



'The ties that bind': experiencing parenting within a religious context

Hannah Polland

'The ties that bind': experiencing parenting within a religious context

Abstract

This report details the findings of an investigation into the influence of religious affiliation on parenting. Research suggests religious influence on parenting can be both positive and negative. Six participants (3 male, 3 female) were questioned using a semi-structured interview, which was then transcribed and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results implied three central themes: (1) Self-reflection and identity, (2) Interactive responsibility, (3) Accountability. The results suggest that religion promoted authoritative techniques such as open and supportive communication. In addition, they imply positive values and behaviours taught within religion can help unify and strengthen family ties.

KEY WORDS:	PARENTING	IPA	RELIGION	SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS	IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT
-------------------	------------------	------------	-----------------	-----------------------------------	-----------------------------

Introduction

The family plays a fundamental and indispensable part in an individual's life (Anshen, 1959). In recent decades drastic changes have taken place in the configuration of the family unit (Chambers, 2001). Divorce, single-parenthood, employed mothers, gay and lesbian couples and blended families pervade current familial dynamics. Consequently, the implications of such changes have become a major subject of enquiry (Schaffer, 2004).

The bond between religion and the family runs deeply through historical, social and theological culture (Greven, 1988; Christiano, 2000). Recent studies show that religious participation is linked with parental behaviours and values. In particular, religious institutions have been influential in shaping family related culture over the course of history (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Clysdale, 1997; Wilcox, 1998). Research indicates that marital quality is highest among religiously involved couples of the same faith (Call & Heaten, 1997; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, Swank, 2001), religious parents are less likely to abuse or shout at their children (Bartowski & Wilcox, 2000) and there are closer parent-child relationships (Mahoney *et al.* 2001, Dollahite, Marks, Goodman, 2004, Wilcox, 2002). In addition, greater religiosity in parents and youth is linked with a number of protective factors for adolescents (Brody, Stoneman & Flor 1996; Regnerus, 2003; Wills, Yaeger, & Sandy, 2003). However, scholars have drawn attention to the way in which religious commitment can lead to over exerted patriarchy and parental authority, thereby creating a malevolent influence on parents and in consequence, children (Wilcox, 2008).

Another question which taxes the research capabilities in contemporary psychology is what constitutes good parenting? Baumrind (1971) categorized four parenting styles – authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and rejecting-neglecting. Research conducted using Baumrind's framework found that authoritative parenting correlated with numerous measures of childhood success, from superior preschool social skills to high academic achievement in adolescence (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). However, children of parents who demonstrated authoritarian, permissive or reject-neglecting traits were found to be the most discontent, withdrawn, distrustful and less self-reliant relative to others (Baumrind, 1971).

In order to fully examine the nature of parenting and children's development, it is necessary to look beyond the insular angles, and specifically note other factors that come into play during these phases of life. Moreover, a broader outlook can be found within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979). From his theory, one must view individuals within the context of multiple environments – the microsystem, exosystem and the macrosystem. Within this study, the microsystem, i.e. influences from family, friends and religious settings will play the biggest part. However, it is necessary to take into account the multiple systems that may influence parents and children alike during these stages of life, such as culture and the media.

The study of religion and parenting, from a psychological approach is still a growing area. Furthermore, little has been done to investigate the impact of

religious affiliation from the parent's personal perspective. Therefore, using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology, this investigation sought to explore the psychological processes and experiences of parents associated with a Christian denomination, namely 'The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints'. Aspects of parenting have been explored within IPA on previous occasions, and it has offered insights into the development of the individual during the transition of motherhood (Smith, 1999a, Smith 1999b). However, there have been no studies looking at both mother and father in relation to religion. IPA was chosen as a research method due to its focus on capturing the subjective personal experiences of individuals in preference to a prescriptive survey methodology.

Method

For the purpose of this study a semi-structured interview was used to explore the participant's experience of parenting within a religious context. This technique was employed as it was felt that this process would enable the researcher to have a more intimate and interactive engagement with the participant. The data were analysed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); which allows the investigator to explore in greater detail the individual's perspective of the world and potentially to gain as much as possible, an 'insider's perspective' of the topic at hand (Smith, 2008).

Design

The data were derived from 3 sets of parents (3 fathers, 3 mothers). Participants were recruited through advertising within a local Latter-day Saint church. Couples selected were those who had been parenting for a minimum of 5 years and had been attending the church regularly during those years.

The names of the participants and members of the family have been changed in order to protect confidentiality. Due to the nature of the data collection, it was felt that the participant should be English speaking.

