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Sanctification of Parenting, Moral Socialization, and Young Children's Conscience Development

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Abstract

Religion is important to most U.S. families, but is often overlooked in research on children's development. This study examined parental religious beliefs about the sanctification of parenting, parental disciplinary strategies, and the development of young children's conscience in a sample of 58 two-parent families with a preschool child. Fathers were more punitive and used less induction when disciplining their children than did mothers. Maternal and paternal reports of the sanctification of parenting were positively related to positive socialization/praise and the use of induction. When mothers and fathers in the family were both using induction, children had higher scores on moral conduct. Parents' use of positive socialization combined with a belief in the sanctification of parenting predicted children's conscience development.

Keywords

Parenting; Fathers; Moral Development; Conscience; Sanctification

Although religion plays a large role in American's lives and provides a socio-cultural context in which they marry and raise children, little research has focused on specific ways religion may shape parenting (Parke, 2001). Likewise, less than two-thirds of one percent of research on children or child development addresses religion (Boyatzis, 2003). Some work has linked general conservative Christian beliefs to parents' beliefs regarding children's obedience to authority as well as their use of corporal punishment (Day, Peterson, & McCracken, 1998; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Segal, 1996; Gershoff, Miller, & Holden, 1999; Giles-Sims, Straus, & Sugarman, 1995). However, to our knowledge, no attention has been devoted to whether religion relates to parents' socialization of young children's sociomoral development (e.g., helping, comforting another in distress, and reparation after wrongdoing), even though most religions emphasize moral responsibility, including acts of compassion and kindness. Several studies also show strong associations between general

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levels of parental religiosity, and parenting and child adjustment (Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000; Brody, Stoneman, Flor, 1996; Brody, Stoneman, Flor & McCrary, 1994; Gunnoe, Hetherington, and Reiss, 1999; Wilcox, 1998).

In the current study, we argue that it is within the family that young children develop a moral sense and show evidence of early prosocial behaviors directed toward others (Dunn, 2006; Volling, Kolak, & Kennedy, 2008; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1979). Further, parents play a formative role in instilling a sense of right and wrong in their children. They hold increasing expectations for good behavior as children mature and expect reparation for behavior that may intentionally harm another. Although most religions emphasize compassion, kindness, and one's moral responsibility to help others in need, no available studies examine if religion may facilitate young children's moral development. Bartkowski, Xu, & Levine (2008) using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K) did find that the frequency that parents and elementary-school children talked about religion was positively associated with parents' ratings of children's self-control and social competence. The main goal of this study was to examine parents' religious beliefs about parenting (i.e., sanctification of parenting) and their socialization practices for early moral development.

Early Conscience Development and Moral Socialization

Young children's empathy and concern in response to another's distress, their feelings of guilt after wrong-doing and their attempts to make amends are indicators of children's emerging moral awareness and internalized conscience. The young child's ability to internalize a set of parental standards that guide his/her behavior in the absence of the caregiver is considered a significant developmental milestone in early childhood (Emde, Biringen, Clyman, & Oppenheim, 1991; Kagan & Lamb, 1987; Kochanska, 1993; Kopp, 1982). Two components of the child's growing conscience have been underscored (Kochanska, 1993). The first consists of moral emotions, such as the anxiety, guilt and remorse the child feels after transgressing, as well as the empathic concern a child experiences for a distressed other. The second component is behaviorally-based and reflects the young child's ability to resist temptation and to exercise self-restraint, along with the ability to execute socially desirable behaviors when asked. This behavioral component reflects the child's emerging self-regulation and moral conduct.

Socialization experiences in the family and particularly parental disciplinary strategies are significantly related to early conscience development (Grusec, 2006; Hoffman, 2000; Thompson, Meyer, & McGinley, 2006). Hoffman's (2000) theory of moral internalization underscores several parental disciplinary strategies that facilitate or undermine children's moral and empathic development. In each case, parental discipline is an attempt to change the child's behavior against their will, with the goal of getting the child to comply. Power assertion includes the use of physical punishment, restraint, the deprivation of privileges, and threats of physical force to control children. Love-withdrawal involves the parent directly expressing their disapproval or anger with the child for performing a harmful action and includes ignoring the child, refusing to speak or listen to the child, or threatening to leave the child. Induction includes the use of explanations and reasoning with the child to convey standards for behavioral conduct, requests that the child behave in accordance with those standards, an emphasis on the consequences of the child's misbehavior, and expectations that children make amends for wrong-doing. Hoffman underscores the important role of induction in disciplinary encounters for the development of moral internalization, because, unlike power-assertion and love-withdrawal, parents are calling attention to the victim and the consequences of the child's behavior, as well as pointing out the child's part in causing the harmful action. In addition to discipline encounters, Hoffman (2000) notes that parents can also model moral behavior and provide other positive

socialization supports, such as praising the child for being good or providing approval contingent on the child's good behavior.

