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Rising Souls: Religion and Family Relationships among Latino Adolescents

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# RISING SOULS: RELIGION AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AMONG LATINO ADOLESCENTS

Eve Veliz

## ABSTRACT

*Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine Latino adolescents' perceptions of the effects of religion on family relationships in the context of intersecting variables of influence such as assimilation, family structure, and migration.*

*Design – Consistent with the ecological and acculturation frameworks, this qualitative, exploratory study uses directed content analysis to analyze responses from 37 religiously diverse Latino adolescents to open-ended, semi-structured questions from the National Study of Youth and Religion to explore religious influence.*

*Findings – Results suggest that Latino adolescents feel that religion impacts family relationships, with higher degrees of positive religious influence expressed by Baptists and Latino males. Christians (various denominations) were more likely to report that religion affected family relationships than Catholics. All participants who stated that religion exerted a negative influence came from nontraditional families. Youths*

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*of Central/South American and Puerto Rican descent were more likely to report that religion affected family relationships positively than were Mexican adolescents. Overall, Latinas girls were more likely to have strong opinions about religion and family relationships than Latino males. Results also suggest an intersection between the Latino cultural values of respeto and marianismo with religion.*

*Limitations/implications – Although this study is exploratory and the sample was diverse, the results are not generalizable.*

*Originality – This study provides a sociological lens to the experiences of a rapidly changing and growing demographic in the United States – Latinos. These findings would be of importance to those who are interested in supporting Latino families and facilitating positive adolescent outcomes.*

**Keywords:** Latino/a adolescents; parent-adolescent relationships; religion and families; Latino families; religion and adolescents

When examining the state of well-being of our nation's building blocks – youths – the Latino population must be at the forefront of the discussion. Latinos are the fastest growing youth population in the United States, and by 2025, one in four adolescents will be of Latino descent (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009). Extant literature on outcomes for Latino youth is mixed at best. Although Latino adolescents have been labeled at-risk for a variety of internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Driscoll, Russell, & Crockett, 2008), other studies highlight Latino youths' resilience and improving educational outcomes (Fry & Lopez, 2012; Kuperminc, Wilkins, Roche, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2009). However, fundamental to any child or adolescent's experience is his/her home life and support structures. Quality parent-teen relationships, characterized by open communication, warmth, and nonpunitive control, are critical to the healthy development of adolescents and mitigation of delinquency (Davidson & Cardemil, 2009; Luk, Farhat, Iannotti, & Simons-Morton, 2010). Latino families face a variety of pressures rooted in the intersectionality of race, nationality, and class, increasing the need for strong family relationships and support networks for Latino adolescents. Research suggests that religion can help

facilitate positive relationships (Marsiglia, Kulis, Nieri, & Parsai, 2005) and can provide support for families (Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006), but little is known regarding whether this holds true for Latinos. Catholicism serves as a foundation for many of the cultural values researchers use in their analyses of Latino families, and links nearly inextricably to Latino identity and cultural norms. Therefore, it is of fundamental importance in any exploration of the Latino adolescent experience (Calzada, Fernandez, & Cortes, 2010; Marsiglia et al., 2005). However, with current transformations occurring in Latino religious life, it is also critical to continue to reexamine how religion affects parent–adolescent relationships, if at all. A recent review of the literature on the role of religion in families reveals that few studies explore how religion affects family relationships in ethnically diverse communities, underscoring the need for qualitative studies that elucidate this underexplored facet of family life (see Mahoney, 2010 for review).

Drawing on the strengths of semi-structured interviews, the purpose of this study is to conduct an exploratory, qualitative analysis on a religiously diverse sample of Latino/a adolescents in varying sociocultural contexts and on their perceptions of the effect of religion on their family relationships. Consistent with the ecological framework, this study analyzes Latino<sup>1</sup> adolescents' beliefs on religion and relationships in varying family contexts to elucidate within-group variations. This study also adds a sociological perspective by examining how variables associated with acculturation and Latino culture influence attitudes toward religion and family life.

## STUDYING LATINO YOUTH

Several facets of Latino culture and family life have been examined to understand and affect often-contradictory Latino adolescent outcomes. The primary cultural tenet research on Latino families uses frequently is familism, a cultural value that emphasizes interdependence between nuclear and extended family, emotional connectedness, familial honor, loyalty, and solidarity (Gil, Wagner, & Vega, 2000). Familism has been shown to be both a risk and resilience factor in various samples of Latino teens (Bámaca, Umaña-Taylor, Shin, & Alfaro, 2005; Calzada et al., 2010; Guilamo-Ramos, Dittus, Johansson, Bouris, & Acosta, 2007; Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). It has been shown to decrease the probability of drug and alcohol use, school conduct problems, parent–adolescent conflicts,

