Dimensions of Religiousness That Influence Parenting

Chelsea Weyand
Akron Children’s Hospital, Akron, Ohio

Liz O’Laughlin and Patrick Bennett
Indiana State University

Parental religiosity has generally been associated with greater child and parent functioning; however, it has been suggested that when parenting a child with behavior problems, some aspects of parental religiosity (e.g., negative religious coping, biblical conservatism) might decrease functioning. We examined the influence of religious variables (sanctification of parenting, negative and positive religious coping, biblical conservatism) on the relationship between child behavior problems and parental stress as well as sense of competence among parents (N = 139) of children ages 3–12 years. Parents high in sanctification showed little change in parental stress as severity of behavior problems increased. Similarly, positive religious coping was found to play a protective role in the relationship between behavior problems and parental sense of competence. However, positive religious coping was related to increased stress in parents of children with few behavior problems and was not associated with any decrease in stress for parents of children with more difficult behavior. Parents of children with greater perceived behavior problems reported significantly higher sanctification of parenting and parental stress, as well as lesser use of positive religious coping and lower sense of competence. This study provides evidence to suggest that parental religiosity can have either a positive or negative influence on parental functioning, depending on parenting circumstances and personal perceptions of God and religion.

Keywords: parental stress, religious coping, behavior problems

Religiousness and spiritual connection have a significant place in the lives of many individuals in our society. The U.S. General Social Survey (2006) found that 88% of Americans describe themselves as religious or spiritual. Parental religiosity has been related to more effective parent–child communication and monitoring (Snider, Clements, & Vazsonyi, 2004), as well as increased parental investment, competence, and satisfaction (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006). On the other hand, parenting a child with behavior difficulties has been associated with higher levels of stress and lower levels of perceived parental competence and satisfaction (Abidin, 1992; Anastopoulou, Guevremont, Shelton, & DuPaul, 1992; Johnson & Reader, 2002; Johnston & Mash, 2001).

Although religion has been associated with improved functioning in parents of children with developmental disabilities (e.g., Poston & Turnbull, 2004) and chronic medical illness (Cardella & Friedlander, 2004), research to date has not considered whether parental religiousness may be associated with improved functioning in parents of children with behavior problems.

The current study focused on three dimensions of religiousness that have found to be relevant to parenting: sanctification, religious coping, and biblical conservatism. Sanctification is a term used to describe a persona’s tendency to attribute spiritual or religious significance to certain aspects of life, such as the birth of a child or a near-death experience (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003). Individuals with a belief in an omnipotent being (i.e., God) may view certain objects or relationships as being a manifestation or representation of their relationship with God, and others may attribute sacred qualities to a religiously benign object or relationship. In many religions as well as in mainstream society, the parent–child relationship is considered to have spiritual significance and is described as precious, inspirational, timeless, and transcendent.

Volling, Mahoney, and Rauer (2009) examined the relationship between sanctification of the parenting relationship, parental disciplinary strategies, and the development of young children’s conscience in a sample of 58 two-parent families. Parents who perceived their relationship with their child to be sacred were more likely to parent the child in a manner that fostered the development of a sense of empathy and guilt following wrongdoing. In general, sanctification of the parent–child relationship is associated with positive outcomes, but few studies have examined sanctification of parenting in families facing a high level of stress. It has been suggested that when faced with a parenting challenge, sanctification may contribute to increased stress as parents may perceive their parenting difficulties as evidence of an inability to fulfill a sacred task successfully (Mahoney et al., 2003).

Biblical conservatism is a dimension of religiousness associated with belief in biblical literalism and original sin, as well as punitive attitudes toward sinners (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993b). These values inform a distinct parenting style, with greater emphasis on obedience and more emphatic endorsement of corporal punishment (Ellison & Sherkat 1993a, 1993b). Although there are mixed views and findings about the benefits versus negative influence of corporal punishment (e.g., Paolucci & Violato, 2004), there is con-
siderable evidence that this method of punishment is largely ineffective in reducing child aggression or increasing moral internalization (Gershoff & Bitensky, 2007). Thus, parents with biblically conservative views who rely on corporal punishment to address difficult child behavior may experience feelings of frustration and ineffectiveness. To our knowledge, the relationship between biblical conservatism and parental stress and sense of competence has not been examined empirically.

