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GOOD DADS: FAITH MAKES A DIFFERENCE



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GOOD DADS: FAITH MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Catholic and evangelical Christian fathers spend a lot of one-on-one time with their children, making them the best dads studied by a University of Virginia sociologist and expert on religion and families.

“My research shows that evangelical Protestant and Catholic fathers are, on average, more involved with their children than fathers who have no religious affiliation,” said W. Bradford Wilcox, assistant professor of sociology at U. Va. “Evangelical Protestant fathers, including Southern Baptists, are very involved with their children, which I found surprising, given their tendency to embrace traditional gender attitudes.”

Previous research has shown that fathers are nearly as important as mothers in guiding children through the challenges of childhood and adolescence. But what makes some fathers more likely than others to focus on their children? Supporters of evangelical Christian denominations often argue that a father's faith can motivate a dad to be there for his kids. Wilcox's research suggests they may be right.

Wilcox studied fathers who lived with their children (ages 5-18), and who participated in the National Survey of Families and Households in 1987-88 and 1992-94. Wilcox's analysis of that data resulted in his study, "Religion, Convention, and Paternal Involvement," which appears in the just-released, August 2002 issue of *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

Dr. Wilcox focused on three measures of paternal involvement. The first was one-on-one interaction. The fathers reported leisure-time spent with the child, working on a project or playing with the child, private talks, and help with reading or homework. Measure two was family dinners. Fathers were asked how many evenings in a week the whole family had dinner together. Finally, the dads reported on their participation in youth-related activities. They were asked how many hours in the average week they participated as an advisor, coach or leader in school activities, community youth groups, sports activities, and religious youth groups.

Fathers were then divided into four groups. The evangelical Protestants fathers were from Southern Baptist, Assembly of God, Pentecostal, Missionary Alliance, Christian Reformed and a number of other fundamentalist and evangelical churches. The mainline Protestant fathers were from Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist or

Congregational churches. The final two groups were Catholic dads, and fathers who identified themselves as unaffiliated with a particular church.

So how do these dads measure up?

The results put evangelical Christian dads at the top or near the top in each area. The measure of one-on-one interaction showed that evangelical dads are more involved than unaffiliated dads and mainline Protestant dads. Catholic dads fell somewhere in between.

A count of family dinners showed evangelical Protestant dads, in the average year, will have roughly 27 more dinners with their families than unaffiliated fathers. Catholic and mainline Protestant fathers fall in between evangelical Protestant and unaffiliated fathers.

Both evangelical Protestant and Catholic dads are more involved in youth activities than unaffiliated dads, with Catholic dads coming out on top. “Evangelical Protestant and Catholic churches may sponsor more youth-related activities than other churches, providing a broader range of activities for fathers and children to share,” Wilcox suggests.

Sally Gallagher, associate professor of sociology at Oregon State University, agrees, and goes on to say, “Wilcox’s analysis demonstrates that religious culture or subculture matters; that the content of religious belief and practice does indeed make a difference in men’s involvement as parents. Sociologists interested in understanding families must now do more to account for how the content of religious beliefs, communities, and institutions encourage and reinforce certain family practices.”

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Religion, Convention, and Paternal Involvement

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Family scholarship has generally overlooked the influence that religion may have on paternal involvement. Accordingly, using longitudinal data taken from the National Survey of Families and Households, I examined the influence of religious affiliation and attendance on the involvement of residential fathers in one-on-one activities, dinner with their families, and youth activities and found religious effects for each of these three measures. Virtually no evidence was found for a competing hypothesis that these effects are artifacts of a conventional habitus such that the type of men who are more conventional in their patterns of civic engagement are both more religious and more involved with their children. However, civic engagement is positively related to paternal involvement.

Keywords: civic engagement, convention, paternal involvement, religion.

In recent years, scholars of family life have increasingly turned their attention to fatherhood in an effort to determine how men's involvement in the lives of their children bears on child well-being, gender equality, and marital quality ([Booth & Crouter, 1998](#); [Coltrane, 1996](#); [Lamb, 1997](#)). Research focusing on one critical dimension of the father role—paternal involvement by residential fathers—has focused on the ways in which socioeconomic status, gender attitudes, and the child's gender, age, and race influence the level and type of paternal involvement among residential fathers ([Cooksey & Fondell, 1996](#); [Harris & Morgan, 1991](#); [Marsiglio, 1991](#); [Pleck, 1997](#)). But this research has largely passed over the ways in which the institutional contexts of men's lives influence paternal involvement ([Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998](#)). This study focuses on the voluntary institution with which Americans are the most actively affiliated, religion ([Putnam, 2000](#)), testing whether men's religious culture and participation are related to the extent and type of their paternal involvement.

Extrafamilial institutions have long been known to shape parental values and behavior. Religious institutions have been particularly influential carriers of family-related culture over the course of American history. Their influence continues to this day, even though some of the distinctive parental value orientations that once divided Protestants and Catholics have disappeared ([Alwin, 1986](#)). Religious institutions have also been powerful sources of family-related social integration, offering family-related activities as well as informal networks that provide social support and control for family-oriented behavior ([Ellison, 1994](#) ; [Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, & Waite, 1995](#)). However, there has been little quantitative research using nationally representative data that focuses on the influence that religion may have on contemporary paternal involvement (but see [Bartkowski & Xu, 2000](#)). Using longitudinal data from two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), this study addresses this research gap by examining the associations between religion and three areas of paternal involvement: one-on-one activities, dinner with one's family, and youth activities.

Given the longstanding association between religion and convention in American life, it is also possible that any relationships found between fatherhood and religion are an artifact of an underlying exogenous *conventional* effect ([Stolzenberg et al., 1995](#)). In other words, the kind of men who are actively involved with their churches and their children may be the kind of men who are more conventional in general. This conventional effect is explored by testing whether civic engagement accounts for any of the relationships found between religion and paternal involvement.