acculturation stress, and sexual risk-taking (Germán, Gonzales, & Dumka, 2009; Gil et al., 2000; Smokowski & Bacallao, 2006), but it has also been shown to decrease college enrollment (Desmond & López Turley, 2009) and intensify effects of familial discord (Hernandez, Ramirez Garcia, & Flynn, 2010). As important as familism is to the examination of adolescent outcomes, an important component of familism – religion – remains largely unexplored. Describing how religion facilitates familism in Mexican–American families, Sarkisian, Gerena, and Gerstel (2007) state, “religion not only provides the opportunity to stay in touch with family members by attending church together but also can be a source of moral values about respecting, obeying, and taking care of kin” (p. 42). Religion is a critical component of Latino culture not only for adults, but also for youths. Fifty-one percent of young Latinos feel that “living a religious life” is important (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009), yet its effect on adolescent functioning and family life is poorly understood. Church attendance, particularly at a Latino-oriented, ethnic church, can provide a support structure and build a sense of community for Latino youths and their families while navigating assimilation and is the preferred type of church for Latinos (Pew Research Center, 2007). However, young, foreign-born Latinos have been shown to have higher church attendance than native-born Latinos (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009), underscoring the need to explore how religion operates in diverse Latino families.

## RELIGION AND PARENT–ADOLESCENT RELATIONSHIPS AMONG LATINOS

Research suggests religion plays a role in parent–adolescent communication, if indirectly. A cultural tenet rooted in the Catholic Church that encourages traditional gender roles, *marianismo* (Hurtado & Cervantez, 2009), can increase tension between mothers and daughters and discourage frank discussions about sexual behavior among Latinas and their parents (Céspedes & Huey, 2008; Zayas, Bright, Álvarez-Sánchez, & Cabassa, 2009). However, it is unknown whether this remains true in the context of increasing assimilation, changing gender roles, heterogeneity of migrants, and increasing diversity of religious faiths among Latinos (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2007). Moreover, little is known about how religion affects relationships between Latino male adolescents and their parents. Stokes and Regnerus (2009) find that parent–adolescent

relationships suffer when parents value religion more than teens. It is unknown how this operates in Latino families, but according to the [Pew Hispanic Center \(2009\)](#), church attendance drops significantly with generational status. This decreasing religiosity might increase tensions between Latino adolescents and more religiously traditional parents. This phenomenon, known as dissonant acculturation ([Portes & Rumbaut, 2001](#)), in which youths acquire the dominant culture quicker than parents, has been shown to increase familial conflict ([Halgunseth et al., 2006](#)).

## RELIGION AND LATINO ADOLESCENT OUTCOMES

Although there are limited findings on how religion affects family relationships for Latinos, research has examined how religion affects outcomes for Latino (primarily Mexican) adolescents. As [Kuperminc et al. \(2009\)](#) suggest, “religion may serve as a protective factor for Mexican–American youth against substance abuse, suicide ideation, and other risks” (pp. 221–222). It has also been shown not only to delay the initiation of sexual intercourse for Latinas ([Kuperminc et al., 2009](#)), but also to decrease sexual activity, generally, among Latino/a adolescents ([Edwards, Fehring, Jarrett, & Haglund, 2008](#)). In a study of primarily Mexican and Mexican–American adolescents, [Marsiglia et al. \(2005\)](#) found that Catholicism is particularly protective against recent marijuana use, but associates with lifetime alcohol consumption. This study was also one of the few that examines non-Catholic Latino youths. They report increased risk of drug use among the small group of Latino youths who are not religious, yet affiliate with the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons). They suggest this anomaly might indicate identity conflict due to being an atypical ([Marsiglia et al., 2005](#), p. 596) member of the Mormon Church. This finding highlights the need for additional research on a religiously diverse sample of Latino youths from various countries of origin.

## CHANGES IN LATINO RELIGIOUS LIFE

The religious affiliations of Latinos are changing as quickly as their demographics. The stereotypical conception of a Latino in the United States as someone of Mexican descent with traditional values (particularly regarding gender) affiliated with the Catholic Church is no longer accurate. An

increasing number of Latinos in the United States are from Central and South America (Motel & Patten, 2013), and they are increasingly non-Catholic (Pew Research Center, 2007). As Latinos assimilate and countries of origin shift, significant changes in religious life are emerging. Although the majority of Latinos remain Catholic (68 percent), 15 percent are born-again or evangelical Protestants (Pew Research Center, 2007). Even among those who identify as Catholic, the way Catholicism is practiced has changed since they incorporate elements of the Renewalist Movement, “which places a special emphasis on God’s ongoing, day-to-day intervention in human affairs through the person of the Holy Spirit” (Pew Research Center, 2007, p. 3) into their practice of Catholicism. Additionally, one-fifth of Latinos have changed their religion, and 8 percent identify as secular (Pew Research Center, 2007). These changes in denomination are important when examining family relationships since findings on religion and family differ substantially by denomination (see Mahoney, 2010 for review).

