

**Religiosity, Christian Fundamentalism, and Intimate Partner Violence Among U.S.  
College Students**

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## **Religiosity, Christian Fundamentalism, and Intimate Partner Violence**

### ***Abstract***

This paper explores the relationship between religious behavior, religious belief, and intimate partner violence. Survey data were gathered from a sample of undergraduates (N = 626). Our dependent variables were derived from conflict tactics scales and Strauss's Personal and Relationships Profile measuring violence approval, psychological aggression, and intimate partner violence. Our two substantive independent variables were, first, religiosity as a scale containing questions from the General Social Survey, and second, Christian fundamentalism as a scale used in previously published research. General religiosity, measured as belief in God, strength of religious faith, church attendance, and frequency of prayer, was not associated with violence approval, psychological aggression, or intimate partner violence. However, Christian fundamentalism was positively associated with both violence approval and acts of intimate partner violence, but not psychological aggression.

## INTRODUCTION

This research examines the relationship between religiosity, Christian fundamentalism and aggression among college students and their intimate partners. Background research indicates that general religiosity correlates negatively with the incidence of domestic violence (Ellison and Anderson, 2001). Moreover, dimensions of conservative Christian religious belief and practice are negatively associated with behavior that is linked to domestic violence, such as excessive drinking, illegal drug use, and illicit sexual behavior (Cochran and Beeghley, 1991; Ford and Kadushin, 2002).

However, a debate exists in the research literature over the meaning of findings that fundamentalist Christians are more likely to endorse, or at least not explicitly oppose, corporal punishment for children (Bartkowski, 1995; Bartkowski and Ellison, 1995). Strauss (1994) argues that support for corporal punishment creates a family environment within which child abuse and partner violence are more likely. And yet others suggest the approval and use of corporal punishment is a singular phenomenon, and is a largely benign reflection of authority and patriarchal leadership among Christian fundamentalists (Ellison, 1996). Even so, Nason-Clark (2000) argues patriarchal leadership and authority approving corporal punishment may also legitimate the use of force and violence by males in fundamentalist Christian families.

For comparative purposes, we also explore common measures of religious belief and practice in relation to partner aggression. We examined these relationships by surveying middle to upper class, mainstream American college students. A college-age sample is appropriate for exploring these issues for several reasons. Renison and Welchans (2000) note that rates of non-lethal intimate partner violence are greatest among individuals aged 20-24, and next highest among those aged 16-19. The majority of college students fall into these high-risk categories.

Moreover, college students make up about 1/3 of the 18-22 year old population; they are forming habits and patterns in intimate relationships that carry forward into the balance of their lives (O'Leary, Malone, and Tyree, 1994). Sugarman and Hotaling (1991) review several studies showing that incidence of physical assault among dating partners aged 18-22 ranges from 9 to 60%. Most of these reports concern relatively minor altercations (Johnson and Leone, 2005). Nonetheless, summary estimates suggest that nearly 30% of dating individuals in this age range experience intimate violence at some point during their dating careers.

This study measures the impact of religiosity and Christian fundamentalism on three measures of aggression. These are: violence approval, psychological aggression, and physical violence. Religiosity and Christian fundamentalism are measured by indicators used in previous research (Davis, Smith, and Marsdan, 2004; Kirkpatrick, 1993; McFarland, 1989). Measures of aggression come from conflict tactics scales developed by Strauss, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, and Sugarman, (1996; 1999).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORY**

Two bodies of previous research inform our work. These are studies which explore:

- (1) Religious practice and domestic violence;
- (2) Christian fundamentalism and corporal punishment;

### ***Religious practice and domestic violence.***

Regular church attendance is inversely associated with domestic violence for both men and women (Ellison and Anderson, 2001). This inverse relationship holds for male perpetrators who attend weekly or more often and for females who attend monthly or more. It holds as well for both male and female victims (Cunradi, Caetano, and Schafer, 2002). These results support other research suggesting that church attendance maintains individuals' contact with normative

reference groups (Roberts, Koch, and Johnson, 2001). We imagine this to be particularly evident among church attendees who would avoid the risk of having fellow congregants witness the effects of domestic violence such as visible bruising, seasonally inappropriate clothing to hide bruises, or other more subtle signs of marital discord and trauma that may become evident through interacting with others in a religious setting.

Even so, a conservatively religious sub culture that supports the use of corporal punishment, and also uses Biblically based family life education may also create a context conducive to hierarchical, if not overtly abusive family dynamics (Capps, 1992; Nason-Clark, 2000). However, data cast some limited doubt on making these assumptions (Brinkerhoff, Grandlin, and Luperi, 1992; Ellison, 1996). Thus, this body of research leads us to initially propose that religiosity itself is not likely associated with intimate partner violence.

