

# **Religious Effects on Levels of Family Functioning**

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**Abstract:** This study examines the effects of religion on family functioning levels. A survey of 87 university students was conducted to collect data on several aspects of religious participation and on family types and functions using the FACES II instrument. These data were then correlated. The results mirror previous findings as several religious factors play at least a small role in family functioning. Attendance at other religious activities and family prayer showed the greatest effects on levels of family functioning, while inter-religious support was negatively related to family functioning. Overall, a “rationing of religion” interpretation seems to explain the results as families which were neither over, nor under religious seem to have higher levels of family functioning.

## **Introduction**

Religious influence on the family has received much attention in the past several years. A variety of studies have been performed to determine different aspects of religious influence on various areas of family life. This study examines the impacts that religious affiliation, and religiosity have on levels of family functioning. Students attending Southwest Missouri State University completed surveys to determine if there was a link between family functioning levels and any of the four religious factors analyzed; religious affiliation, church attendance rates, attendance to other religious activities, and family prayer rates.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems was developed by David H. Olson using concepts from General Systems Theory (Olson, et al. 1989). The model was developed to serve as an aid in research and therapeutic treatment planning for families. The Circumplex model focuses on three components of family systems, and by evaluating those components, families can be represented graphically on the model. The basic premise of the

model states that the more balanced, or closer to the center of the model, the families are, the more functional they will be (Olson 1999).

The three aspects within family systems the Circumplex Model focuses on are flexibility, cohesion, and communication. These three factors were selected by combining similar concepts that have been used to study relationships between families such as rules and roles.

Flexibility is the first dimension of the model. Olson defines flexibility as “the amount of change in its leadership, role relationships, and relationship rules” (Olson 1999). There are four levels of flexibility on the scale: chaotic, flexible, structured, and rigid. The greatest level of flexibility, chaotic, characterizes families with poor leadership, erratic discipline, and extensive change. Flexible families are characterized by shared leadership, democratic discipline, and acceptance of change when needed. Structured family types are families that exhibit less leadership sharing, democratic discipline, and acceptance of change than flexible families, but still contain aspects of these factors. The lowest level of flexibility is rigid. Families that fall into the rigid classification consist of authoritarian leadership, strict discipline, and not enough change (Olson 1999).

Cohesion is the second dimension of the model. Olson defines cohesion as, “the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another” (Olson 1999). As with flexibility there are also four levels of cohesion: disengaged, separated, connected, and enmeshed. The lowest level of family cohesion is defined as disengaged. Disengaged families have little closeness, place individual interests before those of the family, and are highly independent. Separated families exhibit a higher level of closeness than disengaged families, and tend to be slightly more independent than dependent. Connected families are characterized by high levels of closeness, and a greater dependence on the family than themselves. The highest level of cohesion is characterized by enmeshed families. Enmeshed

families are highly dependent on the family, exhibit very high levels of closeness, and will place interests of the family before that of individual interests (Olson 1999).

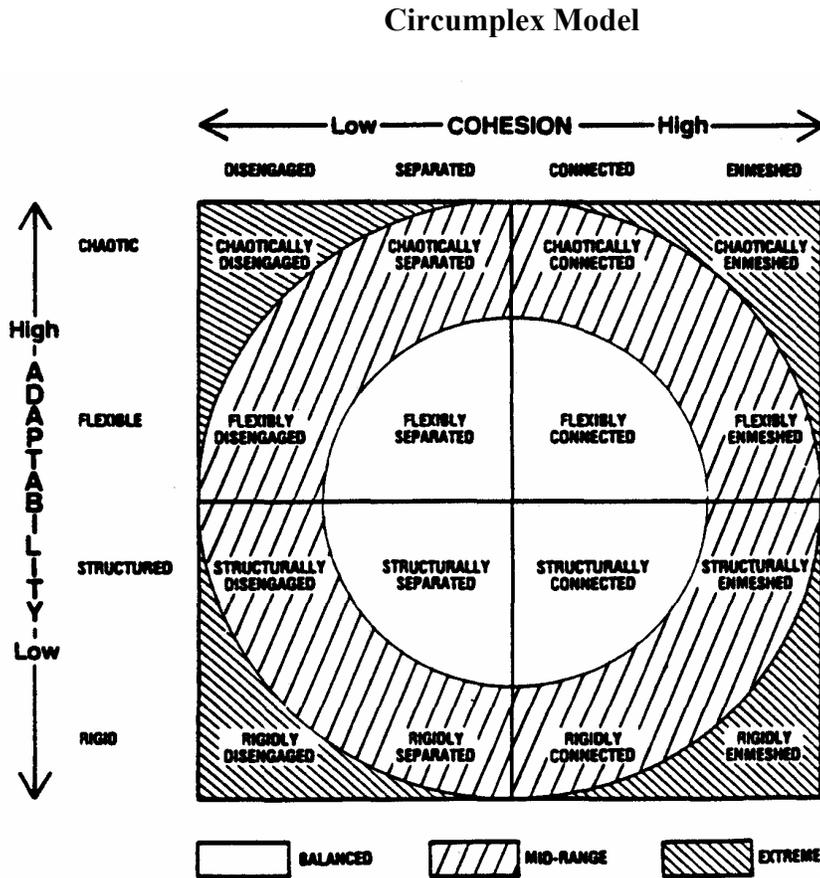
The third and final dimension of the model is communication. The communication dimension is not represented graphically on the model, and is considered a facilitating dimension. Communication is used to determine the families' ability to move within the other two dimensions, flexibility and cohesion. The higher the level of effective communication, the more likely it is that a family will be able to move through the model. Communication deals with the families' ability to listen to one another, engage in self-disclosure, and their ability to stay focused on the conversation (Olson 1999).

