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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 commandments, 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.”

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
   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.”

4. God is personally interested & blesses
   Missionary Alliance mother: “[He] gives us direction; helps us have love, the kind of love He has.”

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 . . . that trust that’s probably the best way to deal with Him, ’cause that’s the way He’s talked to us.”

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.

References