Family Worship Patterns and their Correlation with Adolescent Behavior and Beliefs

JERRY W. LEE†
GAIL T. RICE†
V. BAILEY GILLESPIE†

We examine behaviors involved in family worship, how these behaviors cluster together into specific patterns of family worship, and how these patterns of family worship relate to the behaviors and beliefs of adolescents attending Seventh-day Adventist schools. Seven patterns of family worship were detected by cluster analysis of questionnaires completed by 7,658 Seventh-day Adventist youth, grades 6 through 12. Worship patterns that actively involved youth in reading, praying, and sharing their religious experience were rated as more meaningful and interesting and were associated with higher levels of Active Faith (a factor score). Youth in families with worship patterns that did not actively involve the youth were even lower on Active Faith than youth whose families had no worship. However, No Worship youth were highest on Materialism/Legalism and Alcohol/Drug Use. With one exception, worship patterns with high youth involvement were associated with lower Alcohol/Drug Use and lower Materialism/Legalism. Youth in the Shared Worship group, in which every family member participated in every phase of worship every day, were high on Active Faith but also relatively high on Materialism/Legalism, and Alcohol/Drug use suggesting a pattern of compulsive behavior.

"The family that prays together, stays together." The large number of books published about or for family devotions (at least 418 books in Books in Print, 1995) suggests widespread belief in this cliché and that many religious families engage in family worship, perhaps on a daily basis. Yet literature reviews examining family variables and religiosity mention nothing about family worship (Jenkins 1991; Neuman 1992; Clark and Worthington 1990). Strahan (1994) defines family worship as "regular rituals of togetherness" where sharing occurs among family members as they discuss the importance of values and religious faith. Family worship in many Christian families involves one or more family members reading a passage from the Bible or from some devotional literature. Discussion of what is read and prayer often follow.

Some researchers have examined family worship and marriage. Dudley and Kosinski (1990) reported family worship was one of several strong predictors of marital satisfaction. Earlier, Gruner (1985) had reported an association of marital adjustment with frequency of prayer and Bible reading in four religious groups. He did not indicate, however, whether prayer was limited to private prayer or whether family prayer or worship activities might be included.

† Jerry W. Lee is a professor of Health Promotion and Education, School of Public Health, Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, CA 92350. E-mail: jlee@sph.llu.edu.
† Gail T. Rice is an assistant professor of Health Promotion and Education, School of Public Health, Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, CA 92350.
† V. Bailey Gillespie is a professor of Theology and Christian Personality, School of Religion, John Hancock Center for Youth Ministry, La Sierra University, Riverside, CA 92515.

Erickson (1992) tested a model of religious development that included family devotions as one component of what he called “adolescent’s home religious behavior.” He combined family worship with private religious activity of youth and did not examine specific patterns of family devotions. Thus, Erickson’s conclusion that positive outcomes accompany religious home behavior could not identify the specific contribution of family devotions.

Few studies address the specific impact of family worship on adolescents. Those that do seem to examine only correlates of worship frequency. Dudley, Mutch, and Cruise (1987) reported that higher frequency of family worship was associated with less alcohol and cigarette use in Seventh-day Adventist adolescents. Strahan (1994), using a similar religious group in Australia, found that psychological adjustment, reduced risk behaviors such as alcohol consumption and suicide, and increased religious faith accompanied higher frequency of family worship. Strahan indicated, “While the results present an overwhelming support for the practice of family worship, it must be noted that the quality of relationships is an important aspect of family customs (italics added).” It is interesting that Strahan talks about the “how” of family worship, yet only statistically examined “how often.” Strahan did not examine whether worship content, youth activity in the worship experience, or perceived meaningfulness were related to youth outcomes.

Family worship predicts parental marital satisfaction (Dudley and Kosinski 1990). Worship is associated with better youth psychological adjustment and lower substance abuse (Strahan 1994). Youth are more likely to embrace traditional Christian values if they do not engage in substance abuse and have parents who are satisfied with their marriage (Gruner 1985). Thus, it might be expected that family devotions would predict positive youth outcomes.

Social Cognitive Learning Theory (Bandura 1986) suggests that youth learn through modeling behaviors. During family worship, parents may model prayer and witnessing, and through storytelling or narratives of their own religious experience symbolically model behavior consistent with their religious belief. Bandura suggests that actual or symbolically modeled behavior is more likely to be learned when it is repeated, when modeled by multiple sources (e.g., both parents), when attention is high, and when the target of the modeling (in this case, the youth) engages in reproductions of the modeled behavior. Thus, if both parents are involved in frequent family worship, if a youth is actively involved in the worship process, themselves reading devotional material, praying, and talking about their own faith, then we might expect that their attention would be more engaged and that they would reproduce at least some behavior modeled by their parents. This would lead them to endorse active faith attitudes and behaviors. Numerous others (e.g., Meyers and Jones 1993; Harmin 1994) have suggested that active involvement in an activity (in this case reading, discussion, and prayer) will increase interest, motivation, and learning.

