

# An Ecosystems-Based Model for Faith-Inspired Parenting

Altaf Husain

*School of Social Work, Howard University, Washington, District of Columbia, USA*

Social workers have a professional interest in ensuring the overall well-being of children and families. It is critically important that attention be given to the role of parents in general, especially to those parents who self-identify as religious or spiritual. This article utilizes the ecosystems framework to explore faith-inspired parenting. The guiding premise is that faith traditions provide the inspiration to achieve parenting success and the proposed faith-inspired parenting model presents a starting point for social work practice with this population. The model is characterized by an authoritative parenting style and the use of induction and love-orientation. The model allows for bidirectional communication and ensures that feedback is occurring and that it is beneficial to both parent and child. Limitations of the model and directions for future research are presented.

*Keywords:* Faith, parenting, ecosystems, religious, spiritual

## INTRODUCTION

Central to the study of the family in the macro–social environment is a focus on parenting, because of the tremendous dual responsibility parents have to socialize their children while simultaneously allowing for the unfettered emergence and manifestation of each child’s own personality and character (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). Integral to the socialization curriculum is the transmission of a set of values parents would like their children to internalize that will allow their children to function optimally within the family and larger society (Fichter, 1962). Parenting practices and parenting styles have been used interchangeably in the literature, although practices refer to behaviors parents utilize in the process of socialization while styles refer to the degree of involvement or lack thereof of the parents in the children’s lives (Spera, 2005). Parenting styles also refer to the approach utilized by the parents in both regulating their children’s lives and in disciplining them (Spera, 2005). The relationship between parenting and optimal child adjustment and development has received considerable attention in the social science literature (Baumrind, 1991; Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Lees & Horvath, 2009; Sorkhabi, 2005).

More recently, there have been attempts to discern differences in parenting practices and styles according to demographic factors such as the race/ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and level of education of the parents (Sorkhabi, 2005). Little or no attention has been given to sociocultural factors such as the faith tradition of the parents (Lees & Horvath, 2009). Even then, mostly Jewish and Christian families have been studied. Less apparent in the literature is a robust discussion of

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Address correspondence to Altaf Husain, School of Social Work, Howard University, 601 Howard Place NW, Washington, DC 20012, USA. E-mail: [altaf.husain@howard.edu](mailto:altaf.husain@howard.edu)

the role of religion as the source from which self-identifying religious parents draw the values they wish to impart upon their children, the extent to which their faith inspires and regulates their parenting practices and styles, and the degree to which these parents feel compelled to achieve parenting success as a faith-based imperative.

This article focuses on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam because of the inspiration they provide to their respective adherents, in this case Jewish, Christian, and Muslim parents. These faith traditions are selected because they are rooted in monotheistic beliefs and are family-centered (Marks, 2004). Throughout the article, faith-inspired parenting refers to the conscious choice of self-identifying religious parents to draw inspiration and guidance from their respective religious traditions or faiths. *Faith-inspired parents* and *self-identifying religious parents* will also be used interchangeably in the article.

This article utilizes the ecosystems framework to explore faith-inspired parenting and the implications for social work practice. The position of the family as a bridge between the individual and society is most prominent in the ecosystems framework. The underlying premise is that each faith tradition provides both the inspiration to achieve parenting success and also the promise of achieving divine pleasure as a result of achieving parenting success. Following this introduction is a presentation of the background and significance of the topic, along with a brief discussion on defining religiousness and socialization. The next section describes the family as an ecosystem. Next, parenting styles are discussed, followed by the presentation of a proposed faith-inspired parenting model. Last, strengths and limitations of the proposed model and directions for future research are presented.

## BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Given the deep and abiding professional interest social workers have in ensuring the overall well-being of children and families, it is critically important that attention be given to the role of parents in general but in particular to those parents who self-identify as religious or spiritual. There is evidence in the social science literature of the relationship between parenting inspired by religiousness and positive outcomes in children and adolescents (Boyatzis, Dollahite, & Marks, 2006; Hardy, White, Zhang, & Ruchty, 2011; Miller & Thoresen, 2003; Myers, 1996; Skinner, Johnson, & Snyder, 2005). The peer-reviewed social work literature has examined parenting and religiousness in key areas such as adoption, kinship care, and orphan care (Belanger, Copeland, & Cheung, 2009; Coakley, Cuddeback, Buehler, & Cox, 2007; Winston, 2006). Billingsley (1992) and Schiele (2007) have written extensively about the religious orientation of African American families. The social work literature demonstrates the important role of religion in the African American community by exploring the role of faith in the adoption of African American children (Belanger et al., 2009); faith as a characteristic, among others, that promotes successful fostering of kin (Coakley et al., 2007); and how African American grandmothers turned to religion and spirituality to cope with parenting AIDS orphans (Winston, 2006). However, there is little, if any, evidence in the literature of the examination of parenting skills (Woodcock, 2003) or of the efficacy and impact of religiously inspired parenting on developmental outcomes of children.

