Faculty Publications

2001

Varieties of Religion-Family Linkages

John R. Snarey
Emory University

David C. Dollahite
Brigham Young University - Provo, david_dollahite@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>

Part of the [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Original Publication Citation

Snarey, J. R., & Dollahite, D. C. (2001). Varieties of religion-family linkages. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15, 646-651.

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Snarey, John R. and Dollahite, David C., "Varieties of Religion-Family Linkages" (2001). *Faculty Publications*. 5020.

<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5020>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Varieties of Religion–Family Linkages

John R. Snarey
Emory University

David C. Dollahite
Brigham Young University

The 4 articles in this special issue make important contributions to both family and religious studies as well as to their interface. This commentary begins by considering 4 unifying themes present across all of the articles, including meaningful religion–family linkages, the importance of gender differences in the faith–family interface, the significance of intergenerational relationships, and the need for better theory. The authors then discuss the unique major strength and secondary limitations of each study. Finally, the commentary focuses on two challenges inhibiting the contemporary study of religion and the family—a relative lack of racial and religious diversity in samples and the lack of a unifying theory of religion–family linkages—and suggests how to adjust the trajectory of future theory and research to address these issues.

The time is right for the increased emphasis on religion and family connections represented by this special issue. We say this not simply because the topic of religion is now hot, which it most definitely is, but also because we have observed that family and religious life interact to advance the psyche's deepest commitments and highest ideals. Taken together, these studies suggest that both psychologists of religion and family psychologists who resist seeing reciprocal connections between family and religious experiences are being unnecessarily guarded.

Common Themes

Each article in this special issue deserves careful reading. We have, in effect, been treated to a symposium table with four main courses, and so our plate is overflowing with food for thought. The authors were reasonably frank

about their study's limitations, generally realistic in their interpretations, and they only occasionally forgot that self-reported cross-sectional data do not establish causal relations. In many substantive ways, the articles were unified by common themes. We mention four.

Meaningful, Positive Connections Exist

Perhaps the most common theme across all four articles is that religious faith and family relations are interrelated in positive, statistically significant, and psychologically interesting ways. The research papers provided additional evidence that religious beliefs and practices strengthen marriages and parent-child relationships. In particular, this collection of studies clearly demonstrates that close and intensive study of faith and family life is crucial to a richer understanding of how religion and relationships influence each other. Largely going beyond single-item or global measures of religious variables that have produced weak and inconsistent findings, the present studies generally used measures sufficiently powerful to reveal that, so to speak, God is in the details of marriage and family life.

Gender Differences Are Relevant

We know that, at least in the United States, women tend to be somewhat more religious than men of the same age across the life span.

John R. Snarey, Candler School of Theology and Department of Psychology, Emory University; David C. Dollahite, Department of Marriage, Family, and Human Development and School of Family Life, Brigham Young University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to John R. Snarey, Emory University, Psychology Building, Atlanta, Georgia 30322, or to David C. Dollahite, Brigham Young University, 1044 Kimball Tower, Provo, Utah 84602. Electronic mail may be sent to jsnarey@emory.edu or to dave_dollahite@byu.edu.

The articles in this issue also underscore the special relevance of gender to family-religion linkages. One study found that the relationships between religiosity and marital satisfaction, commitment to marriage, and planned marital stability differ for husbands and wives in meaningful ways (Sullivan, 2001). Another found that the religious behavior of boys appears to be more affected by parental religious modeling than is the religious behavior of girls (Flor & Knapp, 2001). And another showed that the enactment of, and meaning found in, a couple's joint religious activities were different for husbands and wives (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001). Researchers have known for some time that "his marriage" and "her marriage" are different. This set of studies also suggests the possibility that "his faith" and "her faith" are different and that faith and family interact in different ways for husbands and wives. On the basis of some of the findings of these articles, it may be that religion, like marriage, has a greater impact on men's behavior and well-being than on women's. This raises an interesting thesis. Religiousness may bind husbands and wives and parents and children to each other, but in different ways and for different reasons.