Exploring the links between religion, convention, and paternal involvement is particularly important in light of recent research that suggests paternal involvement is related to a range of positive child outcomes. Paternal involvement is positively associated with the educational attainment, economic achievement, emotional well-being, and the social competence of children (for a review, see [Amato, 1998](#)). In fact, taking into account the joint contributions of fathers and mothers to their children, Amato concluded, somewhat surprisingly, “that fathers are about as important as mothers in predicting children's long-term outcomes” (p. 268). By exploring the connections between religion, convention, and paternal involvement using data from the 1987–1988 and 1992–1994 waves of the NSFH, this study should also provide some insight into the possible relationships between religion, civic engagement, and child well-being.

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Religious Participation and Culture: Seedbeds of Paternal Involvement?

Because little research has focused on religion and fatherhood ([Bartkowski & Xu, 2000](#)), I rely on the literature on religion and parenting to frame my hypotheses regarding religion and fatherhood. Recent research on the relationship between religion and parenting suggests that there are two religious factors that influence parenting: religious

participation and the distinctive cultures of religious traditions ([Alwin, 1986](#); [Clydesdale, 1997](#); [Ellison, Bartkowski, & Segal, 1996](#); [Pearce & Axinn, 1998](#); [Wilcox, 1998](#)).

Religious participation can be taken as an indication of the extent to which a person is integrated into the institutional life of a particular religious institution ([Durkheim, 1897/1951](#); [Pearce & Axinn, 1998](#)). Such integration could influence parenting values and behavior in a number of ways. First, the rituals and discourse persons encounter in religious institutions—from baptisms to Father's Day sermons—dramatize the moral relations that bind parents to their children, often endowing them with a transcendent character. Second, by offering worship services, educational programs, and social activities for families, religious institutions offer opportunities for parents to spend time with their children. Third, the family-oriented informal networks that parents encounter in religious institutions may provide social affirmation of parenting, guidance on questions related to child-rearing concerns, and social sanctions for parents who depart from child-rearing norms (Pearce & Axinn; [Stolzenberg et al., 1995](#)). Finally, by imposing a *meaningful order* upon everyday life and more liminal periods (illness, unemployment, and so on), religious participation may help parents deal with stresses that can otherwise harm parent-child interactions ([Ellison, 1994](#)).

A number of recent studies have found that religious participation is linked to parental behaviors and values ([Alwin, 1986](#); [Bartkowski & Xu, 2000](#); [Clydesdale, 1997](#); [Pearce & Axinn, 1998](#); [Wilcox, 1998](#)). Alwin found that parents who participate in church activities are more likely to value obedience in their children than other parents. Parents who attend church are more likely to be involved with their children's education (Clydesdale). Maternal church attendance, as well as the importance of religion to the mother, is associated with improvements in the mother's perception of the quality of the mother-child relationship (Pearce & Axinn). Church attendance has also been linked to a warm, expressive style of parenting (Wilcox). Fathers who attend church frequently are more likely to monitor their children, to praise and hug their children, and to spend time with their children (Bartkowski & Xu). Thus, religious participation, which is understood here as an indicator of religiosity, would seem to foster an authoritative, active, and expressive style of parenting.

Although religious institutions may uniformly foster a family-focused ethos that is associated with higher levels of parental involvement, it is also possible that the culture (ideology, rituals, and norms) of particular religious traditions may incorporate distinctive practices and ends that guide parental behavior. First, the worship style and larger religious ethos associated with different religious traditions may shape the style of parental behavior by providing models for particular familial practices. Second, religious discourse may stress particular religious or family-related ends that, in turn, guide the ways that parents spend time and interact with their children.

The empirical research regarding the influence of distinctive religious cultures on parental behaviors and values is mixed. Although [Alwin \(1986\)](#), [Clydesdale \(1997\)](#), and [Pearce and Axinn \(1998\)](#) found evidence that religious participation shapes parenting behavior and values, they found no evidence that religious culture per se shapes parental

values and practices. Alwin found that the differences that once marked Catholic and Protestant child rearing orientations have disappeared, largely as a consequence of marked acculturation and socioeconomic mobility among Catholics since the 1960s. Alwin concluded, "Lenski's (1963) 'religious factor' of the 1950s has all but vanished in American society, at least with respect to parental socialization values" (p. 423). Similarly, Pearce and Axinn found that religious affiliation did not influence the mother's or child's perception of the quality of the mother-child relationship. Moreover, in looking at a range of family behaviors, Clydesdale found that theological conservatism was not associated with parental involvement in children's education. This literature would suggest that religiosity, rather than a commitment to a distinctive religious culture, is associated with greater investments in fathering.

However, a growing body of literature on religion and parenthood suggests a competing hypothesis about the influence of religious culture on parental involvement ([Ellison et al., 1996](#); [Wilcox, 1998](#)). This literature has focused on conservative Protestantism, which has devoted significant pastoral attention to family life since the 1970s. Conservative Protestant churches and parachurch ministries have stressed values such as traditional gender attitudes, strict discipline, expressive parenting, and parental involvement. Moreover, because of their pietist tradition of worship and an increasingly therapeutic approach to relationships, conservative Protestant churches have an expressive ethos that may carry over into family life. Indeed, this research literature suggests that the family culture produced by this subculture is associated with higher rates of corporal punishment (Ellison et al.) and a warm, expressive style of parent-child interaction in nondisciplinary situations (Wilcox).