The concepts of positive and negative religious coping describe the way in which a person uses religion to cope with stressful events. A person’s tendency toward either positive or religious coping is informed by an individual’s concept of God and religion (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998). Positive religious coping strategies are associated with a secure relationship with God, the ability to ascribe meaning to both positive and negative experiences, and a sense of spiritual connection to the self and others (Pargament et al., 1998). Behaviors that may be associated with positive religious coping include seeking social support, offering and seeking forgiveness, helping others, and actively seeking help from religious leaders. Individuals who display negative religious coping strategies can be described as having an insecure relationship with God and a tenuous or ominous view of the world, leading to a loss of faith in God’s powers and coping in isolation as opposed to engaging in a supportive religious community.

Pargament et al. (1998) found that positive and negative religious coping represent distinct concepts that are both associated with a specific set of outcomes. More recently, the term negative religious coping has been used interchangeably with the term spiritual struggles. As understanding of negative religious coping has increased, researchers have suggested that the development of negative religious coping strategies is often the consequence of a distressing experience that causes a person to question God or the religious community (McConnell, Pargament, Ellison, & Flannelly, 2006). A study by Krumrei, Mahoney, and Pargament (2009) found that among individuals who were recently divorced, spiritual struggles were related to an increase in symptoms of depression, whereas more adaptive spiritual coping was related to fewer depressive symptoms. In the current study, the term negative religious coping is used to more clearly illustrate the relationship between positive and negative religious coping.

Research to date has not examined the impact of sanctification of parenting, biblical conservatism, and positive and negative religious coping on parental functioning in parents of children with behaviors problems. However, parental religiousness has been associated with improved functioning in parents facing other stressors such as parenting a child with a chronic or severe medical illness (Cardella & Friedlander, 2004; Rutledge, Levin, Larson, & Lyons, 1995) and cognitive impairment or developmental disability (Poston & Turnbull, 2004; Tarakeshwar & Pargament, 2001). For example, White (2009) found that parental religiosity was positively correlated with parental well-being and acceptance of their child’s autistic disorder. Parents of children with chronic or severe medical illness or developmental disabilities are generally perceived to be facing a stressor that is outside their control. However, the association between parenting factors and the development of behavior problems is less clear, making adjustment to this stressor more complex. The pressure to rear an “obedient” child may be intensified for religious parents, particularly when the parent–child relationship is closely tied to sacred or religious phenomenon. Because of the pressure to rear obedient children and the sacred nature of the parent–child relationship, it is possible that parental religiousness may be associated with increased stress and decreased competence, particularly when parents use negative religious coping strategies or are from a more biblically conservative theological background.

The current study examined the moderating influence of sanctification of parenting, biblical conservatism, and positive and negative religious coping on the relationship between level of child behavior difficulties and parental stress and sense of competence. The following hypotheses were developed to examine the association between level of child behavior difficulty and parental levels of stress and competence as moderated by religious coping, sanctification of parenting, and biblical conservatism.

**Hypothesis 1:** Higher levels of perceived child behavior problems will be associated with an increase in parental stress and a decrease in parental sense of competence.

**Hypothesis 2:** Sanctification of parenting will moderate the relationships between child behavior problems and stress, leading to increased stress.

**Hypothesis 3:** Based on the findings of Murray-Swank, Mahoney, and Pargament (2006), it is suggested the biblical conservatism will moderate the relationship between behavior problems and stress, leading to increased stress. Biblical conservatism will also moderate the relationship between behavior problems and parental sense of competence, leading to decreased competence.

**Hypothesis 4:** Positive religious coping will moderate the relationship between behavior problems and parental stress and sense of competence, leading to decreased stress and increased sense of competence. Negative religious coping will moderate this relationship in the opposite direction.

### Method

**Participants**

Participants were recruited from several child- or family-focused settings (e.g., preschools, churches) in a midsize midwestern city to facilitate a range of child behavior difficulty as well as religiosity. Parents were entered in a lottery for a gift card, and college student participants were given extra credit in exchange for participation. Approximately 500 questionnaires were distributed, and 139 completed questionnaires were returned, for a response rate of 28%. However, some agencies distributed questionnaires to all parents without first soliciting agreement to participate, thus contributing to the low return rate.

