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Maternal Religiosity, Family Resources and Stressors, and Parent–Child Attachment Security in Northern Ireland

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Abstract

This study explores the associations between mothers' religiosity, and families' and children's functioning in a stratified random sample of 695 Catholic and Protestant mother-child dyads in socially deprived areas in Belfast, Northern Ireland, a region which has experienced centuries of sectarian conflict between Protestant Unionists and Catholics Nationalists. Findings based on mother and child surveys indicated that even in this context of historical political violence associated with religious affiliation, mothers' religiosity played a consistently positive role, including associations with multiple indicators of better family functioning (i.e., more cohesion and behavioral control and less conflict, psychological distress, and adjustment problems) and greater parent-child attachment security. Mothers' religiosity also moderated the association between parent-child attachment security and family resources and family stressors, enhancing positive effects of cohesion and mother behavioral control on mother-child attachment security, and providing protection against risks associated with mothers' psychological distress. Findings are discussed in terms of implications for understanding the role of religiosity in serving as a protective or risk factor for children and families.

Keywords

parent-child attachment security; religiosity; family stressors; family resources

Religiosity is theorized to be a mostly positive factor for individuals and families, promoting mental health and relationship quality in families. Accumulating research finds associations between religiosity and parent-child relationships characterized by high degrees of attachment security, behavioral control, and child disclosure (Bartkowki, Xu, & Levin,

2008). Furthermore, religiosity is associated with more family cohesion and less risk for family conflict and mental health problems (Mahoney, 2010). Although these relations have been found in American populations, virtually no research on the role of religion in families has been conducted in regions of the world fraught with histories of religious hostility, such as Northern Ireland. Some may question whether religiosity, conceptualized in terms of importance to the individual, church attendance, and Christian attitudes, will show the same positive effects for children and families in this context, or if, due to hundreds of years of tension and violence between religious groups in the region, religiosity will instead fuel hatred and conflict, undermining mental health, security, and interpersonal relationships.

Furthermore, although bivariate associations typically support a positive direct association, religiosity as a moderator of the connection between family resources or risks, and the quality of family relationships, namely parent-child, is rarely considered. For example, while religiosity might be expected to reduce the risk of experiencing stressors such as conflict and mental health problems, little is known about the role of religiosity when families do experience these challenges (Mahoney, 2010). As Pargament (2002) noted, whether religiosity is harmful or helpful may vary widely depending on multiple factors. Identifying the contexts in which religiosity enhances or serves to protect parent-child relationships from risk is an important next step in the study of the role of religiosity for children and families.

Relations Between Religiosity and Family and Individual Functioning

Considering the pervasive role and importance of religion in society and individuals' lives, incorporating religiosity (i.e., importance to the individual, attendance, and attitudes) into models of family and child functioning may add significantly to our comprehensive understanding of families (Parke, 2001), as well as the nuances and complexities of religion. A growing body of evidence suggests that stronger personal faith and greater religious involvement through attendance at services are linked with greater family cohesiveness and less family conflict (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar & Swank, 2001), and more parental warmth, (Brody et al. 1996; Simons, Simons, & Conger, 2004). More authoritative parenting is predicted by beliefs and practices (Snider, Clements, & Vazsonyi, 2004) and the manifestation of religious beliefs in daily life (Gunnore, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1999). Among low-income and minority mothers, private worship has been shown to relate to greater parental involvement, and intrinsic religiousness to greater parental responsiveness (Cain, 2007). Religious beliefs and practices (Snider, Clements, & Vazsonyi) and stronger family religious life (Pearce & Axinn, 1998) are related to higher quality mother-adolescent relationships. Furthermore, adolescents' higher degree of personal religious salience (i.e., their evaluation of the importance of religion for them) is related to greater teen satisfaction with the mother-adolescent relationship (Regnerus & Burdette, 2006). Stronger religious belief and greater involvement have been related to fewer depressive symptoms in adults (McCullough and Larson, 1999), and less internalizing and externalizing adjustment problems in young adolescents (Brody, et al., 1996), and in a sample of adolescent mothers and their children (Carothers, Borkowski, Lefever, & Whitman, 2005). Parents' attendance in religious services is related to young children's greater self control, more positive social interactions, and better interpersonal skills, as well

as less impulsivity, and less internalizing and externalizing problems (Bartkowski et al, 2008). Notably, work in this area is not extensive, and effect sizes are often small, with some studies reporting null or even sometimes negative effects (Atkins & Kessel, 2008).

