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Receiving Social Support at Church When Stressful Life Events Arise: Do Catholics and Protestants Differ?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to see if older Protestants and older Catholics differ in the amount of social support they receive from fellow church members and members of the clergy when stressful life events arise. The data come from a nationwide longitudinal survey of older adults. The findings reveal that at relatively low levels of exposure to stress, older Catholics are less likely than older Protestants to get emotional support from either rank-and-file church members or members of the clergy. However, as the level of exposure to stress increases, this difference disappears, and older Catholics appear to be just as likely as older Protestants to receive emotional support from fellow church members and members of the clergy. The theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.

During the past decade researchers have expressed growing interest in the social relationships that people maintain in the places where they worship (Ellison et al. 2009; Krause 2008; McFadden, Knepple, and Armstrong 2003; National Institute on Aging/Fetzer Institute Working Group 1999). Although individuals develop different kinds of social relationships at church, some are especially important because they involve the provision of social support. This type of social relationship is valuable because, as research by Krause (2006a) reveals, social support that is provided by fellow church members helps older adults cope more effectively with the adverse effects of stressful life events. Given these findings, it is imperative that researchers probe more deeply into the factors that promote social support in religious institutions when stressful life events arise.

Unfortunately, the wide majority of studies that have been done on social support in the church focus primarily on all study participants taken as a whole, whereas less effort has been made to see whether there are denominational differences in the use of church-based social support systems during stressful times. Nooney and Woodrum (2002) addressed this issue indirectly by assessing the effect of religious fundamentalism on church-based social support, but they failed to find a statistically significant relationship. However, there are two limitations in this study. First, religious fundamentalism refers to a system of beliefs that is not unique to a specific denomination and, as a result, this study does not evaluate the influence of specific denominations per se. Second, Nooney and Woodrum (2002) did not take the effects of stress into account even though this is one of the primary reasons why people turn to significant others for assistance (Krause 2008).

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In addition to overlooking denominational variations, research on church-based social support suffers from four other problems. First, some investigators study samples that are not representative of the wider population, such as college students (Hunsberger, Pratt, & Pancer, 2001) or Roman Catholic priests and brothers (Froehlich et al., 2006). Second, the social support measures that are used in some studies capture assistance that is provided by people inside as well as outside the church (Kennedy et al., 1996). This is unfortunate because there is some evidence that support provided by fellow church members may be more efficacious than assistance that is given by secular social network members (Krause, 2006a). Third, one of the primary functions of social support is to help support recipients cope more effectively with the deleterious effects of stressful life events (Krause, 2008). This suggests that an increase in stress should be associated with an increase in church-based social support. However, as noted above, relatively few investigators include a measure of stress in their analyses, and as a result, the interface between stress and social support is left unexamined. Rather than focusing on stress per se, a number of researchers examine how other psychosocial constructs affect social support, such as spiritual maturity (e.g., Froehlich et al., 2006). Fourth, even though fellow church members may be an important source of support during difficult times, research also suggests that assistance provided by members of the clergy may influence the way people cope with stress (Krause 2008). But once again, little effort has been made to see whether there are denominational differences in the relationship between stress and social support provided by the clergy.

The goal of the current study is to use data from a nationwide longitudinal survey of older adults to test the hypothesis that there are denominational differences in the relationship between stress and social support that is provided by rank-and-file church members as well as members of the clergy. Given the underdeveloped nature of the literature, this issue will be approached broadly by assessing the difference between Catholics and Protestants. This strategy is adopted because, as the discussion that follows will reveal, there are good theoretical reasons for expecting that the church-based social support systems of older Catholics may operate differently from those of older Protestants.

Stress and Social Support From Fellow Church Members

An intriguing discussion of potential differences in the support mobilization process between Catholics and Protestants may be found in an historical study by Orsi (2005). Orsi (2005) examined official teachings and practices of the Catholic Church from the 1930s through the 1960s. This time frame is especially well suited for the current study because it represents the period in which many older Catholics came of age.

Although Orsi (2005) discusses a number of specific religious practices and beliefs, the way Catholics were taught to deal with adversity during this era has important implications for the support mobilization process. As Orsi (2005) points out, “There was only one officially sanctioned way to suffer the most excruciating distress: with bright, upbeat, and uncomplaining submissive endurance ... No matter how severe your suffering ... Jesus’ and Mary’s were worse, and *they* never complained”(pp. 26–27, emphasis in the original). Orsi (2005) goes on to argue that, “American Catholic religious teachers practiced an especially rough theodicy in which a cheerful, compliant silence was deemed the only appropriate response to human sorrow” (p. 31). Compared to Catholics, Orsi (2005) maintains that “... whining, and complaining were seen as characteristically Protestant responses while Catholics were stronger, better able to endure, better prepared to suffer” (p. 33).