Mothers' use of power assertion and punitive control is inversely related to children's moral reasoning in preschool and middle childhood, and positively tied to children's noncompliance and defiance (Crockenberg & Littman, 1990; Kochanska, 2002; Power & Chapieski, 1986). Conversely, inductive discipline and use of positive gentle guidance predicts young children's early conscience, prosocial behaviors, feelings of guilt after a mishap, and more sophisticated moral reasoning (Kochanska, Gross, Lin, & Nichols, 2002; Krevans & Gibbs, 1996). Although these findings are fairly well established for maternal discipline, few studies have examined fathers' discipline strategies and children's sociomoral development. Thus, our first aim was to examine whether both mothers' and fathers' discipline practices were related to young children's early conscience. We hypothesized that parental inductive reasoning, with a focus on other's feelings during transgressions and reparation after wrong-doing, would be tied to higher levels of moral conduct and emotions, such as guilt and empathy. Similarly, positive socialization strategies, such as praising the child for good behavior and responding contingently to the child's compliance, would be positively associated with the child's conscience development. In contrast, punitive discipline, involving power assertion, love withdrawal and displeasure in the child, would be related to poorer moral development.

Unlike most research that focuses on mother-child dyads, this study takes a family systems approach to questions about moral socialization and young children's conscience (see Cox & Paley, 2003). That is, we focus on both mothers and fathers and whether their disciplinary practices show similar or distinct relations with young children's early conscience. Further, prior work often examines the effects of mothers and fathers behavior separately, yet the couple share parenting and their effects on their children may be quite interdependent. Thus, we examine the combined influence of mothers' and fathers' discipline on children's outcomes, assuming the effect of mothers' discipline on children's conscience is likely to be moderated by the fathers' discipline. For instance, perhaps maternal induction is only related to children's conscience when fathers are also consistently using induction with their children. By examining the interaction of maternal and paternal discipline in predicting children's conscience, we have one way of examining the coparenting that may occur between mothers and fathers.

Sanctification of Parenting as a Cultural Context for Moral Socialization of Children

Although religion is a complex and multi-faceted domain, a meta-analysis of quantitative research published in journals from 1980-1999 revealed that 66% of the 35 studies on parental religiousness and parenting relied on single item measures of religiousness, such as the frequency of worship attendance or type of religious affiliation (Mahoney, Pargament, Swank, & Tarakeshwar, 2001). Such studies have linked global markers of religiousness with more parental warmth and involvement (e.g., King, 2003; Wilcox, 1998) and lower risk of child physical abuse (Brown, Cohen, Johnson & Salzinger, 1998). Other studies have tied membership in conservative Christian denominations or fundamentalist beliefs about the Bible to greater rates of spanking young children (Mahoney et al., 2001). A few studies also suggest that greater general religiousness influences parenting practices, which, in turn, shape adolescents' prosocial behavior (Mahoney et al., 2001). Further, Bartkowski et al.'s (2008) unique and large scale study has documented that greater parental religiousness is tied to a wide range of desirable child outcomes, based on both parental and teacher reports. This body of research highlights the relevance of religion for parenting and child outcomes but, due to measurement issues, offers little insight into the *processes* that may be responsible for associations between parental religiousness and parenting practices (Boyatzis, 2006; Boyatzis, Dollahite, & Marks, 2006; Mahoney et al., 2001).

To gain a deeper understanding of religion and parenting, we examine if the degree to which parents perceive being a parent as having divine significance and character predicts their disciplinary actions and effectiveness in the moral socialization of their child. More specifically, we employ the construct of the theistic sanctification of parenting, which refers to viewing parenting as a manifestation of God (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank & Murray-Swank, 2003). This includes beliefs such as “My parenting role is a reflection of God’s will” or “God is a part of my parenting.”¹ In Christian traditions, which dominate the religious landscape of families in the U.S. (Smith, 2005), as well as in other monotheistic world religions, parent-child relationships ideally embody divine love and reflect a covenant with God. Two studies indicate that lower- and middle-income mothers (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006; Murray-Swank, Mahoney & Pargament, 2006) often view God as intimately involved in parenting. However, the implications of such beliefs for moral socialization practices remain an open question.

Prior theory and research on sanctification suggests that mothers and fathers who sanctify parenting would invest more effort in and be more committed to using effective techniques to elicit moral behavior from their children (Mahoney et al., 2003; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Diverse religious traditions emphasize that parenting is a God-given endeavor that requires personal sacrifice and should be a central priority of parents. Accordingly, parents may feel a strong spiritual duty to invest effort in parenting. More specifically, because inductive approaches to discipline require more effort and consistency to bring out desired consequences compared to threats, inductive approaches may be tied to viewing parenting as a spiritual responsibility. Further, parents who believe they have a spiritual obligation to model a stance of patience and love may be more likely to express approval for appropriate behavior and be consistent in making such praise contingent on desired conduct. Likewise, in order to fulfill an authoritative stance marked by firmness matched with warmth, they would be less likely to resort to shaming, humiliating, or threatening to withdraw love in order to coerce children into moral action.

