

## Transmission of religious beliefs in college students

ILANA M. MILEVSKY<sup>1</sup>, LENORE SZUCHMAN<sup>1</sup>, &  
AVIDAN MILEVSKY<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Barry University, Miami, USA, and <sup>2</sup>Touro College South, Miami Beach, USA

### Abstract

The aim of the current study was to assess factors contributing to the generational transmission of religious beliefs in a sample of college students. Participants were 92 students from a small Catholic university in the southeastern United States. Students were surveyed in school regarding family relationships, communication, and religious values. Overall, results indicated that children's and parents' religious beliefs were significantly correlated. Furthermore, children were fairly accurate reporters of their parents' religious beliefs. Some gender differences were found in the strength of the correlations between parents' and children's beliefs. Additionally, explicit communication, implicit communication, and perception of parents' beliefs predicted children's beliefs. The current study holds clinical and developmental significance by examining the manner in which religiosity is expressed within the familial milieu of emerging adults.

### Introduction

Parents and their children share similar beliefs in many areas. Studies have found significant relationships between parents' and children's beliefs regarding work values, school achievement, political beliefs, and religious beliefs and behaviors (Cotton, Bynum, & Madhere, 1997; Dalhouse & Frideres, 1996; Ellis & Wageman, 1993; Ford, 1993; Francis & Gibson, 1993; Gustafon 1994; Herzbrun, 1993; Hoge, Petrillo, & Smith, 1982; King, Elder, & Whitbeck, 1997; Max, Brokaw, & McQueen, 1997; Ozorak, 1989).

The focus of the present study is the transmission of religious beliefs. Despite the findings cited by Benson, Donahue and Erickson (1989) that parents are generally more religious and hold stronger religious beliefs than their children, numerous studies suggest that parents and children share many of the same religious beliefs. Numerous researchers have found positive correlations

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Correspondence: Avidan Milevsky, Department of Psychology, Touro College South, 1703 Washington Ave., Miami Beach, FL 33139, USA. E-mail: [avidan.milevsky@touro.edu](mailto:avidan.milevsky@touro.edu)

between parents' religious beliefs and behaviors and their offspring's religious beliefs and behaviors (Acock & Bengston, 1980; Ellis & Wageman, 1993; Francis & Gibson, 1993; Herzbrun, 1993; Hoge et al., 1982; King et al., 1997; Max et al., 1997; Ozorak, 1989).

There is evidence of a relationship between religion and various measures of well-being. According to a review by Benson et al. (1989), religious involvement lowers the risk for deviant behaviors, such as drug abuse, premarital sex, and delinquency. Furthermore, studies have found an association between religion and psychological well-being, decreased drug use, and positive attitudes towards school (Milevsky & Levitt, 2004; Trusty & Watts, 1999).

Despite the potential for positive social outcomes, overall religious involvement and religious beliefs are declining (Benson et al., 1989). If the correlations between religiosity and positive life outcomes are causal, parents may be able to affect their children's lives positively by effectively transmitting their religious beliefs.

A number of factors mediate the similarity between a child's beliefs and their parents' beliefs. These factors include quality of family relationships, gender, and communication about the belief.

#### *Quality of family relationships*

From a theoretical perspective, the suggested link between family dynamics and religiosity is based on attachment literature which proposes that the "internal working model" of relationships, established during early maternal interactions, serves as the framework for all other relationships including an individual's relationship with a higher power (Granqvist, 1998). In a meta-analysis reviewing 11 studies on religious conversion and attachment, Granqvist and Kirkpatrick (2004) found that childhood attachment security with both mother and father were related to a more gradual and socialized religious orientation.

Similarly, empirical studies on family relationship quality and transmission of religious beliefs suggest that low levels of parental conflict (Max et al., 1997; Myers, 1996), family closeness (Dudley, 1978; Litchfield, Thomas, & Li 1997; Ozorak, 1989), and parental support (Herzbrun, 1993) are associated with stronger correlations between parents' and children's religious beliefs.

#### *Gender*

Mothers have been found to be more influential than fathers on the frequency of the overt religious behavior and church attendance of their children (Francis & Gibson, 1993). Similarly, Acock and Bengston (1980) found that mothers' religious beliefs, more than fathers' beliefs, were predictive of their adult offspring's beliefs.

However, teenage sons and daughters are influenced differently by each parent. Fathers' church attendance is more predictive of sons' than daughters' church attendance. Similarly, mothers' church attendance is more predictive of daughters' than sons' church attendance (Francis & Gibson, 1993).