Stover and Stover endorse the use of biblical storytelling in child therapy. They indicate that biblical storytelling, using open-ended questions, can serve “as a powerful healing resources for those who work with children and their families (1994: 35).” If Stover and Stover are correct, family worship might have “healing effects,” since family worship often involves telling and discussing Bible stories. Presumably such stories symbolically model positive behaviors that the youth may then incorporate into their own behavior.

Not only the content of the worship experience, but also the type of approach used could influence youth outcomes. Stover and Stover suggest using open-ended questions in storytelling to encourage personalization. It might be that youth who share personal meaning during family worship experiences are developing the kind of understanding based on interaction of ideas and experience that Kolb (1984) describes as critical to learning. Family worship which encourages exploring and sharing personal insights may increase the likelihood of internalizing and applying concepts to daily living.
In this research, we examine behaviors involved in family worship, how these behaviors cluster together into specific patterns of family worship, and how these patterns of family worship relate to the behaviors and beliefs of adolescents attending Seventh-day Adventist schools.

**METHODS**

In 1989, 16,614 Seventh-day Adventist youth in grades 6 to 12, and their parents, teachers, and pastors completed questionnaires as part of what was called the Valuegenesis Project. Benson and Donahue (1990), Rice and Gillespie (1992) and Dudley and Gillespie (1992) provide detailed descriptions of the sample selection and study methodology. The stratified random sample from the United States and Canada (with participation rates of 57% to 79%) provided 7,658 youth who had both parents present in the home. (Limiting analysis for this study to youth with both parents present in the home was necessary because data on several key questions describing parental worship behavior were always missing for youth who had only one parent in the home).

Seventh-day Adventists are conservative Protestant Christians who emphasize application of biblical principles to daily living. They value healthful living and are careful about diet, exercise, sleep, stress reduction, and avoidance of substance abuse. Adventists take seriously the historical precedent set by early church leaders, one of which was to nurture and educate youth in the importance of Christian living. Worldwide, Adventists operate the largest Protestant school system and are known for their extensive medical work. Theologically, their primary differences from other conservative Protestant groups involve worship on the seventh-day Sabbath instead of Sunday, and belief that at the second coming of Christ (which will occur relatively soon), those not accepting the grace of Christ will be destroyed rather than eternally suffering in hell.

**The Questionnaire**

The youth questionnaire asked 464 questions requiring more than 500 responses. Many items were combined into scales such as vertical and horizontal faith, orthodoxy, self-esteem, and family warmth. The questions and scales used in this report are in three categories:

1. **Family Worship Behavior.** Fifteen items describing family worship: frequency of family worship (1 item), frequency of prayer, reading something, and talking about God by father, mother, and youth respectively (9 items), frequency of family talking “together about some issue or idea” (1 item), and youth judgments regarding whether their family worship was “interesting,” “meaningful,” “the same every time,” or “a waste of time” (4 items).

2. **Youth Outcomes.** Eight sets of factor scores including: Alcohol or Drug Use, Active Faith [Vertical Faith (love of God), Horizontal Faith (love of fellow humans), Evangelism, Altruism, Goal to Serve Others, Piety], Acceptance of Adventism, Anti-Social Behavior, Emotional Health, Dating and Sex, Materialism/Legalism, and Exercise/Care-of-Body. These were derived from a factor analysis of 34 items and scales. (Details of this factor analysis are available from the authors).

3. **Control Variables.** Fourteen items and scales that served as control variables: gender, age, family income, place of residence (rural, suburban, urban, etc.), ethnicity, family warmth, family limits, enforcement of family standards, parental education, and youth’s perception of the religiousness of the mother and father. Enforcement of standards included three scales:
Against popular culture: wearing jewelry, listening to rock music, dancing, attending movie theaters, engaging in competitive sports, wearing wedding rings, drinking caffeine-containing beverages. Although none of these activities bars a person from church membership, many Adventists have avoided them.

Against use of drugs: tobacco, beer and liquor, and illegal drugs.

In favor of Adventist standards: sex only in marriage, not eating unclean meats, observing the seventh-day Sabbath, wearing modest clothing, exercising daily.