### ***Christian fundamentalism and corporal punishment.***

Christian fundamentalism is a system of beliefs and practices rooted in a literal interpretation of the Bible, the experience of being “born-again,” and the belief that adherence to strict behavioral and social norms through a Christian fellowship are precursors to eternal life (Ammerman, 1987). There is a debate among scholars and practitioners over the appropriate application of these religious principles regarding the use of corporal punishment with children. Christian parenting specialists tend to support its limited use (Bartkowski, 1995). Survey data also show that parents holding fundamentalist Christian beliefs are more likely to use corporal punishment than are others (Ellison, Bartkowski, and Seagal, 1996; Grasmick, Bursick, and Kimpel, 1991). There is a shortage of direct empirical evidence linking support for and use of corporal punishment with the increased likelihood of child abuse or domestic violence, even among fundamentalists (Ellison, 1996). However, others argue that, at a minimum, corporal

punishment creates a family environment more tolerant of other forms of violence (Strauss, 1994; Strauss and Gelles, 1990). Moreover, Nason-Clark (2000) cautions that institutionalized norms of patriarchal authority among Christian fundamentalists elevate the risk for child and spouse abuse.

This study tries to partially adjudicate that debate. Rather than making assumptions about the beliefs and behavior of individuals resulting from attending a fundamentalist church, or declaring themselves to be part of a conservative religious tradition or denomination, we directly compare respondents' expression of Christian fundamentalist beliefs with their tolerance for, or engagement in, violence approval, psychological, and physical aggression. A positive correlation among these variables strengthens the case for linking corporal punishment with an enhanced likelihood of domestic violence in Christian fundamentalist families. We propose that authoritarian and patriarchal norms emerging from a fundamentalist faith ultimately makes violence more likely.

Based on the review of literature, we offer the following hypotheses:

### ***Hypotheses***

- H1: As religiosity increases violence approval decreases.
- H2: As fundamentalism increases, violence approval increases.
- H3: As religiosity increases, psychological aggression decreases.
- H4: As fundamentalism increases, psychological aggression increases.
- H5: As religiosity increases, intimate partner violence decreases.
- H6: As fundamentalism increases, intimate partner violence increases.

### **SAMPLE AND METHODS**

The sample is comprised of 626 undergraduate students from two universities in the southwestern United States. Data were collected during the Fall of 2003 and the Spring of 2004. After IRB review and obtaining informed consent, students enrolled in undergraduate Sociology

classes responded to questions administered through an anonymous questionnaire. They were offered nominal extra credit for participating and all in attendance on the data collection days chose to do so. Table 1 details basic demographics of the sample. Note that nearly all (88%) reported currently being in a dating relationship. Nearly half (48%) reported being in a dating relationship for a year or longer.

Table 1 about here

We also included a measure of social desirability to indicate the extent to which respondents answered the questions truthfully. We are aware that, especially when asking for anonymous responses concerning religion and deviance, there may be a propensity to shade the truth, especially when true responses put individuals at odds with their stated beliefs or the norms of religious groups to which they belong. Following Reynolds' (1982) guidelines, our sample's mean social desirability score of 34 was deemed an acceptable indicator of truth-telling among our respondents.

### ***Dependent Variables***

There are three dependent variables. The first is violence approval and is measured with the Personal and Relationships Profile (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, and Sugarman, 1999). The next two independent variables are Conflict Tactics Scales measuring psychological aggression and intimate partner violence (Straus, et al. 1996). Possible responses were "Yes" or "No" during the relationship for these two variables. Each scale measures minor, severe, and total psychological aggression and intimate partner violence. Specific questions response choices are noted in the appendix. We note that while these measures are indicators of bona-fide violent behavior, they are more in keeping with Johnson and Leone's (2005) measures of "situational couple violence" than with criminal behavior they more aptly characterize as

“intimate terrorism.” We make this distinction largely because we are dealing with a sample of typically well-socialized, by-and-large normatively behaving, and minimally criminal college students (Roberts, Koch, and Johnson, 2001).

### ***Independent Variables***

Two substantive independent variables measure dimensions of religious belief and practice. The first is religiosity, a four item scale using questions taken from the General Social Survey (Davis, Smith, and Marsdan, 2004). The second is Christian fundamentalism, a six-item scale using questions from previously published research (Kirkpatrick, 1993; McFarland, 1989). The specific questions that comprise these scales are detailed in the appendix.

### ***Demographic Variables***

Basic demographic variables were measured. These included: gender, ethnicity, relationship type, length of relationship, year in university, cohabitation status, age, and whether respondents were sexually active with their partners. Socioeconomic status was computed using an index of father’s education, mother’s education, and family income. Multivariate analysis assesses the impact of our substantive variables in the presence of these controls.

## **ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

The data were analyzed using OLS and Logistic Regression Multivariate Analysis. Table 2 reports these results.

