

Introduction to the Special Section on Religion and Spirituality in Family Life: Pathways Between Relational Spirituality, Family Relationships and Personal Well-Being

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This special section on faith and family life presents 5 studies that each offer novel insights into the complex web of linkages between a target family member's religious and/or spiritual (R/S) functioning and parental or family factors that may influence the target family member's psychological or R/S functioning. The outcome domain of interest is adolescent psychological functioning in the first three studies, parental stress in the fourth study, and the R/S functioning of adult children in the fifth study. In this introduction, we feature unique findings from each study. We then highlight 3 key conceptual issues that researchers need to recognize to continue to move forward rigorous research on specific roles that R/S can play in enhancing as well as undermining individual and family well-being.

Keywords: religion, spirituality, family, parenting, adolescent adjustment

An abundance of research has documented that religious and spiritual (R/S) factors contribute to adolescent and adult psychological well-being (Paloutzian & Park, 2013; Pargament, Mahoney, & Shafranske, 2013). Greater access to R/S resources, such as having a close, supportive relationship with God and being more involved with a religious community, has been tied in cross-sectional and longitudinal studies to better psychological adjustment and lower substance use. On the other hand, greater R/S conflicts with God or other people over faith predict greater psychological distress, particularly if spiritual struggles remain chronic and unresolved. In light of such findings, remarkably scarce research exists on reciprocal pathways of influence between one or more family member's R/S functioning, family and parenting factors, and the well-being of family members.

To address the need for additional research on the interface of R/S and family life, JFP has published two special sections on the topic. We hope that both special sections will entice more researchers to generate more scientific knowledge for researchers, clergy, couples or family counselors, and the general public on this understudied nexus. The first special section of four studies was published in the October issue of *JFP* and examined the manner in which specific spiritual beliefs or behaviors appear to strengthen the generally happy marriages of heterosexual couples. In this second special section, five studies offer novel insights into the complex web of linkages between a target family member's R/S functioning and parental or family factors that may influence the

target family member's psychological or R/S functioning. The outcome domain of interest in the first three studies is adolescent psychological functioning, parental stress in the fourth study, and the R/S functioning of adult children in the fifth study. In this introduction, we feature unique findings of each study. We then highlight three "big picture" issues that researchers need to recognize to continue to move rigorous research forward on the intersection of faith and family life. We refer readers to Mahoney's work on Relational Spirituality for further elaboration of peer reviewed research on this area (Mahoney, 2010, 2013).

Using a community sample of 220 adolescents and their primary caregiver (80% mothers; 78% married), Kim-Spoon, Farley, Holmes, and Longo (2014) present the first evidence that adolescents' access to religious resources may be a powerful factor that helps protect teens from turning to alcohol, marijuana, and cigarettes to cope with harsh parenting and poor self-control. In structural equation models, adolescents' religiousness encompassed their involvement in organized religion, personal spiritual resources (belief in God, prayer, turning to religious beliefs to guide daily life), and emotional support from members of their religious community. Adolescents with lower levels of religiousness were more likely to engage in substance use when subjected to harsh parenting, but there was no association between harsh parenting and substance use among adolescents with higher religiousness. Similarly, for adolescents with lower religiousness, greater struggles with self-control were tied to greater substance use, but this link disappeared for youth with higher levels of religiousness. These findings indicate that religious resources can help buffer adolescents from turning to substance use to cope with the toxic effects of parental maltreatment and their own personal struggles with self-control. Remarkably, the authors were able to locate only two prior published studies that have examined whether adolescents' religiousness buffers the negative effects of family or personal dysfunction on the teens' psychological adjustment using statistical moderation (interaction) effects.

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Goeke-Morey, Taylor, Merrilees, Shirlow, and Cummings (2014) present the first evidence to date that directly examines interactive effects between specific indices of the quality of adolescents' and mothers' perceived relationships with God, using a sample of 667 Christian, predominantly single-parent families from Northern Belfast. Youth who reported a closer relationship with a Christian God figure were less likely to suffer from internalizing adjustment problems 1 year later, but only if their mothers more often turned to God and religion to cope with their own difficulties. Thus, in families where youth are relatively emotionally stable, mothers may often be a valuable role model to show teens how an individual can access and draw on an image of a loving, loyal God and/or Jesus to help them cope with stressors, and this modeling may help prevent youth from developing internalizing problems over time. On the other hand, teens who initially reported higher internalizing problems later reported having a weaker relationship with a Christian God figure, and mothers' religious coping did not buffer them from increased difficulties with God over the year. This suggests that youth who are already struggling with emotional problems, and their mothers, may need help in learning how to effectively access a felt relationship with God over time. Both parties may need assistance in revising their understanding of God's role in why the youth has been experiencing emotional problems and in utilizing psychological and spiritual resources so the youth can resolve both psychological and spiritual struggles.

