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Religiosity in Emerging Adulthood: Familial Variables and Adjustment

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Abstract The current study is an examination of the familial variables associated with the expression of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity and the relationship between religiosity and adjustment in emerging adulthood. Three hundred and five emerging adults completed questionnaires regarding their religiosity, psychological adjustment, and several familial variables. Parental divorce, perceived parental marital satisfaction, and family support were found to relate to religiosity. Additionally, those classified as intrinsically and indiscriminately religious reported higher levels of self-esteem than the extrinsically religious. The current study highlights the importance of examining multiple contextual variables simultaneously in order to assess the true multidimensional aspect of religious expression in emerging adulthood.

Keywords Religiosity · Emerging Adulthood · Divorce · Familial Variables · Adjustment

Introduction

Recent reports documenting the importance of religiosity in the lives of adolescents and young adults have contributed to an influx of studies on many aspects of this

multifaceted construct (Milevsky and Levitt 2004; Patock-Peckham et al. 1998). More specifically, several contemporary studies have suggested focusing specifically on the post secondary-school years in investigations relating to all socioemotional dynamics including studies on religiosity. As Arnett suggests (2000), the transitions and unpredictable nature of emerging adulthood, contribute to its unique character and therefore should be examined separately from the adolescent or young adult years.

The religious expressions of emerging adults have been described as being extremely diverse. Arnett and Jensen (2002) noted, “they form unique combinations of beliefs from various religious traditions and from other sources as well, including popular culture (p. 466).”

The aim of the current investigation was to shed some light on two areas of research involving the religious experiences of emerging adults, both of which have not received much empirical attention.

First, the current study is an investigation of the familial variables associated with the expression of religiosity in emerging adulthood. Recent advances in ecological and systems driven approaches to the study of life-span development (Magnusson and Stattin 1998) have contributed to a wide body of literature assessing the interconnection between familial processes and other contextual variables (Levitt et al. 1993; Magnusson 1998). However, little work has assessed these familial processes in the context of religious experiences in emerging adulthood. Some of the variables found to be associated with religious involvement in emerging adulthood are socioeconomic status (Gaede 1977), level of education (Hoge et al. 1993), and parenthood status (Hoge et al. 1993; Wilson and Sandomirsky 1991). Additionally, marital status, and parental educational attainment have been found to relate to religiosity in emerging adults as well (Arnett and Jensen 2002).

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The current study assessed the expression of religiosity in emerging adulthood and its relationship to perceived parental marital satisfaction, parental divorce, and family support. Several studies examined the associations between parental marital status and socioemotional well being in young adulthood. Adult children of divorced parents are more likely to marry young, more likely to divorce, and more likely to report instability and conflict in their marriage compared to adult children of nondivorced families (Amato 1996; Ross and Mirowsky 1999). Additionally, adult children of divorce are more likely than adult children of nondivorced parents to achieve less education, have lower occupational status, and lower income (Powell and Parcel 1997; Ross and Mirowsky 1999). Furthermore, family support has been shown to relate to several adaptive developmental outcomes in preadolescents and adolescents (Levitt et al. 2005).

However, little work has been published exploring the relationships between parental marital status, family support, and the expression of religiosity in emerging adulthood. Several theoretical propositions suggest that an individual's religiosity and image of God might be moderated by processes within the family and by the individual's feelings of warmth and acceptance by caregivers (Milevsky et al. 2001; Okagaki and Bevis 1999). Based on this framework it was hypothesized that parental marital hostility and divorce, which are consistent with diminished feelings of warmth and acceptance for children (Amato and Keith 1991; Wallerstein and Kelly 1980), may relate to the expression of religiosity even during emerging adulthood. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that family support may relate to the expression of religiosity. The possible interconnections between parental divorce, marital satisfaction and family support will be examined as well.

The second goal of the current study was to examine the relationship between religiosity and adjustment in emerging adulthood. Due to the exploration associated with this transitory stage, emerging adults are in the process of examining their religious identity and beliefs (Erikson 1968; Marcia 1966). The ability to establish an identity has been shown to relate to the expression of self-esteem (Akhtar 1984; Craig-Bray et al. 1988; Rothman 1984). Hence, a detailed examination of the relationship between religiosity and adjustment would further our understanding of the development of religious identity in emerging adulthood and the significant role it plays in other areas of a young adults' life.