Although Orsi’s (2005) observations pertain to church teachings decades ago, it appears that those who suffer in silence are still revered by the Catholic Church. Evidence of this may be found, for example, at the canonization of a well-known Catholic saint – Padre Pio. During

this ceremony, the Reverend Frio Tessari talked about how Padre Pio's "uncomplaining life of pain" had impressed Pope John Paul II (see the June 16, 2002, report by Associated Press at <http://www.aparchive.com>).

If Orsi's (2005) observations about suffering in silence are accurate, then older Catholics should be less likely than older Protestants to obtain social support from fellow church members when stressful life events arise. However, there do not appear to be any studies that evaluate this issue empirically. Even so, evidence that is consistent with this view may be found in two sources. The first is a recent qualitative study by Krause and Bastida (2009). They conducted 52 in-depth interviews with older Mexican Americans who reside in South Texas. Several open-ended questions were asked in this study about suffering in silence. The response of an older Catholic woman is consistent with the observations of Orsi (2005). Referring to the Virgin Mary, this woman stoically concluded that "... she suffered in silence for her son. We suffer in silence for our children. With this problem I had, I did not even tell my son ... I did not tell my sisters ... I faced it alone" (Krause & Bastida, 2009, p. 119). The second source of support for the notion that Catholics may suffer in silence is more indirect but, nevertheless, suggestive. According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999), Catholics are less likely than Protestants to join small groups at church (e.g., Bible study groups, prayer groups, and other social groups). The lower rate of participation in these small groups is noteworthy because research suggests they are a significant source of social support during difficult times (Wuthnow, 1994).

Although the perspective that is developed by Orsi (2005) is thought provoking, some investigators, such as Cohen and Hill (2007), provide contradictory evidence. In studying the religious cultures of the Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic faiths, these investigators characterize Protestant religious groups as individualistic and Catholic and Jewish religious groups as collectivistic. At the core of the individualistic world view lays an emphasis on personal goals, uniqueness, and personal control. In contrast, a key element of collectivism involves the assumption that members of the group are bound together in a network of mutual obligations. So in contrast to Orsi (2005), this perspective suggests that rather than suffering in silence, Catholics may actually be more likely than Protestants to respond to stressful events by reaching out to fellow church members for help. However, Cohen and Hill (2007) did not measure church-based social support directly nor did they examine the influence of stressful life events in their analyses. Instead, they focused on factors such as intrinsic and extrinsic religiousness as well as other constructs that were gleaned from open-ended narratives provided by college students (e.g., whether respondents had an experience that changed their lives by drawing them closer to God or other people). Even so, the findings from the study by Cohen and Hill (2007) reveal that Jews and Catholics have a more collectivistic orientation while Protestants have a more individualistic view.

Given the compelling case that is made by Orsi (2005), as well as the insights provided by Krause and Bastida (2009), it is hypothesized in the current study that older Catholics will be less likely than older Protestants to receive informal social support from their fellow church members when stressful life events arise.

Stress and Support from the Clergy

The discussion that has been provided up to this point deals with factors that may influence the amount of social support that is provided by rank-and-file church members. However, members of the clergy are often an important source of support, as well. But in order to understand why this may be so, an additional set of factors must be taken into account.

The role of pastor is the most authoritative and prestigious position in the congregational hierarchy. As Stark and Bainbridge (1987) point out, because members of the clergy occupy

a highly prestigious position in the church they "... share in the psychic rewards offered to the gods, for example: Deference, honor, and adoration" (p. 101). In addition, researchers have argued for some time that the minister, more than any other church member, is supposed to embody and practice the core tenets of the faith (Lenski, 1961). Among these core tenets are the expression of empathy and concern for others as well as a deep commitment to help people who are in need (Krause, 2008). This is important because, as Reis and Collins (2000) argue, social support is more likely to be effective when it arises in relationships where there is a high degree of trust, commitment, and respect.

Given the position that is occupied by the clergy in the church, it would seem only natural that rank-and-file church members would turn to them for help when difficult times arise. However, assistance from the clergy may take two forms: formal and informal. With respect to formal assistance, a good deal has been written about pastoral counseling services. In fact, a number of journals are devoted specifically to this function (e.g., the *Journal of Pastoral Counseling*, the *Journal of Pastoral Care*, and *Pastoral Psychology*). Consequently, it is not surprising to find that pastors spend, on average, 15 percent of their working time in counseling sessions (Oppenheimer, Flannelly, & Weaver, 2004). Moreover, a number of studies reveal that people are more likely to request assistance from members of the clergy than from any other mental health professional, including psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers (e.g., Neighbors, Musick, & Williams, 1998).