The study by Petts (2014) examines complex moderator effects between adolescent internalizing symptoms and adolescent religious attendance, family religious attendance, family structure and parent-child relationships by utilizing longitudinal data on 5,739 youth drawn from a national U.S. survey. Youth who attended religious services with their parent(s) in late childhood (ages 10–14), regardless of family structure, were more likely to experience a trajectory of higher psychological well-being throughout adolescence. Thus, attending religious services with married, step-, or single-parent(s) at this stage of development appeared to benefit youth over time. In addition, the more preteens attended religious services with married, step- or single parent(s), the more well-being they experienced over time by having a positive parent-child relationship. These findings imply that family religious attendance during late childhood may facilitate greater psychological and spiritual closeness between youth and parents, which benefits adolescents over time. But Petts also found that the adolescents from single-parent households were less likely than those raised in two-parent households to benefit from higher religious attendance. Although more research is needed, some adolescents in single parent families may derive fewer religious resources, and thus relatively fewer psychological benefits, from being involved in organized religion. Perhaps some teens experience psychological and spiritual distress or conflicts with their religious group because their family structure clashes with religious teachings that emphasize the superiority of families headed by married heterosexual couples relative to single parents.

Lamis, Wilson, Tarantino, Lansford, and Kaslow's (2014) study focuses linkages between R/S resources, parenting stress, parent-child relationships, and neighborhood disorder using a

sample of 144 African American women who were primary caregivers of children aged between 8 and 12 and fell into a low socioeconomic category. These researchers assessed mothers' reports of greater religious well-being, characterized by a sense of life in relationship with God, and existential well-being, characterized by a sense of purpose in life. Both R/S factors were robustly correlated with lower parenting stress and fewer dysfunctional parent-child interactions. Furthermore, these associations remained significant in hierarchical regressions after controlling for neighborhood disorder (e.g., physical blight, crime and instability in local neighborhoods) and other relevant covariates (e.g., parental age, education, homelessness status, income level, disability status, marital status, history of recent interpartner violence, child gender/age). In another set of analyses, published for the first time, the researchers found that a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life, but not religious well-being, intensified the link between parenting stress and neighborhood disorder. This suggests mothers with a greater sense of purpose were more stressed by the added responsibilities of protecting their children from dangers inherent in living in neighborhoods with greater crime and social instability. By contrast, a greater sense of purpose lessened mothers' parenting stress for families residing in better functioning neighborhoods. These complex findings indicate that R/S resources are tied to more positive parenting for low income, African American mothers raising children in urban environments, but some R/S factors may increase mothers' sense of burden to ensure their children's safety when families live in the midst of especially impoverished economic and social environments.

Finally, the study by Gutierrez, Goodwin, Kirkinis, and Mattis (2014) explored African Americans' perceptions of which relatives in their family of origin had a positive or negative influence on their R/S identities using a sample of 319 urban-residing adults in the Midwest and Northeast. This study is novel in three important respects. First, the researchers inquired about the influence of mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, sisters and brothers. Thus, this study goes beyond the dominant model of the "nuclear family" in religious socialization literature where married, heterosexual parents, as a unit, are often presumed to be the influential agents in the family on children's faith development, with debates centering on the relative importance of mothers versus fathers and scant attention given to the influence of grandparents or siblings. Second, research on paternal influences on their children's faith development has focused on married, Caucasian fathers affiliated with Latter-Day Saints or conservative Christian groups. By contrast, this is the first study target the role of African American men (fathers, grandfathers, brothers) in the transmission of R/S identity. Third, the researchers asked about whether relatives acted in ways that helped or undermined the adults' R/S identity. Among other findings, the respondents reported positive influences by all six types of family members and higher levels of influence by each relative correlated with the respondents' reports of the current importance of religion their own lives and their commitment to taking children to religious services. Mothers and grandmothers' influence also each uniquely predicted the current importance of religion to the respondents, after controlling for the five relatives' influence. Thus, this study illustrates fruitful ways to fill in gaps in R/S

socialization processes among African Americans. It also highlights the value of extending research on religious socialization to diverse types of families comprised of a system of people other than that of a nuclear model of family.