Although this research has generally not focused on men, much of the discourse produced in this conservative Protestant subculture is aimed specifically at fathers. Although conservative Protestant groups generally stress men's traditional role as the primary breadwinner and head of household, they also place a great deal of emphasis on men's roles as husbands and fathers. The conservative Protestant subculture orients fathers to their children in at least two ways. First, fathers are exhorted to model for their children the love that God has for persons by being an active, expressive, and strict parent ([Bartkowski & Xu, 2000](#); [Wilcox, 1998](#)). Second, the expressive ethos that now characterizes large sectors of conservative Protestantism is associated with a focus on relationships that may translate into greater paternal involvement (Wilcox). Indeed, one study published on religion and fatherhood finds that conservative Protestant fathers combine a strict approach to discipline with a warm, affective approach to nondisciplinary interactions (Bartkowski & Xu). Accordingly, a conservative Protestant affiliation should be associated with increased paternal involvement.

There is considerably less research on family-related culture in mainline Protestant and Catholic churches. Since the 1970s, mainline and Catholic churches have generally not devoted as much symbolic and pastoral attention to family life as conservative Protestant churches ([Browning, 1995](#)). Mainline churches have focused more on public issues like social justice, peace, and environmentalism than on family life (Browning). In this period, American Catholic churches have devoted less attention to family life, largely as

a consequence of disagreement within their church over family and sexual matters since Vatican II ([Greeley, 1990](#)).

Of course, many mainline and Catholic churches continue to foster a *Golden Rule Christianity* centered on an ethic of care for family and friends ([Ammerman, 1997](#)). This brand of Golden Rule Christianity sidesteps contested moral and sexual matters but stresses a generic ethic of love that may promote greater paternal involvement. Moreover, these churches tend to be child-centered, with vibrant Sunday schools, children's choirs, and other family activities. Thus, the Golden Rule Christianity found in many Catholic and mainline Protestant churches may be associated with greater paternal involvement. Nonetheless, I predict that mainline Protestant and Catholic men will not be as consistently involved with their children as conservative Protestant men, who are more likely to be exposed to a sustained and specific ideology emphasizing family involvement. Thus, this literature review suggests two competing hypotheses, which run as follows:

Hypothesis 1. Because of the importance of religious culture in shaping paternal behavior, conservative Protestant men display greater levels of paternal involvement than unaffiliated men and they are more consistently involved with their children than mainline Protestant and Catholic men. Nonetheless, men affiliated with Catholic and mainline churches are more involved with their children than unaffiliated men.

Hypothesis 2. Because religion promotes family-focused behavior uniformly among parents, church attendance—an important indicator of religiosity—is associated with greater paternal involvement. Moreover, any association between religious culture and paternal involvement is a consequence of an underlying association between religiosity and paternal involvement. Thus, controls for church attendance will eliminate any direct effects of religious culture on paternal involvement.

Some scholars who have turned their attention to the relationship between religion and family life have perceptively argued that this reciprocal relationship may “result from common antecedents rather than from a direct causal link” ([Clydesdale, 1997](#); [Stolzenberg et al., 1995](#), p. 85). The most likely suspect is a kind of conventional effect that includes a range of prosocial behavior and ties, where religiosity is just one indicator of a person's integration into the broader social order ([Durkheim, 1897/1951](#)). In the American context, this conventional effect may be rooted in a kind of middle-class convention that reached its zenith in the 1950s. This conventional style was made up of an assemblage of values, norms, and practices that included church-going, civic engagement, and a familial orientation. With respect to religion and the family, the paradigmatic formulation of this middle-class convention was “the family that prays together stays together.” Indeed, the 1950s experienced a dramatic increase in three indicators of this conventional style: family-focused behavior, civic engagement, and religious practice ([Marler, 1995](#); [Putnam, 2000](#)).

Thus, the reciprocal relationships found between religion and a family-centered lifestyle may be an artifact of a conventional 1950s-style *habitus* ([Bourdieu, 1977](#), p. 82).

Following Bourdieu, habitus is used to refer to a “system of lasting, transposable dispositions” that are structured by past experiences and, in turn, structure ongoing perceptions, values, and practices (Bourdieu, pp. 82–83). In the case at hand, men exposed to a 1950s-style conventional habitus may be living in ways that reproduce the cultural patterns they encountered while growing up. Moreover, the pull of such a habitus would be strongest when men and women are in that stage of the life course that coincides with their own childhood; that is, when they have children of their own. Thus, any link between religion and family life may in fact be a product of an underlying conventional habitus that structures involvement in the family, religion, and civil society.

But how relevant is this 1950s-style habitus to contemporary fathers? Despite marked social change since the 1950s, there is evidence to suggest that the kind of conventional habitus outlined above continues to shape the contemporary social practice of American fathers. Recent work by [Nock \(1998\)](#) suggests that, for men, this type of prosocial habitus is tied to the institution of marriage and childrearing. Nock shows how marriage and childrearing continue to be associated with heightened commitment on the part of men to civic engagement. Thus, the following is hypothesized:

Hypothesis 3. A conventional habitus marked by religious attendance, civic engagement, and family-centered activity accounts for any link between religion and paternal involvement. This possibility is particularly important in light of [Bartkowski and Xu's \(2000\)](#) finding that religious participation is linked to paternal involvement. If religious involvement simply amounts to a form of conventional behavior, civic engagement can be expected to eliminate the net effect of religion on paternal involvement. However, if religion has a unique effect on paternal involvement, then religious effects should remain robust to models including civic engagement.

Method [Return to TOC](#)

I relied on The 1987–1988 NSFH-1, a nationally representative survey of 13,017 adults age 19 and over ([Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988](#)), and its follow-up survey in 1992–1994 (NSFH2; [Bumpass & Sweet, 1995](#)). The response rate for NSFH2 primary respondents was 82%. Using data from NSFH1 and NSFH2, the analyses focused on one subset of the data: 1,019 primary respondents who were residential fathers in both waves of NSFH and residential fathers of school-age children (ages 5–18) during NSFH2. Specifically, residential fathers are defined as biological, adoptive, or step-fathers that are living with their children at the time of the survey.