## ECOLOGICAL AND ASSIMILATION FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in both the ecological and acculturation frameworks since many aspects of these frameworks overlap. Developed by Bronfenbrenner (1989), the ecological framework considers the role of social address in shaping family processes and the parent–adolescent relationship (Updegraff, Delgado, & Wheeler, 2009). The social address model considers factors such as a family’s socioeconomic status, ethnicity, religion, parent country of origin, and structure in an analysis of parent and adolescent choices (Bámaca et al., 2005; Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Crouter, 2006). Differentiating families with disparate basic social addresses is a critical building block in research when examining understudied populations (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Using similar variables, the acculturation framework is often used to understand the experiences of immigrants, especially Latino populations. This framework is important to examining Latino family processes because not only do immigrant parents often have unique challenges when raising children due to factors such as dissonant acculturation, but adolescents also face challenges and must navigate between cultures, increasing conflict with parents (Chuang & Tamis-LeMonda, 2009; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). As adolescents attempt to achieve more autonomy, tensions between



parents' desires to retain their culture and increasing peer influences destabilize parent–adolescent relationships (Updegraff et al., 2006). The literature links adolescent acculturation to increased family conflicts, lower parental monitoring, and a decrease in familism (Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2008), all of which might influence perceptions of family relationships.

## PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

This study addresses a gap in sociological literature regarding how parent–adolescent relationships are affected by a prominent and rapidly changing cultural variable in the Latino community – religion. Given the dearth of research on subgroups of Latinos on this topic, this study uses an exploratory, qualitative method to elucidate important variations in the influence of religion by analyzing responses to semi-structured interviews with a religiously and socioculturally diverse sample of Latino adolescents. Consistent with the ecological framework, this study draws on the richness provided by semi-structured interviews to explore responses to various questions on religion and family life through variables consistent with both the acculturation framework and cultural origin such as *marianismo*. This study also explores social address variables such as family structure and socioeconomic status and how they interact with adolescent perceptions of religion and family relationships.

## METHOD

### *Sample*

Subjects were a sample of adolescents ( $N = 267$ ) who participated in the second phase of Wave I of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). The NSYR is a longitudinal, multimethod study designed to explore the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of American youths, with emphasis on family, religion, morality, and spirituality, using both nationally representative telephone surveys and in-person, semi-structured interviews (Youth and Religion, 2013). Participants ranged in age from 13 to 18 years ( $M = 15.7$ ) and included 142 males and 125 females. Wave I included the largest sample of Latinos. One-hundred seventy-four were

identified as White, 39 as Latino/Hispanic, 37 as Black, 8 as Asian, 3 as Native American, 1 as Pacific Islander, 2 as mixed race, and 3 as other. All interviews from Latino adolescents with complete interview data were used, which yielded a sample of 37 Latino adolescents (Tables 1 and 2).

**Table 1.** Demographic Characteristics of 19 Latina Adolescents in NSYR Personal Interviews.

Participant	Nationality <sup>a</sup>	Age	Annual Family Income	Teen Religion/ Importance of Religion <sup>b</sup>	Parents in the Home
1	Puerto Rican	17	<\$10,000	Baptist, very important	Mother only
2	Other	15	\$10,000–20,000	Baptist, very important	Mother only
3 <sup>c</sup>	Argentinean <sup>d</sup>	14	\$20,000–30,000	Catholic, not as important	Both parents
4	Mexican	13	\$20,000–30,000	Christian, not as important	Father and stepmother
5	Honduran <sup>d</sup>	13	\$20,000–30,000	Catholic, not as important	Mother and stepfather
6	Mexican	17	\$30,000–40,000	Nonreligious <sup>e</sup>	Both parents
7 <sup>c</sup>	Peruvian <sup>d</sup>	16	\$30,000–40,000	7th-Day Adventist, important	Both parents
8 <sup>c</sup>	Venezuelan <sup>d</sup>	17	\$30,000–40,000	Nonreligious <sup>e</sup>	Both parents
9	Mexican	16	\$40,000–50,000	Catholic, very important	Both parents
10	Mexican	14	\$40,000–50,000	Catholic, important	Mother only
11	Puerto Rican	16	\$40,000–50,000	Baptist, very important	Mother and stepfather
12	Mexican	16	\$50,000–60,000	Christian, unclear	Grandmother
13	Honduran <sup>c</sup>	17	\$50,000–60,000	Catholic, not important	Both parents
14	Puerto Rican	13	\$60,000–70,000	Catholic, sometimes important	Mother only
15	Mexican	17	\$60,000–70,000	Christian, very important	Both parents
16	Other <sup>f</sup>	15	\$70,000–80,000	Christian, <sup>h</sup> very important	Mother and stepfather
17	Mexican	17	\$80,000–90,000	Nonreligious	Both parents
18	Peruvian	13	\$80,000–90,000	Catholic/Christian, not important	Mother and stepfather
19	Mexican	16	n/d	Catholic, very important	Both parents

Source: National Study of Youth and Religion, Wave I Interview Data.