Two prior studies offer some indirect support that parents who sanctify parenting may put more effort into moral socialization. Using an economically and ethnically diverse sample of 149 parents of preschoolers, Dumas and Nissley-Tsiopinis (2006) found positive associations between mothers’ sanctification of parenting beliefs, maternal investment in children, and the children’s coping competence after controlling for demographic factors and general religiousness. Using a middle-class Caucasian sample, Murray-Swank et al. (2006) found that mothers’ beliefs in the sanctification of parenting correlated with less verbal aggression and more consistent parenting, net of control variables. More complex results emerged for spanking, with Biblical conservatism operating as a moderator. Namely, sanctification of parenting was inversely related to the use of spanking for less Biblically conservative mothers and positively related to spanking for more Biblically conservative mothers. In light of these initial findings and theory discussed above, our second aim was to examine directly links between the sanctification of parenting and inductive/reparative discipline, positive socialization/praise, and punitive disciplinary techniques to elicit moral behavior.

Another unique aim of this study was to examine the role of sanctification for both mothers and fathers as prior research has only included mothers. Although sanctification of parenting should theoretically operate in a similar manner for both genders, some scholars have argued that religious beliefs may be especially valuable for facilitating responsible fatherhood and fathers’ involvement with children (Dollahite, 1998; King, 2003; Marks & Dollahite, 2001).

¹Readers can find a more complete discussion of theory and prior studies on the construct of sanctification in Mahoney et al. (2003) and Pargament and Mahoney (2005).

Whereas multiple cultural forces pressure women to be highly invested in parenting, men generally experience fewer cultural pressures to be involved in parenting their offspring. Religious teachings, however, emphasize that both men and women play a central role in family life (Boyatzis, Dollahite & Marks, 2006). As such, “religious fathers are involved in a culture that shapes their values and behaviors by emphasizing the importance of family relationships and a commitment to others that encourages them to be actively involved in the lives of their children” (King, 2003, p. 384). Thus, although we expected that that sanctification would operate similarly for both parents’ disciplinary efforts, we felt it was especially important to show whether religion seems to provide a cultural context that encourages responsible fathering.

The final aim of the research was to examine the role of the sanctification of parenting in predicting children’s conscience development, both directly and as a moderator in combination with parental discipline. Parents who sanctify parenting may feel a stronger duty to instill a sense of respect and obedience to authority, to encourage self-discipline, to impart prosocial values (e.g., honesty, altruism), and to punish antisocial behaviors (e.g., lying, cheating, stealing) (Mahoney et al., 2003). Such religiously-based motivation may facilitate parents’ consistency in teaching children why certain behaviors are wrong and what to do to make amends as well as help parents be more vigilant in reserving praise for morally appropriate behaviors. Because of such processes, sanctification of parenting may be directly linked to children’s conscience development. In addition, sanctification of parenting and types of disciplinary strategies may synergistically interact with each other. For example, parents who engage in higher levels of positive and inductive disciplinary strategies within a context of high sanctification may be more effective in eliciting desired results because parents view the techniques as fulfilling God-given imperatives about their parental responsibility. They may, in turn, be more consistent, calm, and effective in convincing their children to accept and internalize their directives and moral values. In sum, this study addressed the role of parental religious beliefs about the sanctification of parenting in creating a family context that directs parental discipline practices that promote young children’s conscience development.

Method

Participants

Fifty-eight, two-parent families with a preschool child were recruited as part of a study examining parenting and children’s prosocial behavior. Families were recruited from birth records, newspaper advertisements, and bulletins at local churches, day cares, and preschools. Mothers and fathers in families were predominately White, ($n = 56$) with one Asian-American family and one Hispanic family. Mothers were approximately 35 years old ($SD = 4.5$ years) and all had completed some college. Fathers were approximately 37 years old ($SD = 4.6$ years) and all had at least some college education. Families were predominantly middle-class. Husbands’ modal income was between \$70,000 to \$80,000; wives’ modal income was \$10,000 or less. The children’s mean age was 58 months ($SD = 12$ months). Parents were married for an average of 8.7 years ($SD = 3.4$), and all were the biological parents of the children. The largest percentage of parents were Protestant (e.g., Lutheran, Presbyterian, Unitarian; 35.6% mothers, 32% fathers), followed by Catholics (30% mothers, 28.3% fathers), conservative Protestants (e.g., Baptist, Pentecostal; both genders at 5.7%), Jewish (both genders at 5.7%), and other (e.g., Mormon, Greek Orthodox, at 5.7% for both genders). An additional 17% of the mothers and 20.8% of the fathers reported no religious affiliation.

Procedures

Families participated in two laboratory visits, each lasting approximately 3 hours, occurring about a month apart from one another. The first visit was devoted to assessing the marital relationship, including several marital discussion tasks and a couple interview. The second visit focused on the assessment of family functioning, including observations of children's helping behavior, cooperative play, sibling jealousy, and a clean-up task (see Blandon & Volling, 2008, for more details). Both parents also received questionnaires to take home at both visits that assessed marital relationship quality, individual well-being, religious beliefs, parental discipline, and aspects of children's social and emotional outcomes. Parents either returned these questionnaires at the second visit or mailed them to the researchers upon completing them. Each family was compensated \$50 for their participation. Due to missing data, *n*'s for the analyses varied from 53 to 57 (53 fathers and 57 mothers returned questionnaires).

Sanctification of parenting—Each parent completed the 14-item Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale (Mahoney et al., 1999). Each item, rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), evaluated the degree to which spouses perceived their parenting to be manifestations of their beliefs and experiences of God (e.g., “My parenting role is a reflection of God's will” and “God is a part of my parenting”; $\alpha = .87$ for mothers and .98 for fathers). Responses were summed across items resulting in a score for the manifestation of God in parenting for mothers and for fathers.