Although throughout the short history of psychology the relationship between religiosity and adaptive mental health was viewed with some skepticism (Freud 1952), current advances in the scientific study of religion are beginning to challenge this theoretical presupposition (Genia and Shaw 1991; Knox et al. 1998; Koenig 2001). More specifically,

religiosity has been shown to relate to positive psychological adjustment throughout childhood and adulthood (Milevsky and Levitt 2002, 2004; Nelson 1990). However, most studies examining these relationships have used adolescent or older adult populations (Smith et al. 1979; Walker and Dixon 2002). It was hypothesized that similar associations would be found in the current sample as well, however, due to the unique and personal aspects of the expression of religiosity during emerging adulthood (Arnett and Jensen 2002) assumptions based on findings within other developmental stages cannot be made.

Finally, the current study assessed religiosity using the intrinsic/extrinsic religiosity construct originated by Allport and Ross (1967). Although in previous studies religiosity has been assessed using a variety of methods, several researchers have argued that using Allport and Ross' (1967) concept of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity may eliminate the apparent inconsistencies found in the literature in the association between religion and well being (Gartner et al. 1991).

In sum, the current study is an examination of the relationship between parental marital satisfaction, parental divorce, family support, and intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity and the relationship between religiosity and psychological adjustment in emerging adulthood.

Method

Sample

Data were collected using two procedures. First, 247 participants were recruited from undergraduate and graduate psychology and education classes in a northeastern rural state university. Additionally, 58 non-college students were recruited through a snowball sampling technique; that is, researchers asked people they knew to fill out the survey, who in turn asked people they knew, thus creating a "snowball" effect. The participants in the total sample were 305 young adults (116 men and 189 women) between the ages of 19 and 33 ($M = 22.41$, $SD = 3.25$). By ethnicity the sample consisted of 19 African-Americans, five Hispanic-Americans, 269 European-Americans, three Asian-Americans, eight coded as "other" and one with no ethnicity data.

Procedures

The college sample participants were administered questionnaires in small groups and received extra credit for taking part in the study. The non-college sample participants received the questionnaire directly from the researchers and returned the completed questionnaire in a

sealed envelope. Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Measures

In addition to standard demographic questions, measures included questions about parental marital status and perceived parental marital satisfaction, and indices of religiosity and social support. Well-being was assessed using a self-esteem measure. The following specific measures were analyzed in the current study:

Perceived Parental Marital Satisfaction. The item used to assess parental marital satisfaction was “How satisfied do you think your parents are/were with their marriage?” Participants responded on a 7-point scale from “extremely dissatisfied” to “extremely satisfied.”

Religiosity. Intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity was assessed using items similar to those employed by Wright et al. (1993). The item used to assess extrinsic religiosity was “How often do you take part in religious activities, such as attending services, religious classes, bible study groups, or church activities? Do you take part (1) weekly, (2) at least once a month, (3) sometimes, (4) once or twice a year, or (5) never?” Intrinsic religiosity was assessed using the item “How important is religion to you? Is it (1) extremely important, (2) very important, (3) somewhat important, (4) a little important, or (5) not at all important to you?”

Social Support. Mother, father, and sibling support was assessed using the support questions from the Adolescent version of the Convoy Mapping Procedure (Levitt et al. 1993). Specifically, participants were asked to indicate to what extent do they agree or disagree with the following statements regarding each of the three relationship categories: “I confide in him/her about things that are important to me,” “they reassure me when something bothers me or I am not sure about something,” “they would make sure I am cared for if I were ill,” “they like to be with me and do enjoyable things with me,” “they would give me immediate help if I needed it,” and “they make me feel special or good about myself.” Responses to each of the support items were scored on a 1–5 scale, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree.” Scales of mother, father, and sibling support were obtained by averaging the scores of all six support functions provided within each of these three relationship categories. Alpha reliabilities were .89 for mother support, .93 for father support, and .92 for sibling support. The scale of total family support was obtained by averaging the scores of all three totals of mother, father and sibling support. Alpha reliability was .92 for total support.

Self-esteem was assessed with the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (1965). A sample item is “I am able to do things as well as most other people.” Each item is given a score from 1 to 5 and higher scores indicate more positive self-esteem. The alpha reliability for the sample was .90.

Results

Descriptive Religious Characteristics

About 54% of the current sample indicated that they take part in religious activities at least once a month, with 22% indicating that they take part in religious activities weekly. However, only 32% indicated that religion was very important or extremely important to them with only 15% indicating that religion was extremely important to them.

Intercorrelations of Variables

Intercorrelations of the predictor and outcome variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, parental divorce was correlated with perceived parental marital satisfaction. Extrinsic religiosity was correlated with all predictor variables and intrinsic religiosity was correlated with all variables except for perceived marital satisfaction. Parental divorce, parental marital satisfaction, mother support, father support, and sibling support were all intercorrelated. A correlation of parental divorce with religiosity indicated that individuals from nondivorced families reported higher levels of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity.