Moderating Role of Religiosity in Relation between Family Environment and Parent Child Attachment Security

Parent-child attachment security has been a cornerstone of developmental theory and research for decades. Attachment security is a regulatory process by which children preserve their sense of protection and safety through their emotional, behavioral, and cognitive responses to threat (Davies, Harold, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2002). Considerable research documents positive associations of parent-child attachment security with greater family cohesion, parental control, and child disclosure, as well as less family conflict, lower levels of mothers' depression, and fewer child adjustment problems. Compromised attachment security is one of the mechanisms posited to play an important role in understanding the negative impact of sectarian tension for children in Northern Ireland (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Schermerhorn, Merrilees, & Cairns, 2009). Through increases in marital and family conflict, sectarian and nonsectarian community violence undermine children's sense of security, including parent-child attachment security. This insecurity, in turn, contributes to the prediction of children's internalizing and externalizing problems (Cummings et al., 2010a; Cummings et al., 2010b). Given the relevance of emotional security for understanding children's functioning, particularly in the contexts of sectarian community and political violence in Northern Ireland, it is important to ascertain the factors that serve to enhance or undermine security. Based on its centrality in Northern Irish culture, religiosity and its relation to attachment security merit study.

Family cohesion, defined as the degree of commitment and support family members provide one another, may promote secure attachment relationships to a greater degree in highly religious families than those that are less religious. Celebrations of life (birthdays), rituals of initiation and unions (baptisms and weddings), and every day experiences of time spent together in work and play may be infused with spiritual significance. In a context in which family bond is considered to have sacred qualities (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003), family cohesiveness may have particular significance for children's feelings of attachment security toward highly religious parents. Parents' religiosity may enhance the effectiveness of parents' control (Simons, et al., 2004), promoting security in the attachment relationship. Some religious individuals consider their role as parents to be a sacred calling, understanding their God to be actively present in this aspect of their life and attributing spiritual significance to their everyday parenting responsibilities (Mahoney et al 2003). Furthermore, youth may be more likely to attribute religious parents' control to love and commitment, with positive implications for attachment security (Simons et al., 2004).

It is intuitively appealing to think that religiosity may serve a protective function in the face of stress, including family conflict, mothers' psychological distress, and children's adjustment problems, each of which have been identified as significant risk factors for children's attachment security (Cummings & Davies, 2010). Scant work to date has considered whether mothers' religiosity protects their relationships with their children in the

context of family risk, but several conceptual explanations could be posited. Individuals who are more highly religious are more accepting and forgiving (Mahoney et al., 2003; Dudley & Kosinski, 1990). In addition, praying for another facilitates concern, gratitude, and forgiveness, all of which are elements that could foster healthy attachment security even in the face of stressors such as a family conflict, or a family member experiencing psychological distress or problem behavior (Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stilman, & Braithwaite, 2008). Finally, the expectation and support provided by a community of believers may help religious mothers uphold their obligations as parents (Mahoney et al, 2003). This may in turn promote mothers' investment and protect parent-child relationships even, or especially, in the context of family stress.

Whereas religiosity may reduce the overall occurrence of family stressors, some suggest it may intensify the cost in certain circumstances for family relationships when stressful situations arise (Strawbridge, Shema, Cohen, Roberts, & Kaplan, 1998). "Because religious people more often seek out and enjoy harmonious family relationships, they may be especially ill equipped to handle family stressors that call for radical transformation in the formation or maintenance of family ties" (Mahoney, 2010, p 818). Stressors or behaviors that are counter to one's religious values, such as family conflict (Francis, 1992) or children's problem behavior, may be particularly troubling for highly religious individuals (Ellison, 1994), with negative consequences for parent-child attachment security. Mothers raising children with significant behavioral and adjustment problems may become disheartened by the challenges of their parenting role, and experience spiritual struggles about parenting, leading to lower parental investment and satisfaction (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis 2006).

Ethnic Conflict in Northern Ireland

Among the questions that remain in the study of the role of religiosity in families is whether any beneficial effects are evident in highly religious populations gripped by centuries of segregation and sectarian tension between religious groups. For example, although the ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland may be viewed by outsiders to be a religious struggle between Catholics and Protestants, such categorization underestimates the complex historical, political, economic, and psychological underpinnings of the conflict. Sectarian tension in the region dates back hundreds of years and is rooted in a struggle between those who wish to see Northern Ireland remain part of the United Kingdom (UK) (Unionists/ Loyalists; 60% of the population) and those who wish to see the unification of the island of Ireland (Nationalists/ Republicans; 40% of the population). Although the conflict in Northern Ireland is not ultimately rooted in religious ideology, Catholics and Protestants have traditionally lined up on opposing political sides. Hundreds of years of discrimination and oppression primarily against Catholic Nationalists, including employment, education, housing, and government leadership, ultimately led to a civil rights struggle between 1968-1998, the period during which many of the mothers in our study were adolescents. During this period of ongoing violence, colloquially known as "the Troubles," 3,500 people were killed and 30,000 were maimed, in the context of a relatively small population of 1.6 million. Although The Belfast Agreement, signed in 1998, brought "peace," tension abounds and Northern Ireland remains highly segregated.

