

Who spares the rod? Religious orientation, social conformity, and child abuse potential.

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Abstract:

Objective

Relatively little research has investigated the connection between religiosity and physical child abuse risk. Certain aspects, such as specific religious orientation or beliefs, and cognitive schema, such as socially conformist beliefs, may account for the connection that some have claimed increase religious parents' abuse potential. The current study examined whether greater Extrinsic religiosity, but not Intrinsic religiosity, was associated with elevated physical abuse potential. Those who hold a literal interpretation of the Bible and attend church more frequently were also expected to evidence increased abuse risk. Additionally, the role of social conformity in mediating or moderating the association between religiosity and abuse potential was investigated.

Methods

Two hundred and seven regularly attending Christians of various denominations completed self-report measures of religiosity, social conformity, and child abuse potential.

Results

Findings indicate that Extrinsic religiosity was associated with increased physical abuse potential, with greater social conformity further moderating this association. Intrinsic religious orientation was not associated with abuse risk. Further, those who consider the Bible to be literally true were more socially conformist and evidenced greater abuse risk.

Conclusions

For those working with religious parents, the particular nature of religiosity needs to be considered when interpreting a connection between religiosity and abuse risk, as well as the potential attitudes the parent holds regarding the need for conformity. Given the complexity of religiosity, future research should explore other potential mediating and moderating factors that could further clarify its connection to physical abuse risk.

Practice implications

Clarifying how religiosity relates to child abuse risk has implications for professionals working with the vast numbers of parents for whom religion is a visible force in their daily lives. Findings from the present study suggest that professionals should consider the underlying motivation for an individual's religion as well as the importance the individual places on conformity. Religiosity per se may not be as critical to predicting physical abuse risk as selected approaches to religion or particular attitudes the religious individual assumes in their daily life.

Keywords: child maltreatment | physical abuse | child abuse potential | religiosity | religious practices | social orientation | child abuse

Article:

Introduction

Encouraging declines in substantiated cases of child abuse in the US are balanced by the escalating numbers of allegations (see statistical trends, US Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2006). Physical maltreatment constituted about 20% of the nearly 900,000 substantiated cases in 2004 (DHHS, 2006). Beyond such statistics, estimates of severe physical assault toward children imply the true prevalence is between 5 to 11 times greater than official reports (Straus, Hamby, Finkelhor, Moore, & Runyan, 1998). Therefore, physical child abuse remains a critical concern even considering only those cases that rise to the exacting standards of substantiation (see King, Trocme, & Thatte, 2003 for discussion).

Often physical maltreatment arises when parents inadvertently intensify their administration of physical discipline (Herrenkohl et al., 1983 and Whipple and Richey, 1997). Indeed, abusive parents routinely dispense excessive, severe physical discipline toward their children (Veltkamp & Miller, 1994). Consequently, many strongly advocate that all expressions of parent-child aggression be conceptualized on a physical discipline-child abuse continuum (e.g., Graziano, 1994, Greenwald et al., 1997, Straus, 2001a, Straus, 2001b and Whipple and Richey, 1997), wherein excessive physical discipline becomes abusive further along this continuum. Child abuse potential gauges beliefs and characteristics considered predictive of a parent's risk to physically maltreat a child (Milner, 1986 and Milner, 1994). Abuse potential thus can estimate a parent's

risk to engage in physically aggressive responses during discipline situations that approach the maltreatment end of the discipline-abuse continuum.

Recently, the literature in this field has witnessed a growing interest in cultural nuances that influence child abuse risk (Korbin, 1997). Ecological models of child maltreatment (Belsky, 1980 and Belsky, 1993) have long considered cultural factors to be distal macrosystem level qualities that could increase or decrease risk. Despite interest in cross-cultural and ethnic differences in parenting issues, religion as a cultural force has been relatively neglected in the research literature, although many have implicated religious beliefs in exacerbating child abuse risk (e.g., Capps, 1995 and Greven, 1992). Accordingly, the current study focused on exploring the connection between religious beliefs and child abuse potential, wherein religion is construed as a cultural framework that may operate to impact abuse at the macrosystem level.

Religion is a pervasive, powerful force within US culture. Eighty-one percent of Americans self-identify as belonging to a religious group, primarily Christian (Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001). Nonetheless, surprisingly little psychological research has been conducted on religiosity and parenting issues (Jenkins, 1992), although the prospect for religion to shape parenting behaviors, including physical discipline decisions, is unmistakable (Greven, 1992).