Participants included 139 parents (120 women, 17 men, 2 sex unknown) of children between the ages of 3 and 12 years ($M = 7.4$ years, $SD = 2.83$). Respondents were between the ages of 21 and 58 years, with a mean age of 35.9 years ($SD = 7.7$). The majority of participants (90.6%) described themselves as White/Caucasian, whereas 3.6% of participants described themselves as multiracial, 2.9% described themselves as African American, 2.2% participants described themselves as Asian/Pacific Islander, and one
participant chose not to respond. The majority of the sample (46.0%) described themselves as Protestant Christian, and 14.4% described themselves as “Christian-other denomination.” Other reported religious affiliations included Catholic (18.0%), Christian Latter Day Saints (3.6%), Muslim (2.9%), and atheist or agnostic (2.1%). Additionally, one or two participants reported each of the following denominations for a total of 8.7%: Buddhist (2), Taoist (1), Pagan/Wican (2), and Unitarian Universalist (1). Another 4.3% of the sample chose not to respond to this question. Annual family income less than $35,000 was reported by 37.4% of participants. Another 28.1% reported income between $36,000 and $75,000, with 31.6% reporting a family income above $75,000. Another 2.9% of participants did not report household income. Considering education level of participants, 8% reported finishing some high school, 16.5% reported a high school education only, 15.8% reported some college or vocational training, 36.7% reported a college degree, 22.3% reported postgraduate education, and one participant did not respond to this question.

**Measures**

**Child behavior problems.** The Conduct–Hyperactive–Attention Problems–Oppositional Scale (CHAOS; Kronenberger, Dunn, & Giauque, 2007) is a 22-item measure of child externalizing behaviors. Parents indicate the frequency of each problem behavior using a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (never) to 3 (very often). The CHAOS includes four subscales (Attention Problems, Hyperactivity–Impulsivity, Conduct Problems, Oppositional Behavior) with five questions each. This scale has demonstrated excellent internal consistency for the four subscales (.80 to .91) as well as good test–retest reliability. The CHAOS was found to be highly correlated with lengthier child behavior measures (Kronenberger et al., 2007). In addition, seven questions were added to the CHAOS to provide a more robust measurement of child behavior problems, including more commonly occurring challenging behaviors that are not necessarily indicative of a diagnosable behavior disorder (e.g., easily frustrated, does not follow through on instructions). A total score across all 29 items (range of 0 to 87) was calculated to determine an overall level of parental-perceived behavior problems in the child of interest. Internal consistency for the 29 items was .96.

**Religious coping.** The Brief RCOPE is a 14-item measure of religious coping that was created by Pargament et al. (1998) to measure religious coping strategies used by individuals facing a major adverse life event. This scale has two subscales, one that measures positive religious coping and one that measures negative religious coping. The parenting version of the Brief RCOPE, used in this study, has been used in previous research on parenting and religiosity. Respondents are asked to indicate their level of agreement to a given statement on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (a great deal). For the present sample, internal consistency for the positive religious coping items was .92 and the alpha coefficient for the negative religious coping items was .85.

**Sanctification of parenting.** The degree to which parents view their caregiving role as sacred was measured using two scales, the Sacred Qualities of Parenting Scale (Murray-Swank et al., 2006) and the Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale (Mashoney et al., 1999). The Sacred Qualities of Parenting Scale is designed to measure the degree to which parents consider their relationship with their child as related to divine or transcendent phenomena. This scale asks respondents to describe how closely a list of 10 adjectives (e.g., blessed, heavenly, awesome) describes their relationship with their child using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (does not describe at all) to 7 (very closely describes). Parent responses on each item were totaled for an overall Sacred Qualities of Parenting score. Internal consistency for items on the Sacred Qualities of Parenting Scale was .87.

The Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale is designed to assess the degree to which parents view their role as a parent to be related to their experiences with God. It is comprised of 14 items that ask participants to rate their level of agreement to statements such as “God is present in my role as a parent” on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Participant responses on the Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale were totaled for an overall score. Internal consistency for items on the Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale was .97.

Scores from the two scales were considered individually as well as in combination to consider sanctification of parenting in a more inclusive manner. The two measures were found to be moderately correlated ($r = .49$); in addition, the internal consistency for all 24 items combined was very high ($\alpha = .95$), suggesting that respondents responded similarly to items on the two scales.

