Effects of Religiosity on Parent-Child Relationships

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Introduction

While there is not a multitude of research existing on the potential effects of religiosity on parent-child relationships, there are still several researchers who have investigated this question. The need for further research on this topic is supported by the fact that the effects in question may help or harm individuals in families. Dollahite, Marks, and Dalton (2018) suggest that "religion is a unifying force for many couples and families but a divisive force in others" (p. 223). "Dollahite et al. defined relational *unity* as 'harmony with family members and others resulting from religious belief, practice, identity, and traditions' and relational *division* as 'disharmony with family members and others resulting from religious belief, identity, obligations, and choices'" (Dollahite & Marks, 2020, p. 1). "Religious practices include actions such as church attendance, prayer, and acts of abstinence (e.g., fasting, abstaining from sex before marriage, etc.). Beliefs include the meanings, perspectives, identities, and internal ideals that stem from religion, whereas community refers to the support, involvement, obligations, and relationships that are grounded within a religious group" (Dollahite & Marks, 2020, p. 2).

"Religious beliefs, practices, and communities have the potential to facilitate great good and/or great harm in family members and family relationships" (Dollahite, Marks, & Dalton, 2018, p. 224). "Religion has been lauded for encouraging parental care and condemned for enabling parental and clerical abuse" (Dollahite, Marks, & Dalton, 2018, p. 219). This literature review will explore the ways in which religiosity has the potential to both hurt and harm individuals in families. Advantages of religiosity on parent-child relationships found in the literature include increased amounts of quality time spent together and meaningful interactions exchanged, reduction in parental stress and increase in parental warmth, positive outcomes for children and adolescents, and a reduction in conflict among family members. Potential

disadvantages of religiosity on parent-child relationships found in the literature include parent-child conflict resulting from differing beliefs and/or time confliction with religious practices.

Advantages of Religiosity on Parent-Child Relationships

Increased Quality Time and Meaningful Interactions

A common theme found in the literature showed that the presence of religiosity in families resulted in an increase of quality time spent together as a family as well as an increase in the amount of meaningful interactions. Dollahite and Marks (2020) illustrate that regardless of the religious practice, whether it be reading scripture as a family, attending religious or worship services, praying together, etc., these activities facilitated the amount of quality time that parents and their children spent with one another. A study done by Chelladuraj, Dollahite, and Marks (2018) found that "families prioritized and organized themselves to be available for prayer, and during this special time of family togetherness they expressed needs, conveyed support, and shared insights of happenings in their daily lives, as well as important challenges or decisions" (Chelladuraj, Dollahite, & Marks, 2018, p. 856). The family participants reported that their time spent together praying as a family was a time to worship but also a time of exchanging and interacting. They also said that "removing distractions, getting 'out of the usual norm,' and setting aside time, family members disconnect from the rest of the world and connect with God and each other" (Chelladuraj, Dollahite, & Marks, 2018, p. 852).

In another study done by Jorgensen, Mancini, Yorgason, and Day (2016), results demonstrated that the more time a family spent together participating in religious activities, the higher the likelihood that parents would assist their children with schoolwork and academics, partake in activities with their children such as reading and playing, exchange the events that

took place in their day, make decisions together as a family, and spend weekend time together. (Jorgensen, Mancini, Yorgason, & Day, 2016). Additionally, participants in a study done by Kroff, Cragun, Reyes, Wilmoth, Dollahite, and Marks (2018) described that the religious activities done together as a family facilitated the ability to conversate openly and honestly with one another, while also promoting togetherness between the parent and child.

Reduction in Parental Stress & Increase in Parental Warmth

A second recurring theme found in the literature in regard to the potential advantages of religiosity on parent-child relationships was a seemingly significant reduction in parental stress as well as an increase in parental warmth. Participants in several studies discussed how their religiosity helped to guide them as parents. According to Spilman, Neppl, Donnellan, Schofield and Conger (2013), "religious parents appear to show more warmth and affection toward their children and are less harsh or inconsistent in their parenting than are less religious parents" (Spilman, Neppl, Donnellan, Schofield, & Conger, 2013, p. 764). One study done by Kroff, Cragun, Reyes, Wilmoth, Dollahite, and Marks (2018) found research supporting the notion that Evangelical Christian parents are more likely than non-Evangelical parents to talk about positive emotions with their children, to provide more parental supervision and affective parenting, and to be more involved with their children (Kroff, Cragun, Reyes, Wilmoth, Dollahite, & Marks, 2018). This same study also found research proposing that these Christian parents were less inclined to raise their voices at their children.