Family stability within the model is determined by the families' position within the four levels of cohesion and flexibility. Olson states that families that fall to either extreme of either dimension can have trouble functioning properly (Olson 1999).

By combining the two graphically represented dimensions sixteen family types are identified. Families that have an unbalanced family type are families that fall into either extreme of both dimensions. These families are classified as chaotically disengaged, chaotically enmeshed, rigidly disengaged, and rigidly enmeshed. These are the most unstable family types and fall at the outermost portion of the model. Next are families who fall into either extreme of only one of the dimensions, and are mid-range within the other. These families are classified as flexibly disengaged, chaotically separated, chaotically connected, flexibly enmeshed, structurally enmeshed, rigidly connected, rigidly separated, and structurally disengaged. These families are considered mid-range families and are located between the balanced and unbalanced areas of the model. Finally the most balanced family types are those that fall within the middle range of both dimensions. These families are classified as flexibly separated, flexibly connected, structurally separated, and structurally connected. These family types include a balance in both dimensions, and are located directly

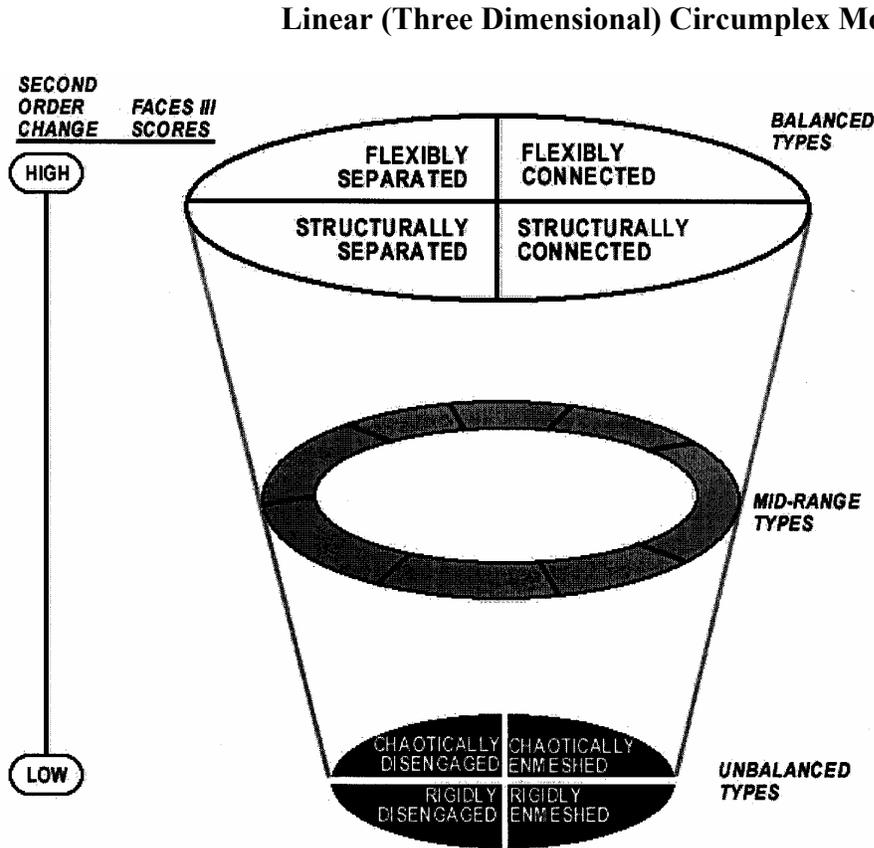
in the center of the model (Olson 1999). All classifications within the model can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. (From Olson 1992)



