place through four universities: one in the West (private), one in the Midwest (private), one in the East (public), and one in the South (public). The study was approved by the

Institutional Review Boards of all four universities. Individuals interested in participating were emailed a link to an online survey. The survey was designed and administered using Qualtrics.

Measures

      Individual religiousness. Participants were first asked to select which of 16 different religious activities (e.g., "study scriptures individually," "pray," "attend religious worship services," and "reflect or meditate on religious things") they participate in regularly. Then, they were asked to rate those they selected on a scale from 1 (*several times a year*) to 7 (*more than once a day*). Thus, participants received a score from 0 to 8 on each of the 16 activities, with 0 indicating they did not select that activity as something they do regularly. Ratings were averaged to create the index for individual religiousness ($\alpha = .94$).

      Individual spirituality. Individual spirituality was assessed using the 16 items Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (Underwood, 2006). Fifteen of the items regarded frequency of various spiritual experiences (e.g., "I feel God's presence," "I feel deep inner peace or harmony," and "I experience a connection to all life") and were answered using a scale from 1 (*never or almost never*) to 6 (*many times a day*). The sixteenth item was more general ("In general, how close to you feel to God?"), and was answered on a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*as close as possible*).   This last item was rescaled to match the 6-point scale of the other items, and then all 16 items were averaged to create the index of individual spirituality ($\alpha = .95$).

      Family religiousness. Family religiousness was assessed using 14 of the 16 items from the individual religiousness measure (two items were omitted because they did not seem appropriate for tapping family religiousness since they specifically ask about individual-level activities: "study scriptures individually" and "reflect or meditate on religious things"). Respondents rated each according to how frequently they participated in that activity with their

parents when they were in high school, on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 8 (*more than once a day*).

Ratings were averaged to create the index for family religiousness ($\alpha = .96$).

Parenting style dimensions. Parenting style dimensions were assessed using the 24-item adolescent-report version of the Parents as Social Context Questionnaire (Skinner, Johnson, & Snyder, 2005). This measure taps the degree of warmth (e.g., "My parents enjoyed being with me"; $\alpha = .86$), rejection (e.g., "My parents though I was always in the way"; $\alpha = .81$), structure (e.g., "My parents explained the reasons for our family rules"; $\alpha = .84$), chaos (e.g., "My parents kept changing the rules on me"; $\alpha = .80$), autonomy-support (e.g., "My parents accepted me for myself"; $\alpha = .78$), and coercion (e.g., "My parents bossed me"; $\alpha = .81$) exhibited by parents. These six dimensions represent the three positive dimensions of authoritative parenting (warmth, structure, and autonomy-support) and as well as three corresponding negative dimensions of parenting (rejection, chaos, and coercion). Participants responded to the items on a scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 4 (*very true*). To create indexes for each of the dimensions, responses to the corresponding four items were averaged.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

SPSS (version 15) was used for all analyses. First, we examined the degree to which the variables deviated from assumptions of normality (skewness and kurtosis). Based on the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality all variables were significantly non-normal (Shapiro-Wilk coefficients ranged from .67-.97). Thus, we elected to transform all variables. Based on recommendations of Tabachnik and Fidell (2007), variables with moderate skewness were square root transformed (family religiousness, individual religiousness, individual spirituality, structure, chaos, and coercion), those with substantial skewness were log transformed

(autonomy-support), and those with severe skewness were inverse transformed (warmth and rejection).

Next, we identified univariate and multivariate outliers (using procedures recommended by Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007). Univariate outliers were identified by obtaining z-scores on all study variables and noting cases with z-scores higher than 3.30. No univariate outliers were identified. Multivariate outliers were identified by conducting a regression analyses using the study variables as predictors and ID number as the outcome, requesting Mahalanobis distance values, and noting which were greater than the critical value [χ^2 (9) = 27.88] of a chi-square with 9 degrees of freedom at significance level 0.001. Only one multivariate outlier was identified, and this case was deleted, leaving an analysis sample of $N = 121$.

Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics for study variables are presented in Table 1. Age was not correlated with any study variables, and thus was not included in any of the study analyses. Family religiousness was correlated positively with individual religiousness and spirituality, and individual religiousness and spirituality were similarly correlated. In terms of parenting style dimensions, the three positive dimensions (warmth, structure, autonomy-support) were positively correlated with each other and negatively correlated with the negative dimensions (rejection, chaos, coercion). Similarly, the negative dimensions were correlated positively with each other and negatively with the positive dimensions. Warmth was positively correlated with family religiousness, but none of the other correlations between parenting style dimensions and family religiousness was significant. Individual religiousness correlated positively with rejection, and negatively with structure and autonomy-support. Individual spirituality also correlated positively with rejection.

Regression Models for Tests of the Moderation Hypotheses

The study hypotheses were tested using hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis (see Tables 2-7). Separate analyses were conducted for each of the six parenting variables predicting each of the two outcomes (individual religiousness and individual spirituality), leading to a total of twelve analyses. Sex and religious affiliation were entered as control variables in the first step for each analysis. Sex was dummy coded (male = 0, female = 1). Religious affiliation was also dummy coded, using five categories (LDS, Catholic, Protestant, none, and other). Given our interest in the LDS religion, we used it as the reference group, yielding the following four dummy variables (LDS-none, LDS-Catholic, LDS-Protestant, LDS-other). Family religiousness and a parenting style dimension were entered in the second step of each analysis, using centered versions of each transformed variable. In the third step of each analysis an interaction term was entered that was created by multiplying family religiousness by the patenting style dimension (the centered versions of each transformed variable).

For the analyses predicting individual religiousness, family religiousness was a significant positive predictor of individual religiousness in the second step of all six analyses (βs from .45-.50). Interestingly, rejection and chaos were positive predictors of individual religiousness, and autonomy-support a negative predictor – in their respective analyses. In the third steps for each analysis, there were significant interactions between family religiousness and parenting style dimensions for rejection (β = -.15) and autonomy-support (β = .12). Both interactions were in the expected direction (see Figures 1-2). Specifically, the link between family religiousness and individual religiousness was stronger in families with lower rejection and higher autonomy-support.

In the analyses predicting individual spirituality, family religiousness was a significant positive predictor of individual spirituality in the second step of all analyses (βs from .56-60). Further, rejection and chaos were positive predictors. In the third steps in each analysis, there were significant interaction effects for warmth (β = .16), rejection (β = -.16), structure (β = .15), chaos (β = -.17), and autonomy-support (β = .18). Again, all interaction effects were in the expected direction (see Figures 3-7), in that the link between family religiousness and individual spirituality was stronger in families with higher warmth, structure, and autonomy-support, and lower rejection and chaos.

In short, over half of all interaction effects tested (seven out of twelve) were statistically significant. In addition, there was one marginally-significant interaction effect for chaos predicting individual religiousness (β = -.11, p = .056). All significant and marginally-significant interactions were in the expected direction.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine parenting style dimensions as moderators of relations between family religiousness and individual religiousness and spirituality. More specifically, it was hypothesized that there would be greater links between retrospectively-reported family religiousness in the adolescent years and current individual religiousness and spirituality for individuals who reported parenting characterized by more warmth, structure, and autonomy-support, and less rejection, chaos, and coercion. Partial support was found for this hypothesis. Out of the twelve possible interactions of family religiousness and parenting style dimensions predicting individual religiousness and spirituality seven were statistically significant – all of which were in the expected direction.

Rejection and autonomy-support moderated the association between family religiousness and individual religiousness, while warmth, rejection, structure, chaos, and autonomy-support moderated the relationship between family religiousness and individual spirituality. In other words, the level of past family religiousness corresponded more strongly to the current individual religiousness in families with less rejection and greater autonomy-support, and corresponded more strongly to current individual spirituality in families with greater warmth, structure, and autonomy-support, and less rejection and chaos. This is in line with prior studies of the transmission of religious beliefs and practices (Myers, 1996; Okagaki & Bevis, 1999), as well as the broader literature on the internalization of values (e.g., Hardy, Padilla-Walker, & Carlo, 2008). More specifically, the present findings suggest that parenting congruent with an authoritative parenting style may best facilitate the intergenerational transmission of religious practices and spirituality. Combined with prior results on internalization and intergenerational transmission, the processes and outcomes involved may be similar regardless of what type of social cognitions or behaviors are being appropriated by youth in the family context.