In the academic realm, religiosity has been traditionally characterized as Intrinsic or Extrinsic religiosity (Allport & Ross, 1967), specifically:

Extrinsic orientation: Persons with this orientation are disposed to use religion for their own ends Extrinsic values are always instrumental and utilitarian. Persons with this orientation may find religion useful in a variety of ways-to provide security and solace, sociability and distraction, status and self-justification

Intrinsic orientation: Persons with this orientation find their master motive in religion. Other needs, strong as they may be, are regarded as of less ultimate significance, and they are, so far as possible, brought into harmony with the religious beliefs and prescriptions (p. 434).

Allport's model is the most widely recognized in empirical research, and although occasionally individuals are typed into categorical groups, typically individuals are considered to evidence varying degrees of both Extrinsic and Intrinsic religiosity (Donahue, 1985a and Donahue,

1985b). In the present study, the concept of the two orientations as orthogonal and continuous was adopted.

In addition to this conceptualization of religious orientation, religiosity has been measured utilizing markers of religious behavior, including the frequency of church attendance (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001), with indications that attendance serves as an independent marker of religiosity (Hills, Francis, & Robbins, 2005). Moreover, researchers have also been traditionally interested in a literal interpretation of the Bible as a further indicator of religiosity (Brown & Annis, 1978). Although religious orientation has been represented as qualitatively continuous, church attendance and literal interpretation of the Bible have generally been categorized into very broad (for church attendance) or dichotomous (for Bible interpretation) groups.

Given the significance ascribed to religion in daily life (Bergin & Jensen, 1990), religiosity would predictably influence parents' discipline decisions. In fact, some religious figures explicitly advocate corporal punishment (e.g., Ezzo & Ezzo's book, "Growing Kids God's Way"). Others directly implicate religion in perpetuating child abuse, underscoring the Bible's support for corporal punishment use and a child's responsibility to conform to a parent's authority (Greven, 1992). However, empirical research on religiosity rarely considers physical abuse, relying instead on corporal punishment use (Mahoney et al., 2001). Such findings indicate that Protestants who are characterized by researchers as "conservative" are more likely to spank their children (Ellison et al., 1996a and Ellison et al., 1996b). Moreover, Christian "conservatism" promotes both child obedience and physical discipline, resulting in more favorable attitudes toward corporal punishment (Grasmick et al., 1991 and Mahoney et al., 2001). Similarly, greater church attendance by parents relates to a stronger emphasis on child obedience (Alwin, 1986). Those who adopt a literal interpretation of the Bible support corporal punishment use (Wiehe, 1990). Adopting a more literal interpretation of the Bible, which assumes a punitive stance toward sinners, may account for "conservative" Protestants' holding a more authoritarian parenting style, emphasis on child obedience, and endorsement of the use of corporal punishment (Ellison and Sherkat, 1993a and Ellison and Sherkat, 1993b).

Yet religiosity also appears to impart benefits that could mitigate the potential negative influences on parenting and discipline use. For example, greater religiosity is associated with general psychological well-being (Maltby, Lewis, & Day, 1999). Moreover, religiosity is associated with positive family relationships, wherein religious mothers engage in less inconsistent parenting, less co-parenting conflict, better reported marital quality, and more frequent hugging and praising of children (Mahoney et al., 2001). Indeed, parents' religious

coping is also associated with various indices of children's well-being, predicting fewer child externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Schottenbauer, Spernak, & Hellstrom, 2007). Collectively, research typically concludes that the findings regarding the benefits and drawbacks of religiosity are mixed and inconsistent (Batson et al., 1993 and Gorsuch, 1988).

Potentially such inconsistency arises because religiosity is not unidimensional. A closer examination of the literature on religiosity reveals that more Intrinsically oriented individuals evidence better mental health (Batson & Ventis, 1982), lower hostility (Masters, Lensegrav-Benson, Kircher, & Hill, 2005), and greater empathy (Watson, Hood, Morris, & Hall, 1984). This line of research implies individuals with more Intrinsic religiosity possess characteristics that would contraindicate a tendency toward parent-child aggression. In contrast, more Extrinsically oriented individuals have higher levels of interpersonal reactivity (Masters et al., 2005), more acceptance of rape (St. Lawrence & Joyner, 1991), and less altruism (Batson & Gray, 1981). Moreover, in a rare study investigating beyond corporal punishment, Dyslin and Thomsen (2005) found that those with higher Extrinsic religious orientation scores obtained significantly higher child abuse potential scores, whereas greater Intrinsic religiosity and orthodoxy were unrelated to child abuse potential. However, the study involved young college undergraduates, some aspects of religiosity appear to have been omitted, and the obtained association with Extrinsic religiosity was notably weak (Dyslin & Thomsen, 2005). Nonetheless, the available evidence suggests greater Extrinsic orientation is more likely related to abuse risk.