Table 2 about here

Model 1, an OLS regression testing hypotheses 1 and 2, examines the relationships between religiosity, Christian fundamentalism, and violence approval. The analysis indicates that fundamentalism is positively associated with violence approval while religiosity is not. As fundamentalism increases violence approval also increases slightly. For each one point increase

in the fundamentalism scale score there is .63 point increase in violence approval. Controlling for gender in this model indicates that males are significantly more likely to approve of violence than females.

Model 2, a logistic regression testing hypotheses 3 and 4, examines the relationships between religiosity, Christian fundamentalism, and psychological aggression. Logistic regression reports the odds ratios; no relationships were found. Neither religiosity nor fundamentalism effect the likelihood of psychological aggression in intimate relationships among our respondents.

Model 3, a logistic regression testing 5 and 6, examines the relationships between religiosity, Christian fundamentalism, and physical violence. The analysis again indicates that fundamentalism is positively associated with physical violence while religiosity is not. For each one point increase in the fundamentalism scale, the odds of physically assaulting a partner increase by 5%.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This research adds to the literature cited above in two substantive ways. First, religious belief and practice (religiosity) is shown to have no impact on the likelihood of intimate partner violence. Any enhancing effect of a religiously based tendency to support corporal punishment is seemingly balanced by the general suppressive effect of religious practice on deviance.

Second, Christian fundamentalism is positively associated with two of the three measures of partner violence. The greater the level of Christian fundamentalist beliefs among our respondents, the more likely they were to approve of violence and to use violent behavior in their intimate relationships. This lends support to Capps (1992) and Nason-Clark's (2000) theoretical argument that a fundamentalist beliefs make family violence at least more tolerable if not more

overtly likely. It also lends support for the argument that approval and use of corporal punishment, which is more prominent among Christian fundamentalists, may lead to a more general level of violence approval and may increase the likelihood of violent behavior in intimate relationships. Further study is warranted as to the more general effects of authoritarian and patriarchal ideologies leading to aggression among fundamentalists in intimate relationships.

These measurable links between religious fundamentalism and aggression suggest expanding this research agenda by examining the impact of Christian fundamentalism on other social relationships. The logic of this work lends itself to investigating its impact on other family dynamics such as child-rearing practices and status hierarchies in marriage. Religious fundamentalism might also affect how individuals relate to one another at school or work, when seeking medical help, wrestling with bio-ethical decisions, as well as when deciding for whom to vote or what political agendas to embrace or reject based on one's faith.

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Table 1: Respondents' Characteristics.

Sample of 626 Undergraduate Students from two universities in the Southwestern United States.

Gender		Race++++	
Female	63%	Anglo	56%
Male	37%	Latino	44%
Relationship Type		Relationship Length	
Dating	88%	1-12 Months	52%
Engaged	6%	13-24 Months	17%
Married	6%	25 or more	31%
Father's education		Mother's education	
High school/less	27%	High school/less	28%
Some college	34%	Some college	36%
College degree	24%	College degree	26%
Graduate school	15%	Graduate school	10%
Family Income			
Median Group	50-59,999	+++SES Mean Score	13.5
Year in University		Cohabiting	12%
Freshman	37%	+Age (Mean)	20
Sophomore	27%		
Junior	20%		
Senior	15%	Sexually Active	70%
Relationship Status		Social Desirability	
Current	57%	Mean Score	34.09
Previous	43%		

+The categories are 18, 19, 20, 21, 22-24, 25-29, 30-39, 40 or older.

++ The categories are 1 = about one month, 2 = about 2 months, 3 = 3-5 months, 4 = 6-11 months, 5 = about 1 year, 6 = more than 1 year but less than 2 years, 7 = about 2 years, 8 = more than 2 years but less than 4, 9 = 4 years or more.

+++ Socioeconomic Status includes family income, father's education, and mother's education

++++There were comparatively negligible numbers of African-American and Other respondents; these were excluded from the analysis.