Less is known about whether there are denominational differences in the use of formal pastoral counseling services. Chalfant et al. (1990) conducted one of the few studies to examine this issue. They evaluated whether liberal Protestants, conservative Protestants, or Catholics are more likely to seek help from the clergy for a personal problem. Their analysis initially suggests that liberal Protestants are more likely than Catholics to request this type of assistance, but this relationship was no longer statistically significant once the effects of the frequency of church attendance were included in the model. Although the findings from this study are informative, the analyses focus on help-seeking alone and not whether effective support was actually provided during pastoral counseling sessions. This is an important issue because research reveals that instead of being helpful, some pastors may be a significant source of unpleasant negative interaction (Krause et al., 2000).

In contrast to formal pastoral counseling, relatively little is known about informal support that is provided to church members by the clergy. Blackbird and Wright (1985) conducted one of the few studies that explored this issue. These investigators gathered data from both pastors and rank-and-file church members in order to examine the effect of a phenomenon they call the "pedestal effect." According to this perspective, close personal relationships between the clergy and church members are discouraged by norms of propriety, anti-fraternization norms, and the guarded and defensive way in which a church member presumably relates to his or her pastor. Nevertheless, as Blackbird and Wright (1985) report, the norms and behaviors that comprise the pedestal effect are not widespread in the typical congregation. This would appear to suggest that informal personal relationships between clergy and church members are fairly common. Unfortunately, the sample for this study consisted of 12 Protestant congregations and, as a result, it is not possible to tell if differences exist in informal support that is provided by the clergy in Protestant and Catholic churches. Moreover, informal social support from a clergy member was not assessed directly in this study.

Somewhat better insight into this issue may be found in the work of Greeley (1990). He reports that Catholic Church members are less likely than their Protestant counterparts to believe that their priest understands their personal and family problems. However, in order for members of the clergy to understand personal problems, church members must be

willing to acknowledge them in the first place. And if the observations of Orsi (2005) are accurate, this is less likely to happen if Catholic Church members believe they should suffer in silence.

Based on the theoretical rational that is provided in this section, it is further hypothesized in the current study that older Catholics will report that they have received less informal support from the clergy than older Protestants when stressful life events arise.

Method

Sample

The data for this study come from an ongoing nationwide survey of older whites and older blacks. The study population was defined as all household residents who were either black or white, non-institutionalized, English-speaking, and at least 66 years of age. Geographically, the study population was restricted to all eligible persons residing in the coterminous United States (i.e., residents of Alaska and Hawaii were excluded). Finally, the study population was restricted to currently practicing Christians, individuals who were Christian in the past but no longer practice any religion, and people who were not affiliated with any faith at any point in their lifetime. This study was designed to explore a range of issues involving religion. As a result, individuals who practice faiths other than Christianity were excluded because the members of the research team felt it would be too difficult to devise a comprehensive battery of religion measures that would be suitable for individuals of all faiths.

The sampling frame consisted of all eligible persons contained in the beneficiary list maintained by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS). A five-step process was used to draw the sample from the CMS Files (see Krause, 2002a).

The baseline survey took place in 2001. The data collection for all waves of interviews was performed by Harris Interactive (New York). A total of 1,500 interviews were completed, face-to-face, in the homes of the study participants. Elderly African Americans were over-sampled so that sufficient statistical power would be available to assess race differences in religion. As a result, the Wave 1 sample consisted of 748 older whites and 752 older blacks. The overall response rate for the baseline survey was 62%.

The Wave 2 survey was conducted in 2004. A total of 1,024 of the original 1,500 study participants were re-interviewed successfully, 75 refused to participate, 112 could not be located, 70 were too ill to participate, 11 had moved to a nursing home, and 208 were deceased. Not counting those who had died or moved to a nursing home, the re-interview rate for the Wave 2 survey was 80%.

A third wave of interviews was completed in 2007. A total of 969 older study participants were re-interviewed successfully, 33 refused to participate, 118 could not be located, 17 were too sick to take part in the interview, and 155 older study participants had died. Not counting those who had died, the re-interview rate was 75%.

The analyses presented below are based on the data from the second and third waves of interviews. These interviews were selected because questions on stressful life events were administered for the first time at Wave 2. By using both the Wave 2 and Wave 3 interviews, it is possible to assess the relationship between denominational preference, stress, and change in social support over time.