This article examines the role of religious beliefs and values in parenting because there is evidence to indicate that for a substantial minority of Americans, religion is the single most important influence in their lives (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). As an integral component of the macro-social environment, religion and religious institutions provide substantial support to parents as the latter attempt to navigate and manage the multiple demands associated with parenting. Addressing potentially vulnerable or at-risk families, Petts (2009) asserts that "religion may also compensate for a lack of social integration and control in some families" (p. 468), risk factors that could be offset by the resources, support groups, programs, and activities provided by religious

institutions. Finally, Marks (2004) highlights the significance of the practitioner's choice to either include or exclude the role of religious influence as being a critical decision in the therapeutic process, especially for those parents self-identifying as religious.

### Defining Religiousness and Socialization

Concepts such as religiousness, spirituality, faith, and socialization are commonly used in the literature, though there is variance in the definitions presented. The terms *religiousness* (and related terms such as *religiosity*) and *spirituality*, for example, are often used interchangeably in the literature. For the purposes of this article, the focus is on religiousness. In particular, religiousness is differentiated from spirituality as follows: "religiousness concerns involvement in practices and commitment to beliefs associated with particular religious communities or ideologies, whereas spirituality is more about the individual's quest for meaning and transcendence" (Hardy et al., 2011, p. 217). A similar distinction is drawn between cognition and behavior in the discussion of faith. Garland (2002) notes that some social scientists have preferred to define faith in the realm of belief—the process by which an individual comprehends experiences and constructs meaning—while others define faith as both the process of comprehending experiences and constructing meaning and subsequently behaving based on that meaning. Hardy et al. examined the extant literature on the relationship between individual religiousness and spirituality (the authors note that these terms are often not used exclusively) and four broad areas of human functioning. Reports of higher individual religiousness predicted the following: (1) better mental and physical health, (2) greater satisfaction with life, (3) higher propensity to engage in pro-social behaviors, and (4) lesser propensity to engage in risk behaviors (Hardy et al.).

In a comprehensive review of the literature on religiousness and socialization, Spera (2005) surmises that socialization essentially is the "manner by which a child, through education, training, and observation and experience, acquires skills, motives, attitudes, and behaviors that are required for successful adaptation to a family and a culture" (p. 126). To the extent that parents in general and faith-inspired parents facilitate the achievement of a person-environment fit for their children, it is critically important that socialization be examined within the sociocultural context in which it is occurring. For self-identifying religious parents, much of the sociocultural milieu is defined and shaped by the faith tradition and associated values. In this regard, the pioneering work of Inabel Burns Lindsay in conceptualizing the sociocultural context (Brown, Gourdine, & Crewe, 2011) was echoed decades later by Ogbu (1981). He asserted that a more robust exploration of socialization goals should include an examination of the impact of the sociocultural context on how parents define competence and make decisions about the socialization of their children. To that extent, the work of Dollahite and Marks (2005) is instructive, because they delineate four behaviors or activities that are to be expected of parents' intent on socializing their children specifically to religious beliefs and practices: (1) formal teaching, (2) informal discussion, (3) role modeling, and (4) co-participation in worship attendance, prayer, and scripture study. For practitioners and researchers working with faith-inspired parents, it is important therefore to explore further the consideration of the family unit as an ecosystem whose components are defined and shaped by the religious tradition to which the family subscribes.

