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PARENTAL BONDING AND RELIGIOSITY IN YOUNG ADULTHOOD¹

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Summary.--85 male and 122 female college students completed the Parental Bonding instrument, provided written descriptions of both parents, and rated themselves on two religiosity questions. The descriptions were assessed for level of acceptance of parental imperfections using the scoring criteria from the Deillusionment subscale of the Thematic Patterning Scale of Object Representations. Participants scoring low in maternal De-illusionment as well as high in maternal Care and Overprotection tended to perceive God as an omnipotent protector and provider. There were no significant effects for any of the paternal bonding variables. Results suggest that religiosity in young adulthood may arise out of variations in maternal bonding.

Psychologists of religion commonly differentiate between an "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" religious orientation, the former denoting a meaningful integration of religious values, the latter a tendency to use religion to satisfy primitive emotional needs (Allport & Ross, 1967; Markstrom-Adams & Smith, 1996). Individuals embodying an extrinsic orientation are thought to overemphasize the sense of security and direction religion can offer (Richards, 1991).

Although theoretical work is available on how an individual's religious orientation might be affected by the quality of parental bonding experienced (McDargh, 1983; Meissner, 1984), empirical investigations are scarce. Extrinsic religiousness has been linked to an early history of insecure attachment (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990) and diminished emotional separation from parents (Richards, 1991). In addition, there is some evidence to suggest that images of God are modeled after parental images (Nelson, 1971); however, relevant studies are few and inconsistently differentiate between the effects of paternal and maternal

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variables.

The present aim was to explore the role of maternal and paternal bonding in shaping religious beliefs. The choice of a young-adult sample was thought to be appropriate because during this phase of development parental attachments are often renegotiated (Rios, 1979) and religious values intensively examined (Markstrom-Adams, Hofstra, & Dougher, 1994).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 85 male and 122 female college students whose mean age was 20 yr. (SD= 1.3). Forty-one percent were Euro-American, 11% African American, 21% Hispanic, 21% Asian, and 6% self-identified as "Other."

Measures

Religiosity was assessed using two questions from the Separation-Individuation Test of Adolescence (Levine, Green, & Millon, 1986) that showed good face validity as measures of extrinsic religiousness: "I believe God looks over me and protects me from danger" and "God knows my life, I will go where he leads me." Each of these questions was assessed using a 5-point scale. and a total religiosity score was computed based on a participant's ratings on both questions. Scores on the religiosity measure showed good internal consistency as $\alpha = .91$.

Participants were also administered the Parental Bonding Instrument (Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979), a 25-item self-report measure designed to measure two dimensions of parental bonding, Care (warmth and affection vs rejection and hostility) and Overprotection (control and

overprotection vs encouragement of independence). Participants were asked to rate the accuracy of items describing their mothers' and fathers' behavior on a 5-point scale as they recollected from the first 18 years of life. Split-half reliabilities of .88 for the Care scale, and .74 for the Overprotection scale have been re-reported (Parker, *et al.*, 1979). and the construct validity of the Paternal Bonding Instrument has been established (Hollenhach, 1993). In addition, the Deillusionment subscale from the Thematic Patterning Scale of Object Representations (Geller, Hartley, Behrends, Farber, Andrews, Marciano, Bender, & Brownlow, 1992) was utilized to assess participants' written maternal and paternal descriptions for evidence of an acceptance of the flaws, contradictions, and disappointments in the respective parent or relationship. This measure was included to tap idealized perceptions of parents, which often signal faults' attachment and separation processes (Russian, 1975). Interrater agreement ranging from .53 to .87 across all subscales have been reported (Wzontek. 1989). For the present sample, the interrater reliability of the Deillusionment subscale was .81, and Kappa coefficients for Maternal and Paternal Deillusionment, respectively, were .64 and .69.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multiple regression analyses were performed to evaluate the relation between six independent variables (Maternal and Paternal Deillusionment, Overprotection, Care), and the religiosity measure (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). A forward regression model was used, with a p value of .05 or less for partial correlations with

religiosity needed for a variable to be entered into the equation. As summarized in Table 2, three variables (Maternal De-illusionment, Care, and Overprotection) entered the regression equation, accounting for 9% of the variance in religiosity ($F=6.67$, $p<.001$). The following pattern was suggested: Lower Maternal De-illusionment, higher maternal overprotection and higher maternal care were associated with higher religiosity. The measures of paternal bonding did not yield significant results.

TABLE 1

Measure	M	SD
Maternal Care	28.72	6.29
Maternal Overprotection	14.11	8.27
Maternal Deillusionment	2.48	0.89
Paternal Care	24.74	7.84
Paternal Overprotection	12.05	7.75
Paternal Deillusionment	2.61	0.91
Religiosity	7.33	2.94

TABLE 2

MULTIPLE REGRESSION DATA PREDICTING SCORES ON RELIGIOSITY (N=204)					
Multiple R	R ²	Predictors	B	SE B	β
.30*	.090	Maternal Overprotection	.090	.027	.253
		Maternal Care	.099	.035	.210
		Maternal Deillusionment	-.539	.225	-.162

Note.--Only predictor variables contributing significant variance are included ($df=3/203$). $p < .001$.

The data provide a modicum of support for the idea that religiosity may be associated with variations in maternal bonding. More specifically, results suggest that perceptions of God may be modeled after maternal perceptions: participants who had difficulties accepting maternal imperfections and who reported having overprotective and highly nurturant mothers, tended to

perceive God as an omnipotent provider and protector.

Extrapolating from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), one possible interpretation of the findings is that internal working models of childhood attachment processes set the foundation for attachments to God. Lack of significant associations for the measures of paternal bonding is surprising given research substantiating the effects of fathers on identity development of children and adolescents (Phares, 1996) as well as psychoanalytic conceptualizations of God as an "exalted father figure" (Freud, 1961). Perhaps, it might be more accurate to think of God as an "exalted mother figure" but only for those who represent their mothers in this light.

It is noted, however, that only a small amount of variance was explained by the maternal bonding variables so considerable caution should be exercised when interpreting the results. The weak findings may be based on the limited measure of religiosity. Researchers should make use of a more extensive and psychometrically established measure of religiosity such as that constructed by Dreger and Adkins (1990) or Allport and Ross (1967).

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