The conflict has caused a chasm in a country that, even today, can be seen as “a particularly religious society” (Barnes, 2005); indeed 90% of the population is regarded as Christian (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2002). More than 50% of the population in Northern Ireland is churchgoing, compared with 15% in the rest of the UK. In addition to the importance of Church affiliation and religious practices, this close affiliation with organized religion provides opportunities for social activity and support from members of the Church community (Whyte, 1990). Maltby and Lewis (1997) reported stronger affiliation, practice, and Christian attitudes in a Northern Irish sample than a similar sample from Great Britain. Moreover, religion has a more pervasive influence in various aspects of civil society in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the United Kingdom (Mitchell, 2004). In this highly religious community, characterized by deep segregation stemming from a long history of tension, division, and oppression between religious groups, it remains an open question, whether adherence to religious ideology promotes or undermines individual and family well-being.

Current Study

The current study examines the link between religiosity and family and individual functioning in a context of ethnic and religious tension and conflict, Belfast, Northern Ireland. We explore whether religiosity provides benefits commonly seen in other contexts, that is, lower levels of family stressors and better functioning in individuals and families. This study also extends previous work by moving beyond bivariate relationships to explore the possible moderating role of mothers' religiosity (i.e., attendance, importance, and attitudes) in the family system, specifically in the prediction of greater mother-child attachment security. Analyses explore the extent to which Christian mothers' religiosity enhances the benefits of family resources (i.e., family cohesion, maternal control, child disclosure), and whether religiosity in this context protects from risks (i.e., family conflict, mother psychological distress, child adjustment problems), or rather intensifies their costs for mother-child attachment security.

Method

Participants and Procedures

The sample included 695 mother-child dyads in Belfast, Northern Ireland (NI), who participated in the first wave of a broader longitudinal study testing a social ecological model of children's exposure to violence. Participating families were selected using a stratified random sample in 18 socially deprived communities. These areas were selected based on the advice of a demographer expert in the region, so that communities were comparable socioeconomically and proportionally represented Protestant and Catholic areas of the city. See (author identifying citation) for more detail about the sampling procedure and areas. Mean age of children (49% boys) = 12.17, $SD = 1.82$; mother's mean age = 37.12 years, $SD = 6.20$. All the mothers were Christian in that 60% reported having been reared in the Protestant community and 40% in the Catholic community, reflecting the population distribution in the region (Darby, 2001). Over 96% of these mothers had lived in Northern Ireland their entire life. Mothers, rather than fathers, were selected as participants for

pragmatic reasons. Specifically mothers are more likely than fathers to be home during the day and available to complete the surveys. Moreover, many families in socially deprived areas in Belfast are led by single mothers; 43% of mothers in this sample were married or living as married.

Mothers and children responded individually to surveys conducted in the home by an established market research firm employing interviewers native to the region. All questionnaires were administered as an interview lasting approximately one hour for the mothers and 20 minutes for the children. Families received £20 for their participation. The research project was approved by the committee for the protection of human subjects at each of the author corresponding universities, and consent was obtained prior to participation.

Measures

Maternal religiosity—We measured three components of mothers' religiosity proposed to be relevant in a region in which approximately 90% of the population (and 100% of our sample) is reportedly Christian.

Importance: The importance of religion for mothers was assessed with the question “How important is your religion to you?” Twenty-four percent of mothers reported “a great deal”, 19% “some”, 17% “a little”, and 33% “not at all.” Seven percent of women ($n=48$) responded “don't know/can't say” and their data were coded as missing and not included in analysis of this variable.

Church attendance: Mothers' church attendance was assessed with the following question: “Apart from special occasions such as weddings, funerals, baptisms, or so on, how often nowadays do you attend services or meetings connected with your religion?” Thirty-six% responded “once a week or more”, 14% “at least once in two weeks”, 9% “at least once a month”, 6% “at least twice a year”, 8% “at least once a year”, 7% “less often than once a year”, 5% “varies too much to say”, 13% “never or practically never”. One percent of women ($n = 8$) responded that they “don't know” and their data were coded as missing and not included in analysis of this variable.