Ellis and Wageman (1993) also found a higher correlation between mothers' and daughters' church attendance than mothers' and sons'. Thus, each parent's church attendance is a better predictor of church attendance in the same gender child than opposite-gender child.

### *Communication*

Another factor in the transmissions of religious beliefs and behaviors may be actual communication between parent and child regarding religion. Studies have found that communication of beliefs, explicitly or implicitly, influenced transmission of values.

*Explicit communication.* Explicit communication of beliefs, when parents actually tell or describe their beliefs to their children, also influences children's beliefs. Dalhouse and Frideres (1996) found that similarity of parents' and children's political beliefs was correlated with parental discussion of their own beliefs.

Herzbrun (1993), one of the few authors to focus on transmission of Jewish beliefs, found mixed results regarding explicit communication. For traditional fathers, he found a positive relationship between explicit communication of beliefs and the correlation between fathers' and daughters' beliefs. However, there was no significant correlation for traditional fathers and their sons. In contrast, for liberal fathers, a positive relationship between explicit communication of beliefs and similarity of father and child's beliefs was found for both sons and daughters. Paradoxically, perhaps, explicit communication about beliefs was more effective for the sons of liberal than traditional fathers. However, the results must be interpreted cautiously because of the heterogeneous nature of both groups and the small number of Orthodox and unaffiliated fathers, as well as the overall low response rate.

*Implicit communication.* Numerous studies have looked at transmission of religiosity and church attendance. Parental church attendance may be unspoken, or implicit, communication about the importance of religion. In a study of frequency of church attendance and religiosity of parents and their children aged 11–12 and teenagers aged 15–16, Francis and Gibson (1993) found positive correlations between parents' and children's church attendance in both age groups. That is, children and teenagers were more likely to attend church if their parents attend church.

### **Current study**

The purpose of the present study was to explore the relationship between parents' and young adults' religious beliefs in a college sample. Specifically, the study was designed to investigate the relationship among quality of family relationships, gender, and communication, and the correlation between parents' and their adult children's religious beliefs.

There are a number of questions regarding transmission of religious beliefs that remain to be answered. First, researchers here looked at many aspects of quality family relationships, including parental conflict, parental support, parental strictness, and closeness with family. The relationship among these factors and the correlation between parents' and children's religious beliefs may be a reflection of overall quality family relationships rather than any specific factor independently. The present study examined the general quality of family relationships.

Second, there is some controversy regarding the role of gender and transmission of religious beliefs and behaviors. More recent literature points to differences according to the gender of parent and child. The present study examined differences in the relationship between parents' and adult children's religiosity based on the gender of the child and gender of the parent.

Third, communication has been associated with the correlation between parents' and children's beliefs regarding many topics. Both explicit and implicit communication have been implicated in the association between parents' and children's beliefs. The research on transmission of religious beliefs and behaviors has addressed communication only in a limited way. The present study investigated the relationship between both types of communication and the correlation between children's and parents' religious beliefs.

Fourth, much of the research includes limited measures of parents' beliefs. Some researchers asked the children to report their own and their perspective of their parents' beliefs. Acock and Bengtson (1980) surveyed over 400 children and their parents regarding their beliefs across many areas including religion. The children were also asked to predict how their parents would answer the questions. The authors found that parents' actual beliefs were poor predictors of children's perceptions of parents' beliefs. This means that children's reports of their parents' beliefs were fairly inaccurate. It should be noted that predictability was highest for religious beliefs (0.53 and 0.50 for mothers and fathers, respectively). However, it calls into question the validity of asking children what their parents believe. This issue was addressed in the current study in two ways. First, a subset of parents was surveyed, regarding their own religious beliefs. These scores were analyzed with their children's perception of their parents' beliefs. This provided data on the similarity between parents' true beliefs and their children's perception of their beliefs in this population. Second, it is possible that the current sample differed from the sample studied by Acock and Bengtson (1980) because the current study used a sample from a university that promotes a religious dimension (although many religions are represented).

Finally, the literature reveals a number of methods for measuring religious beliefs and behaviors. Among the most popular forms of measurement is a questionnaire that asks a few questions regarding frequency of church attendance and importance of religion (e.g., Ellis & Wageman, 1993; King et al., 1997). Although this method has been used frequently, the range of scores it allows is very narrow. The current study employed Rorbaugh and Jessor's (1975) Family Religious Values Questionnaire, which provided a wider range of scores than used by many other studies of religious beliefs.

It was predicted that parents' and children's religious beliefs would be positively correlated. It was further hypothesized that the addition of quality of family relationship, gender, and communication will increase the strength of correlation.