Standard enforcement scales were formed on the basis of an earlier factor analysis by Benson and Donahue (1992) and had alphas of .86, .86, and .71 respectively.

**Dependability of Youth Reports of Worship Behavior**

We attempted to ascertain the validity of youth data by comparing responses with those of parents. Valuegenesis researchers surveyed 1,956 parents of responding youth. We could match 935 of these parents with their children. These parents and children substantially agree on general frequency of worship \( r = .69 \). We conclude that the youth reports were valid.

**RESULTS**

**Cluster Analysis of Worship Patterns**

Results from a random subset of 5% of respondents using hierarchical cluster analysis suggested a five-, six-, or seven-cluster solution. Each of these was applied to the entire data set using K-means cluster analysis. The seven-cluster solution produced groups with the most interpretable pattern, so we selected this solution for further analysis. Figure 1 shows the mean response on the 11 worship behavior variables for each of the seven patterns of worship detected.

The labels we have given each pattern and the percentage of families represented by each pattern are: No Worship (27%), Infrequent Father Led (13%), Infrequent Mother/Youth Led (9%), Mother Led (7%), Father Led (15%), Rotated (14%) and Shared (15%). These labels seem self-explanatory except in three cases. Infrequent Mother/Youth Led was given this label because fathers showed less participation than either mother or youth, the youth's participation was nearly as high as the mother's, and worship occurred infrequently. This contrasts with the Mother Led group for which family worship was also infrequent but with the mother as the primary participant. Shared Worship was given this label because family members in this group showed the highest overall frequency of worship and the highest levels of all specific worship behaviors. The Rotated Worship group was so labeled because overall worship frequency was nearly the same as that of the Shared Worship group; yet their specific worship behavior frequency was much lower, although equally distributed among father, mother, and youth. It appears that worship occurs nearly every day in this group, but that worship duties are rotated among family members.

African-Americans and Hispanics were more likely to report Shared Worship than other groups. Whites were most likely to report No Worship. Differences for gender, though statistically significant, did not exceed 2%. Place of residence was significantly related to worship style. The largest differences were that the Shared Worship style occurred more frequently in large cities (population greater than 250,000) and Father Led in towns 2,500 to 9,999 in population. The Father Led style was also more likely to be reported by older youth and the Rotated style by younger youth.
FIGURE 1
RADAR PLOTS OF 11 VARIABLES DESCRIBING FAMILY WORSHIP FOR SEVEN PATTERNS OF FAMILY WORSHIP BASED ON CLUSTER ANALYSIS
Differences among worship patterns in evaluating worship. The percentages rating worship as both meaningful and interesting were: Mother Led, 51.4%; Infrequent Father Led 53.4%; Father Led, 59.1%; Rotated Participation, 78.2%; Infrequent Mother/Youth Led, 78.5%, Shared Participation, 83.5%. The group with the highest levels of youth participation rated the quality of their family worship most highly.

Differences among worship patterns on factor scores. These data were first analyzed using both gender and worship style as factors. This analysis showed gender differences among the eight factor scores but no interaction of gender and worship style. Since our focus in this study was worship style, we combined data for males and females and treated gender as a covariate. The multivariate test of group differences was strongly significant (F(48, 36,552) = 28.62, p < .0000001). There were significant differences on all eight of the factor scores even after adjusting for eight significance tests using the Bonferroni procedure.