<sup>a</sup>Location in which respondent was born or region with which he/she identifies as a descendant.

<sup>b</sup>Paraphrased responses to question “how important or central is religion in your life?”

<sup>c</sup>Interview conducted in Spanish.

<sup>d</sup>Foreign-born.

<sup>e</sup>Honduran mother, White-American father.

<sup>f</sup>Half Puerto Rican, Half Ecuadorian. Identifies as Puerto Rican.

<sup>g</sup>Raised Catholic, but currently non-practicing.

<sup>h</sup>Recently Converted Christian.

**Table 2.** Demographic Characteristics of 18 Latino Adolescents in NSYR Personal Interviews.

Participant	Nationality <sup>a</sup>	Age	Annual Family Income	Teen Religion/Importance of Religion <sup>b</sup>	Family Structure
1b	Mexican	16	\$10,000–20,000	Christian, important	Mother only
2b	Mexican	14	\$20,000–30,000	Christian, somewhat important	Mother only
3b	Colombian <sup>c,d</sup>	17	\$20,000–30,000	Catholic, very important	Mother and stepfather
4b	Mexican	14	\$30,000–40,000	Christian, not important	Grandparents
5b	Mexican/PR	19	\$30,000–40,000	Catholic, very important	Mother only
6b	Mexican <sup>e</sup>	18	\$40,000–50,000	Baptist, very important	Both parents <sup>f</sup>
7b	Mexican	18	\$40,000–50,000	Catholic, very important	Both parents
8b	Guatemalan <sup>c,d</sup>	17	\$50,000–60,000	Mormon, very important	Mother and stepfather
9b	Mexican	15	\$50,000–60,000	Presbyterian, not important	Mother only
10b	Colombian	15	\$60,000–70,000	Catholic, important	Mother only
11b	Mexican	14	\$60,000–70,000	Catholic, very important	Both parents
12b	Mexican	14	\$60,000–70,000	Catholic, somewhat important	Mother and boyfriend
13b	Mexican	17	\$70,000–80,000	Catholic, very important	Both parents
14b	Mexican	17	\$70,000–80,000	Catholic, not that important	Grandparents
15b	Mexican	15	\$70,000–80,000	Christian, somewhat important	Both parents
16	Mexican	17	\$80,000–90,000	Christian, very important	Mother only
17b	Other	15	\$90,000–100,000	Nonreligious	Both parents
18b	Mexican	17	n/d	Catholic, not that important	Both parents

Source: National Study of Youth and Religion, Wave I Interview Data.

<sup>a</sup>Location in which respondent was born or region with which he/she identifies as a descendant.

<sup>b</sup>Paraphrased responses to question “how important or central is religion in your life?”

<sup>c</sup>Interview conducted in Spanish.

<sup>d</sup>Foreign-born.

<sup>e</sup>Mexican father, White-American mother.

<sup>f</sup>Now a college freshman.

The average age of participants was 15.7 (SD = 1.60). The sample mean for Latina girls was 15.4 (SD = 1.57). Eight of the 19 Latinas in the sample came from families with annual incomes less than \$40,000 (one respondent did not have income data, but lived in a lower middle-class Latino enclave). Although some participants lived with single mothers,

only one (Participant 1) did not have a father figure (i.e., biological or step) in her life. Half of the sample was very religiously active across all income levels, nationalities, and family structures. There was diversity in religious affiliation, with nine participants self-identifying as Catholic (seven practicing and two nonpracticing), four as Christian (nonspecific or nondenominational), three as Baptist, one as half Christian/half Catholic, and one as a Seventh-day Adventist. One participant was nonreligious. Nine of 16 participants who states they practiced a religion attended church weekly or more, suggesting a devout Latina sample. Three of the Latina interviews were conducted in Spanish. I, a bilingual, biracial, Black/Latina with immigrant parents and no religious affiliation, conducted the majority (13) of the interviews with Latinas, including three conducted in Spanish. The average age of the Latino male sample was 15.9 ( $SD = 1.64$ ). Seven of the 18 Latinos in the sample came from families with annual incomes less than \$40,000 (one participant did not have income data, but lived in a working class Latino enclave). The majority of participants were very religiously active across all income levels, nationalities, and family structures. There was diversity in religious affiliation, with eight participants identifying as Catholic (six practicing and two nonpracticing), four as Christian (nonspecific or nondenominational), one as Baptist, one as Mormon, and one as Presbyterian. One participant was nonreligious, and one practiced his "own religion." Nine of 17 participants who were religiously affiliated attended church weekly or more, suggesting a devout sample. Eight participants lived with their mothers and biological fathers. Three participants lived with single mothers but had relationships with nonresidential fathers. Four participants lived with their mothers and stepfathers and had at least some contact with nonresidential fathers. Two participants lived with single mothers and had no contact with nonresidential fathers. I conducted one Spanish interview, but the majority of interviews were conducted by male interviewers, matched by race and religion when possible.