### The Family as an Ecosystem

Among the pioneers who advanced a model of practice that considered the understanding of the family as a unit and an integral part of the treatment of individual problems are Bowen (1978), Minuchin (1974), and Satir (1972). In particular, Satir extended the application of systems concepts such as boundaries, feedback, and roles to family therapy, emphasizing in particular

the examination of patterns of communication (or lack thereof) between family members. Self-identifying Jewish, Christian, and Muslim parents in particular will appreciate this approach for at least two reasons: (1) the insistence of their respective religious traditions on clear roles and mutual rights and responsibilities for parents and children in the immediate family environment; and (2) the related impact and influence of religious institutions and communities in the macro social environment (Dollahite & Marks, 2005; Marks, 2004). Building on the work of these pioneers, Germain (1991) contributed heavily to the present day widely accepted view of the ecosystems family perspective within social work. Since the introduction of this perspective, its utility for social work practice has been noted primarily, because behavior is no longer examined in deterministic, linear, and cause-and-effect terms (Payne, 2005).

The conceptualization of the family as an open system allows for a richer discussion of key systems concepts such as roles and boundaries. Van Wormer (2011) notes that roles are associated with a position and status and are complementary and interactive. For faith-inspired parents, religious teachings inform both position and status as well as the functions parents and children are to fulfill (Lees & Horvath, 2009). The concept of boundaries is also helpful in understanding the parent-child relationship in religious families. The health and functioning of relationships can be examined by assessing how firm or flexible the boundaries between parents and children are. Alba (2005) conceptualized bright and blurred boundaries as tools to evaluate the clarity or lack thereof provided by religious teachings for immigrant families adapting to societies in which adherents of their religion constitute a numerical minority. Roles and boundaries emphasize the interconnectedness of family members while also providing insight to the practitioner regarding exchanges between the family members and the macro-social environment; particularly growth-facilitating institutions such as houses of worship and religious schools. Clear or unclear, firm or flexible, bright or blurred, taken together roles and boundaries are evidence of what Fowler (1992) noted as the “ecologies of faith consciousness” (as cited in Garland, 2002, p. 326).

With particular regard to religious parents, four concepts central to the ecosystems family perspective are worthy of examination: interactionism, stress, adaptation, and coping (Van Wormer, 2011). *Interactionism* refers to interconnectedness of system components and, in particular, the potential of every family member to transact with other family members in a mutually impacting and influencing manner. Conceptualizing the transactions as a dynamic feedback loop helps practitioners to comprehend the affect that each family member can have on others while others are affecting that member as well. *Stress* is conceived as a change in the emotional and physical state of each family member due primarily to external forces over which the family either perceives as having or in fact does have little control. Woodcock (2003) notes that “sources of stress and support in the wider social environment also impact on the quality of the parent-child relationship, in particular at the level of the family” (p. 91). *Adaptation* refers to the deliberate and active process by which a family member seeks to achieve the optimal person-environment fit. The interconnectedness of family members is most prominent when each member, when faced with stress inducing situations, is evoking adaptive strategies to reduce if not eliminate the stress entirely (Van Wormer, 2011). Faith-inspired parents might model behaviors such as prayer or reading scripture as a means to adapt to stressful situations (Garland, 2002). A related concept within the ecosystems family perspective is *coping*, which refers to behaviors a family member might use to reduce stress levels. Due to interactive effects between family members, however, those same coping behaviors could intensify the stress levels. Given the complex, mutually interdependent nature of the impact and influence of each member on the others, the use of the eco-map (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2010) is especially beneficial for practitioners to delineate roles and the health or lack thereof of relationships between family members.

In addition to serving as an instrumental framework for the examination of the family, ecosystemic practice provides a basis for the exploration of how the family interacts with the environment and to what extent the family is carrying out functions deemed essential to the family and society

at large (Darling & Turkki, 2009). One such essential function, especially for self-identifying religious parents, would be the socialization of their children, ensuring in the process that religious values and practices are transmitted and internalized by each subsequent generation. One such religious value common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is social justice, which Lesser and Pope (2007) suggest is an organizing principle for ecosystemic practice. Such principles, the authors contend, emanate from multicultural systems, whose social justice thrust ensures that the treatment of “differences in ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation and ability as normal variations” (p. 26). Notably absent is the mention of differences rooted in religious beliefs, values, and practices. In the case of faith-inspired parents, practitioners should be prepared to also treat such differences as normal variations. The maintenance of clear roles and boundaries and an optimal person-environment fit and the active avoidance of enmeshment (Baumrind, 1991) within the family are undergirded by the importance placed by religious parents on executing their parental responsibilities guided by the values of fairness and justice. However, as the next section elucidates, parenting styles of religious parents are a major factor associated with the extent to which the parent-child relationship thrives.