One participant in a study done by White, Chelladuraj, Monroe, Garand, Dollahite, and Marks (2018) reported "that her faith, religious practices, and community helped her get through tough days with young children" (White, Chelladuraj, Monroe, Garand, Dollahite, & Marks, 2018, p. 688). She went on to add "I don't think if you didn't have faith, you could go through

life, raising children, I cannot imagine it" (White, Chelladuraj, Monroe, Garand, Dollahite, & Marks, 2018, p. 688). Research has shown that particular religious activities, specifically the act of worship or prayer, assisted mothers and fathers with their parenting practices (Dollahite & Marks, 2020). Similarly, another study reported that "parents mentioned that religious beliefs gave them a foundation for meaning, guidance, and a sacred purpose in their parenting responsibilities" (White, Chelladuraj, Monroe, Garand, Dollahite, & Marks, 2018, p. 678). Based off these findings, it is plausible to say that religiosity has the potential to reduce parental stress and to increase parental warmth.

Positive Outcomes for Children and Adolescents

Religiosity has been linked to several positive outcomes for youth in regard to child adjustment, academic performance, social skills, and overall wellbeing. According to Dollahite and Marks (2020), praying as a family was linked to a child's superior ability to adapt. A study done by Petts (2014) found that "attending religious services is associated with a number of positive outcomes for adolescents including prosocial behavior, higher well-being, academic success, and lower risk of delinquent activity" (Petts, 2014, p. 759). Likewise, Marks, Hatch, and Dollahite (2018) concluded that religious practices done as a family are linked to several desired outcomes such as increased educational achievement and optimal interpersonal skills in youth, as well as better relationship quality and solid understanding of family status. More specifically, according to Petts (2014), youth who engage in religious activity are able to be a part of a religious community. This community can provide a social support system or network for these youths that can instill values and morals in them that can help to guide them through life. If there is a lack of this type of support system or community in youths, they may be less likely to be

able to cope with the stresses of adolescence which results in a lower overall psychological well-being (Petts, 2014).

Reduction in Conflict Among Family Members

Harmonious Relationships and Forgiveness

The final major theme found in the literature supporting the advantages of religiosity on parent-child relationships included a reduction in conflict among family members, specifically when it came to maintaining harmonious relationships and facilitating forgiveness. According to White, Chelladuraj, Monroe, Garand, Dollahite, and Marks (2018), several family's religiosity assisted them in the reduction of parent-child conflict as well as their ability to work it out when conflict did arise. Likewise, Chelladuraj, Dollahite, and Marks (2018) indicated that participants reported prayer was an effective way to resolve family conflict when there were periods of stress and tension within the family. They also reported that prayer was helpful in being able to maintain amicable relationships with each other (Chelladuraj, Dollahite, & Marks, 2018). In another study done by King, Ledwell, and Pearce-Morris (2013), specifically the child's religious attendance was linked with a higher reported degree of closeness between parent and child as well as a decrease in conflict. This same study found that the more adult children attended religious services, the more likely they were "to provide assistance to parents, and they reported higher quality relationships and more frequent contact with both their fathers and mothers, even after taking into account a host of factors related to both religiousness and parent–child ties" (King, Ledwell, & Pearce-Morris, 2013, p. 834).

The literature also indicated that forgiveness was a major theme associated with religiosity of parents and children. White, Chelladuraj, Monroe, Garand, Dollahite, and Marks (2018) found that "as parents and children focused on the practices, habits, and teachings of their

faith tradition they reported that they were reminded of the importance of forgiving others, even when it was difficult to do so" (White, Chelladuraj, Monroe, Garand, Dollahite, & Marks, 2018, p. 688). The study also reported that forgiveness between family members was facilitated by religious rituals, readings and practices that helped to enhance parent-child relationships. A study done by Dollahite, Marks, and Dalton (2018) interviewed an ethnically diverse sample of highly religious families in America. One of the participants who was a Native American Methodist father reported that his and his wife's way of parenting and disciplining their child had changed as their religious beliefs grew stronger, and that there was an increase in their ability to forgive their children's mistakes and be less angry.