The moderating role of authoritative parenting style dimensions was evidenced for the links between family religiousness and both individual religiousness and individual spirituality. Hence, there may be more than mere modeling or social learning going on in that youth in authoritative families are picking up more than just patterns of behavior, but, likely also beliefs and ways of relating to others, the world, and deity. This may be possible because religiousness and spirituality are interconnected in many families and individuals (Smith & Denton, 2005). In other words, the level of religiousness and spirituality are linked in families as well as in the youth who develop in those families.

It is interesting, however, that links between family religiousness and individual spirituality were as strong as or stronger than those for individual religiousness, and that more interaction effects appeared when predicting spirituality. Perhaps the cognitions and emotions associated with spirituality are internalized more readily than concrete religious practices. For example, youth may choose to believe as their parents do, but, during the college years they may get out of the habit of regular religious practices.

It is unclear why rejection and chaos were positive predictors of individual religiousness and spirituality, while autonomy-support was a negative predictor of religiousness. We did not anticipate that more authoritative parenting would be predictive of less individual religiousness and spirituality, as this is inconsistent with some prior research (Miller, 2005). However, it should be noted that in the present study, only warmth was correlated with family religiousness. Thus, it was not that religious families were low on authoritative parenting, because at the least they were higher on parental warmth. Rather, the interactions we found demonstrate that family religiousness (at whatever level) is more strongly associated with individual religiousness and spirituality in more authoritative families. In other words, the family climate relates to the degree of intergenerational transmission of religiousness, regardless of the level of religiousness. So, teens in authoritative but less religious families are more likely to be less religious themselves than if they had come from a family low on authoritative parenting. On the other hand, teens from highly religious families that are low on authoritative parenting may not be religious themselves. Still, the main effects of parenting on individual religiousness and spirituality seem counterintuitive. It may be that in some contexts, religiousness and spirituality emerges as a coping mechanism for youth in difficult family situations. However, it may have

something to do with the characteristics of the sample or the methods used. Further work is needed for this to be disentangled.

Limitations

Despite the intriguing patterns of results, this study had several limitations. First, all of the measures were survey measures completed by the participants themselves. Thus, there is the potential for social-desirability bias. However, people are fairly accurate in reporting their own behaviors and internal states (Clarke et al., 1992), and adolescent's reports of their family's religiosity are also fairly accurate (Milevski, Szuchman, & Milevski, 2008). Second, ratings of family religiousness were retrospective. Future research should use longitudinal methods to better establish the family context of religious and spiritual development. Third, our assessment of individual and family religious involvement was somewhat limited, focused on public and private religious activities. Future research should explore whether the present relations hold for other aspects of religiosity, such as religious internalization (Neyrinck, Vansteenkiste, Lens, Duriez, & Hutsebaut, 2006). Fourth, the sample for the present study was relatively small, comprised largely of European Americans from theistic Western religions, and included individuals from relatively functional families. Thus, the findings may not generalize to other populations. In particular, the parenting dimensions seen as most conducive to internalization may differ across populations (for a review of research on ethnic and socioeconomic differences in relations between parenting and adolescent school achievement, see Spera, 2005). Additionally, different processes may be at work in more dysfunctional families.

Conclusions

The present study found support for the notion that religious beliefs and practices may best be conveyed to the next generation in family contexts characterized by authoritative

parenting. These findings attest to the important role parents play in religious and spiritual development (Boyatis et al., 2006). Further, internalization processes in the family (Grolnick et al., 1997; Grusec & Goodnow, 1994) likely apply to a wide range of social cognitions, behaviors, and interpersonal styles, including those in the religious and spiritual domains. One practical implication of this is that religious organizations may encourage authoritative parenting as a way of helping bring up the next generation in their faith tradition. In closing, we hope the intriguing findings of this study prompt future research into religious and spiritual development in the family.

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