**Biblical conservatism.** Biblical conservatism was measured using a four-item index. Two of the questions have been used in previous research on the topic (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993b; Murray-Swank et al., 2006), and two were created for this study to increase the range of possible scores on this measure. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement to the four items on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The two items used in previous research are “The Bible/Koran/Torah/other religious text is God’s word and everything will happen exactly as it says” and “The Bible/Koran/Torah/other religious text is the answer to all important human problems.” The two items created for this study are “I believe that people are born sinful” and “I believe that my religion, which is informed by the Bible/Koran/Torah/other religious text, provides clear instructions about how we are to behave.” These items were chosen on the basis of Ellison and Sherkat’s (1993b) discussion of the theological beliefs that are common in parents who are high in biblical conservatism. These authors suggest that conservative Protestant parents often adhere to a literal interpretation of the Bible and believe that all humans—even very small children—have a propensity toward sinful behavior because of the fall of humanity that occurs in the story of Adam and Eve. In the current study, all four items were significantly correlated with one another ($rs = .26$ to .72). Internal consistency for the four items was .75. It should be noted that although this variable is called biblical conservatism, the wording of these items has been altered to include other religious texts.

**Parental functioning.** Parental functioning was measured on two dimensions including parental stress and parental sense of competency. Parenting stress was measured using the Parental Stress Scale (PSS; Berry & Jones, 1995). This scale has good reliability and has been shown to discriminate between parents who are under a good deal of stress and those who are not. The scale includes 18 items that require the respondent to indicate the
extreme to which they agree with each statement from a Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Parental sense of competence was measured using the Parenting Sense of Competency Scale (PSOCS), which is a 17-item scale with two subscales measuring parental efficacy and satisfaction (Johnston & Mash, 1989). In the current study, internal consistency for the PSS items was .77 and the alpha coefficient for items on the PSOCS was .89.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from various locations in a medium-sized community in the Midwest, including places of worship, preschool facilities, a local university, and a private secondary school. The lead investigator contacted the director of the facility directly and provided information about the study. The directors of the facilities determined whether they preferred to recruit participants from their facility themselves or whether they preferred that the lead investigator recruit in person at their facility. In most cases, the lead investigator provided interested parents with a copy of the questionnaire, a cover letter explaining the study, a consent form, an entry form for the drawing, and a self-addressed stamped envelope to return the questionnaire. Parents who had more than one child between the ages of 3 and 12 years were instructed to choose the child who demonstrated the most challenging behavior problems and to respond to questionnaire items based on that child. On average, parents took 15–20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. All procedures were approved by a university institutional review board committee.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 presents mean scores, standard deviations, and ranges for parenting variables as well as measures of religiousness and spirituality. In general, the sample can be described as moderately religious and spiritual, with the majority believing in God and approximately one quarter reporting regular attendance at worship services. The mean score on the adapted CHAOS (M = 30.42) suggests that on average parents endorsed moderate behavior difficulties. Although the majority of participants endorsed only moderate behavior problems, the sample also included parents reporting child behavior problems in the severe range.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Range of measure</th>
<th>Range of scores</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tr>
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<td>0–87</td>
<td>0–86</td>
<td>30.42</td>
<td>19.14</td>
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<td>Parent Stress Scale</td>
<td>18–90</td>
<td>20–66</td>
<td>36.37</td>
<td>8.94</td>
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<td>Parent Sense of Competence Scale</td>
<td>16–96</td>
<td>36–96</td>
<td>70.04</td>
<td>11.75</td>
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<td>RCOPE Positive subscale</td>
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<td>3–35</td>
<td>20.61</td>
<td>7.62</td>
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<td>1–35</td>
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<td>31–168</td>
<td>118.62</td>
<td>28.93</td>
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<td>Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale</td>
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<td>14–09</td>
<td>68.01</td>
<td>21.32</td>
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<td>Sacred Qualities of Parenting Scale</td>
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<td>6–70</td>
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<td>11.95</td>
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<td>Biblical conservatism</td>
<td>4–16</td>
<td>1–16</td>
<td>10.07</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. CHAOS = Conduct-Hyperactivity-Attention Problems-Oppositional Scale; RCOPE = religious coping scale.