## PARENTING STYLES

During the late 1960s, Diana Baumrind conceptualized *parenting styles* as a tool to comprehend the extent to which parents were demanding (limit-setting) of or responsive (nurturing) to their adolescent children (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Sorkhabi, 2005). Among other studies assessing parenting styles, Baumrind (1991) examined the extent to which parenting styles impacted the competence of adolescent children and promoted or inhibited the latter’s substance use. As a preface to the proposal of the faith-inspired parenting model, it is worthwhile to review Baumrind’s work since Darling and Steinberg (1993) posited that “research based on Baumrind’s conceptualization of parenting style has produced a remarkably consistent picture of the type of parenting conducive to the successful socialization of children into the dominant culture of the United States” (p. 487). A brief presentation of the dimensions upon which parenting styles are based precedes a more detailed description of the parenting styles themselves.

Utilizing the three dimensions of parental *warmth* and parental provision of *structure* and *autonomy*, Baumrind (1991) suggested that four parenting styles could be delineated: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and rejecting. *Warmth* reflects an investment parents have made in their children’s choices and activities through the degree of interest that parents maintain in their child’s life. Higher degrees of warmth result in positive relatedness, a situation that “induces children to be more willing and motivated to attend to, accept, and comply with, parental values and expectations” (Hardy et al., 2011, p. 218). The opposite of warmth is conceived to be rejection (Baumrind, 1991). *Structure* within the parent-child relationship arises when parents not only articulate their expectations clearly but simultaneously convey the importance they attach to those expectations as well as the consequences if and when their children choose not to meet those expectations.

Returning to the preceding discussion about roles and boundaries, it is evident that the presence of structure entails the availability of sufficient information guidelines so that within the family system, the children can self-regulate to a certain degree. Baumrind (1991) proffered that the opposite of structure is chaos. *Autonomy* is the last of the three dimensions along which the four parenting styles are formulated. Inasmuch as *warmth* connotes the interest and investment parents demonstrate in the activities and choices of their children, autonomy support refers to the degree to which parents foster a sense of agency in their children so that the latter feel empowered to initiate, to choose their own activities. Especially noteworthy for faith-inspired parents, Baumrind (1991) cautions against enmeshment, the insistence of the parents on an ideal type in which family

harmony must be maintained at the expense of individuality and disengagement. If enmeshment exists, the real separation between family members, especially parents and children, becomes dysfunctional and results in the waning of influence and impact among family members. The conceptual opposite of autonomy support is coercion. Using this discussion of the dimensions of warmth, structure and autonomy support as a backdrop, four parenting styles are delineated next.

While all four parenting styles are described below, the reader's attention is drawn especially to the *authoritative* parenting style, because it comports well with the socialization priorities of religious parents. Baumrind (1991) indicates that authoritative parents are simultaneously demanding and responsive but exert tremendous psychic energy buffering the impact of the pressures they place on their children. They do so by being available to their children, by articulating their expectations clearly, and in response to any questions or reactions from their children, clarifying their expectations. Authoritative parents are therefore assertive while not being intrusive in or restrictive of their children's lives, disciplining as necessary but taking great steps to remain supportive and not punitive, and most important, encouraging self-regulation and assertiveness in their children. *Authoritarian* parents incline toward demanding obedience through constant reminders of their role and status, while being very unresponsive to their children (Baumrind, 1991). Opting for the maintenance of a very orderly home environment, authoritarian parents set clear regulations but make little or no effort to communicate or clarify their expectations to their children. However, children being raised by authoritarian parents are most keenly aware of their parents' efforts to monitor their activities, if nothing else then for the parents to ensure obedience to the regulations they have set for their children (Hardy et al., 2011). *Permissive* parents are known by their nontraditional approach to discipline, opting instead for lenience, while being responsive to their children. Unlike authoritative and authoritarian parents, permissive or nondirective parents allow behavioral latitude in their children, setting no expectations for age-appropriate behaviors. Minimal conflict occurs between such parents and children because the former allow tremendous latitude to the latter for self-regulation. Last, *rejecting* or *neglectful* parents choose to be neither demanding nor responsive. They are disengaged from the lives of their children, providing neither structure nor monitoring and opting instead for avoidance of responsibility. It becomes evident that an understanding of parenting styles is integral to effective social work practice with self-identifying religious parents.