Table 2: OLS and Logistic Regression Models of Violence Approval, Aggression, and Violence on Independent Variables.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3			
	OLS Regression of Violence Approval on Independent Variables		Logistic Regression of Psychological Aggression on Independent Variables		Logistic Regression of Intimate Partner Violence on Independent Variables			
	Coefficient	P Value	Odds Ratios	P Value	Odds Ratios	P Value		
Religiosity	-.0336331	0.394	.9854053	0.557	.9853233	0.619		
<b>Fundamentalism</b>	<b>.0634642</b>	<b>0.017**</b>	.9906001	0.568	<b>1.055671</b>	<b>0.010*</b>		
<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>1.079176</b>	<b>0.002**</b>	<b>2.04385</b>	<b>0.001***</b>	1.490886	0.141		
<b>Gender</b>	<b>-2.538284</b>	<b>0.000***</b>	1.288056	0.200	.9814135	0.937		
SES	-.0210577	0.622	.9803071	0.465	1.013688	0.680		
<b>Relationship Length</b>	.1120113	0.153	<b>1.309846</b>	<b>0.000***</b>	<b>1.457656</b>	<b>0.000***</b>		
<b>Sexual Activity</b>	<b>.6905253</b>	<b>0.048*</b>	<b>2.109703</b>	<b>0.001***</b>	<b>2.026946</b>	<b>0.004**</b>		
<b>Age</b>	<b>-.2502986</b>	<b>0.007**</b>	<b>.8643439</b>	<b>0.012*</b>	1.044114	0.546		
<b>Social Desirability</b>	<b>-.3278804</b>	<b>0.000***</b>	<b>.8795156</b>	<b>0.000***</b>	<b>.8476436</b>	<b>0.000***</b>		
Constant	32.39035	0.000						
Number of obs	=	624	Number of obs	=	626	Number of obs	=	626
F( 9, 614)	=	23.87	LR chi2(9)	=	103.00	LR chi2(9)	=	103.08
Prob > F	=	0.0000	Prob > chi2	=	0.0000	Prob > chi2	=	0.0000
R-squared	=	0.2592	Pseudo R2	=	0.1261	Pseudo R2	=	0.1640
Adj R-squared	=	0.2483	* p > .05; **p>.01;***p>.001		* p > .05; **p>.01;***p>.001			
Root MSE	=	3.5807						
* p > .05; **p>.01;***p>.001								

## APPENDIX

### *Dependent Variables, Scales, and Questions*

#### 1. Violence Approval (“Strongly Agree, Agree, Not Sure, Disagree, Strongly Disagree”):

##### Family Violence

- 1) It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good hard spanking.
- 2) It can think of a situation when I would approve of a wife slapping a husband’s face.
- 3) It can think of a situation when I would approve of a husband slapping a wife’s face.
- 4) It is sometimes necessary for parents to slap a teen who talks back or is getting into trouble.

##### Male Violence

- 5) When a boy is growing up, it’s important for him to have a few fist fights.
- 6) A man should not walk away from a physical fight with another man.
- 7) A boy who is hit by another boy should hit back.

##### Sexual Aggression

- 8) A woman who has been raped probably asked for it.
- 9) If a wife refuses to have sex, there are times when it may be okay to make her do it.
- 10) Once sex gets past a certain point, a man can’t stop himself until he is satisfied.

#### 2. Psychological Aggression (Responses were “Yes” or “No” in relationships):

- 1) Insulted or swore at my partner
- 2) Shouted or yelled at my partner
- 3) Stomped out of the room or house or yard during a disagreement.
- 4) Said something to spite my partner.
- 5) Called my partner fat or ugly
- 6) Destroyed something belonging to my partner
- 7) Accused my partner of being a lousy lover
- 8) Threatened to hit or throw something at my partner.

#### 3. Intimate Partner Violence (Responses were “Yes” or “No” in relationship):

- 1) Threw something at partner
- 2) Twisted arm or hair
- 3) Pushed or shoved
- 4) Grabbed
- 5) Slapped
- 6) Used knife or gun on partner
- 7) Punched or hit
- 8) Choked
- 9) Slammed against wall
- 10) Beat up
- 11) Burned or scalded
- 12) Kicked

*Independent Variables:*

1. Religiosity:

- 1) How often do you attend a place of worship (church, synagogue, etc.) now?
  - 1) Never
  - 2) Once or twice a year
  - 3) Several times a year
  - 4) About once a month
  - 5) 2-3 times a month
  - 6) Weekly or more often
- 2) In general, would you consider your religious faith to be?
  - 1) Non-existent
  - 2) Very weak
  - 3) Moderately weak
  - 4) Moderately strong
  - 5) Very strong
- 3) About how often do you pray?
  - 1) Never
  - 2) Several times a day
  - 3) Daily
  - 4) Several times a week
  - 5) Once a week
  - 6) Less than once a week
- 4) Beliefs about God?
  - 1) I don't believe in God
  - 2) I don't believe in a personal God, but I believe in a higher power of some kind.
  - 3) I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at other times.
  - 4) While I have some doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.
  - 5) I know that God really exists and I have no doubts about it

2. Christian Fundamentalism (“Strongly Agree, Agree, Not Sure, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.”)

- 1) I am sure the Bible contains no errors or contradictions.
- 2) It is very important for true Christians to believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God.
- 3) The Bible is the final and complete guide to morality; it contains God's answers to all important questions about right and wrong.
- 4) Christians should not let themselves be influenced by worldly ideas.
- 5) Christians must try hard to know and defend the true teachings of God's word.
- 6) The best education for a Christian child is in a Christian school with Christian teachers.