Regression Analyses

A series of moderated multiple regressions (based on the work of Aiken & West, 1991) examined the moderating effect of sanctification, biblical conservatism, and religious coping on the relationship between behavior problems and parental stress and sense of competence. In each of these analyses, the individual predictor variables were entered first, followed by the interaction in one step. Before testing these effects, we centered all predictor variables. To test Hypotheses 2 through 4, we ran seven individual models. To simplify the presentation of results, we give the results of the regression models predicting parental stress and sense of competence in Table 2. The results of each step of the regression equations are presented in Table 3.

To test the prediction that sanctification of parenting would have a moderating influence on parent’s perceived behavior problems leading to increased stress (Hypothesis 2), we completed three separate regressions. In the first, CHAOS and Sacred Qualities of Parenting scores were entered, followed by the interaction of the variables. The overall model was significant, F(3, 127) = 13.845, p = .000. CHAOS scores yielded a significant main effect, but the main effect of sacred qualities and the interaction were not significant. Similarly, CHAOS scores and the Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale scores were entered, followed by the interaction. The overall model was significant, F(3, 127) = 12.457, p = .000. Within the model, the main effect of CHAOS scores was significant. However, the main effect of Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale score and the interaction between the variables were not significant. In the third model, CHAOS, the total sanctification score, and the interaction were entered. The analysis yielded a
significant main effect for the impact of perceived behavior problems on parental stress, $\beta = .407$, $p \leq .01$. Moreover, the interaction between behavior problems and sanctification of parenting was a significant and unique predictor of parental stress, $\beta = -.222$, $p \leq .01$.

Using a method for post hoc probing of interactions suggested by Aiken and West (1991), we further explored the relationship between variables in the interaction term. As seen in Figure 1, which depicts the relationship of these variables based on results of the post hoc analysis, the strongest relationship between behavior problems and increased stress was seen in the group of parents reporting the lowest level of sanctification of parenting. Among parents of children who reported high levels of sanctification of parenting, the positive relationship between stress and behavior problems was less pronounced, suggesting that sanctification of parenting moderated this relationship, but not in the expected direction.

In the first part of Hypothesis 3, we suggested that biblical conservatism would moderate the influence of behavior problems on parental stress, leading to increased stress. To test this hypothesis, we entered biblical conservatism scores, CHAOS scores, and the interaction between the two simultaneously. The final model was significant and accounted for 20% of the variance ($p = .000$). However, the model’s significance was primarily the result of the main effect of behavior problems on parental stress, $\beta = .443$, $p \leq .01$. The interaction between biblical conservatism and CHAOS

**Table 2**

*Moderation Regression Analyses Predicting Parental Stress and Sense of Competenced*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Stress $n$</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
<th>Sense of competence $n$</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>$R^2$</th>
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<td>130</td>
<td>13.85</td>
<td>.25**</td>
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<td>.23**</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>12.46</td>
<td>.23**</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Total Sanctification × Behavior Problems</td>
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<td>.23**</td>
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<td>139</td>
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<td>6, 7</td>
<td>Positive Religious Coping × Behavior Problems</td>
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<td>134</td>
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<td>.97**</td>
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<td>.26**</td>
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*Note.* Sacred Qualities = Sacred Qualities of Parenting Scale; Manifestation of God = Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale; Total Sanctification = sum of Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale and Sacred Qualities of Parenting Scale scores.

**Table 3**

*Predictors of Parental Stress and Sense of Competence*

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<td>Negative religious coping</td>
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<td>.01</td>
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*Note.* For each hypothesis, individual predictors were entered in the first step and the interaction term was entered in the second. Sacred Qualities = Sacred Qualities of Parenting Scale; Manifestation of God = Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale; Total sanctification = sum of Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale and Sacred Qualities of Parenting Scale scores.

$p < .05$. $**p = .000$. 
scores was not significant, suggesting that biblical conservatism did not significantly moderate stress in this sample.

Hypothesis 3 also suggested that biblical conservatism would moderate the influence of behavior problems on sense of competence, leading to less sense of competence. To test this hypothesis, we entered biblical conservatism scores, CHAOS scores, and the interaction between the two simultaneously. The final model was significant and accounted for 25% of the variance \((p = .000)\) and yielded a significant main effect for the impact of perceived behavior problems, \(\beta = -.722, p \leq .01\). The interaction between biblical conservatism and CHAOS scores was not significant.