A selection of approximately 10 questions were prepared prior to the interview taking place, e.g. 'How do your religious beliefs influence your approach to parenting?'. However a number of spontaneous prompts were used in order to elicit the narrative process during the interview. The intention of these questions was to encourage each parent to share their experiences in depth, with a focus on the influence of their religion on their parenting approach and style.

Procedure

Ethical approval was first granted from the Psychology Department Research Ethics committee before commencing the study. In order to test the interview questions, a pilot study was first carried out on a mother who fell under the same requirements as the 6 selected participants. This pilot study enabled the researcher to adapt and add more questions, as they felt necessary to obtain more rigorous interviews for the study. After confirming participants and negotiating an interview schedule, a selection of venues were chosen and

permission was sought to facilitate the interviews – the university department resource room, an empty room in the church building or the researcher's home. Interviews were conducted with each parent individually. Before commencing the interview each participant received a detailed information sheet and consent form. After certifying that the participant was comfortable with the requirements of the study, they were asked to sign the consent form. A digital voice recorder was used in order to record the interview. Each interview lasted approximately 25 minutes. On completion of the interview each participant received a debrief sheet. They were thanked for their participation and reminded that if there were any concerns about the information disclosed to complete the withdrawal form and return it to the researcher. The participants were made aware that the information obtained would be strictly confidential, that all names would be changed during transcription and that the interviews would be erased immediately following transcription.

The recording of the interview was then transcribed verbatim. This verbatim technique ensures that the essence of the interview is retained, aiding the analysis process. Analysis of the transcript was completed in stages. Each transcript was first read a number of times to obtain and develop a familiarity with the text. After which, pertinent passages were highlighted within the script. Emergent themes were grouped together, a focus on meaning was used in place of frequency. This process was used for each of the transcripts. A comparison was then made across the transcripts in order to generate a list of preliminary themes, during which a selection of illustrative examples were chosen. After reviewing these themes, super-ordinate themes were identified.

Results

The definitive themes were (1) Self-reflection and identity, (2) Interactive responsibility, (3) Accountability.
(Participants identified as F1-3 and M1-3)

Self and Identity

A strong sense of purpose with regard to their roles as parents, and in establishing their identity after committing to having children was common:

'I think that it's fundamentally umm and unequivocally the most important role that I will ever have in life.' (M1)

The teachings taught within their church about being a mother or father appeared a strong influence in their perception of self, their goals and general well-being.:

'In fact it, I would say it influences everything I do with my children.' (F3)

'Well I certainly think that I have hope. And I would hope that I can transmit that to my children and I believe I'm a genuinely happier person because of what I believe in and so I think that obviously affects my family.' (F1)

Parents recognised that their identity as an individual was irrevocably tied to their role as mother or father, and that their primary responsibility was to be in a position to care, nurture and support their children:

'I think that is the primary role of the mother, is to nurture the child and to be there for him or her' (M1)

'no success can compensate for failure in the home' (F3)

It could be suggested that the religion to which they are a part, strengthens the parent's sense of self and fosters confidence and perseverance in their approach to life. Participants recognised that their own actions were a fundamentally important tool in the teaching of their children. Furthermore, they held a desire to be a 'good' example to their children in the hope that this would serve to encourage them to replicate their behaviour:

'So I think discipline it starts with the parent, if you are a good example' (M1)

'Umm ultimately my example hopefully will encourage them to make those decisions but I have to give them the tools, give them the information and the opportunity to discover for themselves if those things are actually the way they want to live their lives' (F3)

It would seem that parents identified the power and impact their influence had on their children. While they expressed a motivation for being a good example, it was also apparent that parents would include feelings of inadequacy or an acceptance of their weaknesses as individuals trying to do their best.

'That's the best I can to... is do my best. So I never know if I am good enough for the children, because they do complain that 'I am not a good parent' that 'my friends at school have got a better parent than you are' (F2)

While this self-judgement was apparent, the frequency of such statements was minimal. The main focus held by participants about self and identity were more commonly placed within their persona as a parent and the impact they had as individuals on their spouse and children.