I relied on respondent reports of activity in three areas of paternal involvement at NSFH2 (1992–1994) for dependent variables: one-on-one interaction, dinner together, and youth-related activities. *One-on-one interaction*, was measured by reliance on respondents' reports of involvement in the following four activities: “leisure activities away from home,” “at home working on a project or playing together,” “private talks,” and “helping with reading or homework.” Responses ranging from 1 = *never or rarely* to 6 = *almost every day* were summed to create a scale based on the mean response to each of the items (Cronbach's alpha = .78).

For *dinner together*, the respondent's answers to the following question were relied on: "How many evenings last week did your whole family living here eat dinner together?" Responses were coded from 0 to 7. Fathers were also asked how many hours per week they spent in an average week as a participant, advisor, coach, or leader in the following *youth-related activities*: school activities, community youth groups (e.g., Scouts), sports activities, and religious youth groups. Because of rightward skewedness, I relied on the natural log of the sum total of hours devoted to these four activities to measure weekly paternal involvement in youth-related activities. Values of 0 (i.e., no time devoted to youth-related activities), were recoded to .01 before transformation. The NSFH does not specifically ask parents if the youth activities they participated in involved their own children. However, the questions about youth activities come in the middle of a battery of parenting questions. For this reason, as well as the fact that the sample is made up of residential fathers, it is safe to assume that most fathers are reporting activities that involved their own children. The NSFH also does not ask parents to indicate if youth activities that are not overtly religious, such as Boy Scouts, are sponsored by a religious organization. Thus, this measure of youth-related activities may incorporate a greater degree of religious influence than is readily apparent in the data.

The sample was divided using data from NSFH1 (1987–1988) into the following religious categories: *conservative Protestant*, *mainline Protestant*, *Catholic*, and *unaffiliated*. More specifically, respondents who identified with Southern Baptist, Assembly of God, Pentecostal, Missionary Alliance, Christian Reformed, and a number of other fundamentalist and evangelical churches were coded as conservative Protestant. Respondents who indicated an Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, or Congregational affiliation were coded as mainline Protestants. Respondents who indicated no religious affiliation were coded as unaffiliated, and they serve as the comparison category in my analyses. *Jewish* and *Other* (Mormon, Unitarian, Muslim, and so on) respondents were excluded from the analyses because of the small number of respondents in both of these categories. Respondents were also asked "How often do you attend religious services?" This question measured *frequency of church attendance*, which ranged from 0 = *never* to 8 = *several times a week*.

A measure of civic engagement from NSFH1 (1987–1988) tested whether any effects of religion on paternal involvement might be an artifact of men's conventionality. *Civic engagement* was measured by participation, from 1 = *never* to 5 = *several times a week*, in civic groups (e.g., fraternal or political organizations), work-related groups (e.g., professional associations), and service organizations. The mean responses to eleven measures of nonreligious civic activities were used to create a scale coded from 1 to 5 (Cronbach's alpha = .58). Four types of religious and youth-related civic participation were excluded because they may tap the same behavior examined in the measures of church attendance and youth-related activity.


The following NSFH1 variables, which are known to be associated with paternal involvement ([Marsiglio, 1991](#)) and might otherwise confound any relationships between religion and paternal involvement were controlled for: respondent's *education* (from high school to graduate school, coded from 1 to 6); *age* (in years); respondent's *household*


income (logged); *race–ethnicity* of the respondent (Black; Hispanic; reference category = White–Anglo); *region* (South; Northeast; North Central; reference category = West). Also controlled for was *gender traditionalism* at NSFH1, which was measured by respondent's attitudes toward the following items: “It is much better for everyone if the man earns the main living and the woman takes care of the family and home,” “preschool children are likely to suffer if their mother is employed,” “if a husband and wife both work full-time, they should share housework tasks equally,” and (dis)approving of “mothers who work full-time when their youngest child is under age 5.” The scale is based on the mean response to these four items and was coded from 1 to 5 (Cronbach's alpha = .61).

The following family characteristics at NSFH2 were controlled for because they are also known to be related to paternal involvement ([Cooksey & Fondell, 1996](#); [Harris & Morgan, 1991](#)): biological composition of the family (a *blend* of biological and/or adopted children and step-children; *all biological and/or adopted children*; reference category = *all step-children*); gender of children (*all male children*; a *mix* of male and female children; reference category = *all female children*); and marital status of respondent (*married*; reference category = *single father*). Finally, the following employment characteristics at NSFH2 were controlled for because employment status and schedules are likely to influence paternal involvement: a dummy variable measuring *employment*, a dummy variable tapping *shift work*, and average *weekly hours of employment*.

For each of the dependent variables, a series of hierarchical ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were estimated to determine the effects of religious factors on residential paternal involvement even after controlling for a range of potential covariates—including the measure of convention. The first model, which includes measures of religious affiliation, tests the effect of religious culture on paternal involvement. The second model, which includes a measure of church attendance, tests the independent effect of religious participation on paternal involvement and explores the extent to which the effects of religious culture are mediated by religious participation. The third model, which includes a measure of civic engagement, tests whether religious effects on paternal involvement are artifacts of a conventional habitus.

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[Table 1](#)  presents means and standard deviations for residential paternal involvement, religious affiliation, church attendance, convention, father characteristics, and family characteristics. The data are weighted to adjust for sampling probabilities.

[Table 2](#)  reports regression results for models exploring the links between religion, convention, and residential paternal involvement in one-on-one activities. The hypotheses was evaluated by running three models estimating the effects of religious variables measured in 1987–1988 (NSFH1) on paternal involvement 5 years later (NSFH2).