To address Hypothesis 4, we conducted two regression analyses entering CHAOS scores, positive religious coping, and the interaction between the two as predictors of parental stress and parent sense of competence, respectively. The model predicting parental stress was significant and accounted for 24% of the variance \((p = .000)\). Both perceived behavior problems and positive religious coping independently predicted parental stress, \(\beta = .444, p \leq .01\), and \(\beta = .148, p \leq .01\), respectively. The interaction between positive religious coping and CHAOS scores approached significance, \(\beta = -.009, p = .051\). Post hoc analyses of the interaction were completed to better understand the relationship between these variables. Figure 2 presents the results of these analyses and shows that stress levels were greatest in parents who used the most positive religious coping in the low and moderate behavior problems group. Stress levels were identical in the high problem behaviors group, regardless of parental use of positive religious coping strategies.

When predicting parental sense of competence in Hypothesis 4, we entered CHAOS scores, positive religious coping scores, and the interaction between the two simultaneously. Again, the final model was significant, accounting for 28% of the variance \((p = .000)\). CHAOS scores were predictive of sense of competence, \(\beta = - .507, p \leq .01\). The interaction between positive religious coping scores and CHAOS scores was significant, \(\beta = .017, p = .006\). Post hoc analysis was completed to better understand the relationship between these variables. The results of this analysis are presented in Figure 3. PSOCS scores were the lowest among parents with low positive religious coping and children with high behavior problems, and PSOCS scores were highest among parents with low positive religious coping and children with low behavior problems. Parents who displayed the greatest amount of positive religious coping displayed the least amount of change in PSOCS scores, regardless of behavior problems.

To determine whether negative religious coping moderated the relationship between behavior problems and parental stress scores (Hypothesis 4), we conducted a regression entering CHAOS scores, negative religious coping scores, and the interaction between the two simultaneously. The final model was significant and accounted for approximately 20% of the variance \((p = .000)\). Once again, perceived behavior problems were a significant predictor, \(\beta = .432, p \leq .01\). However, the interaction between negative religious coping and CHAOS scores was not significant. A similar regression model was conducted predicting parental sense of competence by entering CHAOS and negative religious coping scores and the interaction between the two simultaneously. Again, the final model was significant, \(F(3, 132) = 15.619, p = .000\), and accounted for approximately 26% of the variance, with a significant main effect for CHAOS scores, \(\beta = -.467, p \leq .01\). Again, the interaction between negative religious coping scores and CHAOS scores was not significant.

**Discussion**

The focus of the current study was to examine the moderating influence of various dimensions of religiousness on the relationship between parental stress, sense of competence, and level of child behavior problems. In general, parenting a child with
behavior problems has been associated with decreased parental functioning (Alizadeh, Applequist, & Collidge, 2007; Johnson & Reader, 2002). On the other hand, parental religiousness has been associated with increased parental satisfaction, competence, and investment (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006). Prior to this study, research had not considered the impact of religiousness on parents dealing with a stressor that may be perceived to be within their control (i.e., child behavior problems). Consistent with previous research (e.g., Anastopoulos et al., 1992), current results suggest that the experience of parenting is different (i.e., greater stress, lower feelings of competence) for parents who perceive their child to have greater behavior problems compared with those parents who perceive lesser behavior difficulties. Second, results suggest that parental religiousness can have a positive or negative impact on parental functioning depending on the degree of parent-perceived behavior problems, as well as personal beliefs about God, religion, and spirituality.

Figure 2. Influence of behavior problems on parental stress scores as moderated by positive religious coping. High Conduct–Hyperactivity–Attention Problems–Oppositional Scale (CHAOS) scores = high behavior problems (BP); medium CHAOS scores = medium BP; low CHAOS scores = low BP; RCOPE Positive = religious coping Positive subscale.

Figure 3. Influence of behavior problems on parental sense of competence as moderated by positive religious coping. High Conduct–Hyperactivity–Attention Problems–Oppositional Scale (CHAOS) scores = high behavior problems (BP); medium CHAOS scores = medium BP; low CHAOS scores = low BP; RCOPE–Positive = religious coping Positive subscale.
Contrary to Hypothesis 2, when scores on the two measures of sanctification were combined, results suggested that sanctification of parenting protects parents against the stress associated with parenting children with behavior problems. Parents who used the highest degree of sanctification of parenting displayed very little difference in stress, regardless of degree of severity of behavior problems. Therefore, despite the fact that sanctification of parenting may contribute to increased stress in parents of children with fewer behavior problems, when more challenging behavior problems arise, parental functioning is likely to be less impacted in parents who sanctify the relationship they have with their child. Results of the current study suggest that sanctification of the parenting roles has a positive influence on parental functioning, especially when parents are faced with parenting a child with challenging behavior problems.