Interactive responsibility

Becoming a parent requires the individual to develop a new sense of care and responsibility towards others, in particular their child. Participants appeared to express a keen appreciation for the individuality of their children, their worth as individuals in their own right and a reverence for the sanctity of life. This became more apparent as parents discussed this notion in relation to their religious beliefs:

'But I think that my belief in their individuality and in their individual purposes, influences the way that I treat them and the way that I think about them.' (M3)

The parents expressed a desire to treat them more respectfully due to their individuality as 'children of God'. Furthermore, within their church, 'agency' or the freedom to choose for themselves was a key element within their belief system. Therefore, they appeared to hold this idea as an important aspect when nurturing and bringing up their children:

'They are individuals. And the church helps me see that they are children of God and also helps me respect them and draw the line and give them their agency and the freedom to choose for themselves' (M1)

As a result, participants expressed a great desire to try and teach their children what they felt were correct principles, then allow them to choose for themselves:

'She can choose, we try to guide her, and to explain and to tell her what are the things she should do and not do.' (M1)

'what I'm working on is to try and give my children that ability to hopefully make their decisions by themselves.' (F1)

While each couple expressed the desire to give their children the freedom to choose, this was not to be seen as a lack of care or awareness for the actions of their children. Participants seemed to show a huge concern for the choices their children made, in particular those that included rules or principles taught within their church. For example, certain behaviours, such as sexual immorality, taking drugs or smoking were deemed inappropriate and therefore parents stated their need to convey this to their children through discussion and communication not only at church but at home:

'we speak about it, we talk to them and we explain things openly' (M2)

'My biggest worry that even though right now she is quite an innocent girl, and knows the consequences of people who... umm... perhaps from a religious point of view are sexually immoral she sees the consequences of that, I hope that thiswill not break her down but that by the time she's 16 or 17 her views will not have changed.' (F1)

As such, communication was a common theme when individuals explained their discipline and parenting methods. Not only were parents keen to talk to their children about their behaviour, but they also expressed a desire to ensure their child understood through interactive communication. For example, parents suggested children might come up with ideas of how to do something differently:

'I would talk to her first, and then if she doesn't get it... I will talk to her again' (M1)

'I want them to consider their behaviour and understand and tell me what they did, and also what they can do to change the way that they behave.'
(F3)

Children appeared to be dealt with in both a firm but loving manner. Key to their discipline methods were setting boundaries which were clear, ensuring children understood what was expected, however also allowing children to make mistakes and learn from them:

'we talk to them and explain how it went wrong' (F2)

Not only was worthwhile interaction and time spent with one another, a key theme apparent within disciplining children, but it appeared to be a fundamental principle taught within their church and employed in all aspects of family life. Leaders in their church express a desire for families to set aside time to be together each week without interruption, allowing bonds to form between family members:

'family nights on a Monday, umm I think that it helps to draw us together as a family, it helps unify us' (M3)

'you have to really make time for your family, and you have to choose to put them first' (M3)

Another important aspect within a church member's life is the inclusion of prayer and scripture study. These daily actions appeared to play a significant role within the parent's interaction with their children

'as a family we pray together and we read the scriptures together, we do scripture study together' (F1)

'it's a kind of daily religious practice that brings you... unites you and enables you to put aside the mess of the day.'(F3)

Having a shared purpose in the things they believed in appeared to create greater unity and a responsibility to uphold and support one another. Furthermore, showing a commitment to daily common practices allowed children to show obedience to their parents in addition to re-enforcing parental and church held beliefs:

'And that we have to work together if we want to be happy as a family. We have to strengthen each other' (F2)

The data derived from each of the participants highlight aspects of an interdependent interaction of responsibility and identity. Furthermore, ones sense of self appears dynamically interactive and interwoven with other family members.

Accountability

It was identified that participants showed a sense of responsibility and accountability to three expanding sources – that of their immediate family, the society to which they were a part and towards God. Therefore, these sub themes will be reported in like manner.

The family is our most basic institution. However, it forms what could be suggested as one of the most influential and primary educational forces within an individual's life. The participants in this study appeared to emphasise the focus that their religion placed on the centrality and importance of the family:

'our church sees the family as the very centre of everything that it believes' (F3)

'the family is the centre of our religion' (M1)

As such, the narratives identified a necessity towards treating their spouse well and parenting in a manner that showed their commitment to this belief. Parents spoke of how the challenges they faced needed to be met with a desire to overcome and succeed in order to establish a strong family home:

'It's not something that's going to be strong by accident' (M3)

Parents not only felt accountability towards caring for their children, but also the need to maintain a strong relationship with their spouse. They viewed this as their first priority in establishing a healthy, happy home:

'family starts with the husband and wife' (M2)

'it's about putting your spouse first' (M3)

Participants viewed this commitment as stemming, in most part, from their religious beliefs. Their belief in an 'eternal' life with their children and spouse, encouraged them to overcome their difficulties and increased their desire for unity in marriage.