Parental moral socialization—Parents completed the Socialization of Moral Affect Questionnaire (SOMA; Rosenberg, Tangney, Denham, Leonard, & Widmaier, 1994), which assessed parental behaviors that are theoretically relevant to the socialization of shame, guilt, and empathy. Parents read a number of scenarios about children's behaviors and were then asked how likely they would be to respond in a certain way to these scenarios. For instance, “Your child was supposed to put away all his/her toys, but they are still all over the floor.” Possible responses included “I know you know how to clean up so show me how you can pick up your toys,” “I can't take this mess, stay in your room and I don't want to see or hear from you until the room is cleaned,” or “You can't take care of anything---you're hopeless.” There are 70 items that yield thirteen subscales, of which 11 were used: *love withdrawal* (e.g., withdrawing attention and love from child for a misdeed), *disgust/teasing* (e.g., expressing feelings of disgust or ridicule after misdeed), *physical power assertion* (e.g., using physical discipline or threats), *public humiliation* (e.g., emphasizes child's misdeed in front of others), *person-focused negative scenarios* (e.g., telling child they are a bad person or have negative qualities), *conditional approval* (e.g., expressing approval contingent on good behavior), *behavior-focused positive scenarios* (e.g., expressing pleasure in child's good behavior), and *person-focused positive scenarios* (e.g., praising child for being a nice person); *teaching reparation* (e.g., telling the child to apologize for wrongful behavior), *victim-focused induction* (e.g., focusing child's attention on the consequences to another of their wrongful behavior) and *behavior-focused negative scenarios* (e.g., telling child that negative behavior is wrong). A principal components analysis was conducted for purposes of data reduction and revealed that 11 of the 13 subscales loaded on three parent dimensions: (1) *punitive discipline* (comprised of love withdrawal, disgust, teasing, physical power assertion, person-focused negative; $\alpha = .84$ for mothers, .92 for fathers); (2) *positive socialization/praise* (comprised of conditional approval, behavior-focused positive, person-focused positive; $\alpha = .89$ for mothers, .92 for fathers); and (3) *reparation/induction* (comprised of teaching reparation, victim-focused induction, behavior-focused negative; $\alpha = .82$ for mothers, .83 for fathers). Composites were created by summing subscales to create positive, punitive, and induction discipline scores for both mothers and fathers.

Children's conscience—Parents completed the *My Child* questionnaire (Kochanska, DeVet, Goldman, Murray, and Putnam, 1994) which assessed children's conscience development. The measure yields 8 internally consistent subscales designed to represent the range of conscience components including *guilt* (e.g., "It is easy to bring him or her to tears when discussing something that she or he has done wrong"; $\alpha = .86$ for mothers, .72 for fathers), *concern over good feelings with parent after wrongdoing* (e.g., "When she or he does something wrong, seems to feel relieved when forgiven"; $\alpha = .80$ for mothers, .79 for fathers), *confession* (e.g., "May confess to doing something naughty even if unlikely to be found out"; $\alpha = .77$ for mothers, .68 for fathers), *apology* (e.g., "Will spontaneously say 'sorry' to a playmate or sibling when necessary"; $\alpha = .84$ for mothers, .83 for fathers), *reparation/amends* (e.g., "Eager to make amends for doing something naughty"; $\alpha = .83$ for mothers, .68 for fathers), *concern/corrections occasioned by others' transgressions* (e.g., "Gets upset when a guest breaks household rule"; $\alpha = .79$ for mothers, .78 for fathers), *internalized conduct* (e.g., "Rarely repeats previously prohibited behavior even if adult is not present"; $\alpha = .90$ for mothers, .84 for fathers), and *empathic, prosocial response to another's distress* (e.g., "Will try to comfort or reassure another in distress"; $\alpha = .79$ for mothers, .82 for fathers).² The 8 subscales can be composited into two larger indicators of conscience: *affective discomfort* (guilt, apology, concern about good feelings, and empathy $\alpha = .91$ for mothers, .92 for fathers) and *active moral regulation/rule-compatible conduct* (confession, reparation/amends, internalized conduct, and concern about other's wrongdoing; $\alpha = .89$ for both mothers and fathers) that capture, respectively, the moral emotion and moral conduct dimensions of conscience. Mothers' and fathers' scores were averaged to create composites of the child's moral conduct and affective discomfort. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for all variables used in analyses.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

To determine the need to control demographic variables, we correlated mothers' and fathers' ages, child's age in months, mothers' and fathers' educational levels, years married, and family household income with the primary variables of interest (sanctification of parenting, parental discipline and children's conscience outcomes). No correlations were significant so demographics were not considered further. T-tests were also performed to compare those couples reporting no religious affiliation ($n = 8$) with those where at least one spouse reported a religious affiliation ($n = 50$) on all variables used in the analyses. As expected, couples reporting a religious affiliation had higher scores on the Manifestation of God scale for mothers, $M = 67.67$, and fathers, $M = 63.63$, than those couples without an affiliation, $M = 42.14$ and 30.14 for mothers and fathers, respectively. The groups did not differ on any of the parenting or child variables.