We recognize that the combination of the two measures of sanctification of parenting (i.e., Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale and Sacred Qualities of Parenting Scale) is a novel approach to the measurement of this variable. When the initial analyses of each scale measuring sanctification yielded insignificant results and the internal consistency between the items across the two scales was remarkably high (.95), we decided to combine the two scales to examine a broader construct of sanctification. Although the argument could be made that these scales are conceptually different and therefore it is inappropriate to combine them, it should be noted that previous research (i.e., Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopoulos, 2006) that yielded no results for sanctification of parenting made use of a very narrow measure and noted this as a limitation of the study. Thus, it could be argued that examining sanctification of parenting in a more inclusive manner was appropriate to better understand the possible influence on parental stress. It is possible that when faced with a stressor such as parenting a child with behavior problems, sanctification is most relevant to the parenting experience when considered from both a theistic and a nontheistic perspective.

Results did not support the hypothesis that biblical conservatism would moderate the relationship between parent-perceived child behavior problems and stress and sense of competence. This hypothesis was largely exploratory in nature as there are no available studies that have examined parent stress and sense of competence as related to biblical conservatism. Ellison and Sherkat (1993b) suggest that biblically conservative Protestant denominations place great emphasis on obedience and that Protestant parents may perceive a direct link between obedience toward parental authority, adherence to biblical principles, and submission to God’s will in adulthood. For these reasons, parenting a child with challenging behavior problems may be particularly stressful for biblically conservative parents. Therefore, the finding that biblical conservatism did not predict parental stress or sense of competence in our sample was surprising. Previous studies that considered the impact of biblical conservatism on parenting outcomes included only parents from a Protestant Christian background, whereas the current study included parents from a variety of religious backgrounds. Although a significant portion of the sample identified themselves as Protestant Christian (46%), an additional 24.5% identified themselves as Catholic, Christian Latter Day Saints, and Muslim. Therefore, it is possible that conservatism may have less impact on the parenting practices of individuals who are not Protestant Christian.

Negative religious coping did not moderate the relationship between parent-perceived child behavior problems and parental stress and sense of competence. This is inconsistent with previous research that found use of negative religious coping to be associated with increased stress among those who are parenting in difficult circumstances (e.g., Tarakeshwar & Pargament, 2001). Participants in the current sample endorsed fewer symptoms associated with negative religious coping compared with positive religious coping. This suggests that our sample may have been homogeneous on this variable, making it unlikely for a statistically significant relationship between variables to emerge.

Positive religious coping did not seem to protect against stress in parents of children with the greatest behavior problems. In fact, parents reporting the greatest behavior problems displayed similar amounts of stress, regardless of whether or not they used positive religious coping strategies. Furthermore, parents reporting higher levels of positive religious coping also reported higher levels of parental stress for children with medium to low behavior problems compared with parents using fewer positive religious coping strategies. It may be that even very religious parents could benefit from using more active coping strategies when parenting a child with challenging behaviors (i.e., participating in parent training, seeking help from a psychologist/pediatrician) in addition to gaining support from the religious community to effectively manage stress.

Although ineffective in decreasing stress, positive religious coping was related to improvement in ratings of parental sense of competence, particularly when parenting children with significant behavior problems. Previous research has found positive religious coping to be related to spiritual growth and positive changes in social relationships among parents of children with autism (Tarakeshwar & Pargament, 2001).

Results of the current study provide helpful information regarding the relative influence of dimensions of religiousness on the association between child difficulty and parent stress and sense of competence. Overall, results suggest that certain dimensions of religiousness, such as positive religious coping and sanctification of parenting, can contribute to slightly lower sense of competence and slightly higher stress, respectively, in parents of children with lesser behavior problems. However, when examining the group of parents faced with the most challenging behavior problems, sanctification appears to be protective, as it was associated with increased sense of competence and decreased stress. Positive religious coping led to improved sense of competence in parents of children with the greatest behavior problems, but it did not lead to decreased stress. This supports the idea that religion can have a positive or negative impact on parental functioning, depending on level of behavior problems and personal views of God and spirituality.