### *Procedure*

Recruitment for NSYR began with a telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 3,290 English- and Spanish-speaking adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17, including their parents. Participants were located through random-digit dialing (RDD). Following the initial telephone survey, 17 trained interviewers, including me, conducted in-depth interviews, ranging from 1.5 hours to 3 hours in 45 states, with a subset of

the teen survey respondents ( $N = 267$ ). Interviewers were matched with participants, when possible, by race, gender, and religion to increase participant comfort. Those who participated in the follow-up interviews were selected using a stratified quota sample rather than a nationally representative sample. This method was used to reach populations that are generally unreachable with surveys conducted in public school settings (i.e., home-schooled teens and teens who attend private school; [Youth and Religion, 2013](#)). Interview questions elicited thorough discussions of teens' family lives, spirituality, religion, and social lives (see [Youth and Religion, 2013](#) for a copy of the complete interview protocol and procedures). Teens were offered \$30 for participation.

### *Analysis*

NSYR is one of the most extensive sources of data on adolescents and religion that is available. It offers a unique opportunity for in-depth exploration of how religion operates within family relationships. Since religion permeates various facets of a person's life and is rooted in a variety of social institutions, NSYR delves into not only religion directly, but also family life, morality, school experiences, dating and sexuality, and plans. This allows deeper investigation into where religion influences the most and enables researchers to disentangle complicated connections and overlapping structures in adolescents' lives. Capitalizing on the strengths of semi-structured interviews, which allows participants to guide the interview and interviewers the freedom to probe more deeply if necessary, I conducted directed content analysis, which uses extant theory to identify "key concepts or variables as initial coding categories" ([Hsieh & Shannon, 2005](#), p. 1281). I used interview transcripts to search an entire interview, not only questions regarding family relationships directly, and summarized responses to pertinent questions, categorizing themes in adolescents' responses to questions about family life and religion and the importance of religion, generally speaking. I read each interview in its entirety several times and analyzed responses to each question. I focused on interview questions concerning the importance of religion and participants' views on the role of religion in their family relationships. After initial analysis of the transcripts, I conducted additional analyses on coded text and revised and refined categories and themes as necessary. Two colleagues who are knowledgeable about qualitative methods and Latino sociology but who were unfamiliar with the NSYR dataset read subsets of the interviews, and three

research assistants read all interview transcripts and created their own summaries. They then read my summaries and codes to ensure accuracy and consensus on quotes that conveyed the themes within categories. They suggested alternative subthemes when necessary. I grouped participants by socioeconomic status, nativity, religion, family structure, and age, and reanalyzed the interviews, this time looking for variations in responses to ascertain trends in the data.

## RESULTS

Religion influences the lives and family relationships of many Latino adolescents in this sample. Sixteen of the 18 Latino<sup>2</sup> males were religious or religiously active (even if nominally), as were 16 of the 19 Latinas. About half of the sample (10 males and 11 females) stated that religion was “very important” or “important” to their lives, though fewer (8 males and 8 females) felt it was a positive influence on family relationships. Christians (various denominations) were more likely to report that religion affected family relationships than those who identified as Catholic. Four Latinas stated religion had a negative impact on family relations, as did two Latinos. All six who stated that religion exerted a negative influence on relationships lived with stepparents, grandparents, or a single mother. Youths of Central/South American and Puerto Rican descent were more likely to report that religion affected family relationships positively than were Mexican adolescents. Overall, Latinas were more likely to have a strong opinion, one way or another, about religion and family relationships, and could more clearly articulate their beliefs than males. Latinos, in general, conveyed a sense of respect for their mothers’ (primarily) or grandparents’ strong religious beliefs, even if they did not share them.

### *Denomination*

All four adolescents (three females, one male) who self-identified as practicing Baptists stated that religion had a positive effect, even if slight, on family relationships. Participant 1’s (17-year old Baptist) mother and grandmother (her primary caretakers) are both Pentecostal, but she felt more comfortable in the Baptist Church. Although her religious views differ from her mother and grandmother, she still felt that religion strengthens their relationships. Participant 2, a 15-year old Baptist, reported that her

mother was recently “saved,” converting from Catholicism to Christianity, which made her mother discipline her less harshly, strengthening their relationship. Although she felt that her mother goes “overboard” sometimes with her religiosity (such as not allowing the teen to read Harry Potter books), she stated that religion is “the thing that brings us together or else we would be pretty separate.” She continued with:

Because, um, our opinions are the same because of what we believe, and we actually sit and do things as a family because you know, she calls us to pray and you know, we can talk about it, it’s like I don’t come home and say, or tell her highlights of my day I mean like, once or twice I tell her that oh yeah, this happened today. Or I usually tell her that oh yeah today was a good day or today was an okay day or I’m tired today but, when we like, we can actually like talk without, say our different opinions about whatever it might be saying, yeah, so that’s basically what brings us together.