## Method

### *Participants*

Ninety-two college students (71 women and 21 men) from a small Catholic university in the southeastern United States were surveyed. Parents of 36 students were also surveyed. Participants received extra credit in psychology and sociology classes for their participation. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 55 years, with a mean age of 22.3 years ( $SD = 6.3$ ). Forty-eight participants answered questions about their mothers, and 44 participants answered questions about their fathers. Twenty-five mothers and 11 fathers completed and returned surveys.

Forty-five percent of participants were Catholic, 30% were Protestant, and 11% were non-denominational Christian. Four additional students reported two religions in their families. Two percent of students reported no religion, and 1% each reported Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Atheism, and other.

### *Measures*

*Family relationships.* Quality of family relationships was measured with the Family Profile II (Lee & Burr, 1997). The survey measures various aspects of family relationships. Examples of items include, "We do nice things for each other", "We give each other compliments", and "Overall the family gets along well". Scores ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating more positive family relationships.

*Explicit communication.* Explicit communication was measured by questioning students about how frequently their mother and father separately discussed general and specific religious beliefs while they were growing up. Examples of items include, "How frequently does your mother/father talk to you about prayer?" "How frequently does your mother/father discuss things she/he or you learned about religion?" and "How frequently does your mother/father tell you to perform a good deed/charitable act?" Scores ranged from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating higher explicit communication.

*Implicit communication.* Implicit communication was measured by asking students questions about specific religious behaviors their mother and father separately engaged in such as, "How frequently does your mother/father pray?" "How frequently does your father study Bible or attend lectures or classes on religious subjects?" and "How frequently does your father perform good deeds/charitable acts?" Scores ranged from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating higher implicit communication.

*Religiosity.* The Family Religious Values Questionnaire (FRVQ, Rorbaugh & Jessor, 1975) has been used to measure religious beliefs with teenagers and adults of various religious affiliations (e.g., Max et al., 1997; Rorbaugh & Jessor, 1975). Reliability was .89 for the composite score (Max et al., 1997). Religiosity of the young adults and their parents was measured with the FRVQ. Additionally, the young adults' perception of their parents' religious beliefs was measured by asking young adults to respond to the FRVQ as they believe their mother or father would respond. Examples of items include, "How often have you attended religious services during the past year?", "When you have a serious personal problem how often do you take religious advice or teaching into consideration?" and "Do you agree with the following statement: Religion gives me a great amount of comfort and security in life". Scores ranged from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating higher religious values.

### *Procedure*

The examiner asked students for permission to contact one of their parents to complete the parent form. The parents were sent a letter explaining the purpose of the study and asking for their participation. Parents received consent forms, the FRVQ, and a stamped return envelope. The students then completed the surveys including demographic information, FRVQ for themselves, the Family Profile II, and then questions regarding explicit and implicit communication designed by the author. Finally, they completed the FRVQ as they believe their father or mother would answer. An effort was made to balance the number of mothers and fathers in the study. However, some students requested to send a survey to a specific parent, and that request was honored.

### **Results**

Children's religious beliefs were significantly correlated with children's perceptions of parents' beliefs ( $r = 0.44$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Children's beliefs were significantly correlated with parents' actual beliefs ( $r = 0.36$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ).

Correlations were completed for all parents and separately for mothers and fathers. Parents' actual beliefs and children's perception of their parents' beliefs were significantly correlated for all parents ( $N = 36$ ,  $r = 0.79$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), for mothers ( $N = 25$ ,  $r = 0.84$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and for fathers ( $N = 11$ ,  $r = 0.67$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). See Table I for means and standard deviations for scores on FRVQ for each group.

Differences in the gender correlations were measured using Fisher's  $z$  transformation. See Table II for the results of correlations and Fisher's  $z$  transformations.

For parents' actual beliefs, the correlation between mothers' and children's beliefs was significant, but the correlation between fathers' and children's beliefs was not significant. For children's perception of parents' beliefs, correlations between mothers' and children's beliefs and fathers' and children's beliefs were significant. Results of Fisher's  $z$  transformation revealed that the correlation

Table I. Means and standard deviations for scores on FRVQ.

Group	Children's beliefs		Perception of parents' beliefs		Parents' actual beliefs	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Parents						
Children	3.54	0.79	3.73	0.87	3.98	0.94
Fathers						
Children	3.45	0.74	3.66	0.95	3.36	1.24
Sons	2.88	0.51	3.82	0.96	3.88	1.41
Daughters	3.70	0.69	3.60	0.96	3.21	1.26
Mothers						
Children	3.47	0.84	3.90	0.84	3.60	1.21
Sons	3.34	0.53	4.15	0.39	4.45	0.15
Daughters	3.50	0.91	3.85	0.91	3.42	1.26

Table II. Correlations between children's and parents' beliefs.