Models 1–3 indicate that, consistent with Hypothesis 1, men with a conservative Protestant affiliation at NSFH1 are consistently more likely than unaffiliated men to engage in one-on-one interaction with their school-age children at NSFH2. In other words, the positive effect of conservative Protestant affiliation persists even after controlling for attendance and civic engagement. These findings are also inconsistent with Hypotheses 2 and 3, which assumed, respectively, that measures of attendance and convention would eliminate the effect of religious culture.

Moreover, Models 1–3 indicate that conservative Protestant fathers are more involved in one-on-one interaction than mainline Protestant fathers but not Catholic fathers. However, [Table 2](#) provides no evidence that mainline Protestant and Catholic affiliations in 1987–1988 are associated with greater levels of paternal involvement in 1992–1994. Thus, [Table 2](#) suggests that the distinctive stress on familial involvement found in the conservative Protestant subculture leads to higher levels of paternal investment in one-on-one activities.

Models 2 through 3 suggest that church attendance is not linked to paternal involvement in one-on-one activities. In fact, contrary to Hypothesis 2, church attendance in 1987–1988 is negatively associated with paternal involvement in 1992–1994. This finding is particularly surprising because it runs counter to the cross-sectional study done by [Bartkowski and Xu \(2000\)](#), which found a positive relationship between church attendance and one-on-one interaction using cross-sectional data from NSFH1.

But Model 3 does show that the measure of a conventional habitus is positively related to one-on-one involvement for residential fathers. Specifically, civic engagement in 1987–1988 is a significant and very powerful predictor of paternal involvement in 1992–1994. This means that residential fathers who are actively involved in the civic life of their communities are also more likely to engage in one-on-one activities such as homework help with their own children. Nevertheless, as indicated above, Model 3 provides very little evidence that the link between religion and father involvement in one-on-one activities is an artifact of convention, because the conservative Protestant coefficient declines by only 11% from Model 2 to Model 3.

[Table 2](#) also indicates that education, having biological children, adopted children, or both, having all male children, and being Hispanic are positively associated with one-on-one paternal interaction. Father's age, having older children or a larger family, being married, and spending long hours in paid work are negatively related to this type of interaction.

[Table 3](#), which reports regression results for fathers' dinner with their families, lends some support to Hypothesis 1. Model 1 indicates that a conservative Protestant affiliation in 1987–1988 predicts higher levels of dinner together in 1992–1994. In fact, over an average year, conservative Protestant fathers will have roughly 27 more dinners with their families than unaffiliated fathers. (Contrary to Hypothesis 1, mainline Protestant and Catholic affiliations at NSFH1 are not related to dinner together at NSFH2; however, mainline Protestant and Catholic fathers are not significantly different from conservative

Protestant fathers in their propensity to have dinner with their entire family.) Accordingly, [Table 3](#) provides additional evidence that the family-oriented culture of conservative Protestantism promotes paternal involvement.

However, once attendance is included in Model 2, this affiliation effect is completely attenuated, lending some support to Hypothesis 2. Thus, Models 1–3 suggest that the positive effect of conservative Protestant affiliation on dinner participation is mediated, at least in part, through the direct effect of church attendance.

However, contrary to Hypothesis 2, Models 2–3 indicate that church attendance is not significantly related to dinner together. Also, contrary to Hypothesis 3, Model 3 provides no indication that a conventional habitus is associated with dinner together. Civic engagement in 1987–1988 is not related to dinner together 5 years later for residential fathers. Turning to the control variables, [Table 3](#) indicates that African-American fathers, fathers employed in shift work, and fathers with older children are consistently less likely to have dinner with their entire family. Fathers with all biological children, adopted children, or both, are more likely to have dinner together with their family.

[Table 4](#) presents the results from regressions estimating the effects of religion on fathers' involvement in youth-related activities. Model 1 indicates that conservative Protestant and Catholic fathers, but not mainline Protestant ones, are significantly more involved in youth-related activities than unaffiliated fathers. Moreover, Catholic fathers are significantly more involved in youth-related activities than mainline Protestant fathers and remain so even after controlling for church attendance and civic engagement.

Thus Model 1 provides partial support for Hypothesis 1, which suggested that the family focus of conservative Protestant culture translates into greater paternal involvement. Here again, however, conservative Protestant fathers are not significantly more involved than Catholic fathers (see also [Table 2](#)). Indeed, Catholic fathers are more involved than conservative Protestants fathers in this domain of fathering, though the difference is not statistically significant.

However, consistent with Hypothesis 2, the effects of religious affiliation are mitigated by the inclusion of church attendance. Models 2 and 3 indicate that church attendance, which is positively related to paternal involvement in youth-related activities, accounts for about half of the positive effects of conservative Protestant and Catholic affiliation on such involvement. The addition of church attendance also renders the Catholic and conservative Protestant coefficients nonsignificant. These findings indicate that the affiliation effects are mediated by the positive direct effect of church attendance. Thus, consistent with Hypothesis 2, religious participation is linked to greater paternal involvement in youth-related activities.

Here, the institutional effect of church attendance is, in all likelihood, not simply a consequence of family-centered discourse and social networks found in churches. Many churches sponsor religious youth groups, Scout groups, and sports teams. Thus, fathers

who are actively affiliated with churches may have greater opportunities and incentives to get involved in youth-related activities in their own churches.

Model 3 displays the effect of the conventional habitus, measured by civic engagement. Civic engagement is positively related to paternal involvement in youth-related activities. In other words, residential fathers who are active in the civic life of their communities are also more likely to be involved in youth-related activities. But Model 3 only provides limited support for Hypothesis 3 insofar as the measures of convention reduce the effect of church attendance by less than 10%. This suggests that the effect of church attendance on paternal involvement in youth-related activities is largely robust to conventional effects. In other words, the link between religiosity and this type of paternal involvement is not simply a consequence of an underlying link between the conventional habitus and paternal involvement.