Participant 11 (16-year old Baptist) described how religion helped her family through her father’s suicide. She stated:

I know it affected my Mom a lot and even though it was something tragic, now I look at it I’m just like wow that is pretty bad but you know God used it in a great way and to shape my Mom and people were saying you know, oh, they’re, they’re gonna like go down off the deep end, you know, these kids, they need counseling, but my Mom just, she, she really like trusted in God and went to the Word and then she took us out of school, two years after that and we homeschooled for three years and we did some like really good, great curriculum and it was just all focused on the Bible and she you know, God is the father to the fatherless and she really didn’t let us become um, depressed over what had happened and cling on to that, you know, she really kept us going and looking ahead. And then so she, I think it really helped our family ... because if, if we hadn’t, if, if we don’t have any faith, you know, in God or in stuff and we don’t, the things that we learn in church and the things that my parents taught us when we were growing up I think it has a lot to do with how we treat each other today ... forgiving one another and also holding each other accountable, I guess that’s a big thing in our family, and, and sisters and stuff, by calling each other on the weak points but also encouraging each other.

The sole practicing Baptist Latino (Participant 6b) was very religious (attended church three times per week with his family) and his faith permeated every aspect of his family life and values. He attends a Baptist-affiliated college and comes from a large Baptist family. Talking about how religion affected family relationships, he discussed it in terms of codes of conduct in the community and between family members as opposed to a direct effect on relationships. Throughout his interview, he conveyed that his very religious parents had instilled certain values in him:

I’d probably say that I grew up in a family that family reputation was something that was instilled in us so that it never became an issue when I became 18 or when I came in

high school that, I mean they cared, of course they cared about my well-being and stuff, and but reputation had been instilled in us so much that I, myself, naturally didn't want to do something that would hurt the family's reputation ... it's subtly instilled in us so that they of course cared about our well being and my mom would always be worried about what was going on with us and stuff, but it was something that was instilled in us so that when we got a certain age, we weren't out reeking havoc on the community and stuff like that and it was because that we had been instilled that family reputation was something that you need to closely guard and stuff. And I think they've more so instilled it not so subtly in my sister than in me, but of course they always do that to girls, so people do that to girls.

After discussing how "staunchly Baptist" his mother was, he was asked if he would ever live with a romantic partner without being married. He stated, "Shacking up, no ... that goes back to the family relationships and pride and stuff like that, it's just I couldn't imagine doing that to my family and people, yeah, people would have a field day."

More Latino than Latina Catholics felt that religion affected family relationships. Five of seven practicing Latino Catholics (two were nonpracticing) felt that religion had a positive effect on family relationships, albeit slight for some, and Latina Catholics spoke more ambivalently about the role of religion in their families. Participant 13b felt very strongly that religion was one of the most important things in life. He said, "I think it's really important, it's up there with, the three things are religion, family, and education. I think religion comes first." He also stated that religion brought him and his father closer, and although some of his views differed from his mom's, it was not a source of conflict. Discussing how religion affects his relationship with his parents, he stated:

My father, I can talk to him about anything, cause he's real religious, I mean, he talks, he tells me about the Bible and what's gonna happen, I mean, we're a real religious, we try to be a religious family and, and I believe like everything he says because like I look at the Bible, and like I read it ... it's [religion] one of sharing with my father, but with my mother, I don't think it is either, I mean, I don't think there's much conflict there, some things we say or, like about she owns a beauty salon and she has this, she had this one guy working with her that was gay and, and I've read it in the Bible, and my dad's told me like homosexuals like, ah, like go to hell or whatever and, and my Mom, this is a couple, like maybe seven years ago, the guy who worked for her, he like, he made her think that it's okay to be gay, I mean, I mean maybe, I mean, I'm not thinking like it is, but just to her point of view, cause she's like, she's kind of, she kind of defends like homosexuals and it really doesn't bother me ....

The two other Latino Catholics felt religion had no effect on their families' relationships. Two of the seven female practicing Catholics (two were nonpracticing) felt religion was a positive factor in family relationships. One Catholic Latina (Participant 5) stated that religion exerted a



very negative effect on family relationships, and another (Participant 10) felt it had a slightly negative effect on her relationship with her mother in that it encouraged corporal punishment. When asked whether religion affected her relationship with her mother, she stated:

Well, kind of. There's one thing that I don't think is right. Is that, I don't really understand this part, but. To me, I don't understand it, but yet, I don't think it's right. My Mom thinks, even though that, even though the child is like, even when like my sister is 24, 80, whatever, how old she is, she can still hit us. So no matter what age we are, she can still hit us.

When asked for the reason that her mom hit her, she replied, "religion ... she just reads it that way ... my grandma taught her that religion, I guess ... in the Bible it says that you can discipline your kids, no matter how age." The other four Catholic Latinas were neutral on the effects of religion on their family relationships.