Disadvantages of Religiosity on Parent-Child Relationships

Conflict With Parents and Disadvantages

The literature indicated that a potential disadvantage of religiosity on parent-child relationships may be an increase in conflict with parents and general disadvantages to the family. Dollahite and Marks (2020) found that the sanctification of parenting combined with biblical conservatism has been tied to an increased approval of and compliance with corporal punishment on children. Similarly, Kroff, Cragun, Reyes, Wilmoth, Dollahite, and Marks (2018) found research suggesting that Evangelical Christian parents are more inclined to use corporal punishment when parenting their children and are more likely to defend these actions in the name of their religion. Another potential challenge that religiosity poses to parent-child relationships is the use of prayer. According to Chelladuraj, Dollahite, and Marks (2018), "negatively triangulating, accusatory, and manipulative approaches to prayers can all be harmful to marital and familial relationships" (Chelladuraj, Dollahite, & Marks, 2018, p. 850). Furthermore, Dollahite and Marks (2020) also suggested that praying together as a family may

result in the criticizing or manipulation of one family member by another. Dollahite, Marks, and Dalton (2018) found that despite their sample consisting of highly religious individuals and families recommended to them as strong families by their congregations, there were still significant struggles, tensions, and conflicts within these families and their local communities and cultures.

Differing Beliefs

Another factor regarding religiosity that the literature indicated may facilitate conflict within families is differing beliefs. Having differing religious beliefs or views and opinions about the world was shown to be a dividing influence in families (Dollahite & Marks, 2020). Specifically, in adolescence, these differing beliefs can serve as a source of tension and can result in a decrease in reported relationships quality between parents and children as well as having harmful effects on a child's well-being. Additionally, this study "identified that religion had a dividing influence on parents and children when there was dissonance between the religious beliefs and practices and popular culture or the child's peer group" (Dollahite & Marks, 2020, p. 9). A study done by King, Ledwell, and Pearce-Morris (2013) found that when parents and children have differing religious beliefs and the child becomes involved or affiliated with a new religion separate from the parents, this may promote disunity and lead to the child withdrawing from their parents. Likewise, Dollahite, Marks, and Dalton (2018) suggest that differing religious beliefs, views, identities, choices, obligations, etc. may facilitate division between family members as well.

Confliction With Religious Practices

An additional theme seen throughout the literature that outlined potential disadvantages of religiosity on familial relationships was the conflict that arose around timing and attendance of

religious services. According to Dollahite and Marks (2020), children and adolescents have a strong yearning to be accepted by their friends and classmates. The research shows that this desire often does not align with the religious activities and practices that their parents want them to be involved in. Children in this study also "expressed feelings of embarrassment and isolation from their peers, and these feelings often led to conflict with their parents" (Dollahite & Marks, 2020, p. 7). In a study done by Marks, Hatch, and Dollahite (2018) examining the influences of Shabbat on parent-child relationships illustrated that many of their participants reported running into several obstacles that kept them from being able to observe Shabbat on the weekends such as concerts, sporting events, or other social activities. The participant families in this study "discussed not only external challenges with culture, school, work, and scheduling but also internal (within family) challenges that focused around two repeatedly mentioned "hassles": (a) the demanding preparation and intentionality that is required; and (b) the "pulling teeth" and relentless effort that it often takes to engage children's (particularly adolescent children's) participation in the rituals" (Marks, Hatch, Dollahite, 2018, p. 457).