The sample sizes in the analyses presented below vary slightly because separate analyses were performed for support from fellow church members ($N = 471$) and support from the

clergy ($N = 480$). Two factors influenced the number of cases that were available for these analyses. First, it did not make sense to ask study participants questions about support they receive from fellow church members and members of the clergy if they either never go to church or if they go to church only once or twice a year. Consequently, these low-attenders ($N = 342$) were excluded from the analyses presented below. Second, the available sample sizes were further reduced by the use of listwise deletion procedures to deal with item non-response. Preliminary analysis of the sample consisting of 480 study participants reveals that 36.2% are older men, 47.2% are older whites, and 50.2% were married at the time the Wave 2 interviews took place. The average age of the respondents at Wave 2 was 76.4 years ($SD = 5.5$ years). Moreover, the study participants reported that they had successfully completed an average of 12.1 years of schooling ($SD = 3.3$ years). These descriptive statistics, as well as the findings that are presented below, are based on data that have been weighted.

Measures

Table 1 contains the core measures that are included in the analyses that follow. The procedures used to code these indicators are provided in the footnotes of this table.

Emotional support from fellow church members—As shown in Table 1, emotional support provided by co-religionists is assessed with three items that were devised by Krause (2002b). When these questions were administered, study participants were explicitly instructed to exclude emotional support that may have been provided by a member of the clergy. A high score on these measures indicates that older study participants receive emotional support from fellow church members more often. These measures come from the Wave 2 and Wave 3 interviews. The mean of this brief composite at Wave 2 is 8.940 ($SD = 2.482$) and the mean at Wave 3 is 9.180 ($SD = 2.276$). The internal consistency reliability estimate for this emotional support measure at Wave 2 is .809 and the corresponding estimate at Wave 3 is .796.

Emotional support from the clergy—Emotional support provided to older study participants by their pastor or priest is evaluated with two indicators. These items were also devised by Krause (2002b). A high score denotes more frequent support from a member of the clergy. These measures come from the Wave 2 and Wave 3 interviews. The mean at Wave 2 is 4.816 ($SD = 1.796$) and the mean at Wave 3 is 5.236 ($SD = 1.706$). The bivariate correlation between the two items that assesses pastoral support at Wave 2 is .584 ($p < .001$) and the bivariate correlation between the two measures of this construct at Wave 3 is .516 ($p < .001$).

Stressful life events—Information on exposure to stressful life events was only obtained in the Wave 2 interviews. The stressful events in this 54-item checklist, which was designed specifically for older people, were taken from the work of Krause (1994). Respondents were asked if they had experienced any of the events during the past year. The one-year time frame is based on recommendations from an extensive review of the literature by Turner and Wheaton (1995). In addition, study participants were asked whether the events they experienced were desirable or undesirable. Stress scores were computed by taking the unweighted sum of all undesirable events that arose in the year prior to the interview. The use of unweighted sums of undesirable stressors is also consistent with the recommendations of Turner and Wheaton (1995). A high score on this measure stands for more undesirable stressful life events. The mean number of events reported by the older participants is 2.104 ($SD = 2.276$).

Denominational affiliation—Study participants were asked to identify their religious preference. A binary variable was created from these data that contrasts Catholics (scored 1)

with Protestants (scored 0). Data on denominational preference were taken from the Wave 2 survey. Preliminary data analysis reveals that 16.5% of the study participants self-identified with the Catholic faith.

Frequency of church attendance—Research reveals that measures of religiousness are correlated fairly highly (Idler et al., 2003). Therefore, in order to be sure that the effects observed in the current study reflect the influence of church-based social support and stress per se, two religion control measures are included in the analyses presented below. The first has to do with the frequency of attendance at formal worship services. The mean of this measure, which comes from the Wave 2 survey, is 7.550 ($SD = 1.207$). A high score represents more frequent attendance at worship services.

Frequency of private prayer—The second religion control variable assesses how often older study participants pray when they are alone. A high score stands for more frequent private prayer. This measure was taken from the Wave 2 survey. The mean is 7.368 ($SD = .972$).

Demographic control variables—The relationships among the measures discussed above were evaluated after the effects of age, sex, race, education, and marital status were controlled statistically. Age is a continuous measure and education reflects the total number of years of schooling that were completed successfully by older study participants. In contrast, sex (1 = men; 0 = women), race (1 = whites, 0 = blacks), and marital status (1 = married at Wave 2; 0 = not married at Wave 2) are binary variables.

Results

The findings from this study are presented below in three sections. First, as the description of the study sample reveals, some older people who participated in earlier waves of interviews did not participate in the last wave of interviews (i.e., Wave 3). Some investigators argue that study findings may be biased if the loss of subjects over time does not occur in a random manner (McKnight et al., 2007), but there is considerable controversy over this issue (Groves, 2006). Consequently, the analyses presented in the first section are designed to take a preliminary look at this issue. Following this, section two contains the findings from the analyses that examine the relationship between denominational preferences, stressful life events, and the amount of emotional support that is provided over time by fellow church members. Finally, section three contains the results of the analyses that assess denominational preferences, stressful life events, and the amount of emotional support that is provided over time by members of the clergy.

