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Transcendent Matters: Family Relationships Associated With How One Experiences God

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Directive Transcendence (God as Authority Figure)

1. God gives commandments

Baptist father: "Obeying his [God's] laws, or his commands, or his teachings, is very important to have a successful life and a family."

2. Submit my will to God

Episcopalian father: "The more I submit to God, the better husband I become."

3. God has a plan

Jewish mother: "But wasn't this actually, without our knowing it, all part of Hashem's plan? . . . We didn't like it. . . obviously this was how it was intended to work itself out, so that instead of you and me going divergent roads over it, we had to work together and find a place where we could be comfortable with each other and build a Jewish home together."



Research Questions

1. How do religious families experience/perceive God?
2. How do these perceptions influence family relationships?

Introduction

For religious families, an important but understudied aspect of spirituality is how their perceptions of God influence their family lives. Most research addresses religious behaviors such as attendance, prayer, or degree of salience (how important/central is religion) or degree of literal belief (e.g., biblical inerrancy). Relatively little research has addressed both substantive beliefs about God as well as their potential impact on specific relational processes. Mahoney has called for more research on the influence of substantive, specific beliefs as a way to further our understanding of the religion-relationships linkage (Mahoney, 2013). Specifically, she has used the concept of *relational spirituality* to connect religiosity with marriage and family relationships. This study will explore one aspect of relational spirituality: How perceptions of one's experiences with God are related to family life.

Methods

Qualitative interview data from the American Families of Faith (AFF) project with 198 religious families were coded and analyzed. The original data consisted of 2,818 accounts of experiencing God as an authority figure and/or a close confidant. Eight students were divided into three groups, each with a different set of codes based on authority theory, attachment theory and authority/confidant grounded theory ideas (Marks, 2015).

Discussion

We suggest that when the two types of relationships with God are combined into an authoritative transcendent relationship with God, parents may be better equipped to relate to and with their children. They may be better able to balance being an authority figure to, and a close confidant for their children, which could increase the likelihood of a healthy, high-attachment relationship. Empirically, there is emerging evidence that close parent-child relationships are a salient factor in successfully transmitting religiosity across generations (Kim-Spoon et al., 2012; Bengston, Putney, & Harris, 2013).

Some people have directive transcendent experiences with God, others intimate transcendent experiences, and others authoritative transcendent experiences. Each type of transcendent experience with God can color one's expectations of or experiences with family members. These transcendent experiences are influenced by one's attachment to God and one's perspective of God's authority. Because one's experiences with God are transcendent, they influence other areas of life, including family relationships. Through understanding how individuals may perceive their relationships with God, we can better understand influences on family relationships and what may or may not be helpful in building and strengthening family bonds.

Intimate Transcendence (God as Close Confidant)

1. One can trust God

Missionary Alliance father: "It provides . . . a security blanket. . . no matter what's going on around you, there is some constant that's there, and that's God. . . we can bring all of our problems and cares to Him. And there is that foundation that . . . it's unmovable."

2. God is available at any time

Catholic father: "God is there. As much as you get wrapped up in society and work and school and your friends, and this, and that . . . you know God is there. God is there. . . You are never alone, and no matter what happens, if you have faith, it will work out for you."

3. God heals & provides support

Muslim mother: "In the course of . . . trying to raise children . . . your faith has to be a significant factor in that. . . To fulfill your responsibility, to pass along faith in God, and in understanding that God loves you, and keeps you. [You teach your children that God] takes care of you, and provides for you, and is there when even I am not there, and [that He] will sustain you and make you whole."

4. God is personally interested & blesses

Mormon father: "We believe that our Heavenly father is willing, able, and desires to help us in every decision we have to make in life. Not just the big decisions. . . We believe he [also] wants to help us to give us the guidance in . . . the little daily activities of our lives that require inspiration . . . we believe that our Heavenly Father is more than happy to . . . put impressions in our heart [and] in our minds to give us direction."



Authoritative Transcendence

(God as Both an Authority Figure and a Close Confidant)

1. One can trust God

Chinese Christian mother: "Last year, we wanted to move again. When we prayed to God, we asked God's will, 'If you want us [to] stay at Baton Rouge, please prepare a job for us.' It was wonderful to find this job. So whenever we have something, we pray to God [and] ask for God's will."

2. God as a guide

Missionary Alliance mother: "[God is] a guide definitely . . . [to] where you're going to live, how to bring your children up. [He] gives us direction; helps us have love, the kind of love He has."

3. One can converse with God

Baptist husband: "I would consider God fatherly and parental. . . since He has communicated to us in those relational terms . . . I trust that that's probably the best way to deal with Him, 'cause that's the way He's talked to us."

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