Family Socialization: Mother and Father Differences

A MANOVA with parent (mother/father) as a repeated factor and the three indicators of parental discipline as the dependent variables was conducted to examine differences across mothers and fathers. There was a significant multivariate effect for parent, Wilk's $\Lambda = .014$, $F(3, 52) = 6.57$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .38$. Follow-up paired t -tests revealed significant parent effects for punitive, $t(54) = -3.19$, $p < .01$, and inductive discipline, $t(54) = 2.54$, $p > .05$. Fathers were more likely to report the use of punitive discipline than were mothers, $M = 46.93$, $SD = 2.04$, and $M = 40.97$, $SD = 1.38$, respectively, whereas mothers reported the use of induction more often than fathers, $M = 51.69$, $SD = 1.14$ and $M = 48.25$, $SD = 1.17$, respectively.

²Two additional scales of the original measure were deemed unreliable and were not considered here (see Kochanska et al., 1994).

Relations between Sanctification of Parenting, Moral Socialization and Children's Conscience

Correlations between sanctification of parenting, moral socialization and children's conscience are reported in Table 1. Maternal and paternal beliefs about the sanctification of parenting were positively correlated. Mothers' perceptions of the sanctification of parenting were positively associated with mothers' positive socialization. Paternal perceptions of the sanctification of parenting were positively related with mothers' and fathers' positive socialization and marginally with fathers' induction. With regard to children's conscience, mothers' and fathers' beliefs in the sanctification of parenting were positively related to the child's affective discomfort. As for discipline, maternal and paternal positive socialization was positively correlated with children's affective discomfort, although this relation was only marginal for mothers. Maternal punitive discipline revealed a strong inverse relation with children's moral conduct, whereas maternal induction showed a marginal positive association with the children's affective discomfort.

Family Systems, Religion, and Children's Conscience Development

Because mothers' and fathers' function in a family system and are interdependent, we developed a series of regression models to test the combined and interactive influence of mothers' and fathers' religious beliefs and parenting practices on children's outcomes. Specifically, the hierarchical regression models required that mothers' and fathers' discipline be entered in the first step, then mothers' and fathers' sanctification of parenting beliefs were entered in Step 2. For Step 3, we added the interactions: mothers' by fathers' discipline, mothers' by fathers' sanctification beliefs, mothers' sanctification by mothers' discipline, and fathers' sanctification by fathers' discipline. Due to sample size constraints, a separate model was run for each of the three discipline measures and each conscience outcome resulting in 6 total models. All variables were centered prior to analyses. Because of the difficulty in detecting interaction effects, Whisman and McClelland (2005) have suggested adopting higher alpha levels when using smaller samples where statistical power may be an issue. Therefore, whenever an interaction was significant at $p < .10$, we conducted simple slopes analyses in order to interpret the interactions.³ The findings from those models revealing significant simple effects and interactions are summarized in Table 2.

Three models revealed significant findings. The first model examined the sanctification of parenting and parental induction predicting moral conduct. A significant 21% of the variance was explained when adding the interactions in Step 3. Also, the mother by father induction interaction was marginally significant and the fathers' sanctification by fathers' induction interaction was significant in predicting children's moral conduct.

The interactions for maternal and paternal induction predicting moral conduct are graphed in Figure 1. Following recommendations by Aiken and West (1991), we plotted the slope for the association between mothers' induction and the children's moral conduct at low (-1 SD below the mean) and high (1 SD above the mean) levels of fathers' induction. Simple slopes analyses were also conducted to determine if the slopes were significantly different from 0. Figure 1 shows that maternal induction was positively related to the child's moral conduct at high levels of father induction, $b = .22$, $t = 2.03$, $p < .05$, but not at low levels, $b = .04$, ns.

³We adopted this strategy because the simple slopes analyses may still be significant even if the overall interaction is not. Whereas the interaction indicates whether the slopes of the regression lines differ from one another, the simple slopes analysis tests whether the slope of a given regression line is significantly different from zero, indicating that the association may be significant for one group and not the other group.

Figure 2 shows the significant father induction by sanctification interaction predicting moral conduct. Simple slopes analyses indicated that fathers' induction was positively associated with children's moral conduct at high levels of fathers' sanctification of parenting, $b = .18$, $t = 1.80$, $p = .08$, (although this was only marginal), but not at low levels of father's sanctification of parenting, $b = -.10$, ns. Even though these analyses reveal only a marginal effect (i.e., slope differs from zero), the significant interaction from the original analyses indicates that the slopes of the two regression lines are significantly different from one another.

The second model examining positive socialization and sanctification of parenting accounted for a significant 19% of the variance in children's affective discomfort (see Table 2). Parents' positive socialization explained a significant amount of variance (15%) when entered in Step 1 and the interactions in Step 3 explained a marginal 14% of the additional variance once the simple effects were in the model. In the final model, fathers' positive socialization and the fathers' sanctification by positive socialization interaction were significant. Simple slopes analyses revealed that fathers' positive socialization predicted the child's affective discomfort when fathers' sanctification of parenting was high, $b = .32$, $t = 2.93$, $p < .01$, and not low, $b = -.03$, ns (see Figure 3).