Assessing the Effects of Sample Attrition

As noted above, some older people who participated in the Wave 1 interviews did not participate in the Wave 3 survey. Similarly, some older adults who participated in the Wave 2 interviews did not take part in the Wave 3 survey. Two sets of analyses were conducted to see whether those who dropped out of the study at either point in time differ from those who completed the Wave 3 interviews. In the first set of analyses, a nominal-level variable was created by assigning a score of one to older people who completed the Wave 3 survey, a score of 2 to older individuals who dropped out after the Wave 1 interviews but were presumed to be alive, and a score of 3 to older adults who died between Waves 1 and 3. Then, using multinomial logistic regression, this nominal-level variable was regressed on the following Wave 1 study measures: age, sex, education, race, marital status, the frequency of church attendance, the frequency of private prayer, denominational preference, the amount of emotional support provided by fellow church members, and the amount of assistance

provided by a member of the clergy. Older adults who participated in the Wave 3 survey served as the reference category in these analyses.

The data from the first set of sample attrition analyses suggest that the loss of subjects over time did not take place in a random manner from Wave 1 to Wave 3. Compared to older adults who remained in the study through Wave 3, study participants who died tended to be older (odds ratio = 1.081; $p < .001$), they were more likely to be men (odds ratio = 1.622; $p < .01$), they had less education (odds ratio = .953; $p < .05$), they attended church less often (odds ratio = .766; $p < .001$), and they received more emotional support from clergy members (odds ratio = 1.148; $p < .05$).

The results from the first set of sample attrition analyses further indicate that compared to older people who remained in the study at Wave 3, those who were missing but presumed to be alive were less likely to be white (odds ratio = .498; $p < .01$), they were less likely to be married (odds ratio = .542; $p < .01$), and they attended church less often (odds ratio = .858; $p < .05$).

The second set of sample attrition analyses was designed to assess the effects of sample attrition from Wave 2 to Wave 3. These analyses were set up in an identical fashion to the first, with two exceptions. First, all of the independent variables were taken from the Wave 2 survey. Second, in addition to using these variables, the stress measure was also included as an independent variable (recall that questions on stress were not asked until Wave 2). Once again, the findings reveal that the loss of study participants over time did not take place in a random manner. Compared to older people who participated in the Wave 3 interviews, those who had died tended to be older (odds ratio = 1.058; $p < .05$), they were more likely to be men (odds ratio = 2.463; $p < .05$), they had fewer years of schooling (odds ratio = .905; $p < .05$), they were less likely to be white (odds ratio = .422; $p < .05$), and they were more likely to be Catholics (odds ratio = 3.207; $p < .01$).

Findings from the second set of sample attrition analyses also indicate that compared to older people who remained in the study at Wave 3, those who dropped out but were presumed to be alive were less likely to be men (odds ratio = .324; $p < .05$). However, significant differences failed to emerge with respect to the other nine independent variables.

Viewed broadly, the two sets of sample attrition analyses suggest that the loss of subjects over time did not take place in a random manner. However, as noted above, there is considerable controversy over the effects of non-random sample attrition on study findings. In fact, as Groves (2006) concluded in his recent review of the literature: "... there is no simple relationship between nonresponse and nonresponse bias ... hence, there is little empirical support for the notion that low response rate surveys de facto produce estimates with high nonresponse bias" (p. 670). Because it is not possible to resolve this issue here, it is best to keep the potential influence of nonrandom subject attrition in mind as the substantive findings from this study are reviewed.

Stressful Life Events and Support from Fellow Church Members

Earlier, it was hypothesized that Catholics and Protestants will differ in the amount of emotional support they receive from fellow church members when stressful life events arise. Stated in more technical terms, this means that there should be a statistical interaction effect between denominational preference and stress on change in support from rank-and-file church members over time. A statistical interaction is present in the data when the effect of one independent variable (i.e., denominational preference) on an outcome (i.e., change in support from fellow church members over time) depends on the level of a second independent variable (i.e., the amount of stress that is present). This literally means that

there should be a separate estimate of the effect of denominational preference on change in support from coreligionists for each additional stressor that is experienced by the older people in this study. Put another way, as the level of stress goes up, the amount of support that older Catholics receive from fellow church members should become progressively smaller. Tests for this interaction effect were performed with ordinary least squares multiple regression analysis. This analysis was conducted in two hierarchical steps. First, the additive effects of denominational preference, stress, support from fellow church members at Wave 2, and the control measures were added to the model (Model 1). Following this, a multiplicative term that was formed by multiplying denominational preference by stressful life event scores was inserted in the second step (Model 2). The t-test that is associated with this multiplicative term will reveal whether a statistically significant interaction effect is present in the data. Following the recommendations of Aiken and West (1991), all of the independent variables were centered on their means prior to estimating Model 1 and Model 2. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2.

