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Christopher G. Ellison, Jenny A. Trinitapoli, Kristin L. Anderson and Byron R. Johnson

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Race/Ethnicity, Religious Involvement, and Domestic Violence

Christopher G. Ellison

Jenny A. Trinitapoli

University of Texas at Austin

Kristin L. Anderson

Western Washington University

Byron R. Johnson

Baylor University

The authors explored the relationship between religious involvement and intimate partner violence by analyzing data from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households. They found that: (a) religious involvement is correlated with reduced levels of domestic violence; (b) levels of domestic violence vary by race/ethnicity; (c) the effects of religious involvement on domestic violence vary by race/ethnicity; and (d) religious involvement, specifically church attendance, protects against domestic violence, and this protective effect is stronger for African American men and women and for Hispanic men, groups that, for a variety of reasons, experience elevated risk for this type of violence.

Keywords: *domestic violence; religion*

According to some estimates, nearly 30% of U.S. couples (married and unmarried) will experience intimate partner violence at some point in their relationship, and between 3% and 10% of intimate relationships are characterized by severe violence (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Although both women and men perpetrate—and are victimized by—domestic violence, women are much more likely to be victimized by men, and the effects of such violence are particularly serious for women (Websdale 1998; Wilson & Daly, 1992b). Domestic violence can result in a variety of physical injuries, mental health problems, and even death (Websdale, 1999; Wilson & Daly, 1992a). For these reasons, domestic violence is now widely recognized as a major health problem within the United States and other societies (Rosenberg & Fenley, 1991).

To enhance our understanding of this complex phenomenon, researchers have explored some of the characteristics associated with victimization and especially perpetration of intimate partner violence (Gelles, 1993; Gelles & Straus, 1988; O'Leary,

1993). Studies to date have identified several robust demographic predictors. For example, domestic violence is more common among younger couples, aged 18–30 (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000; Szinovacz & Egley, 1995); African Americans and Hispanics (Lockhart, 1987); cohabiting (as opposed to married) couples (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998; Howell & Pugliesi, 1988; Kaufman & Straus, 1990; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980); and couples dealing with poverty (Websdale, 1998, 2001), limited education, and unemployment (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000; Campbell et al., 2003; Gelles, 1993; Websdale, 2001; Websdale & Johnson, 1997a). Studies also reveal that several psychosocial factors—including alcohol and substance abuse, stress, and social isolation (Cunradi, Caetano, & Schaefer, 2002; Gelles, 1993; Websdale, 1998; Websdale & Johnson, 1997b)—are associated with elevated rates of intimate partner violence. Ideologies that sanction male dominance, as well as relative power differentials between partners (as reflected by disparities in levels of education and earnings), have also been linked with domestic violence (Stanko 1994; Stets, 1991).

Although a growing body of research has revealed religious variations in a wide range of other family-related processes and outcomes (Ellison & Hummer, in press; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999), until recently the linkages between religious beliefs or practices and the occurrence of domestic violence received short shrift in this literature (Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006). This oversight is particularly surprising considering that there are decades of solid survey research confirming that Americans—especially women and African Americans—tend to report comparatively higher levels of religiosity (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004). This pattern, however, has begun to change in recent years. Building on this recognition, this article addresses the following specific research questions: (a) Is religious involvement—gauged here (as in most other studies) in terms of the frequency of attendance at religious services—inversely associated with domestic violence perpetration and/or victimization? (b) Do levels or rates of perpetration and/or victimization differ for African Americans or Latinos, compared with non-Hispanic Whites? (c) Given the well-established ethnic variations in patterns of religious involvement and influence, does the magnitude or direction of the association between religious involvement and domestic violence vary across these three racial/ethnic groups?

Religion and Domestic Violence: Previous Studies

In recent years, several studies of domestic violence have begun to consider the possible influence of religion in legitimating or reducing the likelihood of committing partner violence. Some have speculated that traditionalist or patriarchal religious ideologies may legitimate, or at least fail to adequately condemn, the practice of partner violence (e.g., Nason-Clark 1997, 2000). This may be particularly true for certain

variants of conservative Protestantism that emphasize male headship; however, to date, studies of domestic violence that have examined the role of religion have not identified any clear support for this claim (Brinkerhoff, Grandin, & Lupri, 1992; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999; Wilcox, 2004).

Another line of thought suggests that religious people may be less likely to perpetrate domestic violence (Fergusson, Horwood, Kershaw, & Shannon, 1986). A 1999 study of U.S. couples found that both men and women who attend religious services regularly are less likely to commit acts of domestic violence than those who attend rarely or not at all (Ellison et al., 1999). A follow-up study identified three pathways through which religious involvement may operate; namely, increasing levels of social integration and social support, reducing the likelihood of alcohol or substance abuse, and decreasing the risk of psychological problems (Ellison & Anderson, 2001). However, even after considering such indirect effects of religion through the use of statistical controls, that study found that regular religious involvement still had a protective effect against the perpetration of domestic violence by both men and women (Ellison & Anderson, 2001). In addition, that study showed that evidence of such protective religious effects persisted regardless of whether domestic violence was measured using data from self reports or partner reports, which makes it difficult to attribute these observed religious effects to simple social desirability or other response bias.