Additional unexplored factors may also influence the association between religiosity and child abuse risk. One possibility is that rigidity may relate to both religiosity, given the emphasis on child obedience in Christian religions (Mahoney et al., 2001), as well as child abuse potential. Social conformity involves a narrow view of conventional, normative behavior, wherein deviance from social norms is considered an unacceptable challenge to authority, consistent with the concept of authoritarianism (Feldman, 2003). Although social conformity per se has not been investigated with respect to either abuse potential or religiosity, rigidity and dogmatism has been studied. Socially conformist belief systems may represent one of the cognitive schema that parents hold when they enter parent-child interactions. Such pre-existing schema, as conceptualized in Social Information Processing theory (Milner, 2000), may operate at more proximal ecological levels to increase child abuse risk.

Early research demonstrated that individuals with a more Extrinsic religious orientation display greater rigidity and dogmatism (Hoge and Carroll, 1973 and Kahoe, 1974), and religious individuals who value obedience are more likely to support corporal punishment (Ellison and Sherkat, 1993a and Ellison and Sherkat, 1993b). More recent research suggests that rigidity is

associated with both Intrinsic and Extrinsic religiosity (Maltby, 1998). Rigidity is also considered a component of child abuse potential (Milner, 1994). Theoretically, abuse potential may in part relate to religiosity either because of a shared, underlying influence of social conformity (a mediation role) or alternatively, because of the extent to which a religious individual also adopts a rigid, socially conformist manner (a moderation role).

Consequently, the current study was designed to clarify connections of religious orientation and social conformity to child abuse potential. With rare exception, prior research on religiosity has largely targeted corporal punishment use rather than child abuse risk per se. This study aimed to determine whether greater affiliation with a particular religious orientation, a literal interpretation of the Bible, and greater church attendance relate to abuse potential. The study also considered whether authoritarianism, as measured by socially conformist beliefs, would mediate or moderate any association between religiosity and abuse potential, controlling for background characteristics. Greater Extrinsically oriented religiosity, rather than Intrinsically oriented religiosity, was hypothesized to correlate with increased child abuse potential. Those who subscribe to a literal interpretation of the Bible and attend church more frequently were also expected to score significantly higher on child abuse potential. Lastly, social conformity was expected to mediate or moderate the relationship between religious orientation and child abuse potential. Given that a sizeable proportion of research on religiosity has been conducted with college students and with isolated, specific denominations, the present study targeted a group who would be more representative than college students, from a wider array of Christians.

Methods

Participants

A total of 207 regularly attending Christians (62% female) were recruited from churches in a moderately sized Mountain West city (an additional 6 were excluded from analysis due to low church attendance, e.g., once or twice a year; 2 were eliminated due to elevated distortion indices on the Child Abuse Potential Inventory). See Table 1 for a summary of participant characteristics, including religious affiliation and frequency of church attendance. Participants' mean age was 47.57 ($SD = 14.27$). Respondents were predominantly Caucasian (93.2%), the majority of the sample was living with a spouse or partner (71.5%), and the majority were parents (85.1%) with a mean total number of 2.26 ($SD = 1.73$) children. The mean annual family income was reported as \$82,915, with a median income of \$70,000 that is probably more representative given some outliers. The majority of participants (66.7%) had a college degree or some graduate school. In addition to such demographic characteristics, participants were asked whether they held a literal interpretation of the Bible (see Table 2).

Table 1. Demographic and religious characteristics of participants.

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	% or <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Gender	
Male	37.7%
Female	61.8%
Age (years)	
	47.57 (14.27)
Ethnicity	
White	93.2%
Hispanic	2.4%
Asian	1.9%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1.0%
Black/African-American	.5%
Other	1%
Annual family income	
	\$82,915 (\$75,068)
Educational attainment	
Did not graduate high school	1%
High school graduate	3.9%
Vocational training/some college	28.2%
College degree	37.9%
Graduate school	29.1%
Living with spouse/partner	
Yes	71.9%
No	28.1%
Parent	

	% or <i>M (SD)</i>
Yes	85.1%
No	14.9%
Frequency of Church attendance	
Once per month	6.3%
Once per week	72.5%
More than once per week	21.3%
Religious affiliation ^a	
Methodist	14.8%
Baptist	12.8%
LDS (Mormon)	12.3%
Presbyterian	12.3%
Lutheran	11.5%
Born Again Christian	10.7%
Episcopalian	10.3%
Catholic	9.9%
Evangelical	2.9%
Buddhist ^b	.4%
Other	1.6%

a Total percentage exceeds 100% due to multiple endorsements by participants.

b Participant indicated Buddhist in addition to a Christian denomination.