'religion ummm, can help us see the bigger picture in our marriage and can help us be more patient and tolerant and understanding.' (M1)

'So it's forever. And, the... believing that, the relationship that we tend to have is built in a more solid foundation' (F2)

Their shared religious belief created a common goal and perspective on life which in turn also strengthened unity:

'I think that the unity that we feel as a couple comes ultimately from us believing the same things about life' (F3)

I know that my ... there have often been times when we have perhaps been in conflict, or had conflicting opinions about something. But by

praying about it, and looking at it from the perspective of our beliefs, it then is able to unify us again. (M3)

Duty and accountability appears to be a key aspect in maintaining long term perspective and loyalty within the family. Furthermore, experiencing greater satisfaction through implementation of the religious teaching appears to give the individual a sense of perspective and hope.

As previously stated, the family plays a key role in an individual's life. Parents identified their accountability in helping to shape their children. Nevertheless, participants also identified accountability towards the society to which they were a part. They indicated their desire to bring up their children in a manner that would help them become a valuable member of society:

'...Cause actually all the things I have been saying about making strong, well integrated kids that can contribute to society is all about helping them look outward, as well as inward' (F3)

Lastly, participants felt they were accountable to God for their actions. It was identified that God was the central driving force in their lives, and affected the way they approached their parenting and how they saw the world:

'I believe that I am responsible to a higher authority than my own for the exercise of my duty' (M3)

Parents indicated that they also saw God as a secondary source of authority when teaching their children. Thereby they indicated that their children were not only accountable to them as parents, but also to God for their actions:

'Sometimes we tell them... have you read your scriptures, this is what it says here this...and you should be obedient' (M1)

'the things that we are teaching them are being taught at church as well, so they are getting it from more than one perspective' (M3)

Discussion

This report has sought to carry out an investigation into the personal experiences of parents associated with a Christian religion. Furthermore, it questioned whether religious affiliation would have an influence on parenting styles or behaviours.

Through a close analysis of the interviews conducted, several themes emerged including many behaviours suggesting participants employed authoritative techniques when parenting their children (Baumrind, 1971). Participants were keen to employ meaningful conversations with their children in order to establish boundaries and create open and honest relationships. Research suggested that religiosity within families promoted high quality parent-child and husband-wife relationships (Call & Heaten, 1997; Mahoney *et al*, 2001). This investigation supports these ideas, as parents recognised their responsibility in

maintaining a long-term perspective and remaining committed to their spouse and children. In addition, this report also supports the previous research which suggests protective factors for adolescents. For example teens were taught at church and at home to follow certain rules, such as not smoking or having premarital sex (Brody *et al*, 1996). However, there were new aspects within the data that were not found in previous literature; insomuch that a participant's sense of identity played a key role in their perception and approach to their parental role. Their beliefs appeared to project an emphasis on their importance as individuals and their primary role as a parent.

On general reflection, the connection with and responses from participants during the interviews went well. Furthermore, they seemed comfortable to share their experiences with relative ease. It is suggested that future research could include looking at parents from different religious denominations. Thereby, the data would not reflect only one religious perspective. It might also be fruitful to gather participants from different economic backgrounds, due to the fact that social factors may have an influence on parental approaches. Another aspect that must be considered is the possibility that my own preconceptions in this area may have affected the interpretation process.

Conclusion

While the configuration and approach to 'the family' continues to change rapidly in our contemporary society, there remains a need for moral and consistent parenting. While the religious denomination may be inconsequential, values and behaviours encouraged within such groups appear to play an influential role in promoting individual emotional well being, marital stability and greater familial functionality and unity.

References

Alwin, D.F. (1986). Religion and parental child-rearing orientations: Evidence of a Catholic-Protestant convergence. *American Journal of Sociology*, 92, 412-440.

Anshen, R. *The Family: Its function and Destiny*. (1959) New York: Harper.

Bartowski, J.P., & Wilcox, W.B. (2000). Conservative Protestant child discipline: The case of parent yelling. *Social Forces*, 79, 265-290.

Bartowski, J.P., & Xu, X. (2000). Distant patriarchs or expressive dads? The discourse and practice of fathering in conservative Protestant families. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 41, 465-485.

Baumrind, D. (1971). Current patterns of parental authority. *Developmental Psychology*, 4, 1-103.

Brody, G.H., Stoneman, Z., & Flor, D. (1996). Parental religiosity, family processes, and youth competence in rural, two-parent African-American families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 56, 878 – 888.

Bonfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*. 32, 515-31.

Bronfenbrenner, U.(1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Belsky, J. (2007). *Experiencing the Lifespan*. New York: Worth Publishing.

Biddulph,S. (1998). *The Secret of Happy Children*. London: Harper.