The data in the left-hand column of Table 2 (see Model 1) suggest that compared to older Protestants, older Catholics tend to receive less emotional support from their fellow church members over time ($\text{Beta} = -.162; p < .001$). However, as the theoretical rationale for this study suggests, the amount of support that is received by older study participants should depend on the amount of stress that is present. As a result, the findings that emerge from Model 1 may not accurately depict the nature of the relationship between denominational preference and support from fellow church members because the role of stress is not properly specified in these analyses.

The findings derived from estimating Model 2 bring the relationships between stress, denominational preference, and change in support from fellow church members into sharper focus. More specifically, the data indicate that there is a statistically significant interaction effect between denominational preference and stress on change in emotional support from fellow church members over time ($b = .404; p < .01$; unstandardized estimates are provided when discussing interaction effects because standardized estimates are not meaningful in this context).

When the theoretical rationale for this study was developed, contrasting views were presented about whether Catholics receive more or less support than Protestants from coreligionists when stressful events arise. Consequently, it is important to probe more deeply into the nature of the observed interaction effect to see whether the hypothesis that was developed for this study is supported by the data. As noted above, support for this hypothesis would be found if older Catholics receive progressively less support from fellow church members at successively higher levels of stress. Aiken and West (1991) provide a formula that can be used to see if this is the case. This formula provides a regression coefficient that contrasts the effects of denominational preference (i.e., Catholic versus Protestant) on change in support from fellow church members over time at select levels of exposure to stress. Although any level of stress could be used with this formula, researchers typically compute the effects of constructs like stress at -1 standard deviation below the mean, the mean, and $+1$ standard deviation above the mean. However, as in virtually all studies, the measure of stress that is used in the current study is skewed (i.e., most older people experience relatively few stressors) and, as a result, one standard deviation below the mean stress level falls outside the range of stressors that were reported in this study (i.e., -1 standard deviation is below zero stressors). Because it does not make sense to compute estimates of the effects of stress that fall outside the range of this measure, the following data points are used to illustrate the observed interaction effect: zero stressors, the mean level of stress, and one standard deviation above the mean stress level. Once these estimates are computed, Aiken and West (1991) provide an additional formula that produces standard

errors for these estimates. These standard errors can be used to perform tests of statistical significance (i.e., t-tests) for the effects of denominational preference on change in support at each level of stress.

The findings from the hand calculations (not shown in Table 2) reveal that when no stressors are present, older Catholics tend to receive less emotional support from fellow church members over time than older Protestants ($Beta = -.280$; $b = -1.716$; $p < .001$). The same conclusion is reached for study participants who are exposed to the mean level of stress ($Beta = -.139$; $b = -.856$; $p < .01$). However, the size of the relationship between denominational preference and change in support from fellow church members is reduced by about 50%. The fact that this relationship becomes weaker suggests that at least some Catholics elect not to suffer in silence and instead receive assistance from fellow church members as the amount of stress begins to rise. Finally, the additional calculations reveal that at relatively high levels of stress (i.e., +1 standard deviation above the mean), the difference between older Catholics and older Protestants disappears entirely ($Beta = .011$; $b = .068$; ns). This suggests that at high levels of exposure to stress, Catholics are just as likely as Protestants to receive emotional support from fellow church members.

Stressful Life Events and Support from the Clergy

Table 3 contains the findings from the analyses that assess whether older Catholics receive less support from the clergy than older Protestants when stressful life events arise. The relationships among these variables were evaluated with the same procedures that were used in the previous section. The only difference is that measures of emotional support from the clergy were used in place of measures of emotional support from fellow church members.

As the data in Table 3 reveal, the findings involving emotional support from pastors largely mirror those involving emotional support from fellow church members. More specifically, the results provided by estimating Model 1 initially create the impression that older Catholics tend to receive less emotional support from the clergy over time than older Protestants ($Beta = -.132$; $p < .01$). However, as the data derived from Model 2 reveal, the relationship between denominational preference and support from the clergy depends upon how much stress is present (i.e., a statistically significant interaction effect emerged from the data; $b = .265$; $p < .01$). The nature of this interaction effect can be illustrated by computing separate estimates of the effects of stress on emotional support from the clergy for older Catholics and older Protestants. Consistent with the previous set of analyses, these estimates were computed at the following levels of exposure to stress: zero stressors, the mean level of stress, and one standard deviation above the mean level of stress.