Table 2 is omitted form this formatted document

Measures

The Religious Orientation Scale (ROS; Allport & Ross, 1967) was developed to assess Intrinsically and Extrinsically religious orientation. A widely used self-report measure, 11 questions comprise the Extrinsic Scale and 9 questions make up the Intrinsic Scale on which participants choose from a 9-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (9). Scales are summed and divided by the total number of items, with higher scores indicative of greater endorsement of the respective orientation. Although not without criticisms (Kirkpatrick & Hood, 1990), this measure has been the most widely used in the study of religion and demonstrates strong psychometric properties (Donahue, 1985a). KR-20 reliabilities were found to be .91 for the Intrinsic scale and .85 for the Extrinsic scale (Spilka, Stout, Minton, & Sizemore, 1977). Among three different denominational groups, Cronbach's alpha reliabilities have been reported to range from .81 to .93 for the Intrinsic scale and from .69 to .82 for the Extrinsic scale (Griffin & Thompson, 1983). In terms of validity, the Intrinsic scale has been found to correlate with other measures of religious commitment at .76, whereas the Extrinsic scale correlated at .03 (Donahue, 1985b). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for the Intrinsic Scale was .86 and for the Extrinsic Scale, .84.

The Religious Life Inventory (RLI; Batson et al., 1993) was intended to supplement the ROS with three scales, labeled External, Internal, and Orthodoxy. The RLI utilizes the same format as the ROS in which participants respond on a 9-point Likert scale. Internal consistency estimates for each of the three scales were found to be acceptable, with .79 for External, .84 for Internal, and .91 for Orthodoxy (Batson et al., 1993). However, employing factor analysis, Batson et al. (1993) found that all three loaded with the ROS Intrinsic Scale, referring to this empirically derived factor as "Religion as an End." The RLI External Scale, initially intended to be an extension of the ROS Extrinsic scale, unexpectedly did not extend the ROS's efforts to measure one's Extrinsic religious orientation. Consequently, the construct of religion as primarily instrumental was solely captured by the ROS Extrinsic scale. (A factor analysis with the current data was also performed that confirmed this two-factor structure.) The alpha coefficients obtained in the present study for the RLI supplemental scales were: Internal, .81, External, .59, and Orthodoxy, .91.

The Social Conformity-Autonomy Beliefs Scale (SCA; Feldman, 2003) consists of a series of 17 paired alternate items that were developed to measure social conformity and autonomy. The measure includes five scales labeled Conformity Versus Autonomy, Freedom Versus Fear of Disorder, Respect for Common Norms and Values, Social Cohesion, and Socialization and Child-Rearing Values. Examples of items on the SCA include:

A. Society should aim to protect a citizen's right to live any way they chose. OR

B. It is important to enforce the community's standards of right and wrong.

A. Obeying the rules and fitting in are signs of a strong and health society. OR

B. People who continually emphasize the need for unity will only limit creativity and hurt our society.

Reliability for the total score was reported to be .80, and an exploratory factor analysis identified only a single factor, labeled social conformity (Feldman, 2003). The SCA was found to correlate with other measures of social conformity and autonomy (Feldman, 2003). The present study obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .81 for the SCA Total score.

The Child Abuse Potential Inventory (Milner, 1986) was designed to assess a participant's risk of engaging in physical child abuse. The CAPI is a widely used self-report measure consisting of 160 statements on which the participant must either agree or disagree. Seventy-seven of the items are variably weighted contributing to an overall Abuse Scale score whereas the remaining items include questions used in the validity indices and experimental scales. Higher scores indicate a greater potential toward physical child abuse. KR-20 reliability coefficients have been found to range from .92 to .95 and split-half reliability for the CAPI Abuse Scale ranges from .96 to .98 (Milner, 1986). Retest reliabilities have been found to range from .91 after one day to .75 after a period of three months (Milner, 1986). In terms of predictive validity, the CAPI has been found to be an accurate predictor, correctly identifying 81.4% of confirmed child abusers and 99% of comparison parents (Milner, 1994). Overall the CAPI has been found to be accurate 96.2% of the time (Milner & Wimberley, 1980).

Procedures

All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the university institutional review board. Christian churches of a variety of denominations were approached to participate in the study. Researchers visited either a Sunday service or weekly Bible study class for recruitment,

announcing that any adult interested in participating remain after the service for a group administration of measures. The measures were typically administered with individuals completing forms at their own pace privately in a small group format, although one group had nearly 30 participants. All questionnaire packets were returned to the researcher anonymously, with no identifying information on the questionnaire packet. Total time of administration was approximately 45 min and participants received a \$5 movie pass for compensation.