Christian attitudes: Finally, mothers completed the 7-item short form of the Francis Attitudes Toward Christianity Scale (Francis, 1993). Participants indicate on a 5-point scale the extent to which they agree with statements such as “I know that Jesus is very close to me” and “Prayer helps me a lot”. Reliability and validity of the short form are well established, including samples in NI (Maltby & Lewis, 1997). Cronbach's alpha for internal reliability in the current sample was .83. Mothers' scores ranged from 9-35, $M = 23.43$, $SD = 4.89$.

Measures of religiosity were intercorrelated: Attendance and importance $r(643) = .77$, attendance and Christian attitude $r(687) = .67$, and importance and Christian attitude $r(647) = .66$, all $p < .001$. Variables were standardized and then averaged to create a single composite score of mothers' religiosity, with higher values indicating greater religiosity.

Children's attachment security—Children reported the quality of their attachment security in the mother-child relationship using the Parental Attachment Security Scale (PASS; Davies et al., 2002). Children report the extent to which statements about their mother are true for them, such as “when I'm upset, my mother makes me feel a lot better” and “I think my mother really understands me.” Higher scores indicate greater attachment security. This 15-item scale shows strong reliability and convergent and divergent validity (Davies et al); Cronbach's alpha for the internal reliability was .94.

Family and individual resources—Family cohesion, mothers' behavioral control, and children's disclosure were considered as positive processes within families.

Family cohesion: Family cohesion was assessed with mothers' and children's reports on the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1994). Respondents indicate whether items such as “People in my family really help and support one another” are *true* or *false* for most of their family members. Higher scores indicate greater family cohesion. Mothers and children's reports were correlated, $r(694) = .49, p < .001$, and were combined for these analyses. Cronbach's alpha for the internal reliability of the combined scale was .73.

Behavioral control: Mothers' behavioral control (i.e., rules and restrictions placed on children by mothers) was measured with a 5-item index created by Kerr and Stattin (2000), who reported adequate validity and reliability. Using a 7-point scale, participants answered questions such as “Must you ask your parents before you can make plans with friends?” Higher scores indicate greater behavioral control. Mothers' and children's reports were correlated, $r(693) = .53, p < .001$, and were combined for these analyses. Cronbach's alpha for the internal reliability of the combined scale was .82.

Children's disclosure: Children reported how often they disclosed information to their parents using a measure created by Stattin and Kerr (2000). Youth responded to questions such as “Do you tell your parents about your friends -which friends you hang out with and how they think and feel about various things without them having to ask?” using a 7-point scale. Higher scores indicate greater disclosure. Reliability and construct validity has been established (Stattin & Kerr). Mothers' and children's reports were correlated, $r(693) = .69, p < .001$, and were combined for these analyses. Cronbach's alpha for the internal reliability of the combined scale was .67.

Family and individual risk factors—Family conflict, mothers' psychological distress, and children's adjustment problems were considered as risk processes within families.

Family conflict: Both mothers and children reported family conflict using the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1994). This measure is widely used in family research and has well established psychometric properties (Moos & Moos). Respondents indicate whether items such as “We fight a lot in our family” are *true* or *false* for most of their family members. Higher scores indicate greater family conflict. Mothers and children's reports were highly correlated, $r(690) = .67, p < .001$, and scores were combined for these analyses. Cronbach's alpha for the internal reliability of the combined scale was .76.

Mothers' psychological distress: Mothers' psychological distress was assessed using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ; Goldberg & Williams, 1988). The 12-item version of this self-report instrument was developed in the United Kingdom (UK) and has been used extensively in the region. On a 4-point scale, participants answer questions such as the degree to which they had recently “been feeling unhappy and depressed”. Higher scores indicate greater psychological distress. The scale has been shown to be both reliable and valid amongst community samples in NI (Curran et al., 1990). Mothers' mean score in the current study was similar to a sample of respondents in the Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey in 2001 (Murphy & Lloyd, 2007). Cronbach's alpha for the internal reliability was .89.