The findings from the additional calculations (not shown in Table 3) reveal that when no stressors are encountered, older Catholics tend to receive less emotional support from members of the clergy than older Protestants ($Beta = -.234$; $b = -1.073$; $p < .001$). However, the relationship between denominational preference and clerical support over time is reduced by approximately 52% when older study participants experience the mean or average level of undesirable life events ($Beta = -.112$; $b = -.515$; $p < .05$). Finally, the results of the additional computations suggest that at relatively high levels of exposure to stress (i.e., 1 standard deviation above the mean), older Catholics are just as likely as older Protestants to receive emotional support from their pastors ($Beta = .019$; $b = .088$; ns).¹

¹Preliminary analyses revealed that there were no race differences in the relationship between stress, denominational preference, and change in church-based emotional support. This was true with respect to support from fellow church members as well as support from the clergy. However, rather than reflecting substantively meaningful issues, these analyses should be viewed cautiously because only 11 older African Americans self-identified as being Catholic. As a result, the findings could reflect little more than problems arising from data sparseness (Cohen et al, 2003).

Conclusion

Spilka and his colleagues persuasively argue that one of the primary functions of religion is to satisfy deeply held needs for sociality (Spilka et al., 2003). Yet researchers know relatively little about the nature and functions of social relationships that people develop and maintain in the places where they worship. This is especially true with respect to denominational variations in church-based social ties. The primary goal of the current study was to test the hypotheses that older Catholics are less likely than older Protestants to obtain emotional support from fellow church members and members of the clergy when stressful life events arise. The findings suggest that these hypotheses do not fully capture the complex interface between denominational preference, stress, and church-based emotional support. Consistent with the study hypotheses, the data indicate that compared to older Protestants, older Catholics appear to receive less emotional support from fellow church members and less emotional support from members of the clergy at relatively low levels of exposure to stress. But denominational differences in support from rank-and-file church members and members of the clergy tend to disappear at relatively high levels of stress. Taken together, these results may point to an initial reticence on the part of older Catholics to obtain assistance at relatively low levels of exposure to stress. But once exposure to stress reaches a certain point, it appears that this reluctance may be overcome and older Catholics get as much emotional support from church members and the clergy as older Protestants. If these conclusions are accurate, then perhaps the initial hesitancy on the part of older Catholics to get support during difficult times may be a vestige of lessons learned in their formative years when official church doctrine extolled the virtues of suffering in silence. Greater confidence may be placed in the findings from the present study because the data were obtained from a longitudinal, nationwide survey of older adults.

Although the findings from the current study may have contributed to the literature, a considerable amount of work needs to be done. More attention should be given to at least four issues. First, researchers need to arrive at a better understanding of why denominational differences in church-based social support tend to disappear at greater levels of exposure to stress. Perhaps it's something as simple as reaching a threshold where stress-induced discomfort becomes intolerable for older Catholics, regardless of their beliefs. Second, those who work in the stress field have argued for decades that there are different kinds of stressful experiences and that some, such as persistent or chronic strains, have a greater effect on health and well-being than other types of stressors (e.g., Pearlin et al., 1981). Perhaps the pain and distress that are created by more potent types of stressors more quickly erode differences in the amount of support that older Catholics and older Protestants receive at church. Third, if older Catholics do, in fact, receive less support from fellow church members and the clergy at low levels of stress, then they must be relying on some other resource to cope with the life events that confront them. It is important to identify this resource. Perhaps it is a more internal or psychological resource, such as feelings of God-mediated control or religious coping responses. Fourth, although people in church may indeed be an important source of assistance when stressful events arise, a vast body of literature suggests that secular social network members may perform a similar stress-buffering function (Krause, 2006b). Consequently, research is needed to compare and contrast how people in different denominations utilize secular and church-based support when they are exposed to stressful life events.

In the process of exploring these as well as other issues, researchers should pay attention to the limitations in the current study. Three shortcomings are discussed briefly below. First, in the process of discussing pastoral support, a distinction was made between receiving help in formal counseling sessions and getting assistance informally from a member of the clergy. But measures of formal support from the clergy were not available in the data. Examining

this distinction may help sharpen insight into the role played by suffering in silence when stressful events arise. More specifically, older Catholics might be more likely to receive support through formal counseling through informal social encounters with the clergy. Second, there may be important differences in the amount of support that is received by older people within the Catholic Church. Evidence of this may be found in a study by Ebaugh, Richman, and Chavez (1984). These investigators report that Bahais and Catholic Charismatics are more obtain support than Christian Scientists. Unfortunately, it was not possible to distinguish between mainstream Catholics and Catholic Charismatics with the data in the current study. Third, even though the data in this study were gathered at more than one point in time, it is still not possible to conclude that stressful events cause subsequent increases in social support. The direction of causality between these constructs can only be determined in studies that employ a true experimental design.