	Mothers' actual beliefs	Fathers' actual beliefs	Children's perception mother's beliefs	Children's perception father's beliefs
Children's beliefs				
<i>r</i>	0.58	-0.09	0.58	0.32
<i>p</i>	<0.01	0.40	<0.01	0.02
<i>n</i>	25	11	48	44
Sons' beliefs				
<i>r</i>	0.41	-0.40	0.63	-0.12
<i>p</i>	0.24	0.37	0.03	0.36
<i>n</i>	5	3	9	12
Daughters' beliefs				
<i>r</i>	0.60	0.078	0.610	0.501
<i>p</i>	<0.01	0.43	<0.01	<0.01
<i>n</i>	20	8	39	32

between mothers' and children's beliefs was not significantly different from the correlation between fathers' and children's beliefs, although the difference approached significance.

For parents' actual beliefs, correlations between mothers' and children's scores and fathers' and children's scores were not significant. For perception of parents' beliefs, mothers' and sons' scores were significantly correlated, but fathers' and sons' scores were not significantly correlated.

For parents' actual beliefs, the correlation between mothers' and daughters' beliefs was significant, but the correlation between fathers' and daughters' beliefs was not significant. For perception of parents' beliefs, the correlations between mothers' and daughters' beliefs as well as fathers' and daughters' beliefs were significant. Results of Fisher's *z* transformation revealed that these correlations were not significantly different from each other.

For parents' actual beliefs, mothers' and daughters' scores were significantly correlated, but mothers' and sons' scores were not significantly correlated. For perception of parents' beliefs, mothers' and daughters' as well as mothers' and sons' scores were significantly correlated. Contrary to prediction, results of Fisher's  $z$  transformation revealed that the correlations were not significantly different from each other.

Correlations were compared for differences between fathers and sons and fathers and daughters. For parents' actual beliefs, neither the correlation between fathers and sons' scores nor the correlation between fathers' and daughters' scores was significant. For perception of parents' beliefs, the correlation between fathers' and sons' scores was not significant, but the correlation between fathers' and daughters' scores was significant.

Furthermore, explicit communication was significantly correlated with implicit communication ( $r=0.78$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), perception of parents' beliefs ( $r=0.65$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), and quality of family relationships ( $r=0.21$ ,  $p=0.02$ ). Additionally, implicit communication was correlated with perception of parents' beliefs ( $r=0.78$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

A hierarchical regression analysis was performed to predict children's beliefs. In the first step, explicit communication was entered, and it significantly predicted children's beliefs. In the second step, implicit communication was entered, but it did not significantly add to the predictability of children's beliefs. In the third step, perception of parents' beliefs was entered, and it significantly added to the predictability of children's beliefs. In the fourth step, quality of family relationships was entered, but it did not significantly add to the predictability of children's beliefs. Results of the hierarchical regression analysis can be found in Table III.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was (1) to examine the relationships among children's and parents' religious beliefs, communication about religion, and quality of family relationships and (2) to explore differences in these relationships based on two measures of parents' religious beliefs: parents' report of their beliefs

Table III. Models predicting children's religious beliefs.

Model	$R^2$	Significance	$R^2$ change	Significance $R^2$ change
Explicit communication	0.13	0.01		
Explicit communication, implicit communication	0.13	0.04	0	0.92
Explicit communication, implicit communication, perception of parents' beliefs	0.25	<0.01	0.126	<0.01
Explicit communication, implicit communication, perception of parents' beliefs, quality of family relationships	0.26	<0.01	<0.01	0.73

and children's perception of their parents' beliefs. The current study expanded on earlier studies by examining in one study the relationship among children's and parents' beliefs, implicit and explicit communication, gender of parents, and quality of family relationships. Previous literature examined these factors separately.

As predicted, children's religious beliefs were positively correlated with both measures of parents' religious beliefs. This is consistent with the work of Francis and Gibson (1993) that found significant correlations between children's church attendance and children's reports of their parents' church attendance. It also supports the results of Acock and Bengston (1980) that parents' reports of their religious beliefs were predictive of their children's religious beliefs.

Additionally, children's perception of their parents' beliefs was positively correlated with parents' actual beliefs. In fact, the correlation found in this study is stronger than the 0.53 and 0.50 correlations found by Acock and Bengston (1980). However, this difference may be a result of selection bias. Participants in the sample attended a university that fostered a religious dimension. Young adults who choose to attend such a university (presumably in consultation with their parents) may be more aware of their parents' religious beliefs than other young adults.