Children's adjustment problems: Children's adjustment problems were assessed using mother and child report versions of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997). The adjustment total is a composite of 5-item subscales for emotional symptoms (“I worry a lot”), conduct problems (“I fight a lot. I can make other people do what I want”), hyperactivity/ inattentiveness (“I am easily distracted, I find it difficult to concentrate”), and peer problems (“Other children or young people pick on me or bully me”). Higher scores indicate more problems. Created in the UK, this scale has established psychometric properties, and has been shown to be preferable to the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991) for use with community samples (Goodman & Scott, 1999). Mothers' and children's reports were correlated $r(692) = .63, p < .001$ and were combined for these analyses. Cronbach's alpha for the internal reliability of the combined scale was .86.

Intercorrelations—Intercorrelations among the predictor variables are presented in Table 1.

Results

Data Analyses

First, we used multiple regression analyses to assess the direct association between mothers' religiosity, and family and individual adjustment variables. The sample was drawn from a highly segregated area of Belfast, NI, where religious affiliation (i.e., Protestant or Catholic) may have political or social implications, or relate to family or individual factors. In order to control for these possible influences, religious affiliation was controlled in all the regression analyses. Children's age and gender were controlled as well. In order to ascertain possible developmental variations, a second set of models were then run considering age and gender as potential moderators by adding Religiosity $\times$ Child Age and Religiosity $\times$ Child Gender interaction terms to the models along with the other predictors.

We also used multiple regression to examine the moderating role of mothers' religiosity in the relation between family variables and mother-child attachment security. Interaction terms were calculated using family predictors and religiosity scores centered around their respective means in order to reduce problems of multicollinearity. These mean-centered predictor terms (i.e., family variable, religiosity, and the product of those two terms) were simultaneously entered into regression models while controlling for mothers' religious

affiliation and children's age and gender. To facilitate interpretation of interaction effects, we followed current conventions (Cohen, Cohen, Aiken, & West, 2002) for probing significant interactions. Specifically, because the religiosity variable is a continuous scale, we tested simple slopes at one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean of religiosity for each significant interaction in order to ascertain the nature of the effect of the family predictor at higher levels and at lower levels of mothers' religiosity. Again, possible developmental variations were assessed in a second set of models by adding age and gender as potential moderators. Family Predictors $\times$ Religiosity $\times$ Child Age and Family Predictors $\times$ Religiosity $\times$ Child Gender product terms were entered along with the other predictors.

Direct Associations with Religiosity

Main effects—First we examined the extent to which mothers' religiosity related to family and individual functioning, controlling for children's age and gender (0=boy, 1=girl) and mothers' religious affiliation (0= Protestant, 1=Catholic). Seven separate analyses were completed, one for each of the seven family and individual variables. Results are presented in Table 2. Consistent with prediction, mothers' religiosity was significantly related to greater mother-child attachment security, more family cohesion, and greater child disclosure. In addition, religiosity was associated with less family conflict and lower levels of psychological distress for mothers and adjustment problems for children.

Child age and gender as moderators—Next, child age and gender were simultaneously added as potential moderators, revealing only one significant result. The Religiosity $\times$ Child Gender interaction was significant in the prediction of children's adjustment problems, $B = -0.98$, $SE B = .42$, $p = .020$. Follow-up tests suggest that religiosity was related to fewer child adjustment problems for girls, $B = -1.51$, $SE B = .33$, $p < .001$, but not for boys, $B = -0.53$, $SE B = .33$, $p = .105$, although, notably, relations were in the same direction for boys and girls.

Religiosity as a Moderator

Moving beyond direct effects associations, the next set of analyses examined the extent to which mothers' religiosity moderated the relation between family factors and children's attachment security in the mother-child relationship (see Table 3). A series of regressions examined the main effect of religion (centered), the main effect of an individual family variable (individual regression models run for each centered family variable), and the Religion $\times$ Family Variable interaction (product of two centered variables, that is, religion and family), controlling for child age, child gender, and religious affiliation.

Religion moderating the relation between family resources and attachment security—We examined the extent to which mothers' religiosity enhanced the positive influence of family resources on children's attachment security. Religiosity moderated the associations of family cohesion and mothers' behavioral control, respectively, with children's attachment security in the mother-child relationship. As reflected in Figure 1 (a, b), follow-up tests revealed that both family cohesion and behavioral control, respectively, were even more strongly related to attachment security when mothers were more highly religious, $B =$

1.99, $SE B = .30$, $p < .001$ and $B = 0.81$, $SE B = .08$, $p < .001$, than when they were less highly religious, $B = 0.98$, $SE B = .23$, $p < .001$ and $B = 0.55$, $SE B = .08$, $p < .001$. Mothers' religiosity did not moderate the relationship between children's disclosure and mother-child attachment security; rather, the main effects suggest that children's disclosure related to greater attachment security irrespective of the level of mother religiosity.