Analytic plan

All basic analyses were conducted using SPSS 15.0 for Windows. Initial descriptive statistics for the outcome measures are presented for comparison to previously reported statistics to better contextualize the sample. Consideration of demographic and background characteristics follows in order to evaluate the need for covariates in the subsequent multivariate analyses. To evaluate whether religious behavior and belief were associated with abuse potential, an ANOVA was conducted with church attendance as the independent variable, and t-tests were performed to consider differences due to a literal interpretation of the Bible. Pearson correlations among outcome measures are then provided to evaluate the associations between religious orientation, social conformity, and abuse potential, with particular attention to ascertaining whether Extrinsic religious orientation and Social Conformity were significantly related to abuse potential. Analyses regarding the possible mediational role of social conformity between religious orientation and abuse potential were contingent on significant associations between religious orientation and abuse potential as well as between religious orientation and social conformity (as per guidelines in Baron & Kenny, 1986). Finally, a hierarchical multiple regression was conducted predicting CAPI Abuse Scale scores. To minimize multicollinearity, a composite score for Intrinsic religiosity was created (a linear combination of standardized scores for ROS Intrinsic, RLI Internal, RLI Orthodoxy, RLI External), consistent with the construct of Religion as an End described by Batson et al. (1993) and congruent with our own factor analysis. To test for moderation effects of social conformity, two centered multiplicative terms were created (social conformity by Intrinsic or Extrinsic religiosity). The regression proceeded with potential background/demographic covariates in the first block, followed by religiosity and social conformity in the second block, and ending with the two interaction terms for social conformity moderation in the final block.

Results

Sample descriptive statistics

Refer to Table 3 for a summary of obtained means and standard deviations of the outcome measures. Mean scores on the scales for both the RLI and ROS indicate the present sample was

significantly more likely to be inclined toward Intrinsic religiosity relative to the original sample, but significantly less Extrinsically oriented (not surprising given that the Batson et al., 1993 sample involved college students). With respect to social conformity, the test author does not provide mean scores to facilitate comparison (Feldman, 2003). However, for the CAPI, the present sample obtained a mean abuse potential score comparable to the general population reported mean of 91.0 (Milner, 1986).

Table 3. Means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations among outcome measures.

	<i>M (SD)</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. ROS Extrinsic	3.65 (1.49)						
2. ROS Intrinsic	7.15 (1.35)	-.40**					
3. RLI Internal	7.31 (1.36)	-.32**	.73**				
4. RLI External	6.67 (1.15)	-.07	.51**	.56**			
5. RLI Orthodoxy	7.75 (1.53)	-.28**	.63**	.67**	.40**		
6. SCA Social	23.23 (3.63)	-.08	.33**	.42**	.20*	.42**	
Conformity Total							
7. CAPI Abuse Scale	82.37 (65.15)	.31**	-.03	.04	.00	.11	.30**

Note: ROS = Religious Orientation Scale; RLI = Religious Life Inventory; SCA = Social Conformity-Autonomy; CAPI = Child Abuse Potential Inventory.

* $p \leq .01$.

** $p \leq .001$.

Potential covariates from demographic characteristics

The statistical analyses generally revealed no significant gender differences across measures, with the exception that females obtained higher scores on the RLI Internal Scale, $t(204) = 2.05$, $p < .05$. With regard to partnership status, t-tests determined that participants who were single obtained significantly higher CAPI Abuse Scale scores, $t(201) = 2.37$, $p < .05$, than those who lived with a partner, but no differences on religiosity or social conformity were observed. With regard to parenthood status, non-parents obtained comparable scores on religiosity and social conformity but significantly higher scores on the CAPI Abuse Scale score, $t(205) = 2.96$, $p < .01$. With respect to educational background, several significant differences emerged, with college-educated participants reporting lower RLI Internal Scale scores, $t(204) = 46$, $p < .05$, lower RLI Orthodoxy scale scores, $t(204) = 2.37$, $p < .05$, lower social conformity SCA Total scores, $t(204)$

= 4.71, $p < .001$, and lower CAPI Abuse Scale scores, $t(204) = 2.30$, $p < .05$. Collectively, these results suggest that those with a college education are less inclined toward an Intrinsically religious orientation, are less socially conformist, and demonstrate lower child abuse risk.

Further, age evidenced a weak association with the ROS Intrinsic scale, $r = .19$, $p \leq .01$, such that older participants were reportedly more Intrinsically oriented. Age also demonstrated a modest negative association with the CAPI Abuse Scale, $r = -.24$, $p \leq .001$, with younger participants demonstrating greater abuse potential. Otherwise, age was not significantly associated with any of the other religion scales or with social conformity. Annual family income was only modestly but significantly correlated with social conformity SCA Total scores, $r = -.21$, $p \leq .01$, and the CAPI Abuse Scale, $r = -.21$, $p \leq .01$, indicating that those with higher income evidenced lower social conformity and lower abuse potential (comparable to the findings reported for college-educated participants).