The theoretical model used within this research is the Linear (or Three Dimensional) Circumplex Model (Figure 2). The FACES II instrument (described in the Methodology portion of the paper), was designed for the Circumplex model, but due to its inability to accurately represent the extreme high levels of cohesion and adaptability, Olson created the Linear model to better interpret the FACES II Scores (Olson 1992).

Figure 2. (From Olson 1992)



To eliminate the high extreme levels of cohesion and adaptability Olson reinterprets high scores in these dimensions from enmeshed and rigid to very connected, and very flexible, the new categories now representing the highest levels of family functioning. The remaining levels of cohesion and adaptability remain the same (Olson 1992). The new version of the Circumplex model also has a new look. Instead of the higher levels of functioning being represented closer to the middle of the diagram, it is stretched vertically so that the higher levels of functioning are represented at the top of the diagram.

## **Methodology**

Respondents for this study were selected from two undergraduate courses in the Sociology and Child and Family Development departments at Southwest Missouri State University. Due to time constraints this method of sampling was chosen to give the study a larger sample, in a shorter amount of time. Eighty-seven respondents were present during the administration of the surveys, and all of the respondents completed the surveys. Students not present in class during the administration of the surveys were not included in the sample. This allowed the sampling to be completed during one administration period for each course, and eliminated the need for alternate survey administration dates, or phone interviews. These factors led to a large enough sample size for the demands of the research project, and allowed for a 100% return rate for the surveys. The courses selected were based on two factors; diversity of students, and ease of administering surveys. The primary course that was selected, which consisted of approximately 75% of the respondents included in this research, was chosen because of its classification as an introductory course which is taken by students in all areas of study at the University, and because of the availability to administer surveys within the course. The second course was chosen because of the availability to administer the surveys within the course, and to increase the sample size. Once the courses were selected the professors were approached and asked if they would allow the researcher class time to administer the surveys. The surveys were completed during scheduled class periods within both classes, and were returned to the researcher when completed.

Two separate measures were utilized within this research, both designed to gather information about their family of origin. First, respondents were asked to fill out a thirteen item survey constructed by the researcher to gather religious information about their family of

origin. Within the context of this research, family of origin refers to those members of the immediate family who resided in the home during the respondents' adolescent years.

Immediate family members include Father, Mother, and Siblings. Respondents were asked questions determining religious affiliation, and religiosity. This research defines religiosity solely based on religious participation rates. These rates can be broken into two main categories, individual church attendance rates and family religious participation rates.

Religious affiliation is defined as the religious organization that the family member was a member of, participated in, or was raised in. Individual church attendance rates are defined as; how often each family member attends regular church services. The final component of religiosity is family religious participation rates. This category can be divided into three subcategories; family church attendance rates, family attendance rates at other religious activities, and family prayer rates. Family church attendance refers to the frequency of attendance in church when the majority of the family members are present. Family attendance rates to other religious activities include plays, bible studies, prayer groups, and any other religiously related activity other than regular church service. Finally family prayer rates deal with the frequency the majority of the family prays together, and includes prayer before meals, prayers during crises, and any other prayer occurring between the majority of family members.

The second measure used was the FACES II instrument developed by D. H. Olson. This instrument was developed to assess levels of adaptability and cohesion, and allow researchers to place families into the Circumplex model. As noted in the theory section FACES II was developed for the curvilinear scoring method used in the Circumplex model, but several studies found that FACES II failed to capture the high extremes of cohesion and adaptability (Olson 1999). This limitation led to the instruments being scored according to a linear scoring method, and analyzed using the Three Dimensional Family Circumplex Model

(Walsh 2003). The instrument is a thirty item questionnaire in which respondents rate their family on each of the questions according to the provided five point scale; almost never = 1, once in a while = 2, sometimes = 3, frequently = 4, and almost always = 5. The instrument is divided into two scales; one examining cohesion and the other adaptability. The cohesion portion of the instrument consists of sixteen items, and the adaptability portion consists of fourteen items.