Discussion

Limitations and Future Research

While the literature does suggest a correlation between religiosity and parent-child relationships, this does not mean there is a cause and effect relationships between the two. While several studies have been done on this topic, there is much left to be investigated and researched. Even so, the existing literature still poses its own limitations and suggestions for much needed future research in this field. For example, in the study done by King, Ledwell and Pearce-Morris (2013) examining the effect of religiosity and religious attendance on the extent of parent-child ties in later life did find that children who attended religious services more often were more

likely in later life to have more extensive ties with their parents, they also found that "perceived importance of religion was more predictive of mother-child relationship quality than religious service attendance, suggesting that [their] study may be underestimating the association between religiousness and adult children's ties with their parents" (King, Ledwell, & Pearce-Morris, 2013, p. 834).

According to Dollahite and Marks (2020), a limitation of their study that may warrant future research is investigating the advantages and disadvantages of religion's influence on multi-faith families, different types of families and family structures, both extremely and moderately religious families, and religious families who do not fall into the religion of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Future research needed after King, Ledwell an Pearce-Morris's study is to investigate what it is specifically about religion and religious attendance that may enhance or diminish ties between children and their parents and vice versa. Additionally, many of the studies done have found a correlation between religiosity and parent-child relationships, but most results were modest and may not be generalizable. In general, further research is needed on how religion, religious beliefs, practices, identities, etc. can really affect family outcomes, families as a whole, and individual family members. This research must include all different types of families, individuals, genders, ages, ethnicities, etc. to gain a better understanding of the effect's religion can have on these relationships.

Summary

As a whole, the research and literature indicate that both advantages and disadvantages of religiosity exist when it comes to the effect it can have on the relationships between parents and their children. The specific, reoccurring, reported advantages found throughout the literature included a higher prevalence of meaningful interactions and quality time spent together as a

family, a reduction in parental stress and increase in parental warmth, positive outcomes for children and adolescents, and a reduction in conflict among family members leading to more positive family interactions and functioning, specifically the facilitation of harmonious relationships and forgiveness. The subsequent reoccurring reported disadvantages of religiosity on parent-child relations found in the literature included an increase in conflict between parents and children, mainly rooting from either differing beliefs or time conflictions with religious practices or services.

Jorgensen, Mancini, Yorgason and Day (2016) concluded that the act of participating in religious activities, prayer, church attendance, reading scripture or holy texts, and participating in religious conversations were tied to an increase in meaningful time spent together between parents and their children. Research shows that the practice of family prayer serves as an important foundation for family identity as well as the relationships between parents and children (Chelladuraj, Dollahite, & Marks, 2018). In the study done by Marks, Hatch, and Dollahite (2018), their results indicated that religion facilitated "the inclusion of all family members, the structured control and predictability of consistent rituals that add stability and reduce chaos, and the resulting closeness, unity, and intimacy between parents and children" (Marks, Hatch, Dollahite, 2018, p. 457-458). Petts (2014) concluded that when children attend religious services or participate in religious practices with their parents that it may consecrate relationships within the family as well as amplify the advantages of parent-child relationship quality for the children. Petts (2014) also found that children attending these types of services with their parents may help to strengthen their relationships with their parents and bring them closer together, while also increasing meaningful and nurturing interactions. These outcomes of religiosity are only a few

out of many found in the literature that exemplify the advantages and positive influences that religion can have on relationships between parents and their children.

While Dollahite and Marks (2020) found that there were significantly more advantages and uniting influences of religion than disadvantages, dividing influences of religion were still reported. They also indicated that several parents in their study reported that their religiosity was correlated with an increase in their parental warmth and capability, while their children reported that they associated religiosity with feelings of rejection from their parents. Chelladuraj, Dollahite, and Marks (2018), concluded that "family prayer was associated with important relational processes and, for most of these families, represented a family ritual that was a 'potentially unique pathway to family [cohesion]', whereas some expressed relational and religious struggles" (Chelladuraj, Dollahite, & Marks, 2018, p. 857). Dollahite and Marks (2020) found that when children attend religious services or church less than their parents do, it can be linked to decreased relationship quality between parents and children. They also found that many adolescent participants reported feeling like they were constantly struggling to balance their social lives and spending time with their peers with their religious duties and practices. This struggle seemed to cause tensions between the adolescents and their parents. These are all examples found in the literature of some of the ways in which religion can serve as a drawback when it comes to parent-child relationships.

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