Familial Variables and Religiosity

In order to assess the relationship between parental divorce and religiosity a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed with parental marital status and gender as the independent variables and intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity as the dependant variables. The MANOVA yielded a main effect for parental marital status for both intrinsic religiosity, $F(1,277) = 4.51, p < .05$ and extrinsic religiosity $F(1,277) = 4.46, p < .05$. Individuals with divorced parents scored lower on extrinsic religiosity ($M = 2.34, SD = 1.18$) and on intrinsic religiosity ($M = 2.70, SD = 1.16$) compared to those from intact families ($M = 2.77, SD = 1.34$, and $M = 3.10, SD = 1.20$ respectively). The main effect for gender was not significant.

Table 1 Intercorrelations of variables

| Predictor variables | Predictor variables | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 1. Religious activity | .68** | -.14* | .14* | .14* | .16** | .20** |
| 2. Religious importance | – | -.15* | .06 | .14** | .13** | .19** |
| 3. Parental divorce | | – | -.57** | -.20** | -.34** | -.24** |
| 4. Parental marital satisfaction | | | – | .27** | .53** | .36** |
| 5. Total mom support | | | | – | .27** | .40** |
| 6. Total dad support | | | | | – | .44** |
| 7. Total sibling support | | | | | | – |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

In order to determine the contribution of perceived parental marital satisfaction and family support in predicting religiosity a simple regression was performed. Perceived parental marital satisfaction was found to be a significant predictor of extrinsic religiosity, $F(1,282) = 5.47, p < .05$, accounting for 2% of the variance in extrinsic religiosity. Additionally, family support was found to be a significant predictor of intrinsic religiosity, $F(1,304) = 13.06, p < .01$, accounting for 4% of the variance and extrinsic religiosity, $F(1,304) = 16.03, p < .01$, accounting for 5% of the variance.

Finally, hierarchical regression analyses were used to determine the mediating effects of family support on the relationship between perceived parental marital satisfaction and extrinsic religiosity. For the analyses, perceived parental marital satisfaction was entered into block 1 of the regression, followed by the family support variable in block 2. The results of the regression analyses are presented in Table 2. Mediating effects were determined, using the method detailed by Baron and Kenny (1986), by assessing the contribution of perceived parental marital satisfaction after family support was entered into the equation. If after family support is entered into the regression perceived parental marital satisfaction is no longer found to be significantly related to the outcome variable, a mediating effect can be assumed. Family support was found to mediate the relationship between perceived parental marital satisfaction and extrinsic religiosity.

Table 2 Path analysis of parental marital satisfaction, family support and extrinsic religiosity

| Stages/predictors | Criteria | |
|---|-----------------------|-------|
| | Extrinsic religiosity | |
| | β | r^2 |
| Stage 1 analysis: parental marital satisfaction | .14* | .02 |
| Stage 2 analysis: parental marital satisfaction | .03 | <.01 |
| Family support | .21* | .05 |

* $p < .05$

Religiosity and Adjustment

In the current analysis religiosity was converted into a categorical predictor as opposed to a dimensional one. This decision was based on previous studies that suggest that a lower level of intrinsic religiosity does not necessitate higher levels of extrinsic religiosity (Hood 1978). Furthermore, several studies propose that the simple use of the intrinsic/extrinsic model may shadow possible curvilinear relations between religiosity and outcome variables (Donahue 1985). Thus, Hood (1978) began classifying religiosity within a fourfold system. As the current analysis is using religiosity as a predictor variable we followed Hood’s (1978) suggestion and, based on a median split of both items, derived four groups of religious affiliation. In addition answering “1” or “2” for the activity item and “1”, “2” or “3” for the importance item were classified as “indiscriminately religious”. Those who answered “3”, “4” or “5” on the activity statement but answered “1”, “2” or “3” on the importance statement were labeled as “pure intrinsic.” Individuals who answered “1” or “2” on the activity item but answered “4” or “5” on the importance item were classified as “pure extrinsic.” In addition those answering “3”, “4” or “5” on the activity item and “4” or “5” on the importance item were classified as “indiscriminately nonreligious”.

In order to assess the relationship between religious orientation category and self-esteem an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was carried out with self-esteem scores as the dependent variable and religious orientation category and gender as the independent variables. The means and standard deviations on the self-esteem measure for each of the four religious categories are reported in Table 3. The main effects of religious category approached significance for self-esteem, $F(3,297) = 2.14, p = .096$. The ANOVA was followed with a Tukey LSD post hoc comparison, yielding a significant difference between the extrinsic group and the intrinsic and indiscriminately religious group at the .05 significance level. The intrinsic and indiscriminately religious groups reported higher levels of self-esteem than the extrinsic group.