[Table 4](#) also indicates that education, having male children, and being African-American are positively related to paternal involvement in youth-related activities. However, fathers with older children, fathers with more traditional gender attitudes, and fathers with more preschool children are less likely to be involved in such activities.

Discussion [Return to TOC](#)

This study poses two central questions: (a) are religious culture and participation associated with residential paternal involvement? and (b) can the associations between religion and fatherhood be attributed to an underlying conventionality effect? This study indicates that religion is related to paternal involvement in all three areas that were examined: one-on-one engagement, dinner with one's family, and volunteering for youth-related activities. The findings presented here also suggest that these religious effects are, for the most part, not artifacts of what I call a conventional habitus. In particular, religious predictors of paternal involvement were robust to the specification of controls for civic engagement in two out of the three measures that were examined. This means that religion appears to make a unique contribution to paternal involvement above and beyond its status as a conventional activity. In all likelihood, the specific attention that religious institutions dedicate to family life accounts for the religious effects found in this study.

Religious culture—in this case, conservative Protestant affiliation—has an independent effect on residential paternal participation in one-on-one activities, even after controlling for generic religiosity and a conventional habitus. Conservative Protestant fathers are more likely to be involved with their children in personal activities such as personal talks than unaffiliated and mainline Protestant men. Moreover, conservative Protestant men are also more likely than unaffiliated men to have dinner with their children and to participate in youth-related activities. These findings are particularly striking in light of the gender traditionalism championed by conservative Protestant churches and embraced to a large degree among conservative Protestant rank-and-file. Nevertheless, these

findings are consistent with results found in earlier research on conservative Protestantism ([Bartkowski & Xu, 2000](#); [Wilcox 1998](#)).

However, the models for paternal participation in youth-related activities suggest that religiosity is a more salient predictor than religious culture of some forms of paternal involvement. Specifically, I found that the positive effect of conservative Protestant and Catholic affiliations on youth-related activities dramatically declined and, in most cases, disappeared when controlling for church attendance. These results lend credence to the stress that [Alwin \(1986\)](#), [Clydesdale \(1997\)](#), and [Pearce and Axinn \(1998\)](#) place on the power of religiosity as an influence on family life. In all likelihood, the normative discourse, family-focused social networks of support and control, and psychological support associated with religious institutions help explain the link between religious participation and paternal involvement in youth-related activities ([Christiano, 2000](#)).

An alternative possibility is that paternal religious participation is only associated with youth-related activities because religious youth groups are included in the measures of such activities. Youth activities were separated into religious and nonreligious activities and additional models were run to test this possibility. But logistic models indicate that paternal church attendance is associated with higher rates of involvement in both religious and nonreligious youth activities (analysis not shown). Of course, it is possible that some nonreligious activities, such as Scouts, are sponsored by religious organizations, because the NSFH did not ask parents if such activities were sponsored by a religious organization. Thus, this study may overestimate the contribution of religious participation to involvement in nonreligious youth activities.

Surprisingly, evidence was also found that religious participation is negatively associated with paternal involvement in one-on-one interaction. As noted earlier, this finding runs contrary to the cross-sectional research conducted by [Bartkowski and Xu \(2000\)](#). Perhaps exposure to the more traditional messages and social networks associated with religious institutions is negatively related to specific types of paternal involvement that are seen as more progressive: in this case, one-on-one interaction. Other types of interaction—dinner with one's family and youth-related activities, for instance—may be more in keeping with traditional expressions of paternal care.

Nonetheless, the argument about the power of religiosity to foster family-focused behavior in a uniform fashion does not account for the findings that only conservative Protestant and Catholic affiliations, and not mainline Protestant affiliations, are associated with higher levels of paternal involvement in family dinners and youth-related activities. I suspect that two factors account for the distinctive affiliation effects found in this article. First, ancillary regression analyses reveal that conservative Protestant and Catholic residential fathers are significantly more likely at NSFH1 to attend church (analysis not shown). Thus, these two religious groups appear to enjoy greater religious strength than mainline Protestantism. This vitality may translate into more opportunities and incentives for residential fathers to devote themselves to their children.

Second, it may be that high-attending Catholic and conservative Protestant fathers are both more involved but have distinctive culturally based motivations for their involvement. In an effort to test this, I ran further regression analyses to see if Catholic and conservative Protestant men focused their paternal involvement in youth activities in different areas and found that conservative Protestant fathers were disproportionately involved in religious youth groups, whereas Catholic fathers were disproportionately involved in secular youth-related activities (analysis not shown). The conservative Protestant commitment to religious youth groups is in keeping with research that suggests members of this subculture focus their time and attention on religiously centered activities affecting their own families and churches at the expense of nonreligious civic activities ([Putnam, 2000](#)). By contrast, the Catholic commitment to nonreligious youth activities appears to be in keeping with the more worldly, communitarian ethos found in Roman Catholicism ([Greeley, 1990](#)). Thus, it appears that distinctive dimensions of religious culture do have indirect and direct effects on patterns of paternal participation in youth-related activities.

This study also provides some evidence that the relationship between religion and paternal involvement is not an artifact of convention, because the indicator of a conventional habitus generally did not eliminate the net effects of religious variables when it was added to the statistical models. This is a particularly important finding because [Bartkowski and Xu \(2000\)](#) have recently found positive relationships between religious participation, as well as conservative Protestant affiliation, and paternal involvement. This suggests that religion exercises a unique role in influencing paternal involvement above and beyond its status as a conventional activity.

Given the longitudinal design of this study and the fact that religious effects vary by denomination, I am fairly confident that my findings regarding the influence of religion on paternal involvement do not incorrectly specify the direction of causality. Of course, I do not have any information on religious identity or practice for these residential fathers prior to the birth of their children. Thus, it could be that birth of a child generates a strong family orientation among some men, which in turn fuels religious commitment and paternal involvement ([Dollahite & Hawkins, 1998](#)). Still, the fact that most of the religious effects vary by denomination, which is not likely to be related to such a family-focused factor, strongly suggests that religion has an independent effect on paternal involvement.