The interaction between mothers' positive socialization and sanctification was significant at $p < .10$, and simple slopes analyses indicated that mothers' positive socialization was significantly associated with the children's affective discomfort at high levels of sanctification, $b = .30$, $t = 2.62$, $p < .01$, but not at low levels, $b = -.09$ (see Figure 4).

In the model examining punitive discipline, 22% of the variance in children's moral conduct was explained when adding maternal and paternal punitive discipline in the first step, yet only mother's punitive discipline had a significant inverse association with the child's moral conduct once all other variables were included in the model (see Table 2).⁴

Discussion

This study examined the relations among moral socialization, parents' beliefs in the sanctification of parenting, and conscience development in early childhood. Our findings about parental disciplinary practices are consistent with Hoffman's (2000) emphasis on the use of inductive discipline as a means of promoting children's empathy and conscience development. As expected, young children's affective discomfort was related to both parents' use of induction, where parents focus the child's attention on the consequences to others of the child's misbehavior, tell the child that this negative behavior is wrong, and request that the child make amends by apologizing or correcting the situation that resulted from the misbehavior. Children's affective discomfort about wrongdoing was also related to both parents' use of positive socialization strategies that involved praising the child's good qualities and making their approval conditional on the child's good behavior. These findings fit with prior theory and research indicating that parents' use of induction, gentle discipline, and a focus on reparation promote the child's emerging moral awareness (Grusec, 2006; Hoffman, 2000; Kochanska, 2002; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992).

⁴Given that Murray-Swank et al., (2006) found that Biblical conservatism moderated links between mothers' reports of the sanctification of parenting and the frequency of spanking as well as positive parent-child interactions, readers may be interested to know that we did not find interactions between theistic sanctification of parenting and Biblical conservatism in predicting any of the disciplinary strategies in this study. Methodological issues may account for our null findings, including the small sample, our measure of punitive discipline practices which is more than just spanking, and a more focused measure of contingent praise and induction (as compared to Murray-Swank's measure of many types of pleasant parent-child activities outside the context of discipline).

As married spouses, mothers and fathers in the current research are part of a family system in which both parents socialize children's moral affect and early conscience development. As such, their joint contribution to children's outcomes was examined because the couple may use similar or different disciplinary strategies, which could predict children's outcomes differently. In models that tested the interaction terms between parents' discipline, we found an interaction between mothers' and fathers' induction predicting children's moral conduct. Maternal induction was positively associated with children's moral conduct, but only when fathers were high on induction as well. This suggests that children are more likely to internalize standards of conduct when both parents are using induction and sending the same messages. Maternal induction was not linked to moral conduct when fathers were low in inductive discipline, which might reflect a family dynamic where parents disagree about child-rearing, are inconsistent in their child-rearing, or are unable to co-parent effectively. Such problems may reflect marital strife and as such, children in these households may be exposed to inconsistent discipline as well as marital conflict, both of which have been related to problematic child outcomes (Jouriles, Murphy, Farris, Smith, Richters, & Waters, 1991; O'Leary & Vidair, 2005; Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006).

The significant interaction between mothers' and fathers' induction is particularly noteworthy in light of the absence of significant correlations between mothers' or fathers' induction and the child's moral conduct. That is, only the interaction term in the regression analyses revealed the importance of mothers' and fathers' induction. Had we analyzed mothers and fathers separately, as most research does, we would have concluded erroneously that neither parents' use of induction was relevant to young children's moral conduct. Although only 2 of the 6 models tested revealed significant interactions, this is still quite noteworthy considering the difficulty in detecting interactions in nonexperimental research and particularly with small samples such as ours where statistical power is an issue (McClelland & Judd, 1993). Although caution is needed in interpreting these findings, we recommend that future research take a family perspective and consider the interdependency of mothers' and fathers' parenting when predicting sociomoral outcomes for young children.

Although others have reported that punitive discipline that emphasizes power assertion undermines the development of young children's conscience, we found no associations between mothers' and fathers' punitive discipline and children's affective discomfort. Further, in only one instance did the mothers' use of punitive discipline relate inversely to the children's moral conduct. Specifically, the more mothers reported using punitive strategies that involved power assertion, love withdrawal, public humiliation, and disgust/teasing, the less likely children were to engage in rule-compatible conduct. Because of the correlational nature of the current research, we cannot ascertain cause and effect relations, and hence the role of child and parent effects. Perhaps mothers use more punitive discipline in response to children's misbehavior, or maternal power assertion undermines the child's ability to internalize a sense of moral awareness independent of external control. Developmental researches don't always agree on the primacy of child or parent effects, with some suggesting that most discipline encounters are influenced by the children's misbehavior (e.g., Kuczynski, Marshall, & Schell, 1997) and others underscoring that parents ultimately have more power in the parent-child relationship than does the child, particularly in early childhood (Hoffman, 2000). In any event, parents' use of discipline seems important for the early emergence of a young child's conscience, although future longitudinal research is needed to address fully the causal connection between them.