Religion moderating the relation between family risk and attachment security

—Next, we considered the extent to which mothers' religiosity intensified the costs or protected children's attachment security from negative effects of family stressors. Significant interactions emerged for each of the family stress variables: family conflict, mothers' psychological distress, and children's adjustment problems.

Follow-up tests to the significant Family Conflict $\times$ Religiosity interaction suggests this security is sensitive to family conflict when mothers are more highly religious, $B = -0.99$, $SE B = .20$, $p < .001$. Mother-child attachment security was not significantly related to family conflict at lower levels of mother religiosity, $B = -0.34$, $SE B = .22$, $p = .122$. However, as shown in Figure 1 (d), except at the extremes for family conflict, attachment security tended to remain higher with more religious than less religious families.

As shown in Figure 1 (e), follow-up tests to the significant Maternal Psychological Distress $\times$ Religiosity interaction suggest maternal psychological distress was related to less attachment security with mothers with lower levels of religiosity, $B = -0.22$, $SE B = .07$, $p = .002$, but attachment security with more highly religious mothers remained high irrespective of her psychological well-being, $B = 0.05$, $SE B = .06$, $p = .422$. Thus, mothers' religiosity seemed to serve a protective function in this context.

Follow-up tests to the significant Religiosity $\times$ Children's Adjustment Problems interaction suggest greater adjustment problems were related to less attachment security in relationships with more highly religious mothers, $B = -0.19$, $SE B = .07$, $p = .010$, and to more attachment security with less religious mothers, $B = 0.23$, $SE B = .08$, $p = .003$. However, as shown in Figure 1 (e), mother-child attachment security tended to be higher with more religious mothers than less religious mothers, except at the extremes of adjustment problems. As noted below, this pattern was moderated by child gender.

Age and Gender as moderators—In the only significant age or gender moderation, gender interacted with religiosity and children's adjustment problems to predict children's attachment security, $B = 0.28$, $SE B = .11$, $p = .013$. Follow-up analyses suggest that the pattern reported above holds for boys, but not for girls. That is, boys' greater adjustment problems were related to less attachment security with more highly religious mothers, $B = -0.32$, $SE B = .09$, $p < .001$, and to more security with less religious mothers, $B = 0.37$, $SE B = .10$, $p < .001$. Girls' experienced greater attachment security with highly religious mothers irrespective of the level of adjustment problems.

Discussion

This study explored the association of mothers' religiosity with family and child functioning, including the moderating role of religion in the relation between family variables and mother-child attachment security. As expected, even in this context of social deprivation and political tension that divides along lines of religious affiliation (i.e., two Christian denominations in Northern Ireland), maternal religiosity was associated with family and child well-being. Specifically, religiosity predicted greater family cohesion and parent-child relationship quality, as well as less conflict and fewer adjustment problems. None of the tests of direct relations suggested a detrimental effect of mothers' religion. The findings support the notion that, even in this context, religiosity, measured by religious observance, the importance of religion in one's life, and Christian attitudes, related to consistently less psychological distress and more positive relations in families.

An additional contribution of this paper was the investigation of mothers' religiosity as a moderator of the association between family factors and mother-child attachment security. Accumulating evidence identifies religiosity as a significant contributor in this regard to psychological well-being and positive family relationships. Analyses revealed that mothers' religiosity enhanced some of the positive influences of family functioning. For example, mothers' behavioral control (i.e., rules and restrictions placed on children by mothers) was more likely to promote children's attachment security when mothers were more religious. It is possible that religious mothers set a positive example to be modeled, and establish rules and expectations for their children which would include empathic and altruistic behavior in the family and in the world. It is likely that children reared in this type of environment internalize these teachings and embody them in their daily behavior (Volling, Mahoney, & Rauer, 2009). Furthermore, greater family cohesion and less family conflict promoted secure relationships with more highly religious mothers. It is possible that the safety children feel in the context of cohesive families and attentive parents may be enhanced if children feel that their God is playing an active role. Although sanctification (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005) was not measured in this study, it is an appealing candidate as another possible process-oriented explanation for this pattern of positive results. Further investigation of the processes set in motion by religiosity is critical to fully understanding its impact.

Mothers' religiosity did not interact with child disclosure to predict parent-child attachment security. It may be that the association between disclosure and attachment varies more as a function of the homogeneity of the religious beliefs of mother and child, than beliefs and practices of mothers specifically. Religious dissimilarity between parents and adolescents has been shown to predict greater relational discord and distance (Stokes & Regnerus, 2009), whereas constructive dialogue between college students and mothers about spiritual journeys has been found to contribute to better relationship quality (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008).