Bjorklund, B.R. & Bee, H.L. (2008). *The Journey of Adulthood*. New Jersey: Pearson.

Bowlby, J. (1996). *Attachment and Loss: Loss, Sadness and Depression*. New York: Penguin.

Brotherson, S.E., Dollahite, D.C., & Hawkins, A.J. (2005). Generative fathering and the dynamics of connection between fathers and their children. *Fathering*, 3, 1-28.

Call, V.A. & Heaton T.B. (1997). Religious influence on marital stability. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36, 382-392.

Chambers, D. (2001). *Representing the Family*. London: Sage.

Christiano, Kevin J. (2000). "Religion and the Family in Modern American Culture." In S. K. Houseknecht & J. G. Pankhurst (Eds.), *Family, Religion, and Social Change in Diverse Societies* (pp.43-78). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clysdale, T.T. (1997). Family behaviours among early U.S. baby boomers: Exploring the effects of religion and income change, 1965-1982. *Social Forces*, 76, 605-635.

Darling, N., & Steinberg, L. (1993). Parenting Style as Context: An Integrative Model. *Psychological Bulletin* 113:486–496.

Davies, J., Berger, B. & Carlson, A. (1993). *The Family: Is it just another Lifestyle Choice?* London: IEA.

Doherty, K., & Coleridge, G. (2008). *Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting*. London: Transworld.

Dollahite, D.C., Marks, L.D., & Goodman, M. (2004). Families and religious beliefs, practices, and communities: Linkages in a diverse and dynamic cultural

context. In M.J. Coleman & L.H. Ganong (Eds.), *The handbook of contemporary families: Considering the past, contemplating the future* CA: Sage. pp.411-431.

Golombok, S. (2003). *Parenting: What really Counts?* London: Routledge.

Greven, P. (1988). *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jorgensen, N. (1995). *Investigating Families and Households*. London: Collins.

Maccoby, E.E., & Martin, J.A. (1983). Socialization in the context of the family: Parent-child interaction. In P.H. Mussen (Series Ed.) & E.M. Heathenington (Vol. Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol.4. Socialization, personality, and social development* (4th ed.). New York: Wiley.

Mahoney, A., Pargament, K. I., Tarakeshwar, N., & Swank, A.B. (2001). Religion in the home in the 1980s and 90s: A meta-analytic review and conceptual analyses of links between religion, marriage and parenting. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15, 559-596.

Mackley, J. (2003). *Home and family... the role of religion*. Birmingham: Christian Education Publications.

Meadows, S. (1996). *Parenting Behaviour and Children's Cognitive Development*. Sussex: Psychology Press.

Michelle, P. (1992). *The Psychology of Childhood*. London: Falmer Press

Morgan, P. (1995). *Farewell to the Family?* London: IEA.

Pearce, L.D., & Axinn, W.G. (1998). The impact of family religious life on the quality of mother-child relations. *American Sociological Review*, 63, 810-828

Regnerus, M. D. (2003). Linked lives, faith, and behaviour: Intergenerational religious influence on adolescent delinquency. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42, 189-203.

Schaffer, H. (2004). *Introducing Child Psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Smith, C. (2003). Religious participation and parental moral expectations and supervision of American youth. *Reviews of Religious Research*, 44, 414-424.

Smith, J.A. (1999a). Identity development during the transition to motherhood: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Reproduction and Infant Psychology*. 12, 281 – 299.

Smith, J.A. (1999b). Towards a relational self: Social engagement during pregnancy and psychological preparation for motherhood. *British Journal of Social Psychology*. 38, 409-426.

Smith, J.A. (2003). Shifting identities: the negotiation of meanings within and between texts. In B. Gough and L. Finley (Eds), *Doing Reflexivity* (pp. 176-86). Oxford: Blackwell.

Smith, J.A. (2008). *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. London: Sage.

Sugarman, L. (2000). *Life-Span Development: Frameworks, Accounts and Strategies*. New York: Psychology Press. p.91

Wilcox, W.B. (2002). Religion, convention, and parental involvement. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 64, 780-792.

Wilcox, W.B. (1998). Conservative Protestant child-rearing: Authoritarian or authoritative? *American Sociological Review*, 63, 796-809

Wilcox, W.B. (2008). Focused on Their Families: Religion, Parenting, and Child Well-Being. In K. Kline (Ed.), *Authoritative Communities: The Scientific Case for Nurturing the Whole Child*. New York: Springer.

Wills, T.A., Yaeger, A.m., & Sandy, J.M. (2003). Buffering effect of religiosity for adolescent substance abuse. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviours*, 17, 24-31.