The FACES II portion of the surveys was scored first utilizing the scoring procedures provided with the instrument. Respondents received a family type score within both cohesion and adaptability according to their responses on the FACES II instrument. The scores for adaptability and cohesion were combined and averaged to yield a final family type score. For instance a respondent that scored six on the cohesion portion of the instrument and four on the adaptability portion would have a family type score of five, and would fall into the Moderately Balanced category. Surveys were then separated into groups based on their responses to specific questions about the families' religious affiliation and participation. Family type scores were then averaged, and compared to the averages of the other groups. This process was repeated for each of the religion questions analyzed.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Religious Affiliation**

Overall the effect of religious affiliation on levels of family functioning when the affiliation is the same between both parents seems to be fairly minor in comparison to interfaith marriages. When examining the family type scores obtained from the surveys, families in which the religious affiliation of both parents were the same, no matter what the religion, yielded an average score of 4.92, which places them just below the moderately

balanced category and into the mid-range category. In comparison, families in which the religious affiliation of the parents was different yielded an average score of 4.32, slightly lower than intra-faith families, but still within the mid-range category. When examining each specific religious affiliation, or combination of affiliations, there are more significant differences. Within intra-faith marriages, Baptists showed the highest levels of family functioning with an average score of 5.25 placing them in the moderately balanced category. Catholics and Lutherans also fell into the moderately balanced category with average scores of 5.16 and 5.13 respectively. Families that indicated both parents' religion as Christian fell into the mid-range category with an average score of 4.25. The lowest score for an intra-faith group of families was that of Presbyterian families with an average score of 3.75 placing them in the lower end of the mid-range category. Within interfaith marriages sufficient data was obtained for three types of non-homogamous unions. The first type includes unions between one parent of any religious affiliation, and the other parent claiming no religious affiliation. This group averaged 4.93 on the family type scale, and fell between Methodist unions, and Christian unions. Families that identified one parent as belonging to the Catholic faith and the other Baptist scored on average 3.63, slightly higher than unions between Catholics and all other religions which scored the lowest with an average score of 3.31. Generally the data suggests that intra-faith families are more balanced than interfaith families. (Table 1)

This conclusion is supported by studies performed by Landis (1949), Bumpass and Sweet (1972), and Lehrer and Chiswick (1993). Landis' study determined that marriages between Catholics and Protestants had a higher rate of divorce than marriages between couples of the same faith. Bumpass and Sweet in their 1972 study also state that Protestant/Catholic unions are significantly less stable than those of Protestant/Protestant, or Catholic/Catholic unions. Lehrer and Chiswick in their article note that "religious heterogamy is generally associated with a higher likelihood of marital dissolution."

The highest average score collected within the data came from unions between parents of which neither claimed any religious affiliation with an average score of 5.40.

Table 1:

**Religious Affiliation**

Family Type							
Extreme		Mid-Range		Moderately Balanced		Balanced	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Affiliation(s)		Average Score		Number of Families		Family Type	
Baptist		5.25		10		Moderately Balanced	
Catholic		5.16		22		Moderately Balanced	
Lutheran		5.13		4		Moderately Balanced	
Methodist		5.10		5		Moderately Balanced	
Christian		4.25		6		Mid-Range	
Presbyterian		3.75		4		Mid-Range	
None		5.40		5		Moderately Balanced	
INTERMARRIAGE							
All Faiths / None		4.93		7		Mid-Range	
Catholic / Baptist		3.63		4		Mid-Range	
Catholic / All Other Faiths		3.31		8		Mid-Range	

**Church Attendance**

The rate of church attendance for mothers, fathers, and both parents seemed to have a small effect on family functioning. In family situations where the mother attended church at least yearly, regardless of the fathers' rate of attendance, scores were higher than if the mother never attended. Families in which the mother attended church weekly scored an average of 4.87 on the family type scale. This figure was slightly lower than that of families reporting mothers attending monthly with an average score of 5.56, and slightly higher than families whose mothers attended yearly with an average score of 4.25. Families which reported the mothers' church attendance as never, scored an average of 3.94. This suggests that the

mothers' rate of church attendance has a positive effect on family functioning as long as the mother attends church at least yearly.