Table 3 Means and standard deviations of self-esteem measure for religious categories

| Religious categories | Self-esteem | |
|----------------------|--------------------|---------------|
| | <i>M</i> | (<i>SD</i>) |
| Religious | 4.10 ^a | (.69) |
| Pure intrinsic | 4.17 ^b | (.63) |
| Pure extrinsic | 3.84 ^{ab} | (.68) |
| Non-religious | 4.04 | (.65) |

^{a, b} Denote a significant difference from each other at $p < .05$

Discussion

The goals of the current study were to (a) examine the familial variables associated with the expression of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity, and (b) to explore the relationship between religiosity and psychological adjustment in emerging adulthood.

As hypothesized several familial variables were found to relate to the expression of religiosity in the current sample. Emerging adults from families of divorce reported lower levels of both extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity. Furthermore, perceived parental marital satisfaction was found to predict extrinsic religiosity. These findings are consistent with studies suggesting that an individual's image of God may be mediated by processes within the family (Okagaki and Bevis 1999). In the current sample over 50% of those coming from divorced homes experienced the divorce of their parents before the age of 8, suggesting that early experiences might contribute to an emerging adult's conceptualization of religion. These findings reinforce the "social learning theory" of religious commitment which states that early socialization practices may contribute to an individual's religious commitment later in life (Hoge et al. 1993).

Family support was found to relate to intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity as well. Of particular note is that family support was found to mediate the relationship between perceived parental marital satisfaction and extrinsic religiosity. Although findings relating to parental marital status highlight the importance of early experiences in religious development, the relationship between current family support and religiosity exemplifies the multidimensional and changing nature of religious expression in emerging adulthood.

Additionally, in the current study religiosity was found to relate to well-being. Those classified as intrinsically and indiscriminately religious scored higher on self-esteem than the extrinsic group. This finding complements previous research pointing to the positive relationship between religiosity and adjustment within the adolescent and older adult population (Milevsky and Levitt 2004; Nelson 1990).

When religiosity is assessed using the fourfold classification of religious orientation (Hood 1978) subtle yet

possibly insightful findings begin to emerge. In the current study differences in self-esteem were only found between the intrinsic and indiscriminately religious groups and the extrinsically religious. Interestingly the "nonreligious" group had a comparable score to the religious group. In explaining the difference between an intrinsic religion and an extrinsic religion, Paloutzian (1996) suggests that an intrinsic motivated faith is one that is internalized becoming part of the biological system of the individual. In contrast, the extrinsically motivated person is one who is involved in religion for external reasons. For this individual religion is followed only when an external benefit, such as social desirability, exists. As Allport and Ross (1967) state "the extrinsically motivated person uses his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated lives his religion" (p. 434). Hence, it is possible that an individual in pursuit of religion purely for belongingness purposes may be at a disadvantage in terms of self-esteem in the first place.

Although an overwhelming number of studies on religiosity seem to suggest that females score higher on religiosity than males (Donahue 1985) the current study did not find any gender differences in religiosity. One of the prominent explanations for apparent gender differences in religion is that gender disparity in socialization may indirectly contribute to variation in religiosity. Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997) propose that, in nearly all cultures, females are socialized to be more nurturing, obedient, responsible, and active in religious work supporting and nurturing others. These socialization dynamics may play less of a role in the life of emerging adults who are in the process of challenging many of their prior beliefs.

There are some limitations to the present study. First, the study does not solve the direction-of-effects problem. It is probable that individual differences in religiosity lead to differences in adjustment; however, it is also possible that individual differences in adjustment lead to differences in religiosity. Additionally, although the present study used a relatively large sample of participants, the present results may not generalize beyond the homogeneous sample included in the study. Previous studies have reported ethnic differences in religiosity (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997; Moore 1991). Additional work is needed to assess the generality of the influence of religion on adjustment. Further work in this area should employ a variety of religious indices to assess the dynamics of this relationship more specifically and more conclusively.

Summary and Conclusions

Overall the results indicated that familial processes, such as parental marital status, satisfaction and family support, are related to the expression of religiosity in emerging

adulthood. Additionally, the current study suggests that religious involvement is related to adjustment in emerging adulthood. Finally, the current study highlights the importance of examining multiple contextual variables simultaneously in order to assess the true multidirectional and multidimensional aspects of religious expression in emerging adulthood.

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