The direct associations between religiosity and greater family cohesion and parent-child relationship quality, as well as less conflict and fewer adjustment problems, were perhaps due to the social support network of a faith community, shared family activity of attending services, or spiritual and life guidance which promote positive mental health and interaction.

It is reasonable to suspect mothers' attitudes and beliefs likely manifest in their behavior with their children, with positive effects of religious attitudes and beliefs on the quality of these interactions. These notions merit further study.

Beyond the direct associations with positive outcomes and enhancement of positive influence of family resources, mothers' religiosity also buffered children from harmful effects of her psychological distress on children's attachment security in the mother-child relationship. Notably, the current sample was drawn from socially deprived, highly conflictual communities in Belfast. Smith, McCullough, and Poll's (2003) meta-analysis found that the buffering effect of religiosity against depression was stronger when individuals experienced more psychosocial stress. It seems that even if mothers are less psychologically healthy, their religious beliefs and behaviors may help children feel safe and secure, confident they can trust and count on their mother and their family. Mothers' religiosity may increase children's confidence that their God will watch over and help their mother, keeping the children safe.

Family conflict is related to lower mother-child attachment security, but only for children of more highly religious mothers. When mothers are less religious, the level of security is lower and not significantly related to family conflict. Similarly, greater adjustment problems in boys are related to lower security with more highly religious mothers. However, except at very high levels of family conflict or child adjustment problems, mother-child attachment security remained higher when mothers are more highly religious. The significant interactions show that although mother-child attachment security was more sensitive to family stress when mothers are more highly religious, children are typically less secure in their relation with less religious mothers irrespective of the level of family conflict.

A number of possible explanations could be posited to account for this pattern of results. Children of religious mothers experience less risk of family stressors such as conflict and adjustment problems, and a more secure mother-child attachment relationship than do children of less religious mothers. Higher attachment security may help children to value family relationships and to evaluate nuances in family dynamics. This awareness may make them vulnerable to declines in attachment security when stresses arise if they are not able to effectively alleviate or cope with the stress. Children of less religious mothers, on the other hand, are more likely to suffer from family stress and less secure mother-child relationships. Support was not found in analyses for the notion that mothers' religiosity exacerbates the negative impact of family stress for children's attachment security.

As with all cross-sectional designs, the direction of effects is uncertain. Further considering the direct effects, we theorize that religious observance and attitudes improve the quality of relations in families and the individual adjustment of family members, but it may be that better functioning families are more attracted to organized religion or religious ideals, or that crises of faith can lead individuals to depression or conflict (see Johnson, Sheets, & Kristeller, 2008). Furthermore, individuals who suffer from depression, for example, may erode their ties to religious faith and institution over time (see Smith, et al., 2003). The direction of effects within a moderation framework has rarely been considered empirically. The comparison of models examining the moderating influence of religion on the effect of

family stressors on individual adjustment, and conversely the effect of individual adjustment on family stressors, could further our understanding of these complex family dynamics. The current findings offer directions for exploration of these issues, which are promising direction for future research.

Several additional limitations should be noted. Self-report questionnaires were used to measure complex constructs of religiosity and family and individual functioning. A multi-method design incorporating self-report and more direct measures is advisable for future research. Although it is possible that highly religious mothers may have exhibited a greater tendency toward reporting cohesion and better parenting, and less conflict and adjustment problems, in an attempt to justify or substantiate their high religiosity, the addition of children's report for many of these constructs, and the high agreement between children and mothers' reports, lessens some of the concerns about the biases of common method variance. In addition, the population of NI is almost exclusively Christian, limiting our ability to generalize to other religious groups. It would be valuable to consider the moderating role of religiosity in other religions as well.

In this study we examined the moderating role of mothers' religiosity, but it is also important to consider the role of children's religious beliefs and practices. Although we might presume that the church attendance and religious beliefs and attitudes of children in this age range (8-15 years) are similar to those of mothers, children's religiosity was not measured directly. Thus, we are limited to discussing the role of mothers' religiosity, without clear understanding of the extent to which her behaviors and attitudes are unique, or shared by other members of the family, including husbands and children. It is important for research to examine the role of youths' spirituality and religiosity in their development and relationships, as well as the broader family system (Lerner, Alberts, Anderson, & Dowling, 2006).