Findings on church attendance and literal interpretation of the Bible

Greater church attendance was predicted to relate to abuse potential. An ANOVA was performed for those in the three main categories: once per month, once per week, more than once per week. There were no significant differences between the three groups on any of the three RLI scales of Internal, External, or Orthodoxy. However, the ANOVA detected a significant difference on the ROS Extrinsic scale, $F(2, 204) = 5.49$, $p \leq .01$, wherein those who attended church more than once per week obtained the lowest scores but the other two groups appeared virtually identical (i.e., frequency of church attendance was not linear). The groups were significantly different on the ROS Intrinsic Scale, $F(2, 204) = 9.77$, $p \leq .001$, with a linear progression wherein those attending more than once per week obtaining the significantly highest scores relative to the two other groups. The three groups were also significantly different on the SCA Total conformity scores, $F(2, 204) = 5.58$, $p \leq .01$, with those attending more than once per week again obtaining significantly higher social conformity scores than either of the other two groups. However, there were no significant differences across groups on the CAPI Abuse Scale scores (those attending once a week and once a month obtained comparable mean scores, lower, albeit not significantly lower, than those who attend more than once per week, again suggesting nonlinearity on this dimension of religious behavior).

Participants also indicated whether they subscribe to a literal interpretation of the Bible. Significant differences were observed across most measures (see Table 2). With the exception of the RLI External scale, those who interpret the Bible literally were found to be significantly higher on the ROS Intrinsic, RLI Internal, RLI Orthodoxy scales and significantly lower on the

ROS Extrinsic scale. Moreover, those who maintain a literal interpretation of the Bible obtained significantly higher scores on social conformity as well as on the CAPI Abuse Scale.

Correlations among religious orientation, social conformity, and abuse potential

Several of the outcome measures were significantly intercorrelated, as shown in Table 3. Of particular interest is the significant positive correlation between the ROS Extrinsic scale and the CAPI Abuse Scale (greater Extrinsic religiosity associated with greater abuse potential). Moreover, note that greater social conformity was significantly associated with higher abuse potential scores and with greater endorsement of Intrinsically oriented religiosity. Also of interest was the absence of an association between Intrinsically oriented religiosity and child abuse potential as well as no association between ROS Extrinsic and Social Conformity Total scores. Given the absence of a significant association between Intrinsically oriented religiosity and abuse potential, as well as the absence of an association between Extrinsically oriented religiosity and social conformity, the initial assumptions (as per Baron & Kenny, 1986) required to test for potential mediation of social conformity were not met. Thus, the hypothesized mediation of social conformity between Intrinsic or Extrinsic religious orientation and abuse potential was not supported and not included in the ensuing multiple regression analyses.

Multiple regression analysis

The initial prediction of CAPI Abuse Scale scores entered potentially significant background characteristics as covariates first (age, income, education, partnership status, and parenthood status), followed by Social Conformity Total and religiosity (including the composite score for Intrinsic religiosity, ROS Extrinsic, church attendance, and literal interpretation of the Bible), and interaction terms to test for moderation in the final block (Intrinsic religiosity \times Social Conformity and Extrinsic religiosity \times Social Conformity). This initial regression equation was indeed significant, $R^2 = .35$, $F(11, 195) = 9.41$, $p \leq .001$. However, age was the only background characteristic that contributed significant unique variance, followed by both social conformity and Extrinsic religiosity, and then the interaction between social conformity and Extrinsic religiosity. Notably, the variance from the composite Intrinsic religiosity score, as well as literal interpretation of the Bible, appears to be accounted for by social conformity; moreover, church attendance was not sufficiently linear (with its three categories) to adequately serve as a predictor. Thus, the final, most parsimonious regression of CAPI Abuse Scale scores resulted in an $R^2 = .33$, $F(4, 202) = 24.33$, $p \leq .001$, with age, Total Social Conformity, ROS Extrinsic scores, and ROS Extrinsic \times Social Conformity contributing significant unique variance (see Table 4 for a summary of the final regression equation results). Thus, after controlling for age, greater Extrinsic religiosity and greater social conformity independently predicted child abuse potential, with additional variance attributable to those who evidenced both higher social

conformity and Extrinsic religiosity. Consequently, the interaction of Extrinsic religiosity and social conformity was significant such that those high in both social conformity and Extrinsic religiosity obtained the highest child abuse potential scores (compared to those who are high in Extrinsic religiosity but low in social conformity, high in social conformity but low in Extrinsic religiosity, or low in both Extrinsic religiosity and social conformity).

Table 4. Final hierarchical multiple regression predicting CAPI Abuse Scale scores ($N = 207$).^a.