Intergenerational Relations Are a Common Concern

Perhaps the most important theme that emerged from the articles is that both family groups and religious congregations share a common interest in intergenerational care and continuity. Parallel to a family psychology of care, there also is a theology of care in the sense that caring for future generations is an explicit and central aim of Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and most other religious perspectives (Agius & Chircop, 1998). Only one study did not deal extensively or exclusively with intergenerational issues. The articles showed that religious parents are likely influenced by their beliefs in (a) how they view their parenting, (b) the appropriateness of physical punishment, and (c) the degree of warmth they exhibit toward children (Mahoney et al., 2001). They also showed that family of origin significantly influences how couples enact and think about religious holiday rituals (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001) and that sustained discourse between parents and children on religious matters strongly relates to

how children feel about religion (Flor & Knapp, 2001).

Good Theory Is Crucial

Each of the articles in this issue used theory to frame, guide, and understand their research. It was clear that authors valued theory, used theory, and desired to contribute to theory development. In an era of data-driven and problem-driven scholarship, this is no small thing. One reason this was important for this set of studies is that so many of the most interesting and important findings were among interactions. In the study of such complex phenomena as family relationships and religion, the main effects will almost always be in the interactions between variables, and without a unifying coherent theory to interpret those complex empirical findings, the reader is left with the daunting task of unraveling conceptual spaghetti. We return to the need for better theory in our conclusion.

Unique Strengths and Secondary Limitations

Beyond common themes, each of the articles has its own unique strength and secondary limitations. In this section we touch on some of the uncommon aspects of each paper.

"Religion in the Home in the 1980s and 1990s: A Meta-Analytic Review and Conceptual Analysis of Links Between Religion, Marriage, and Parenting," by Annette Mahoney, Kenneth I. Pargament, Nalini Tarakeshwar, and Aaron B. Swank (2001), presents a sweeping and rigorous meta-analysis of the religion and family literature over the past two decades. They found several important trends: Church attendance serves as a protective factor against divorce, as couples who attend church on a regular basis have a divorce rate of 44%, compared with a divorce rate of 60% for nonattenders; more religious parents are less likely to favor physical discipline and express warmth (with the exception of Biblical-literalist conservative Protestants, who are more likely to favor and practice corporal punishment); greater personal religiosity was strongly related to greater marital satisfaction; and couples who were more religious had better communication and conflict resolution skills. Weaknesses are rare in this review. Nevertheless, the article would have

benefitted from more concise summary methods and greater attention to fewer studies. Given that the authors found that most quantitative studies used one-item measures of religiosity and that they concluded that "such measurement methods do not address the mechanisms that tie religion to family life," (p. 561) it could have been useful to spend more time discussing the truly excellent articles, particularly the more qualitative ones that tried to do what Mahoney et al. found missing in the overwhelming majority of the studies they reviewed.

"Finding Meaning in Religious Practices: The Relation Between Religious Holiday Rituals and Marital Satisfaction," by Barbara H. Fiese and Thomas J. Tomcho (2001), presented an engrossing exploration of the relationship between self-reported joint religious activity and marital satisfaction. The article's unique contribution was its focus on meaning: Symbolic meaning associated with holiday rituals was related to marital satisfaction. But the meaning of rituals seemed more important to the marital satisfaction of men, whereas the routines associated with rituals seemed more important to the marital satisfaction of women. A second contribution of this article is the focus on the significance of intergenerational continuity in rituals and the benefits this brings to the marriage. In discussing their findings, the authors argue that positive family rituals are transmitted intergenerationally and that this can be the basis for strengthening the marriage. This effectively counters some contemporary views that suggest that each couple is an island and that they should not pattern their marriage on the marriage of their parents because likely it was "traditional" or "dysfunctional" or "closed." One limitation of the study is the use of a one-item measure of religious importance, an item that had only three possible answers. This approach, which the authors correctly characterized as valid and useful, is still far from ideal. A better measure of religious importance would have allowed more complex findings.