Nondenominational Christians were also split. Half of the eight nondenominational Latinos and Latinas felt religion affected family relationships positively. Participant 16, who engaged in many internalizing and externalizing behaviors (e.g., cutting herself, hospitalization for depression, getting drunk, early sexual activity), converted to Christianity in the ninth grade, ameliorating her relationship with her mother and was thus able to disclose more about the abuse she suffered from her biological father. Her stepfather is Catholic, and he and her half-siblings go to a Catholic Church while she and her mother attend a Christian church. In spite of this difference, she believed religion brought them closer because her conversions helped the relationship with her parents. Describing her relationship with her mother and stepfather, she stated, "When I became a Christian I got along with them better." She reported that having the same religious beliefs as her mom brought them much closer, and although she experiences some tensions with her stepfather over differing beliefs, they do not affect her relationship with him much. She said:

My stepdad and me have like totally different beliefs, not like totally, but, he's Catholic and everything and just like a lot of things I believe he doesn't, I don't know why ... he believes in purgatory, I don't ... I get mad because he doesn't see things my way, but, it's not really anything big or important.

### *Gender*

Latino males were more likely to convey that religion is a source of sharing in the family even if they did not think it affected family relationships

markedly. Ten of the 17 religiously affiliated Latino males reported that religion is a source of “sharing” or “togetherness,” in comparison to 8 of 17 religiously affiliated Latinas. They also stated more than females that they participated in religious activities or acted in a certain way out of respect for religious parents or grandparents, even if they did not agree with their views. Participant 4b, whose mother had recently become a devout Pentecostal after a period of drug and alcohol use and was experiencing some tension with her because of it, still respected what she stood for. He was adamantly anti-religion and was a drug dealer for a gang, yet still attended church with his mother twice a week and endured home-schooling by his mother. Similarly, Participant 5b conveyed how religion and respect are linked when he stated:

I believe in Him a lot. I live by his, I live by the Bible, I do the 10 commandments, I don't disrespect my mom, I'm not saying that I never disrespect her but, but I try not to and if there's a disagreement I leave, walk away, I don't argue her, none of that, it makes your day shorter here.

Reflective of the great diversity of the Latina sample versus the Latino sample, there were more extremes in the Latina responses. A substantial number of Latinas (7) felt that religion was marginally important or unimportant. Participants 3, 4, and 5 stated that religion is important, but in the words of Participant 5, “not as important as people say.” However, Latina who did see religion as positively influential in family relationships spoke more articulately and more in-depth than did the boys and were very active in their religions. Also, four of the eight who felt that religion was a positive influence had converted to Christianity or been saved, in their words.

### *Social Address Variables*

All four Latinas who reported that religion had a negative effect on family relationships had parents who had separated or divorced. One had a step-father who used religion as punishment. Participant 5 stated:

My stepdad he's really religious, even though he doesn't go to church, like every morning before he goes to work he goes and he donates money, he's really religious, when he wakes up he's like, he says a prayer, when he goes to sleep he says a prayer, I say you know, I say prayers sometimes but he wants me to say a prayer every, every morning, every night and I have to learn this little book of prayers and I have to say it every night, if I don't, he pulls my ear, he starts yelling.

Religious conflicts with stepparents did not emerge with Latino boys. Participant 8b, a member of the Mormon Church, was very close to his stepfather, and felt that religion strengthens his family's relationships.

Although the sample was heavily Mexican, especially the Latino sample, more Puerto Rican and Central/South Americans felt that religion affected their family relationships. No general themes were noted by nativity, but for one foreign-born, Seventh-day Adventist Latina (Participant 7), religion was the only factor ameliorating her contentious relationship with her father who had migrated before her. She was resentful toward his attempts to control her given that he had been absent for a substantial portion of her life. She turned to church to deal with the confusion of being a recent migrant. The time the family attends church is the only time her very tense family is happy. She stated:

On Sabbaths, we prepare a meal and take it to church and we get together. All of us share our happy times of the week with the brothers and sisters that also go to church and it's a nice relationship.

The other two foreign-born girls were adamant that religion did not affect family relationships. Both foreign-born boys (Participant 8b, a Mormon who emigrated at 2 years old from Guatemala, and Participant 3b, a more recent migrant from Colombia who is Catholic) stated that family was very important. Participant 3b reported that it was definitely a way that his family got closer. He stated, "Let's say my sister is mad because they didn't let her go out somewhere. Then we get together, go out, visit the church, and like that everything is resolved."

There were no notable trends by social class. The two most affluent Latinas and the most affluent Latino were not religious, but no general themes emerged from the data.