After adjusting for the control variables, multivariate significance remained quite strong (F(48, 36,444) = 11.41, p < .0000001), but only three of the factor scores had significant differences after Bonferroni adjustment (Active Faith, Materialism/Legalism, and Alcohol/Drug Use). Adjusted means for this analysis are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
ADJUSTED MEAN FACTOR SCORES FOR EACH WORSHIP STYLE*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No Worship</th>
<th>Infrequent Mother/Youth Led</th>
<th>Infrequent Father Led</th>
<th>Mother Led</th>
<th>Father Led</th>
<th>Rotated</th>
<th>Shared</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active Faith</td>
<td>-0.19b</td>
<td>0.36d</td>
<td>-0.19bc</td>
<td>-0.30a</td>
<td>-0.27a</td>
<td>0.11c</td>
<td>0.50d</td>
<td>0.00000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materialism/Legalism</td>
<td>0.06a</td>
<td>-0.13ab</td>
<td>-0.08ab</td>
<td>0.03a</td>
<td>-0.15bc</td>
<td>-0.25c</td>
<td>-0.08ab</td>
<td>0.00000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol/Drug Use</td>
<td>0.02ab</td>
<td>-0.05ab</td>
<td>-0.10b</td>
<td>-0.13b</td>
<td>-0.14b</td>
<td>-0.12b</td>
<td>0.03a</td>
<td>0.00009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-social Behavior</td>
<td>-0.17a</td>
<td>-0.06ab</td>
<td>-0.08ab</td>
<td>-0.03ab</td>
<td>-0.02b</td>
<td>-0.04ab</td>
<td>-0.03ab</td>
<td>0.00902</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Health</td>
<td>-0.01a</td>
<td>0.06a</td>
<td>-0.02a</td>
<td>0.02a</td>
<td>0.13a</td>
<td>0.11a</td>
<td>0.04065</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denominational/</td>
<td>0.04a</td>
<td>0.19a</td>
<td>0.06a</td>
<td>0.14a</td>
<td>0.09a</td>
<td>0.16a</td>
<td>0.19a</td>
<td>0.04422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctrinal Acceptance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise/Care of Body</td>
<td>0.11a</td>
<td>0.16a</td>
<td>0.06a</td>
<td>0.10a</td>
<td>0.18a</td>
<td>0.18a</td>
<td>0.20a</td>
<td>0.04835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating and Sex</td>
<td>0.00a</td>
<td>0.05a</td>
<td>-0.01a</td>
<td>-0.05a</td>
<td>-0.03a</td>
<td>-0.02a</td>
<td>0.07a</td>
<td>0.19006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = 1,601

* Note: Variables sorted high to low on strength of effect. Adjusted for age, gender, ethnicity, income, residence, mother and father’s education, mother and father’s religiosity, family warmth, family limits, and family enforcement of rules against drugs and popular culture, and in favor of Adventist culture. Means in a single row that do not share a superscript are significantly different at (p<.05 by Tukey’s HSD test. For example, for anti-social behavior the No Worship group has a superscript of “a” and the Father Led group a superscript of “b”. They do not have a common superscript, meaning that they differ significantly. All the other groups have a superscript of “ab”. They share the “a” superscript with the No Worship group and the “b” superscript with the Father Led group, meaning that they do not differ significantly from either.

The Shared, Infrequent Mother/Youth, and Rotated patterns (in that order) have the highest Active Faith scores. The lowest scores are in the Mother- and Father Led groups. It is interesting that the scores in these last two groups are even lower on the Active Faith factor score than are the No Worship groups. Materialism/Legalism is highest in the No Worship group, but second highest in the Mother Led group. It is lowest in the Rotated style group. Alcohol/Drug Use seems to follow a pattern similar to Materialism/Legalism.

Discriminate Analysis Results.

To obtain a clearer idea of what differentiates the groups, we performed a discriminant analysis using worship-group membership as the dependent variable and the eight
factors as independent variables. To eliminate the effects of the control variables from the analysis, we first regressed each factor on the control variables, then calculated the residual for each factor score after regression. These residual factor scores were used in the discriminant analysis rather than using the original factor scores. Dimension reduction analysis suggested the existence of only two statistically significant dimensions differentiating the seven groups. The correlation of each factor with each of the two discriminant functions is found in Table 2.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discriminant Function Analysis Structure Matrix*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Function 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Faith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materialism/Legalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol/Drug Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-social Behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denominational/Doctrinal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise/Care of Body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating and Sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of Function</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Numbers in function columns are correlations between discriminating variables and canonical discriminant functions.

The first function discriminating the groups is Active Faith. Materialism/Legalism and Alcohol/Drug Use seem to dominate the second function although Materialism/Legalism is clearly the stronger. Calculated group centroids (means) and 95% confidence intervals for each worship group on the two dimensions are shown in Figure 2.

The Shared, Infrequent Mother/Youth, and Rotated groups are noticeably higher on Active Faith than are the other groups although the Rotated group is reliably lower on Active Faith than the Shared or Infrequent Mother/Youth group. The Mother Led and Father Led groups are even lower on Active Faith than the No Worship group. On Materialism/Legalism with Alcohol/Drug use, the No Worship group was clearly highest, followed by the Shared Worship group, the group that was highest on Active Faith. The lowest on this dimension were the Rotated, Father Led and Infrequent Mother/Youth groups.