Although the primary focus of this study is not the effect of a conventional habitus on paternal involvement, civic engagement is strongly associated with paternal involvement in a wide range of activities. Accordingly, future research should explore in greater detail the mechanisms that push some men into a conventional habitus marked by high levels of civic engagement and paternal involvement.

Finally, this study may have important implications for research on child well-being. The literature on paternal involvement indicates that such involvement is positively associated with a range of beneficial child outcomes ([Amato, 1998](#); [Lamb, 1997](#)). This study suggests that religion—measured by affiliation and church attendance—may be

indirectly linked to child outcomes through its association with paternal involvement. For similar reasons, paternal civic engagement may also exert indirect positive effects on children through its association with increased paternal involvement. Thus, future research should examine possible links between child well-being and religion, as well as child well-being and paternal civic engagement.

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This study's findings must be placed in perspective. The effects of religious culture and participation are relatively small, especially in comparison to demographic and life course factors such as the age, gender, and number of children. Moreover, this study may overestimate the religious effects on paternal involvement if religious men have inflated their estimates of paternal involvement because of the normative messages they encounter in their churches.

Nevertheless, this study suggests that religion does play a role in shaping men's commitments to their children. This finding is particularly striking because this study and previous studies have not documented a consistent effect on fatherhood involvement for gender ideology (see [Marsiglio, 1991](#)), another potential source of cultural influence over paternal involvement. In all likelihood, the institutional power that religious congregations can bring to bear on their members is one reason why religion appears to be a more powerful predictor of paternal involvement than gender ideology. The irony is that religious institutions, generally taken to be carriers of more traditional mores, seem to be showing some success in closing the gap between new fatherhood *culture and conduct* observed by [LaRossa \(1988\)](#). In other words, at least in terms of the quantity of their involvement, conservative Protestant and Catholic residential fathers are more likely to embody the new fatherhood style [Furstenberg \(1988\)](#) attributes to *Good Dads*.

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TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF ALL VARIABLES

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Control variables, NSFH1		
Black	0.097	0.297
Hispanic	0.118	0.323
Education	2.639	1.321
Age	36.427	7.036
Household income (logged)	10.073	1.801
South	0.354	0.478
Northeast	0.183	0.387
North Central	0.268	0.443
West	0.196	0.397
Gender traditionalism	3.028	0.714
Control variables, NSFH2		
Married	0.943	0.232
Age of youngest child	9.200	4.918
Preschool children	0.249	0.541
School-age children	1.823	0.816
All step children	0.138	0.335
Blend	0.054	0.365
All biological children	0.818	0.401
All male children	0.304	0.460
Mixed gender	0.457	0.498
All female children	0.239	0.426
Employed	0.882	0.322
Shift work	0.412	0.493
Weekly hours of employment	41.758	18.430
Religious factors, NSFH1		
Conservative Protestant	0.249	0.433
Catholic	0.300	0.458
Mainline Protestant	0.326	0.469
No affiliation	0.129	0.335
Church attendance	4.011	2.872
Convention, NSFH1		
Civic engagement	1.156	0.226
Dependent variables, NSFH2		
One-on-one interaction (1 to 6)	3.665	1.057
Dinner together (0 to 7)	4.445	2.246
Youth-related activities (hours, logged)	-1.302	3.045

Note: NSFH1 = National Survey of Family Households, Wave 1. NSFH2 = National Survey of Family Households, Wave 2. N = 1,019.

TABLE 2. COEFFICIENTS FROM OLS REGRESSION MODELS: PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT IN ONE-ON-ONE ACTIVITIES WITH SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN (NSFH2)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Control variables, NSFH1						
Black	-0.025	0.116	-0.011	0.116	-0.077	0.115
Hispanic	0.224*	0.110	0.252*	0.111	0.248*	0.110
Education	0.170***	0.026	0.182***	0.026	0.174***	0.026
Age	-0.013*	0.005	-0.012*	0.005	-0.014**	0.005
Household income (logged)	0.027	0.018	0.027	0.018	0.023	0.018
South	-0.125	0.087	-0.107	0.087	-0.105	0.086
Northeast	-0.038	0.102	-0.036	0.102	-0.071	0.101
North Central	-0.103	0.091	-0.086	0.091	-0.123	0.091
Gender traditionalism	-0.072	0.044	-0.062	0.044	-0.057	0.043
Control variables, NSFH2						
Married	-0.511***	0.146	-0.501**	0.146	-0.518***	0.145
Age of youngest child	-0.104***	0.010	-0.104***	0.010	-0.106***	0.010
Preschool children	-0.510***	0.082	-0.503***	0.081	-0.498***	0.081
School-age children	-0.179***	0.046	-0.169***	0.046	-0.145**	0.045
Blend	0.331*	0.164	0.326*	0.164	0.095	0.162
All biological children	0.402***	0.101	0.416***	0.101	0.359*	0.148
All male children	0.301***	0.084	0.302***	0.084	0.300***	0.083
Mixed gender	0.130	0.084	0.126	0.084	0.118	0.083
Employed	0.158	0.168	0.152	0.168	0.156	0.166
Shift work	0.065	0.066	0.073	0.066	0.069	0.065
Weekly hours of employment	-0.010**	0.003	-0.009**	0.003	-0.010**	0.003
Religious factors, NSFH1 ^a						
Conservative Protestant	0.252** ^b	0.105	0.342** ^b	0.112	0.305** ^b	0.112
Catholic	0.078	0.101	0.161	0.107	0.165	0.106
Mainline Protestant	0.033 ^c	0.098	0.103 ^c	0.102	0.108 ^c	0.101
Church attendance			-0.027*	0.012	-0.028*	0.017
Convention, NSFH1						
Civic engagement					0.623***	0.135
Intercept	5.269***	0.358	5.146***	0.361	4.643***	0.375
Adjusted R ²	0.220		0.223		0.235	

Note: NSFH1 = National Survey of Family Households, Wave 1. NSFH2 = National Survey of Family Households, Wave 2. $N = 982$.