The results for the fathers' attendance rates, regardless of the mothers' attendance rates, were closer across the categories. Fathers who attended church weekly averaged a score of 5.00, and fathers who attended monthly averaged 4.64. Slightly lower were families who reported the fathers' attendance to be either yearly or never, both scoring on average 4.53 on the family type scale. These results suggest that the fathers' rate of attendance is not quite as important to levels of family functioning as the mothers' rate of attendance. The variation in scores for mothers who attend monthly and mothers who attend never is 1.62 points on the scale while the difference between fathers who attend weekly, and fathers who never attend is only .47 points. Pending a test of statistical significance, this could suggest that although families whose fathers attend church more have higher levels of family functioning, the fathers' rate of attendance is not as important a factor on family functioning levels as the mothers'.

When examining the rates for the attendance of both parents together the results suggest that combined attendance rates do have an effect on levels of family functioning. This conclusion supports research performed in 1997 by Call and Heaton. Their study determined that "when both spouses attend church regularly, the couple has the lowest risk of divorce." Families reporting both parents attending weekly or monthly scored, on average, higher than families reporting both parents attending yearly or never with scores of 5.03 and 6.13 versus 4.28 and 4.13 respectively (Table 2).

The higher scores on table 2 are located in the upper half of the diagram indicating once again the importance of the mothers' attendance rates in levels of family functioning. With the exception of families whose mothers attend weekly and fathers attend monthly all scores are an average of at least 5.03, whereas the highest score on the bottom half being an

average score of 4.28 for families in which both parents attend yearly. The highest score within the table belongs to families in which both parents attended church monthly. This finding supports a “rationing of religion” explanation in which a moderated amount of religious attendance yields a higher family functioning score. Boxes containing 0 / N/A indicate combinations of parental attendance for which no data were collected.

Table 2:

**Church Attendance Rates**

		<b>Fathers Attendance Rate</b>				
		Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Never	
<b>Mothers Attendance Rate</b>	Weekly	$\frac{33}{5.03}$	$\frac{6}{4.00}$	$\frac{5}{5.20}$	$\frac{4}{5.75}$	$\frac{48}{4.87}$
	Monthly	$\frac{0}{N/A}$	$\frac{4}{6.13}$	$\frac{4}{5.50}$	$\frac{0}{N/A}$	$\frac{8}{5.56}$
	Yearly	$\frac{0}{N/A}$	$\frac{0}{N/A}$	$\frac{9}{4.28}$	$\frac{47}{4.21}$	$\frac{56}{4.25}$
	Never	$\frac{0}{N/A}$	$\frac{0}{N/A}$	$\frac{1}{2.50}$	$\frac{8}{4.13}$	$\frac{9}{3.94}$
		$\frac{33}{5.00}$	$\frac{10}{4.64}$	$\frac{19}{4.53}$	$\frac{59}{4.53}$	

\*  $\frac{\text{Number of Families}}{\text{Average Score}}$

Whereas the previous data examined each individual parents rates of church attendance, and both parents’ rates together, data examining the entire families’ attendance rates, including children, was also collected. These results seemed to indicate that the rates of church attendance for families as a whole did not seem to have a large effect on levels of

family functioning. Families who reported attending church weekly scored an average of 4.98 on the family type scale and families reporting monthly church attendance scored an average of 4.63. Falling between weekly and monthly attendance were families who reported church attendance as being yearly with a score of 4.86, and the lowest average score came from families reporting never attending church as a family with an average score of 4.21. These results seem to indicate that the attendance of the entire family plays at best a small role increasing family functioning levels.

### **Attendance in Other Religious Activities**

In addition to Church attendance respondents were also asked how often their families attended other religious activities together, not including church services. Families that attended other religious activities on a weekly basis scored, on average, higher than families who attended other religious activities less. The families that reported their “other” attendance rates as weekly scored 6.13, which was 1.20 points higher than the average for families who attended other activities on a monthly basis with an average score of 4.93. Families reporting their attendance to other religious activities as being yearly or never scored slightly lower than those reporting monthly attendance, with average scores of 4.50 and 4.63 respectively. These results suggest that families who engage in extra religious activities are much more likely to have higher levels of family functioning.

### **Family Prayer**

Another aspect of religion that was asked of respondents was the frequency their family prayed together. The results of this question indicated that family prayer could have a positive impact on levels of family functioning (Chart 1). Families that prayed together at least monthly showed higher levels of family functioning than those who prayed yearly, or

never. Families indicating they prayed together daily scored an average of 5.02, slightly higher than families reporting weekly prayer who scored on average 5.00. Families reporting monthly prayer together averaged the highest scores on the family functioning scale with an average of 5.10. Families who prayed together yearly scored 4.61, and scoring the lowest were families who never prayed together with an average score of 4.39.