Sanctification of Parenting and Moral Socialization

In this study, we examined how religiously-based beliefs about parenting itself may play a role in parents' socialization practices. The current work was unique in several respects. First, whereas most research on religion and parenting has focused on one-item global

indices of parents' personal religiosity (e.g., church attendance, how important is religion to you?), we specifically assessed parental beliefs about the sanctification of parenting (see Mahoney et al., 2001, 2003). Second, we moved beyond a narrow focus on spanking (one form of power assertion) by more conservative religious parents to a broader analysis of moral socialization. Parental beliefs about the manifestation of God in their parenting had clear links to children's affective discomfort. Parents' belief in parenting being connected to God was also linked to mothers' and fathers' use of positive socialization and induction in discipline encounters. Hopefully, this evidence that religious views of parenting guide parental discipline and are tied to young children's moral development will foster more research on specific religious processes within the family that also includes measures of parenting beyond spanking.

Another noteworthy finding was that parental praise and a focus on induction was positively linked to children's conscience and parental beliefs in the sanctification of parenting. Although some conservative religious groups may emphasize child obedience to parental authority (i.e., compliance) as well as endorse controlled spanking to facilitate moral education and proper conduct (Bromley & Cress, 1998), this study, like other research on child development (see Kochanska, 2000, for example) did not find that power assertive and punitive discipline promotes morality and the development of conscience in young children. Young children may comply in the face of excessive power assertion because they fear their parents' anger (Hoffman, 2000), but the true testimonial to the development of early conscience is whether the child internalizes a code of conduct and refrains from transgressions in the absence of parental surveillance. In this study, higher use of punitive discipline by mothers was tied to a lower likelihood that the child internalized and complied with societal standards of right and wrong. In contrast, positive socialization and induction were consistently related to the emergence of early conscience.

Many religions view parents as their children's spiritual guide for the development of moral behavior. For example, a recent review suggests that mothers and fathers who deeply internalize religious edicts about parenting are especially motivated to invest in their children's spiritual development, and by extension, presumably their moral development (Boyatzis et al., 2006). Consistent with this view, mothers and fathers in this study who held strong beliefs that their parenting was a manifestation of divine love were more likely to use the positive and inductive strategies that promoted children's conscience. Further, for both mothers and fathers, the regression analyses found significant interactions between parents' beliefs about the sacredness of parenting and positive socialization. In both cases, mothers' and fathers' positive socialization was related to children's affective discomfort when parents were also high in their beliefs in the sanctification of their parenting role, but this relation did not hold when parents did not hold such beliefs. When parents believe their parental role is sanctioned by God, they may use religious justification as a means of accentuating what is right and wrong for their children or they may jointly communicate messages to their children about moral responsibility due to religious convictions that reinforce their children's regret for wrong-doing. One diary study, for instance, indicates that children and their parents are equally likely to initiate conversations about religious concepts (Boyatzis & Janicki, 2003). Perhaps some children who feel affective distress about wrong-doing elicit religious explanations from parents about their disciplinary tactics or attempt to negotiate with parents about the situation. Such discussions may be particularly effective when both parents possess a coherent religious framework to justify their disciplinary decisions and expectations for children's moral conduct.

In addition, fathers' beliefs in the sanctification of parenting interacted with their use of induction to predict children's moral conduct. That is, father's induction was positively related to the child's moral conduct, but only when fathers held a greater belief in the

sanctification of the fathering role. Perhaps fathers with stronger beliefs in the sacredness of parenting view their role as disciplinarian differently than those men who do not hold such beliefs, and may use religious doctrine to enforce the messages they want to convey to children about their misbehavior. Within conservative Christian communities, a “covenantal logic” is promoted, wherein fathers are expected to exert authority that emanates from God and to insist that children unselfishly place others ahead of themselves. Children must also show respect for elders and both parties fulfill divine intentions for a social order marked by strong hierarchical, yet communal, relationships (Bromley & Cress, 1998). Perhaps children respond differently to messages delivered by a caring father who asserts his expectations for proper conduct, especially if a father and/or child understand the discipline as being consistent with religious teachings. Children may, as a result, comply and conduct themselves in a manner that reflects their father’s moral expectations. Because this study is one of only a few studies to examine religious fathers’ beliefs about parenting, future research that investigates the formative role of fathers in their children’s spiritual and moral development in the early years and beyond is certainly needed.

Several limitations to the current study need to be noted. First, the sample size was relatively small and representative of predominantly white, middle-class families from Judeo-Christian backgrounds in the U.S. Despite the small sample, though, to our knowledge this is the only study that has examined parents’ religious beliefs about the sanctification of parenting, moral socialization and children’s conscience development in the period of early childhood. Certainly room exists for future research to address similar questions using larger and more diverse samples of families that vary with respect to race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, the developmental age of the children, and non-Western religious affiliations. Beliefs in the sacredness of family relationships, as well as religious coping strategies, may differ in these families. In any event, researchers need to attend more seriously to the role of religion in the family when investigating childhood socialization and parenting (Parke, 2001).

The current study found that beliefs in the sanctification of parenting were positively related to parental induction and children’s conscience. We must be cautious, however, in assuming that religion always exerts a positive impact on parenting and family life. As Pargament and his colleagues (Mahoney et al., 1999; Pargament, Magyar-Russell, & Murray-Swank, 2005) note, individuals use religion in different ways to make meaning out of their life circumstances. When parents begin to blame God for their failures in childrearing, demonize their children’s misdeeds as signs of the devil, and justify their use of harsh, abusive discipline as a reflection of God’s will, we would not expect children to flourish in such a family environment.