CAPI Abuse Scale results	<i>B</i>	SE <i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>sr</i> ²
Step 1					.058
Age	-1.01	.27	-.22	3.73*	
Step 2					.173
Total Social Conformity	5.52	1.04	.31	5.28*	
ROS Extrinsic	10.81	2.61	.25	4.15*	
Step 3					.095
ROS Extrinsic × Social Conformity	22.37	4.20	.32	5.33*	
					$R = .57, F(4, 202) = 24.33^*$
					$R^2 = .33$ (adj. $R^2 = .31$).

a Unstandardized regression coefficients (*B*) with standard error, intercept, standardized regression coefficients (*Beta* weights), semipartial correlation coefficients or incremental r^2 (sr^2), multiple correlation coefficient (*R*), squared multiple correlation coefficient (R^2), and adjusted squared multiple correlation (adj R^2).

* $p < .001$.

Discussion

The present study evaluated the role of social conformity and religious orientation, behavior, and beliefs in physical child abuse risk. A sample of 207 regularly attending Christians reported on their religious beliefs, socially conformist attitudes, and child abuse potential. Findings support a hypothesized connection between greater Extrinsic religious orientation and child abuse risk, as well as increased risk for those inclined toward more social conformity. In addition, as expected, those who interpret the Bible literally evidenced elevated abuse risk, although such individuals were also more likely to hold socially conformist beliefs. However, rather than a mediating role, social conformity moderated Extrinsic religiosity.

Confirming our hypothesis, considering religion as more instrumental, serving a means to an end, is associated with an increased risk to engage in physically abusive behavior. Such results are consistent with research that more Extrinsically oriented college students obtained higher child abuse potential scores (Dyslin & Thomsen, 2005), and with findings that individuals with greater Intrinsic religiosity display better adjustment relative to those with greater Extrinsically oriented religiosity (e.g., Batson and Ventis, 1982 and Watson et al., 1984). Therefore, those who are more inclined to focus on the personal and social benefits of religion (Extrinsically religious), rather than those who internalize religion, appear to share characteristics with those who are more likely physically abusive toward children. Furthermore, those with greater Extrinsic religious orientation who are also more socially conformist appear to be especially likely to share characteristics identified in those who are physically abusive.

Social conformity was operationalized in this study as an adherence to social norms, order, and values, consistent with theories regarding authoritarianism (Feldman, 2003). Although not extensively considered in the previous literature, socially conformist beliefs independently predicted child abuse potential scores. Indeed, the study that most closely parallels the concept of social conformity used in our study did identify that a high value in obedience was manifest in “conservative” Protestants (Ellison & Sherkat, 1993b). The present results underscore that those who advocate for autonomy (including children's autonomy) appear less likely to display attributes that characterize physically abusive individuals. Although a connection to rigidity has been previously implicated in connection to child abuse risk (Milner, 1994), research on the role of social conformity in abuse risk is scarce and future research should consider further investigating the role of social conformity beliefs in abuse potential with other samples.

The current study also investigated two additional markers of religiosity, literal interpretation of the Bible and church attendance. Previous researchers had suggested that those who consider the Bible to be literally true are more supportive of corporal punishment (Ellison and Sherkat, 1993a, Ellison and Sherkat, 1993b and Wiehe, 1990). Findings from the present study of abuse potential parallel those regarding corporal punishment. Those respondents who held a more literal interpretation of the Bible obtained higher child abuse potential scores. Literal interpreters also evidenced greater social conformity, higher scores on nearly all Intrinsic religiosity scales, but lower scores on Extrinsic religiosity. Greater social conformity was also associated with greater Intrinsic religiosity but not Extrinsic religiosity, in contrast to earlier research suggesting both orientations were associated with rigidity (Maltby, 1998). Consequently, in the multiple regression analyses predicting child abuse potential, whereas Extrinsic religiosity contributed significant unique variance, literal interpretation of the Bible did not account for variance not

already explained by social conformity. In other words, although more Intrinsically religious individuals may be more socially conformist and interpret the Bible as literally true, socially conformist beliefs appear to be the component that elevates abuse risk.

With respect to church attendance, greater attendance was expected to relate to abuse potential, consistent with earlier research that greater attendance was associated with an emphasis on obedience (Alwin, 1986). The findings in the present study suggest that church attendance, however, may not be linear in some respects (e.g., as observed with the ROS Extrinsic scale) but linear in others (as on the ROS Intrinsic Scale), complicating the ability to characterize its potential relationship. However, the trends suggested that increased church attendance was associated with higher abuse potential scores, which may reflect that frequent attenders were also most socially conformist, already noted as significant in predicting abuse potential. Nonetheless, any interpretations regarding church attendance are tempered by the fact that we elected to recruit regular church attendees, thereby restricting the variance on this variable. Future research designed to gauge attendance more continuously would be helpful, although researchers should be aware that this variable may not perform linearly.