"Understanding the Relationship Between Religiosity and Marriage: An Investigation of the Immediate and Longitudinal Effects of Religiosity on Newlywed Couples," by Kieran T. Sullivan (2001), presented the results of an important investigation of the longitudinal impact of religiosity on newlywed couples, which focused on "processes" of marital-religious func-

tioning. This is important because very little social science research on religion is process oriented, and of course longitudinal studies of religion are even more rare. Sullivan used a combination of cross-sectional and longitudinal methods to reveal several important findings. She found that as a person's religiosity increases, attitudes about divorce become more conservative, commitment to the marriage increases, and the likelihood of seeking help in times of marital difficulty increases. Sullivan's major finding is that religion promotes the marital satisfaction of couples with more psychologically healthy husbands. Spiritual healing is a major goal of religion, and there are strong relationships between religiosity and mental health (Koenig, 1998; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001). However, this study suggests that in the area of marital relations, religiosity may work more to strengthen healthy people and relationships and may actually cause relationship problems for relationships involving less psychologically functional people. Another important finding here is that religion had an equal or greater effect on men than on women in the sample. The apparently weak relationship among newlyweds between religiosity with marital satisfaction and stability still leaves open the possibility that religiosity may become more important to the couples as they mature through the experiences of parenthood and, even further into the future, grandparenthood. Relations between generations, no doubt, will be addressed more fully in a future follow-up study of this sample. Such a follow-up study also should go beyond "distal" or global measures of religiosity, which tend to produce weak findings. Indeed, Sullivan mentions these caveats herself.

"Transmission and Transaction: Predicting Adolescents' Internalization of Parental Religious Values," by Douglas L. Flor and Nancy Flanagan Knapp (2001), is a creative effort to predict adolescents' internalization of parental religious values. The most unique and important finding of this article is that two-way open discussions of religious beliefs and values between parents and adolescent children are most likely to result in the internalized acceptance of those beliefs and values by the children. Poor communication between parents and children, in contrast, may inhibit the intergenerational transmission of beliefs and values. The authors

found significant support for the transactional theory of intergenerational value transmission and self-determination theory of adolescent internalization of parental values, and for both direct and indirect transmission of religious values. One problem with this outstanding article was that the authors tended to approach religion as simply a means to the end of studying families rather than understanding that both religion and families are also ends in themselves. In fairness to the authors, however, they may have simply felt the need to build a strong case for the study of religion by family psychologists.

Challenges for the Future

In this section we focus on two challenges inhibiting the contemporary study of religion and the family and suggest how to adjust the trajectory of future theory and research to address these issues. The first is a relative lack of racial and religious diversity in samples. The second is a lack of a unifying theory of religion-family linkages.

Looking Toward Racial and Religious Inclusiveness

The field of family studies and the field of religious studies both have long traditions of valuing diversity, but such awareness has not yet had the impact it could on family-religion research. The four studies included in this special issue are no exception: Most of the participants in the otherwise fine study of religious practices were White and Christian. The newlyweds in the study of the relationship between religiosity and marriage were White and Judeo-Christian in background. All of the participants in the study of adolescents' internalization of parental religious values were White and Protestant. The meta-analysis of two decades of research on religion in the home did not give sustained attention to racial-ethnic diversity, although this was in part because even the studies they reviewed that had included large national samples had apparently not systematically considered or reported data in such detail. To paraphrase developmental psychologist Amos Wilson, it is as if Black Protestant families are White Protestant families who happen to be "painted Black," and therefore the family-religious "patterns of the white middle class . . . become the optimal standard by

which Blacks . . . [are] measured" (Wilson, 1978, p. 6). In addition, studies of only dominant cultural-religious groups make it difficult to learn from the strengths of other racial and religious groups (Parke, 2000) and to understand the complex ways that faith and family life interact among those whose beliefs and practices differ from the dominant or mainstream faith traditions.