Young children not only witness and practice prosocial interaction with other family members (e.g., sharing, helping), but parents also lay down the ground rules for what is morally right (e.g., sharing with a sibling) and wrong (e.g., hitting a sibling) and do not hesitate to discipline their children when they transgress or violate these rules. In order for young children to develop moral character and engage in acts of kindness, the current research suggests that parents must hold their children in high regard and praise them for good behavior. But, they must also be willing to teach their children that it is wrong to hurt others and to firmly adhere to a set of standards where children make amends and feel remorse for their wrongful behavior. To explore fully the sociocultural influences on children’s development, future research on the role of religion in the socialization of children’s moral emotions and the development of rule-compatible conduct is needed.

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Figure 1.
Association of mothers' induction and children's moral conduct at high and low levels of fathers' induction.

Figure 2. Association of fathers' induction and children's moral conduct at high and low levels of fathers' sanctification of parenting.

Figure 3. Association of fathers' positive socialization and children's affective discomfort at high and low levels of sanctification of parenting

Figure 4. Association of mothers' positive socialization and children's affective discomfort at high and low levels of sanctification of parenting.

Table 1

Intercorrelations between Parental Sanctification, Moral Socialization, and Children's Conscience Development along with Means and Standard Deviations

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Sanctification of Parenting (M)	1.0	.69**	.31*	.22	-.09	-.02	-.05	.09	.07	.29*
2. Sanctification of Parenting (F)		1.0	.39**	.37**	.02	-.01	.12	.26 [†]	.15	.32*
3. Positive Socialization (M)			1.0	.27*	.16	.11	.56**	.32*	-.01	.24 [†]
4. Positive Socialization (F)				1.0	-.09	.13	.39**	.56**	.17	.33*
5. Punitive Discipline (M)					1.0	.41**	.23 [†]	.14	-.48**	-.14
6. Punitive Discipline (F)						1.0	.11	.23 [†]	-.22	.06
7. Reparation/Induction (M)							1.0	.39**	-.01	.23 [†]
8. Reparation/Induction (F)								1.0	.01	.22
9. Moral Conduct (P)									1.0	.40**
10. Affective Discomfort (P)										1.0
M (SD)	64.48 (26.09)	59.30 (27.19)	63.70 (11.50)	64.20 (12.25)	40.75 (9.99)	46.85 (14.79)	51.16 (8.77)	48.27 (8.43)	44.45 (.50)	4.52 (.50)

Note. M = Mother; F = Father; P = Parent Composite (averaged score);

[†] $p < .10$,

* $p < .05$,

** $p < .01$

Results from multiple regression analyses examining sanctification of parenting, parental discipline, and children's conscience

Table 2

	Model 1: Moral Conduct (n = 51)		Model 2: Affective Discomfort (n = 51)		Model 3: Moral Conduct (n = 51)		
	β	t	β	t	β	t	
Step 1: M Induction	.28	1.66 [†]	Step 1: M Positive	.21	1.43	Step 1: M Punitive	-.47 ^{**}
F Induction	.08	.54	F Positive	.31	2.11 [*]	F Punitive	-.09 ⁻²⁹
$\Delta R^2 = .00$, ns			$\Delta R^2 = .15$, $\Delta F(2, 50) = 4.32$, $p < .05$		$\Delta R^2 = .22$, $\Delta F(2, 50) = 7.08$, $p < .01$		
Step 2: M Sanctification	-.21	1.01	Step 2: M Sanctification	.12	.59	Step 2: M Sanctification	.19 ^{.96}
F Sanctification	-.09	-.41	F Sanctification	-.04	-.20	F Sanctification	-.03 ⁻¹⁵
$\Delta R^2 = .02$, ns			$\Delta R^2 = .03$, ns		$\Delta R^2 = .02$, ns		
Step 3: M Ind x F Ind	.29	1.73 [†]	Step 3: M Pos x F Pos	-.21	-1.10	Step 3: M Pun x F Pun	.05 ^{.35}
M San x F San	-.20	-1.18	M San x F San	-.27	-1.44	M San x F San	-.02 ^{-.09}
M Ind x M San	-.04	-.27	M Pos x M San	.31	1.90 [†]	M Pun x M San	.03 ^{.21}
F Ind x F San	.34	2.27 [*]	F Pos x F San	.40	2.23 [*]	F Pun x F San	-.13 ^{-.80}
$\Delta R^2 = .21$, $\Delta F(4, 44) = 3.00$, $p < .05$.			$\Delta R^2 = .14$, $\Delta F(4, 44) = 2.30$, $p = .07$		$\Delta R^2 = .01$, ns		
Total Adj. $R^2 = .10$, ns			Total Adj. $R^2 = .19$, $F(8, 44) = 2.56^*$		Total Adj. $R^2 = .12$, $F(8, 44) = 1.92^{\dagger}$		

Note: M = Mother, F = Father, Ind = Induction, Pos = Positive, Pun = Punitive, San = Sanctification. Beta weights reflect standardized coefficients from final regression models when all simple effects and interactions have been included.

[†] $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.