## DISCUSSION

This study expands the knowledgebase regarding the influence of religion on parent–adolescent relationships in Latino families, from an adolescent perspective. Findings confirm what recent surveys demonstrate: significant changes are occurring in Latino religious family life (Pew Research Center, 2007). Although this study focuses on adolescents, it is clear that both adolescents and their parents are shifting religious beliefs and experiencing recommitments and de-commitments. The majority of Latino

adolescents felt that religion is a very important facet of their family lives, but there were substantial variations by denomination, gender, family structure, and country of origin. Males, Baptists, Central/South Americans, and Puerto Ricans reported a greater amount of religious influence on family relationships than females, Catholics, and Mexican adolescents did. Social address variables varied in importance, with family structure affecting Latinas more than Latinos, and there were no trends noted by socioeconomic status.

#### *Variations by Denomination*

The theme that emerged was that non-Catholic Latinos perceived religion's effect more positively than Catholics did. This finding seems to confirm Smith and Denton's (2005) analysis of this same data which suggests that Catholic teens are less committed to their faith than other Christian teens (Smith & Denton, 2005), however they attribute this to changes in the Catholic Church in the United States. However, many Latino/as in this sample had foreign-born parents and lived in Latino enclaves, so the changes in the American Catholic church might not be relevant to Latino families. Additionally, it does not explain why Latino boys and girls would have different perceptions about the effects of religion on their family lives. These findings suggest something Latino-specific and gendered is occurring. Catholicism is more an ascribed status for Latinos as opposed to other religions where they might represent a minority of the members, which could trigger identity issues (Marsiglia et al., 2005), but had to choose to join. It is possible that Latinas are responding negatively to the cultural tenet of *marianismo* that tends to accompany Catholicism for Latinos. *Marianismo* encourages traditional gender roles, and perhaps young Latinas are attributing their parents' attitudes and actions toward them to religion when it is more cultural. Two Latinas perceived that their mothers' past or present use of corporal punishment was rooted in the Catholic doctrine, which in both cases affected their relationships with their mothers negatively. It is plausible that Catholic adolescents are conflating Catholicism with cultural norms because the two link inextricably. As Marsiglia et al. (2005) explain when discussing their findings of unclear associations between religious affiliations and risky behaviors in adolescents of Mexican descent, religiosity and ethnic culture appear to be "ritualistically" webbed (p. 596).

*Ambivalence of Latinas and Respeto for Latinos*

Marked gender differences were unsurprising given the number of extant studies that explore the potential for conflict between Latina adolescents and their parents as they assert more freedom and defy gender roles (Zayas et al., 2009). For boys, a Latino cultural value emerged that has not been linked with religiosity in the literature – *respeto*. *Respeto* is a cultural tenet of familism that emphasizes the hierarchy of power in the family and encourages children to be very respectful to adults and avoid interrupting adult conversations or getting involved in adult affairs (Calzada et al., 2010). Boys were more likely to attribute their observation of rules of decorum and actions toward parents in religious rather than cultural terms. Dissonant acculturation in the form of incongruent religiosity between adolescents and their parents did not appear to affect family relationships.

*Social Address Variables*

Religion seemed to exacerbate tensions for Latinas already experiencing conflicts within their stepfamilies. Research demonstrates that girls in early adolescence have a harder time adjusting to stepfamilies than boys do (Vuchinich, Hetherington, Vuchinich, & Clingempeel, 1991), explaining disparate findings by gender. Both adolescents (one male, one female) who lived with their grandparents due to problems at school also reported that religion affected their family relationships negatively.

Findings on religious influence by nationality are unsurprising given statistics on foreign-born Latinos presented by Motel and Patten (2013). Central and South Americans are much more likely to be foreign-born, and less-acculturated youths tend to have stronger religious identities. Mexican youths are more likely to be assimilated and, as the Pew Hispanic Center (2009) report shows, retreat from Catholicism and religiosity in general with generational status. Findings for Puerto Ricans are not explained as easily. They tend to have less traditional values on markers such as cohabitation and premarital childbearing (Oropresa, 1996). However, analyzing Puerto Ricans who were born in Puerto Rico, the Pew Hispanic Center (2009) states:

Although individuals born in Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens by birth, they are included among the foreign born because they are born into a Spanish-dominant culture and because on many points their attitudes, views and beliefs are much closer to Hispanics

born abroad than to Latinos born in the 50 states or the District of Columbia, even those who identify themselves as being of Puerto Rican origin. (p. ii)

Perhaps Puerto Rican parents convey the same attachment to religion to their children, as do Central and South American parents.

## LIMITATIONS

Although this study is exploratory and the sample was diverse, it used a small, nonrepresentative sample from which to collect data. Therefore, results cannot be generalized. This study relies on adolescent reports, which begins to elucidate nuances occurring with Latinos and religion, but inclusion of parent responses would complete the picture. With parents also going through profound religious changes, it is important that future research garner a complete family picture if interventions are to be discussed to strengthen support for Latino families.

## NOTES

1. “Latino” is used throughout this section to denote both male and female Latinos. “Latino males” will be used for males and “Latinas” for females.
2. In this section, Latino males are referred to as “Latino” and Latina Females as “Latina.”

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