^aThe comparison category is unaffiliated. ^{b,c}Coefficients with different superscripts are significantly different ($p < .05$). * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 3. COEFFICIENTS FROM OLS REGRESSION MODELS OF FAMILY DINNER TOGETHER FOR FATHERS WITH SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN (NSFH2)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Control variables, NSFH1						
Black	-1.224***	0.257	-1.246***	0.257	-1.293***	0.257
Hispanic	0.311	0.246	0.270	0.247	0.253	0.246
Education	-0.049	0.058	-0.067	0.059	-0.077	0.059
Age	0.010	0.012	0.008	0.012	0.008	0.012
Household income (logged)	0.068	0.041	0.068	0.041	0.067	0.041
South	0.195	0.194	0.163	0.195	0.160	0.195
Northeast	0.219	0.229	0.216	0.228	0.169	0.229
North Central	0.081	0.205	0.055	0.206	0.012	0.206
Gender traditionalism	-0.113	0.099	-0.129	0.099	-0.118	0.099
Control variables, NSFH2						
Married	0.205	0.326	0.182	0.326	0.156	0.326
Age of youngest child	-0.132***	0.023	-0.133***	0.023	-0.137***	0.023
Preschool children	-0.310	0.186	-0.319	0.185	-0.305	0.185
School-age children	-0.191	0.104	-0.206*	0.104	-0.167	0.102
Blend	0.277	0.367	0.283	0.367	-0.615	0.371
All biological children	0.732**	0.226	0.708**	0.226	0.164	0.340
All male children	0.317	0.188	0.312	0.188	0.315	0.187
Mixed gender	0.190	0.188	0.195	0.188	0.198	0.186
Employed	-0.062	0.374	-0.046	0.374	-0.031	0.373
Shift work	-0.594***	0.148	-0.607***	0.148	-0.618***	0.147
Weekly hours of employment	-0.002	0.007	-0.002	0.007	-0.003	0.007
Religious factors, NSFH1 ^a						
Conservative Protestant	0.528*	0.239	0.381	0.255	0.333	0.255
Catholic	0.380	0.228	0.241	0.243	0.263	0.242
Mainline Protestant	0.253	0.222	0.141	0.232	0.159	0.231
Church attendance			0.044	0.027	0.044	0.027
Convention, NSFH1						
Civic engagement					0.549	0.303
Intercept	4.447***	0.804	4.662***	0.814	4.635***	0.872
Adjusted R-squared	0.097		0.098		0.104	

Note: NSFH1 = National Survey of Family Households, Wave 1. NSFH2 = National Survey of Family Households, Wave 2. $N = 1,019$.

^aThe comparison category is unaffiliated.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 4. COEFFICIENTS FROM OLS REGRESSION MODELS ON PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT IN (LOGGED) YOUTH-RELATED ACTIVITIES (NSFH2)

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	SE	β	SE	β	SE
Control variables, NSFH1						
Black	0.981**	0.372	0.914*	0.369	0.701	0.365
Hispanic	-0.010	0.370	-0.142	0.368	-0.171	0.363
Education	0.382***	0.081	0.314***	0.082	0.277**	0.081
Age	0.008	0.017	0.005	0.017	0.001	0.017
Household income (logged)	-0.069	0.059	-0.071	0.059	-0.080	0.058
South	0.027	0.281	-0.087	0.280	-0.098	0.275
Northeast	0.160	0.335	0.130	0.332	0.043	0.329
North Central	-0.206	0.292	-0.313	0.291	-0.444	0.288
Gender traditionalism	-0.287*	0.138	-0.331*	0.137	-0.304*	0.135
Control variables, NSFH2						
Married	0.188	0.476	0.138	0.472	0.092	0.466
Age of youngest child	-0.120***	0.033	-0.125***	0.033	-0.127***	0.033
Preschool children	-1.017***	0.266	-1.053***	0.264	-1.034***	0.259
School-age children	0.162	0.147	0.112	0.146	0.160	0.142
Blend	0.430	0.526	0.459	0.522	0.537	0.509
All biological children	0.564	0.325	0.497	0.323	0.857	0.463
All male children	1.415***	0.270	1.408***	0.268	1.403***	0.262
Mixed gender	1.032***	0.267	1.051***	0.265	1.040***	0.260
Employed	0.758	0.546	0.794	0.542	0.827	0.534
Shift work	0.044	0.210	-0.017	0.209	-0.042	0.206
Weekly hours of employment	0.001	0.010	-0.001	0.010	-0.002	0.009
Religious factors, NSFH1 ^a						
Conservative Protestant	0.976**	0.331	0.453	0.354	0.294	0.350
Catholic	1.132*** ^b	0.321	0.661 ^b	0.340	0.648 ^b	0.334
Mainline Protestant	0.503 ^c	0.306	0.099 ^c	0.321	0.044 ^c	0.316
Church attendance			0.150***	0.038	0.140***	0.038
Convention, NSFH1						
Civic engagement					2.205***	0.419
Intercept	-3.148**	1.133	-2.467*	1.138	-4.933***	1.211
Adjusted R-squared	0.107		0.121		0.148	

Note: NSFH1 = National Survey of Family Households, Wave 1. NSFH2 = National Survey of Family Households, Wave 2. $N = 912$.

^aThe comparison category is unaffiliated. ^{b,c}Coefficients with different superscripts are significantly different ($p < .05$).
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

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