### A Faith-Inspired Parenting Model

Building on the background information presented earlier, a parenting model for practice with self-identifying religious parents is delineated. Characteristics of faith-inspired parenting being proposed in this article include a primary motivation (1) to fulfill their roles as parents in an exemplary manner, in accordance with the expectations of their respective faiths (Dollahite & Marks, 2005); (2) to articulate clearly the religious values and teachings they wish for their children to internalize and emulate (Boyatzis et al., 2006); (3) to be involved in and supportive of their children's choice of activities (Marks, 2004); (4) to teach the importance of self-control and self-regulation (Boyatzis et al., 2006); and (5) to incline toward forgiveness and justice in the process of disciplining their children (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Marks (2004) reviewed research on the family-religion connection and discerned three dimensions of the religious experience: religious beliefs, religious practices, and the religious community. Well-established correlations have been reported between these dimensions of the religious experience and higher marital quality, stability, and satisfaction and higher parental involvement; especially the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children (Marks, 2004). To be sure, there are possible negative outcomes as well, such as data that indicate faith-inspired parents may also transmit a prejudicial outlook on either adherents of other faiths or those subscribing to no faith tradition (Marks, 2004).

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the centrality of religion is not a foregone conclusion by virtue of children being raised by faith-inspired parents. Billingsley (1992) and Schiele (2007) have written about the important role parents play in imparting a religious orientation in the lives of African American children. Indeed, the central and interdependent roles of institutions such as the family and the church in the African American community in the socialization project are well documented (Billingsley, 1992). Regardless of whether the families are Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, if the parents are invested in developing a religious orientation in their children, it stands to reason that the children will perceive the importance of religion to their parents and to their own development. This investment, according to Dollahite and Marks (2005), is manifested in the range of socialization activities in which the parents participate. These range from formal teaching and informal discussions to role modeling and co-participating in worship attendance, prayer, and scripture study. An outcome of such an investment into an objective-driven socialization process could be to increase “the child’s desire to make his or her parents proud in a domain known to be important to them” (Darling & Steinberg, 1993, p. 494). To assist social work practitioners to understand and intervene effectively with self-identifying religious parents, a *faith-inspired parenting model* is proposed. Such a model comprises the conscious use of (1) an *authoritative* parenting style, (2) *induction*, and (3) a *love orientation*.

### Authoritative Parenting

Returning to Baumrind’s (1991) pioneering conceptualization of parenting styles, it is proposed that an authoritative style is most suitable for effective faith-inspired parenting. The depth and breadth conveyed in the conceptualization of the authoritative parenting style is best summed up as “a constellation of parent attributes that includes emotional support, high standards, appropriate autonomy granting, and clear, bidirectional communication” (Darling & Steinberg, 1993, p. 487). These authors indicate further that “authoritativeness . . . has been shown to help children and adolescents develop an instrumental competence characterized by the balancing of societal and individual needs and responsibilities” (p. 487). Sorkhabi (2005) notes in particular that in comparison to the other three styles, studies have shown that authoritative parenting provides children with “the experiential basis for optimally balancing agency (characterized by self-assertion, self-reliance, and prudential self-interest) with communion (characterized by prosocial engagement, cooperation, and moral concern for others’ interests)” (p. 552).

Baumrind (1991) also reported in her study on the influence of parenting styles on adolescent competence and substance use that the efficacy of the authoritative style during periods of social instability is a noteworthy finding. She concluded that authoritative parents were more likely to protect their children from risk behaviors such as problem drug use while also engendering competence in their children. Similarly, faith-inspired parents, it is conceived, seek to protect their children from risk behaviors by being simultaneously demanding and responsive.

Darling and Steinberg (1993) acknowledge the efficacy of Baumrind’s conceptualization of parenting style but admit that its suitability for application to non-European-American populations has yielded mixed results. Sorkhabi (2005) asserts that while the authoritative style might be more suitable to cultures that emphasize an individualistic outlook on life, there is disagreement as to whether the same style has utility in cultures that emphasize a collectivistic outlook on life. Although not an exact correlation, the findings from the examination of the fit of the authoritative parenting style to collectivistic cultures do have import for the present discussion about faith-inspired parenting, especially to the extent that all three faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—expect their adherents to prefer the needs of others over themselves. Further research is necessary to explore the extent to which faith-inspired families consciously draw upon the teachings of their respective faith to inform their particular adaptation of the authoritative parenting style. Along

with the authoritative parenting style, it is proposed that faith-inspired parents will also incline toward the use of induction as a part of their parenting repertoire.