Looking for a Few Good Unifying Theories

We began our commentary by noting several general themes, one of which was that all authors recognized the usefulness of good theory. It is important to underscore, however, that all of the authors also called for more and better theory. As Sullivan (2001) observed, "perhaps the largest impediment to a more complete understanding of how religiosity affects marital functioning" is that many studies have been "empirically driven rather than theory driven" (p. 611). Both psychologists of the family and psychologists of religion, in fact, have found it difficult to integrate the findings from the various studies of families and religion because of the absence of a unifying theoretical perspective. We find ourselves awash in data without adequate theoretical interpretive lenses. There is an urgent need for a more theory-based approach to empirical research on the topic of families and religion. In particular, there is clearly a lack of, and need for, more good middle-range theories explaining the complex relationships between familial and religious processes, not to mention an overarching theory linking religion, marriage, and family.

If a good unifying theory is needed, are there any candidates for the position? As an initial attempt to get a name or two on the table, we would nominate the model of psychosocial generativity developed by Erik H. Erikson with Joan M. Erikson (E. H. Erikson, 1950; E. H. Erikson & Erikson, 1981, 1997; J. M. Erikson, 1988). Emmons (1999) stated that

there are several reasons for associating generativity with spirituality. . . . Several facets of generativity, including loving and caring for future generations, concerns with the nature of personal finitude, belief in the fundamental goodness and worthwhileness of human life, and concern for the well-being of others suggest the presence of a spiritual component. (p. 133)

McAdams and de St. Aubin (1998) suggested that "When one thinks hard about generativity, one is challenged to ask some of the most important questions about the psychological, social, ethical, and existential meanings of one's own life and of life in general" (p. 490).

By *psychosocial generativity*, Erik and Joan Erikson (1981, 1997) mean an adult's caring activities that create or contribute to the life of the next generation. Most broadly, they consider generativity to mean any caring activity that contributes to the spirit of future generations, such as the generation of new or more mature persons, products, ideas, or works of art. Most centrally, they base adult generativity on a procreative drive and the need to be needed. Regardless of the angle of vision, however, generativity's psychosocial challenge is to create, care for, and promote the development of others, from nurturing the growth of another person to shepherding the development of a broader community. Three types of generativity have been distinguished: (a) biological or birth parenthood, (b) parental or childrearing parenthood, and (c) sociocultural or institutional parenthood (Snarey, 1993). The primary adult virtue that accompanies mature generativity is *care*: "the widening concern for what has been generated by love, necessity, or accident; it overcomes the ambivalence adhering to irreversible obligation" (E. H. Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986, p. 37).

There are a number of reasons that we recommend Erikson's theory. First, there are existing separate bodies of successful studies that could be linked. Eriksonian generativity has been applied theoretically and longitudinally to family studies by both the Eriksons (E. H. Erikson, 1950; E. Erikson et al., 1986) and Eriksonian scholars (e.g., Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Snarey, 1993). Similarly, the concept of generativity has been applied to religious studies by both Erikson himself (E. H. Erikson, 1958, 1969, 1981) and several Eriksonian scholars (e.g., Browning, 1973; Capps, Capps, & Bradford, 1977; Dollahite, Slife, & Hawkins, 1998; Emmons, 1999; Wright, 1982). The interface of these two bodies of Eriksonian literature can provide a fruitful theoretical foundation for future research on families and religion. Second, we recommend E. H. Erikson's theoretical model because it is plastic, not wooden. It originated in, and has been sensitively used with,

diverse cultural and racial groups (E. H. Erikson, 1950, 1964; E. H. Erikson & H. P. Newton, 1973). It does not claim the rigid universality of many stage theories but neither does it abandon itself to the relativity of cultural studies; rather it charts a middle path (cf. Snarey, Kohlberg, & Noam, 1983). Eriksonian theory also is sensitive to complex bidirectional relationships. For example, Eriksonian scholars would agree with Sullivan's (2001) call for "careful processing of the role of religiosity in the relationship" (p. 624) but would also call for careful processing of the role of the relationship in the religiosity of each person.