Five sets of analyses were performed to test the hypothesis that there would be a significant difference in the strength of the correlations between parents' and children's beliefs according to the gender of the parent and of the child. For parents' actual beliefs, mothers' religious beliefs were correlated with children's religious beliefs, though fathers' religious beliefs were not. This is consistent with the work of Acock and Bengston (1980), who surveyed parents and their children regarding their own religious beliefs. They found stronger relationships between mothers' and children's than fathers' and children's religious beliefs.

For children's perception of parents' beliefs, both mothers' and fathers' beliefs were significantly correlated with children's beliefs. Though the difference between the scores was not significant, the difference approached significance in the predicted direction. That is, children's perceptions of mothers' beliefs was somewhat more strongly correlated with children's beliefs than children's perceptions of fathers' scores with children's beliefs. This is similar to the results of Francis and Gibson (1993), who found that children's church attendance was more positively correlated with their report of their mothers' than their fathers' church attendance.

Although children's beliefs were correlated with their perception of their fathers' beliefs, they were not correlated with their fathers' actual beliefs. This is difficult to explain with the hypothesis that children are inaccurate reporters of their fathers' beliefs because children's perception of their fathers' beliefs and their fathers' actual beliefs were highly correlated. However, this points to the need for researchers who discuss relationships between children's and parents' beliefs to specify whether they employed children's or parents' report of parents' beliefs.

Interestingly, the results did not support the hypothesis that each child's score would be more strongly correlated with the same-gender parents' beliefs score. This conflicts with the findings of Ellis and Wageman (1993) and Francis and Gibson (1993), who found that mothers' religiosity scores were more similar to their daughters' religiosity scores than to their sons' religiosity scores, and fathers' church attendance was more similar to their sons' than daughters' church attendance. This inconsistency may be a result of the small number of male participants in this study.

Explicit communication and implicit communication, together, predicted children's beliefs. This is consistent with research regarding children's academic achievement and sexual values, which found that children's values are associated with their parents' communication about those values. For example, Miller, Norton, Fan and Christopherson (1998) found that explicit parental communication about sex was related to teenagers' sexual abstinence values. Additionally, Peterson and Paulson (1997) found that parental behaviors that indicate to children that parents consider academics important were predictive of children's beliefs that they can succeed in school.

Furthermore, the addition of perception of parents' beliefs to communication increased the predictability of children's beliefs. As discussed by Acock and Bengtson (1980), children are not always accurate predictors of their parents' beliefs. The relationship between children's perception of parents' beliefs and children's beliefs emphasizes the need for researchers to address perception of parents' beliefs in transmission of religious beliefs.

Contrary to the hypothesis, quality of family relationships, as measured by the Family Profile II, did not add to the predictability of children's beliefs. Earlier studies that found such a relationship used specific aspects of parent-child relationships, such as parental discord (Myers, 1996), closeness with parents (Ozorak, 1989), and parental strictness (Litchfield et al., 1997). The present study may not have reproduced earlier findings because a measure of general quality of family relationships was used. Additionally, this population may be more religious and more aware of their parents' religious beliefs. This may have decreased the usefulness of other factors in predicting children's beliefs. Further research would be needed to examine the predictive strength of specific and general relationship factors.

There are a number of methodological problems that may have resulted in sample bias. First, students were not randomly assigned to answer questions about their father or mother. An attempt was made to assign students in such a way that there would be an equal number of mothers and fathers for both male and female students. However, if a student explained that they would allow a letter sent to the parent other than that suggested by the author, the student answered questions about that parent. This may have created sample bias in that some students chose which parents' beliefs they reported.

Additionally, it is possible that there were differences between those who did and did not agree to send letters to their parents. Thus, the results of parents' actual beliefs may not be truly representative. Future research in this area might

include random assignment and may look for differences among students who do and do not agree to send letters to parents.

Another adjustment that might have improved accuracy would be to specify that participants should respond to questions about their parents and family while they were growing up and perhaps ask about changes since then. Additionally, it may be useful to ask participants about their religious beliefs while they were growing up and currently in order to assess change in religious beliefs. Similar to the work of Ozorak (1989), this would also allow comparisons between students who adhered to the religion of their childhood and students who changed religions or made significant adaptations to their belief system.

Overall, results of this research highlight the intergenerational dynamics involved in religious affiliation. These interconnections should be examined in further studies assessing all aspects of the development of spirituality and religion. The current study holds clinical and developmental significance by examining the manner in which religiosity is expressed within the familial milieu of emerging adults.

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