### Induction

It is proposed that through the provision of explanations and the use of reasoning, faith-inspired parents can engender in their children an internal desire to uphold their respective faith values. Hoffman (2000) conceptualized “induction” essentially as the use of reasoning to facilitate the process of assisting children to be empathic and to develop pro-social emotions. Citing Hoffman, Spera (2005) notes specifically that “parents’ provision of explanations with respect to their actions, values and disciplinary behaviors” (p. 133) ensures that the children’s psychic energies remain in the cognitive domain rather than devolving into the material domain. Induction is conceived as unleashing the potential of both parents and children through their mutual dependence and interactions. Although critical of Hoffman’s conceptualization of how sympathy is related to justice, Kristjánsson (2004) concedes that his “account of the developmental stages of empathy is compelling and convincing” (p. 302). The author suggests that perhaps the most straightforward way to understand the importance of induction is by way of a scenario in which the parent is observing the child about to harm her- or himself or someone else. In particular, Kristjánsson notes that according to Hoffman, the parent has two objectives to achieve with regards to inducing empathy: (1) “call attention to the victim’s distress and make it salient to the child, thus tapping into the child’s empathic proclivity” and (2) “point to the role of the child’s action in causing that distress and the way in which the child is responsible for its reparation” (p. 302).

For faith-inspired parents, the use of induction seems appealing for two reasons: (1) Teaching children to be empathic is a laudable goal across faith traditions, but just as important is the scripture-rooted socialization of the children to the interdependent role and power of shame and guilt to elicit good behavior; and (2) making references would be helpful to stories within their respective traditions about faithful individuals who, moved by a desire not to oppress another or inflict undue harm, had in fact chosen a more empathic and God-pleasing path of action. Such empathic imagery, accompanied with a script based on reasoning, is expected to induce in the children longer-term internalization of and adherence to the values taught by their parents.

### Love Orientation

The social work practitioner must comprehend fully not just the parenting style that is evident but the cognitive processing of that style by the children. How do children perceive the words and actions of their parents, especially their disciplinary styles? Of particular relevance here is the seminal work of Sears, Maccoby, and Levin (1957), entitled *Patterns of Child-Rearing*. Three hundred and seventy-nine mothers were interviewed to examine the disciplinary styles specifically, and child-reading practices broadly, that they used in parenting their 5-year-old children (Sears et al., 1957). Essentially, the research explores answers to questions such as “How do parents rear children? What effects [do] different kinds of training have on children?” and “What leads a mother to use one method rather than another?” (Sears et al., 1957, p. 8). Among several findings, one salient contribution of their research is the discernment of two orientations that best captured the child-rearing ideology of the mothers; namely the love-orientation and the object-orientation. The love-orientation implies that during their interactions with their 5-year-olds, the mothers consciously alternated between being warm, affectionate, and praising and withholding warmth, affection, and praise. The authors state that “a mother can offer praise and the promise of maintaining a loving relationship with the child,” or “she can isolate the child from her or withdraw her affection” (p. 318). The object-orientation implies that the mothers’ interaction with

their children was characterized by a non-emotional, object-driven approach involving the mother's allowance or disallowance of toys, playtime, and any other objects in the child's daily routine. The authors state that the mother "can give more tangible rewards, such as candy, gold stars, money, toys, or permission to play with a prized object," or "she can deprive him of material objects (dessert, TV, going outdoors) or spank him" (p. 318).

Most instructive here is the impact that each orientation had on the children and why a combination of an authoritative parenting style with a love-oriented disciplinary approach seems most aligned with faith-inspired parenting. Sears et al. (1957) found that mothers who used the love orientation were more likely to "produce relatively more children with high conscience" (p. 389). The children exposed to an object-oriented disciplinary approach were more likely to give lesser attention to, if not miss entirely, the messaging from the mothers and focus most of their psychic energies on being sure they could continue to have access to a particular toy or be allowed to have play time or maintain other aspects of their daily routine (Sears et al., 1957). The authors posited that the love orientation socialized the children to focus their psychic energies more on how to remain worthy of their mother's warmth, affection, and praise. Building on this discussion, the next section presents the strengths of the faith-inspired parenting model.