We believe there is great need for theory development that coherently links core concepts, focuses on issues of meaning, and informs the kind of research needed to better answer the important questions raised by these articles. Along these lines, we suggest that an extension of an Eriksonian model of generativity is quite promising in terms of its ability to integrate concepts from family studies, religious studies, and human development and further the exploration of the linkages between religion and family.

References

- Agius, E., & Chircop, L. (1998). *Caring for future generations: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic perspectives*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Browning, D. S. (1973). *Generative man*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Capps, D., Capps, W., & Bradford, M. G. (Eds.). (1977). *Encounter with Erikson: Historical interpretation and religious biography*. Missoula, MT: Scholars Press.
- Dollahite, D. C., Slife, B. D., & Hawkins, A. J. (1998). Family generativity and generative counseling: Helping families keep faith with the next generation. In D. P. McAdams & E. de St. Aubin (Eds.), *Generativity and adult development: How and why we care for the next generation* (pp. 449–481). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Emmons, R. A. (1999). *The psychology of ultimate concerns: Motivation and spirituality in personality*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.
- Erikson, E. H. (1958). *Young man Luther*. New York: Norton.
- Erikson, E. H. (1964). *Insight and responsibility*. New York: Norton.
- Erikson, E. H. (1969). *Gandhi's truth*. New York: Norton.

- Erikson, E. H. (1981). The Galilean says and the sense of "I." *Yale Review*, 70, 321-362.
- Erikson, E. H., & Erikson, J. M. (1981). On generativity and identity. *Harvard Educational Review*, 51, 249-269.
- Erikson, E. H., with Erikson, J. M. (1997). *The life cycle completed* (extended version). New York: Norton.
- Erikson, E. H., Erikson, J. M., & Kivnick, H. (1986). *Vital involvement in old age: The experience of old age in our time*. New York: Norton.
- Erikson, E. H., & Newton, H. P. (1973). *In search of common ground: Conversations with Erik H. Erikson and Huey P. Newton*. New York: Norton.
- Erikson, J. M. (1988). *Wisdom and the senses: The way of creativity*. New York: Norton.
- Fiese, B. H., & Tomcho, T. J. (2001). Finding meaning in religious practices: The relation between religious holiday rituals and marital satisfaction. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15, 597-609.
- Flor, D. L., & Knapp, N. F. (2001). Transmission and transaction: Predicting adolescents' internalization of parental religious values. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15, 627-645.
- Hawkins, A., & Dollahite, D. (1997). *Generative fathering*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Koenig, H. G. (Ed.). (1998). *Handbook of religion and mental health*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press.
- Koenig, H. G., McCullough, M. E., & Larson, D. B. (Eds.). (2001). *Handbook of religion and health*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mahoney, A., Pargament, K. I., Tarekshwar, N., & Swank, A. B. (2001). Religion in the home in the 1980s and 1990s: A meta-analytic and conceptual analysis of links between religion, marriage, and parenting. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15, 559-596.
- McAdams, D., & de St. Aubin, E. (Eds.). (1998). *Generativity and adult development: How and why we care for the next generation*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Parke, R. (2000). Beyond white and middle class: Cultural variations in families—assessments, processes, and policies. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 14, 331-333.
- Snarey, J. (1993). *How fathers care for the next generation: A four-decade study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Snarey, J., Kohlberg, L., & Noam, G. (1983). Ego development in perspective: Structural stage, functional phase, and cultural age period models. *Developmental Review*, 3, 303-338.
- Sullivan, K. T. (2001). Understanding the relationship between religiosity and marriage: An investigation of the immediate and longitudinal effects of religiosity on newlywed couples. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15, 610-626.
- Wilson, A. (1978). *The developmental psychology of the Black child*. New York: Africana Research.
- Wright, J. E. (1982). *Erikson: Identity and religion*. New York: Seabury Press.

Received August 14, 2001

Accepted August 14, 2001 ■