Together, these results suggest that specific aspects of religiosity are pertinent to abuse risk, namely a particular religious orientation (Extrinsic) and those who are more socially conformist. In contrast, individuals who are more Intrinsically religiously oriented do not appear to be at increased risk, despite the fact that they may at times be more socially conformist or more literal interpreters of the Bible. Consequently, prior confusion regarding whether religiosity is harmful or beneficial (Batson et al., 1993 and Gorsuch, 1988) may reflect that research had not yet begun to disentangle what particular qualities and religious orientation within individuals are salient in abuse risk.

Findings of the present study should be considered in light of several limitations. With respect to sample characteristics, participants were relatively homogeneous given that respondents were predominantly White, educated, and upper middle class, limiting generalizability. The homogeneity of this sample may diminish the effects of race and socioeconomic status on these results, but external validity is compromised. Earlier research in fact underscores the positive influence of Intrinsic religiosity on parenting among African-American mothers (Cain, 2007); combined with the findings of the present study, future research should evaluate how Intrinsic religiosity could serve a protective role in abuse risk for various ethnic/racial groups. In addition, because lower education and poverty appear associated with physical child abuse (Brown et al., 1998 and Herrenkohl et al., 1984), generalizations from the current sample are limited by the sample's higher education and income characteristics. Although several previous studies have

actually relied on college populations (Batson et al., 1993, Dyslin and Thomsen, 2005, Hills et al., 2005 and Maltby et al., 1999), the relatively religious sample in this study, which was intentionally recruited as regular church-goers, also may not be representative of the broader group of Christians. Yet a particular strength of this study involves its inclusion of a wider array of Christian denominations, which is quite atypical in this literature that tends to focus on particular denominations or subgroups. Nevertheless, given the nature of the items on religious orientation, only Christians could be included. More creative assessment strategies could consider the role of religiosity in non-Christian groups. Overall, future research should endeavor to include more diversity in ethnicity and income as well as a wider representation of Christians (including infrequent attendees) or other religious/spiritual denominations to evaluate the generalizability of these results.

Data obtained in this study also relied on self-report in a group format within religious institutions. Although completed anonymously, respondents may still have felt pressured to present themselves more favorably, particularly with regard to describing themselves as more religious. Although the bulk of earlier research on religiosity has considered corporal punishment, the present study targeted child abuse potential, which would speak more directly to concerns raised regarding religiosity perpetuating child abuse (e.g., Greven, 1992). However, child abuse potential scores, although predictive of likelihood to abuse, do not gauge abusive behavior in particular. Administering the measures in a different context may allow participants to respond more candidly, and collecting data not dependent on self-report may yield different results (e.g., obtaining observer reports of religious behavior, conformity, or abuse potential).

Although several significant findings emerged for participants who endorse a literal interpretation of the Bible, this distinction was based on a single dichotomous question, similar to previous studies (e.g., Ellison & Sherkat, 1993b). Potentially, participants vary in their degree of literalism and the dichotomization of this construct may fail to detect subtle variations among participants. Continued work in this area should devise continuous measures that may better capture what different meanings one may ascribe to holding a literal interpretation of the Bible. The closest approximation in this study was likely the RLI Orthodoxy scale, which was in fact highly associated with literal interpretation, although a well-validated instrument of Biblical interpretation has not yet been developed. Indeed, given the complexity in reported frequency of church attendance, as well as some of the criticisms leveled at traditional measures of religious orientation (e.g., Kirkpatrick & Hood, 1990), future research should attempt to design more sophisticated measures of religious orientation, beliefs, and behavior. Lastly, future research should consider additional factors that may relate to both physical child abuse risk and religiosity. The connections between religion and abuse risk appear to be complex and continued

study may help tease apart the nuances of these connections, particularly identifying other potential mediators or moderators.

Religion is indisputably an important component of life for many Americans (Bergin & Jensen, 1990). Uncovering how religiosity impacts parenting and discipline, both in terms of how it enhances optimal parenting or promotes abuse risk, can inform those professionals working with parents who rely on religion for guidance. Evidently, other important aspects reflective of an individual's personality, such as their need for social conformity, may be a more critical component to consider in efforts to decrease abuse potential. Further, as suggested by the findings on Extrinsic religiosity, the purpose religion serves in an individual's life should also be evaluated. For example, given the research highlighting the importance of social support in buffering abuse risk (Culbertson & Schellenbach, 1992), perhaps those who are pursuing religion for instrumental reasons are those who are most in need of social support and turn to religion to fulfill those needs. Most importantly, professionals working with parents should be cautious about their biases and assumptions regarding religiosity, respecting the complex mechanisms whereby religiosity relates to the propensity to engage in abusive behavior.

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