### STRENGTHS OF THE FAITH-INSPIRED PARENTING MODEL

A major strength of a faith-inspired parenting model (i.e., an authoritative parenting style, the use of induction, and love orientation) is that it allows, in ecosystemic terms, for bidirectional communication and ensures that feedback is occurring in real time and is beneficial to both parent and child. By being simultaneously demanding and responsive, by exerting energy explaining and rationalizing and encouraging bidirectional communication, and by assuring and reassuring their children in loving ways, faith-inspired parents may be modeling demonstrably the very religious values they intend to impart to their children.

Another strength of the model is that faith-inspired parents will incline toward treading on familiar ground by contextualizing explanations for their parenting style and disciplinary approach in religious doctrines. They may use storytelling rooted in scripture to orient their children to the values of their respective religious traditions. For parents who may be inspired by faith but lack the requisite knowledge about their respective faith tradition, religious institutions provide not only learning resources but support groups and networks (Petts, 2009). In addition to relying on the respective religious institutions, families might rely on religion itself for support. Billingsley (1992) asserts, for example, that the Black church, as an institution in the macro-social environment of the family, is "a vehicle for the expression of this sense of reverence" Black families give to religion (p. 330). Particularly for families with a lower socioeconomic status, even the most faith-inspired parents might find it unrealistic to carve out quality time to invest in imparting faith and values, or in explaining or reasoning with their children, or with providing emotional security. In those cases, the faith-inspired parenting model allows for the parents to benefit from involving the religious institutions in order to expose their children to and familiarize them with the faith and its values.

Indeed, an effective partnership between the family and the religious institution could assist in fostering resiliency through the maintenance of strong family and community bonds, along with collective participation in acts of worship and other rituals. This emphasis on resilience building is critical because, as indicated earlier, religion and faith do serve as protective factors inasmuch as the qualities—nurturing, supportive, growth inducing—of the environment help to promote resilience. In fact, Van Wormer (2011) posits that "ecosystems-oriented social workers look to protective factors (dispositional, psychological and social) that can serve as a buffer against life stressors and reduce their impact" (p. 27). Although missing from the protective factors mentioned

by Van Wormer, the preceding discussion has provided support for the inclusion of religion and spirituality as buffers as well. A final strength of the model emanates from the value attached to learning. Success in domains such as personal and academic achievement are accounted for through faith-inspired parenting (Spera, 2005).

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Faith-inspired parents share common concerns about their effectiveness or lack thereof with childrearing. The faith-inspired parenting model presents a starting point, although there are obvious limitations. First, as indicated in previous sections, there is disagreement as to the applicability of key features of the model, such as the authoritative parenting style to non-European-American populations. Future research could explore how faith-inspired parenting differs not only across religions but across families with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Second, the model assumes that faith-inspired parents are sufficiently knowledgeable about their faith and its values in order to implement the socialization curriculum fully. As indicated in earlier sections, the challenge remains that for effective internalization of the socialization curriculum, the children need to experience first-hand the modeling and practice of the faith and its values by their parents. Future research could assess whether religious institutions provide training programs for parenting and childrearing and the degree to which those programs prepare the parents to independently utilize the key features of the model. Third, the model does not account for the eventuality that an authoritative parenting style could mutate over time into an authoritarian parenting style, giving way to parental insistence on dogma. It is conceivable that a dogmatic approach to parenting, with too much insistence on obedience without bidirectional communication and feedback between parents and children, would have the opposite effect of the faith-inspired parenting model being proposed (R. Gourdine, personal communication, March 5, 2012). A fourth limitation of the model that lends itself to further research is the assumption of the model that the socioeconomic status of the families allows for the time needed for parents to implement the socialization curriculum effectively. Future research will have to examine concretely what Marks (2004) refers to as the "costs" of religious practices. A possible research question would be the extent to which parents who are managing work-related demands are able to invest time and energy being involved in the religious and spiritual activities along with their children.

### Conclusion

Drawing from the work of earlier theorists who explored the relationship between parenting styles and practices and developmental outcomes in children, this paper proposes a parenting model for social work practice with faith-inspired parents. Acknowledgement of the impact of the parents' religiousness on the socialization of their children allows social workers a backdrop against which to assess parenting. Incorporating an ecosystemic framework, effective parenting for self-identifying religious parents is conceived as being multidimensional using an authoritative parenting style (Baumrind, 1991; Darling & Steinberg, 1993); induction (Hoffman, 2000); and a love orientation (Sears et al., 1957). The proposed model contributes to the existing limited knowledge on practice with self-identifying religious parents.

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