Friedrich Schleiermacher was a leading Protestant theologian of his day. Writing in 1799, he made a series of unequivocal statements about the social nature of all religions: "If there is a religion at all, it must be social, for that is the nature of man, and it is quite peculiarly the nature of religion ... there is also a spiritual nature which he has in common with the rest of his species which demands that he express and communicate all that is in him. The more violently he is moved and the more deeply he is impressed, the stronger the social impulse works" (Schleiermacher 1799/1994, p. 48). However, if the findings from the current study are valid, then it appears as though Schleiermacher may have overstepped his bounds, and that instead of facilitating the unbridled and open exchange of support, denominations may vary in the extent to which social impulses are expressed. Consequently, the challenge facing contemporary investigators is to rein in such broad-based claims by developing more finely nuanced perspectives on the role that stress and social relationships play in places of worship.

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Table 1**Core Study Measures**

1	Emotional Support from Fellow Church Members ^a
	A. Other than your minister, pastor or priest, how often has someone in your congregation let you know they love and care for you?
	B. How often does someone in your congregation talk with you about your private problems and concerns?
	C. How often does someone in your congregation express interest and concern in your well-being?
2	Emotional Support from the Clergy ^a
	A. How often does your minister, pastor, or priest speak with you about your private problems and concerns?
	B. When talking with your minister, pastor, or priest on an individual basis, how often does he or she express interest and concern in your well-being?
3	Stressful Life Events ^b
4	Denominational Affiliation ^c
5	Frequency of Church Attendance ^d
	A. How often do you attend religious services?
6	Frequency of Private Prayer ^e
	A. How often do you pray by yourself?

^aThese questions are scored in the following manner (coding in parentheses): never (1), once in a while (2), fairly often (3), very often (4).

^bA stress measure was created by summing the number of undesirable events respondents experienced in the year prior to the survey.

^cA binary measure of religious preference was created by contrasting older Catholics (1) with older Protestants (0).

^dThis variable was scored in the following manner: never (1), less than once a year (2), about once or twice a year (3), several times a year (4), about once a month (5), 2–3 times a month (6), nearly every week (7), every week (8), several times a week (9).

^eThis variable was scored in the following manner: never (1), less than once a month (2), once a month (3), a few times a month (4), once a week (5), a few times a week (6), once a day (7), several times a day (8).

Table 2Stressful Life Events and Emotional Support from Fellow Church Members ($N = 471$)

	Model 1	Model 2
<u>Independent Variables</u>		
Age	.007 ^a (.003) ^b	.002 (.001)
Sex	-.034 (-.159)	-.033 (-.145)
Education	-.095* (-.066)	-.094* (-.066)
Race	-.008 (-.036)	-.010 (-.047)
Marital Status	.028 (.129)	.029 (.131)
Church Attendance	.145*** (.275)	.143*** (.272)
Prayer	.014 (.035)	.015 (.038)
Catholic	-.162** (-.994)	-.139** (-.856)
Stressful Events	-.031 (-.030)	-.001 (-.001)
(Catholic X Stressful Events)	---	--- (.404)**
Emotional Support Wave 2	.383*** (.353)	.376*** (.347)
Multiple R ²	.266	.280

^a standardized regression coefficient^b metric (unstandardized) coefficient* $p < .05$;** $p < .01$;*** $p < .001$.

Table 3Stressful Life Events and Emotional Support from Members of the Clergy ($N = 480$)

	Model 1	Model 2
<u>Independent Variables</u>		
Age	.016 ^a (.005) ^b	.012 (.004)
Sex	.033 (.115)	.035 (.124)
Education	-.027 (-.014)	-.026 (-.013)
Race	.005 (.018)	.003 (.011)
Marital Status	-.005 (-.015)	-.005 (-.018)
Church Attendance	.110** (.156)	.107** (.152)
Prayer	.001 (.001)	-.004 (-.007)
Catholic	-.132** (-.605)	-.112** (-.515)
Stressful Events	.012 (.009)	.036 (.027)
(Catholic X Stressful Events)	---	--- (.265)**
Emotional Support Wave 2	.357*** (.339)	.362*** (.344)
Multiple R ²	.179	.190

^a standardized regression coefficient^b metric (unstandardized) coefficient* $p < .05$;** $p < .01$;*** $p < .001$.