We hope the five studies in this special section inspire more researchers to delve an emerging subfield called Relational Spirituality, which focuses on the ways that people can draw on specific spiritual beliefs and behaviors to motivate them to create, maintain, and transform their family relationships, thereby influencing the well-being of all family members (Mahoney, 2010, 2013). To facilitate that process, we alert researchers to three important conceptual issues to recognize as they proceed. First, the broad domains of Religion and Spirituality are becoming increasingly polarized in scientific literature dominated by scholars from Western societies. "Being religious" is increasingly portrayed as public involvement with well-established religious groups (e.g., attendance at worship services), and external pressure to adhere to dogmatic religious beliefs, especially those that reinforce socially and politically conservative values. By contrast, "being spiritual" is increasingly framed as private efforts to seek a relationship with God/Higher Power, and internal motivation to pursue a life marked by a sense of sacredness, purpose and meaning, and virtuous conduct toward others. We argue that such dichotomies are conceptually problematic for at least three reasons. For one thing, organized religion remains the primary social institution that attempts to promote spirituality in peoples' daily lives and, in many societies, people continue to seek out support for their own and their children's spiritual identities from one or more established religious traditions. Second, religious groups offer diverse theological positions on existential, political and social issues, and wide variation exists within and between religious denominations on controversial moral and ethical issues. People can thus selectively seek out social support from religious leaders and members within religious subgroups that reinforce their family values. These family values can fall along the entire continuum of socially liberal to conservative viewpoints. Third, individuals can turn to nonreligious groups to support diverse ideological approaches to family life and reject the notion that seeking a sense of identity, meaning and purpose, and ethical values is inherently "being spiritual," finding the phrase superfluous at best and insulting at worst. Thus, it behooves researchers to precisely label and operationalize their R/S variables, and articulate the extent to which their variables tap into these two overlapping and complex domains when interpreting their findings.

Second, when it comes to empirical findings on the intersection of faith and family, academic debates over all-encompassing definitions of religion and spirituality are largely moot because researchers have relied so heavily on single items to tap into these multifaceted, overlapping domains. For example, about 75% to 85% of peer-reviewed, published studies conducted from 1980–2009 assessed whether a given family claims membership in a religious tradition, attends religious services, or says that religion or spirituality is personally important (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney, Pargament, Swank, & Tarakeshwar, 2001). In short, most controlled research on faith and family life assesses a given family member's global level of engagement in public religious groups (e.g., affiliation, attendance rates) or endorsement of private R/S attitudes (e.g., importance of religion or spirituality). Because of the general nature of these items, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify

and untangle particular spiritual beliefs or practices pursued within or outside of organized religion that could either help or harm family relationships. Moving forward, we urge researchers to draw on or develop conceptual models and measures that target specific spiritual beliefs or behaviors that could strengthen or damage family bonds (see Mahoney, 2013 for examples).

Third, research on links between participation in religion and family life has been dominated in a social science literature by a sociological lens called "religious familism" (Mahoney & Krumrei, 2013). Within this framework, the primary function of institutional religion is to promote the stability and functioning of families comprised of married heterosexual couples and their offspring. Reciprocally, many religious groups teach that this type of family structure is spiritually optimal. Perhaps it is not therefore surprising that one U.S. survey found that 56% of married parents with children attend religious services 2 to 3 times per month compared to 39% of single mothers or 39% of cohabiting couples with children. Yet 77% of single mothers and 78% of cohabiting couples with children also reported that religion is "somewhat" or "very important" to their daily life, compared to 89% of married parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Thus, people from diverse families continue to endorse that religion is relevant to their lives, even if they are less engaged in public participation. Moreover, single parents who more often attend religious services and feel a closer connection to God engage in better parent practices and have better parent-child relationships. Thus, researchers need to recognize that family members from diverse families may benefit from religion and spirituality.

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