Parents of children with diagnosable behavioral disorders have been found to have less self-confidence (Alizadeh et al., 2007) and lower self-esteem (Mash & Johnston, 1983) and display higher base rates of depression and anxiety (Johnston & Mash, 2001). If sanctification of the parenting role and positive religious coping strategies can help to improve sense of competence in this population, it is possible that they would also prevent the development of further decline in parental functioning. These protective factors could also benefit parents whose children are generally well-behaved, but who are inevitably faced with challenging behavior problems at some point in their child’s development. Parents who
sanctify the parenting role and who use positive religious coping strategies seem to do better when faced with challenging parenting situations compared with those who endorse less sanctification of the parenting role and positive religious coping. These results are consistent with previous research that found sanctification of parenting to be related to more positive parent–child interactions and a greater perceived control over a child’s behavior (Murray-Swank et al., 2006).

Future research should continue to consider the possibility that sanctification of a relationship that is stressful in nature or deviates from the expectations of one’s religion (i.e., having a disobedient or sinful child) may contribute to increased stress levels (Mahoney et al., 2003). Use of a larger sample that includes parents facing more significant child behavior problems as well as higher levels of parental stress may reveal a different relationship between sanctification of parenting and parental stress. It may also be interesting to examine stress levels in parents of children with severe emotional or thought disorders and the moderating impact of dimensions of religiousness in this population.

Although several significant relationships emerged between dimensions of religiousness, parent-perceived behavior problems, and parental stress and sense of competence, the predictor variables included in the study accounted for little more than 30% of the variance found in ratings of parental stress and sense of competence. Therefore, it is likely that there are other variables, not included in this study, that better predict levels of parental stress and sense of competence. It may be interesting, for example, to consider the interaction between parental attributions of child behavior problems, the use of religious coping strategies, and associated levels of parental stress and sense of competence. Attributions can be either external or internal. External attributions are characterized by perceiving behavior to be caused by an outside force, whereas internal attributions include the feeling that one is in control or able to influence behavior or the outcome of a situation. It may be helpful to examine the interactions between parental attribution of behavior problems and sanctification of parenting and biblical conservatism, as each of these variables may increase or decrease parental stress, depending on whether the parents consider child misbehavior to be related to their child’s temperament or their own parenting style.

One limitation of the present study was the relatively small sample size. Several parents expressed interest in the study and took a questionnaire packet home but did not return it. This might suggest that the content of the questionnaire was perceived as too long or perhaps too difficult by some parents. It is also possible that some parents elected not to share personal information (i.e., religious views) after reading the questionnaire items. Future research should consider alternative methods of collecting data that may lead to a better return rate; perhaps having a research assistant available to answer questions about specific items to decrease concerns about confidentiality or making the questionnaire available online to improve access to the measures would be helpful. A second limitation involves the relative homogeneity of the present sample as the majority of participants were women, Caucasian, and Christian. Future research would ideally include a wider range of gender, religious, racial, and socioeconomic diversity. Lastly, our measure of biblical conservatism was very limited (i.e., four items); future research may further explore the influence of biblical conservatism using a broader measure of this construct.

Research regarding the relationship between religiosity or spirituality and well-being is rapidly expanding and changing. The Sacred Loss and Desecration Scale (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005) has been created to measure the degree to which a person considers the stressor to be a desecration or loss of something they considered to be sacred. Future research that focuses on the impact of religiousness on parental functioning in parents of children with behavior problems may include this scale to determine whether a parent perceives having a child with behavior problems as a sacred loss. Many parents attribute spiritual significance to their relationship with their child, but it is unclear whether the presence of challenging behaviors would contribute to the development of a sacred loss or whether this is more accurately defined as a stressor.

Overall, the current study lays the groundwork for future studies on the impact of dimensions of religiousness on parents of children with behavior problems. Results provide support for the idea that parents of children with greater behavior problems experience the connection between parenting and religion in a manner that differs from parents of children with lesser behavior problems. The results also indicate that religion can have either a positive or negative impact on parental functioning depending on personal views of God, religion, and spirituality. Furthermore, this study provides evidence to suggest that the influence of religion is different for parents coping with child behavior difficulties as compared with parents of children with a developmental disorder or a chronic medical illness; however, this should be examined more closely in future studies.

References


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