Given the tensions between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, a potentially fruitful direction for future research is to consider the extent to which religiosity influences experiences of political tension, including attitudes or behavior towards members of the out-group. Furthermore, groups in sectarian conflict often have different ethnic religious orientations, even though doctrine related to differences in religious beliefs may not be at stake (just as in Northern Ireland). By contrast, in other instances, fundamental religious differences may be at stake, at some level (e.g., the Middle East). A future direction that warrants attention is to examine whether the current findings hold in these areas of sectarian and inter-religious conflicts as well, or whether quite different effects of religiosity are obtained.

In summary, mothers' religiosity consistently predicted less psychological distress and adjustment problems, and stronger relationships in families, and enhanced positive processes and relations in families. Although mothers' religiosity buffered mother-child attachment security in some instances, findings suggest nuances in the role of religion as a moderator of family stress. These findings expand our understanding of the role of religiosity, as well as further our appreciation of process-oriented family dynamics.

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(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Figure 1. Moderating role of mother's religiosity of the relation between family risk or resource and mother-child attachment security graphed at one standard deviation above and below the mean

- (a): Family Cohesion $\times$ Mother Religiosity
- (b): Mother Behavioral Control $\times$ Mother Religiosity.
- (c): Child Disclosure $\times$ Mother Religiosity
- (d): Family Conflict $\times$ Mother Religiosity
- (e): Mother Psychological Distress $\times$ Mother Religiosity
- (f): Child Adjustment Problems $\times$ Mother Religiosity (*moderated by child gender)

Table 1

Correlations among the predictor variables.

	Family cohesion	Maternal control	Child disclosure	Family conflict	Mother psychological distress	Child adjustment problems
Family cohesion	1.0					
Maternal control	.24***	1.0				
Child disclosure	.45***	.59***	1.0			
Family conflict	-.64***	-.18***	-.40***	1.0		
Mother psychological distress	-.18***	.01	-.06	.16***	1.0	
Child adjustment problems	-.40***	-.14***	-.39***	.43***	.18***	1.0

Note.

 $p < .001$

$N = 696$, except Mother psychological distress $N = 694$

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Note. Child gender: 0=boy, 1=girl; Mother religious affiliation: 0=Protestant, 1=Catholic

p .001

Table 3

Results of series of multiple regression analyses examining moderation of religiosity in the prediction of mother-child attachment security.

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Model 1		
Child Age	-0.62***	.14
Child Gender	2.11***	.52
Affiliation	-0.34	.64
IV: Family Cohesion	1.49***	.18
Moderator: Religiosity	1.31***	.36
Interaction: Family Cohesion × Religiosity	0.57**	.22
R ²	.19	
F	28.08***	
Model 2		
Child Age	-0.26	.14
Child Gender	2.00***	.49
Affiliation	-0.54	.61
IV: Mother Behavioral Control	0.68***	.06
Moderator: Religiosity	1.63***	.33
Interaction: Behavioral Control × Religiosity	0.14*	.06
R ²	.27	
F	43.75	
Model 3		
Child Age	-.31*	.13
Child Gender	1.37**	.47
Affiliation	-2.11***	.61
IV: Child Disclosure	0.67***	.05
Moderator: Religiosity	1.32***	.32
Interaction: Child Disclosure × Religiosity	0.07	.05
R ²	.33	
F	56.68***	
Model 4		
Child Age	-0.62***	.15
Child Gender	2.29***	.53
Affiliation	0.13	.66
IV: Family Conflict	-0.67***	.16

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Moderator: Religiosity	1.63***	.36
Interaction: Family Conflict $\times$ Religiosity	-0.37*	.16
R ²	.14	
F	20.31***	
Model 5		
Child Age	-0.67***	.15
Child Gender	2.81***	.53
Affiliation	0.65	.66
IV: Mother Psychological Distress	-0.09	.05
Moderator: Religiosity	1.83***	.36
Interaction: Mother Distress $\times$ Religiosity	-.15**	.05
R ²	.13	
F	17.71	
Model 6		
Child Age	-0.67***	.15
Child Gender	2.59***	.54
Affiliation	0.73	.68
IV: Child Adjustment Problems	0.02	.05
Moderator: Religiosity	1.72***	.37
Interaction: Child Adjustment $\times$ Religiosity	-0.23***	.06
R ²	.14	
F	18.67***	

Note. Child gender: 0=boy, 1=girl; Mother religious affiliation: 0=Protestant, 1=Catholic; Predictors and Moderator were centered; Interaction is product of centered predictors.

*
 $p < .05$,

**
 $p < .01$,

 $p < .001$