**Discussion**

Seven patterns of family worship practice were found, and these were shown to relate to differences in Active Faith, Materialism/Legalism, and Alcohol/Drug Use. Active Faith is highest among youths whose families have a worship pattern that involves the youth. The group with the three highest scores on this dimension were those with the Shared, Infrequent Mother/Youth, and the Rotated patterns of worship. All three of the groups share a relatively high level of youth participation. Mother and Father Led Worship — infrequent worship with low youth reading, sharing, and praying — are associated with even lower Active Faith scores than occurred the No Worship group. Possibly worship activities that do little to actively involve the youth, lower the youth's maturing faith. Strahan indicates that some worship experience is compulsory, boring and meaningless. "As such," he says "it is likely to generate resentment" (1994: 11).
That youth involvement in worship activities would be associated with increased youth faith agrees with theory discussed earlier. Active learning, known to be important in enhancing learning (Bonwell and Eison 1991; Meyers and Jones 1993; Harmin 1994), would seem to be effective in the transference of faith as well. Youth involvement and participation in worship is much more important than the mere presence of worship in the family experience. At first, it seems odd that lower levels of faith are associated with Mother- or Father Led worship than with no family worship at all. One might expect that modeling carried out by parents having worship might transmit a sense of the unimportance of faith in Christian living, and it was precisely in the Mother- and Father Led groups that youth were least likely to rate worship as interesting or meaningful. Bandura (1986) has pointed out that observational learning cannot take place unless the observers attend to the content of the behavior modeled. He has also suggested that the affective valence surrounding the activity observed can influence the outcome of observational learning. Thus, we might expect that a negative affective valence surrounding the occasion of worship might lead to a negative affective valence attached to religious beliefs and behaviors.

The finding that surprised us the most was that among those families that had any type of family worship, the youth whose families were in the Shared Worship group (the group whose youth reported the highest Active Faith) were also those who had the highest Materialism/Legalism and higher Alcohol/Drug Use scores. How could it be that young people who were involved in helping activities and personal devotion also value money and material possessions? One obvious possibility that we explored relates to the Shared
Worship group being either lower or higher on income than other families. If they were lower, then perhaps deprivation would account for their wanting to have many nice things as a goal. If higher than average, perhaps overexposure to material blessings has left them wanting more. However, there were no significant differences among the youth in the seven worship style groups regarding reported family income and income was statistically controlled in the final analyses.

Biblical examples, such as Abraham, Job, or Nicodemus, suggest a relationship between serving God and enjoying material wealth. It is conceivable that within a conservative Christian community who take seriously biblical support for regular family sharing of worship activities, there will also be those families who believe that those who obey and honor the Lord will be rewarded with worldly goods. Yet there seems to be no clear reason why this relationship would then exist for the Shared Worship group but not for the Rotated Worship group. Perhaps, the attitude that everyone must participate in every phase of family worship every day is a manifestation of an obsessive-compulsive pattern that leads to an active (though obsessive) faith but also to obsessive tendencies about gaining possessions, keeping of the law, and, when it does occur, the use of alcohol or drugs. A closer examination of the pattern of alcohol/drug use provided some support for this notion. Variation on the alcohol/drug use factor score was higher for the Shared Worship than for the Rotated Worship (1.02 v. 0.51, $F(869,844) = 2.00, p < .0000001$). Also, while there was only a small difference between these two groups in ever using alcohol or drugs (77.6% Rotated, 77.0% Shared), when the individuals in the Shared Worship group did use drugs they were 71% more likely to report heavier use of some substance than youth in the Rotated Worship group (4.8% v. 2.8%, $\chi^2(n = 2,105, df 2) = 7.0, p = .031$). Heavier use was defined as 20 or more times per year for alcohol, cocaine, marijuana, or binge drinking, or more than several times a week for cigarettes. Shedler, Mayman, and Manis's (1993) concept of illusions of mental health may be relevant in this regard. They suggest that those who score well on most mental health measures may be of two kinds: those with true mental health and those with the illusion of mental health. An interesting question for further research is whether those scoring high on self-reported Active Faith might be further divided into those for whom faith is an integral and healthy part of their lives and those for whom faith-related attitudes and behavior are based on an unhealthy obsession — an illusion of faith.

The data show that worship patterns in which worship occurs frequently and in which youth are actively involved in worship are associated with positive youth outcomes. Lowered concern for material things and lowered alcohol and drug use occurred in two of the three groups with frequent worship in which youth were actively involved. Active faith, including reported helping of others, was higher in all three of the groups in which youth frequently read, prayed, and talked about God during family worship. Yet frequent worship, by itself, is not associated with higher levels of faith. In fact, patterns of frequent family worship without active youth involvement were associated with the lowest Active Faith scores. Also, frequent family worship in which everyone participated in all worship activities every time was associated with higher materialism, legalism, and, when it did occur, drug or alcohol use. Patterns of worship associated with the most consistently positive youth outcomes involved youth directly in reading, praying, and talking about some topic or the place of God in their lives but not necessarily all three at every worship occurrence.

NOTES

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REFERENCES


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