Chart 1:

**Prayer Rates for Families**



These findings lead to the assumption that prayer is a beneficial element in a family setting. Families that pray more often are more stable. This factor could be attributed to prayer assisting families with communication, and allowing them to be more open with one another, thereby increasing levels of cohesion, and in turn increasing family functioning levels. Another possible explanation is proposed by Butler, Stout, and Gardner (2002). They state “For religious couples, prayer appears to be a common self-intervention during conflict, used with some measure of success.” This hypothesis would support the findings due to the fact that more effective conflict resolution would lead to higher levels of family functioning.

**Inter-religious Support**

One of the questions respondents were asked involved parental support of their spouses' religion if different from their own. Only two of the respondents indicated that neither parent "participated in, or was passively accepting" of their spouses' religion. Both of these families scored 2.5 on the family functioning scale placing them into the extreme category. This category indicates a family with very low levels of family functioning. One respondent stated within the survey that their parents divorced when the respondent was a child, but that the respondent knew that religious differences were a factor in the divorce. Even with the small number of respondents indicating that neither parent was supportive of their spouses religion, the data suggests that if neither parent can accept the others religion, it has a major negative affect on the families level of functioning.

### **Conclusions and Implications for Further Research**

The data collected from the surveys in this study seems to mirror the findings of previous studies. The results however must be interpreted carefully due to the small number of families falling into some of the categories. For example the information collected on many of the homogamous unions contained only results from a few families. This sample may not be representative of the actual population. Secondly, surveys were only completed by one of the children in the household. To better obtain accurate scores on the FACES II instrument, all family members should fill out the instrument.

One of the things this research has concluded is that interfaith marriages have lower levels of family functioning than most intra-faith unions. This could be due to differences within their religious beliefs that lead to irresolvable conflicts within the marriage. These differences affect levels of cohesion, and in turn lower the families' level of functioning. The differences in religious beliefs are not found within intra-faith marriages since both partners

hold to the same religious beliefs. Without the conflict in beliefs intra-faith couples have one less hurdle to tackle, and may even find that their similarity in religious beliefs is an asset to their levels of cohesion and communication, which lead to higher levels of family functioning.

With regard to attendance rates, the mothers' rate of attendance seems to be more connected to levels of family functioning than the fathers'. As Table 2 shows, if the mother is attending church weekly, and the father never attends church, the family still maintains high levels of family functioning. Another interesting point that is found in Table 2 is the fact that there was only one family that indicated that the father attended church more often than the mother. That family scored 2.5 on the family functioning scale placing them in the extreme category, indicating a family with low levels of family functioning. This score could be related to the mothers low attendance rates, but more research is needed to determine if this is the case. Rates of attendance for other religious activities seemed to indicate that the higher the rate of attendance at other religious activities, the higher the levels of family functioning. This could be attributed to the family doing something different together as a family. Church attendance is often routine, and a weekly event. If the family attends special religious activities together that are not routine they are spending more quality time with each other. This in turn would raise the levels of cohesion and also the families' level of functioning.

Prayer also seemed to be a factor in levels of family functioning. Families that pray together invest emotional dependence and trust on those they pray with. This increases their cohesion with one another and also their level of functioning.

Finally, monthly figures seemed to be high in many of the areas. This could possibly be due to the "rationing" of religion. For many families too much religion could be as harmful to levels of family functioning as too little religion. Families who responded that they participate in religion monthly could have a better balance of religion in their lives that allows them more freedom while still participating in religion regularly.

In general higher levels of most of the factors involving religion that this study has considered have a positive effect on family functioning. Although the relationships are minor, and the difference between the variables is small, there still seems to be a mild correlation between most of the variables and levels of family functioning. One observation that could be made is that many of the variables can increase levels of closeness between family members, and an increased closeness leads to increased levels of functioning.

The idea that religion affects the family is not a new idea, but is one that demands more attention. Further research is needed in the area of religion and levels of family functioning. Further analysis of the relationship between the variables could lead to stronger support for religions influence on family functioning levels. A closer examination of the aspects of religiosity would also be beneficial to the field. Studies could examine different aspects of religiosity, such as the intensity of a belief in a higher power or the amount of personal devotion, and compare those aspects to levels of family functioning to determine which is a greater predictor of high levels of functioning. Overall, research in the area of religion and family functioning levels is increasing in importance and attention, and in the years to come there will certainly be more research in the area.

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