Why might religious involvement have this protective effect vis-à-vis domestic violence? Over the years, studies have shown that people who identify themselves as religious, either through self-reported attendance or devotion, have higher indicators of marital quality including happiness and satisfaction, adjustment, and duration (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990; Filsinger & Wilson, 1984; Hansen, 1987). Through rituals, sermons, and informal social interactions, religious congregations can emphasize the significance of committed relationships and family life for personal and spiritual growth. Religion may encourage values of altruism and self-sacrifice, encouraging individuals to defer immediate personal gratification and self-interest in favor of promoting the well-being of family members, and may validate the choices of those persons who do so. Religious couples may also hold strong beliefs about the sanctity of marriage and about the vows taken before God; religious involvement may reinforce such beliefs and encourage efforts to fulfill familial roles. Additionally, religious communities often provide informational and other practical support for married couples; pastoral counseling, classes, and seminars, and other mechanisms provide guidance on resolving conflicts and improving communication (Ellison et al., 1999). Furthermore, because recent evidence documents that spirituality is important for survivors of domestic violence (Gillum et al., 2006), it may be that religious congregations provide an environment in which one's religious commitment or spirituality is bolstered in important ways. Thus, the theoretical and empirical evidence in this area suggest the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Frequency of attendance at religious services will be inversely associated with the perpetration of violence against women.

Race/Ethnicity and Domestic Violence

The topic of possible racial/ethnic variations in abuse is complex, and it has elicited both research and controversy. Numerous studies have found levels of domestic violence to be higher among African Americans and Latinos, compared with non-Hispanic Whites. For instance, a well-known analysis of data collected in 1975 reported that African American women experienced nearly four times more partner violence than White women (Straus et al., 1980). When that study was replicated using 1985 data, the rate of severe violence toward African American women had dropped, but African American women were still slightly more than twice as likely to be victimized as White women (Hampton, Gelles, & Harrop, 1989). One 1985 study of family violence among U.S. Latinos also found overall levels of domestic violence among Latino couples to be about twice as high as the rate for non-Hispanic Whites, but those researchers concluded that several demographic factors (the relative youthfulness of the Latino population, the higher concentration of Latinos in urban areas, and the lower income levels among Latinos) accounted for most of the apparent ethnic differences in the rates of domestic violence (Straus & Gelles, 1990). However, analyses of data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) have revealed significant differences in levels of intimate partner abuse among African Americans, Latinos, and non-Hispanic Whites (Anderson, 1997; Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998; Ellison & Anderson, 2001; Ellison et al., 1999).

Explaining such ethnic variations in partner violence has proved to be difficult and contentious. According to some researchers, differences in domestic abuse that appear to be racial or ethnic in origin may, in fact, be due to group variations in age (e.g., married or partnered Latinos, in particular, tend to be younger than others), or socioeconomic status (e.g., minority group members tend to have lower income and education levels, and higher poverty and unemployment rates, than nonminority group members; see Centerwall 1984, 1995). On the other hand, in several studies, racial/ethnic differences in domestic violence persist even after controlling for indicators of social class, age, and other factors (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998). Patterns such as these have led some observers to suggest cultural roots of these differences in violence and, consequently, the possibility that the cultural values of African Americans and Hispanics may be more tolerant of violence in general, or violence toward women in particular (Comer, 1985; Websdale, 1999).

However, there are other explanations for racial/ethnic differences in rates of domestic violence. For instance, African Americans and Latinos living in socially disorganized communities encounter more social stressors, on average, than non-Hispanic Whites, including work-related problems and financial strain, as well as interpersonal and institutional racism (e.g., at the hands of police, schools, public officials, lenders and landlords, and others). They may also face more limited housing options, resulting in concentration in disadvantaged neighborhoods, which may increase exposure to crime, violence, vulnerability of minorities to closer law enforcement scrutiny, aesthetic and

environmental stressors, residential hazards, and many other problems (Benson, Wooldredge, Thistlethwaite, & Fox, 2004; Boardman, Finch, Ellison, Williams, & Jackson, 2001; Ross, Mirowsky, & Pribesh, 2001; Zorza, 1991). Latinos—particularly (but not exclusively) immigrants—may confront additional sources of stress, centering on issues of language, acculturation, and assimilation, as well as possible legal problems. Thus, for African Americans, and perhaps Latinos as well, the cumulative emotional toll of actual and perceived discrimination, tokenism, maltreatment, identity work, and other sources of strain may exacerbate feelings of stress, frustration, and entrapment (Websdale, 2001). Such factors may reduce feelings of personal efficacy and increase the likelihood of family conflict and violence (Hampton, Oliver, & Magarian, 2003; Straus & Gelles, 1990).

Thus, viewed broadly, the existing theory and evidence suggest the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: African Americans—and possibly Latinos—will be more likely to perpetrate violence against women than non-Hispanic Whites.

Race/Ethnicity and Religion

Religion has played a distinctive role in the individual and collective lives of African Americans throughout U.S. history (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Indeed, the African American church has served as a symbolic center of African American life, one of the few social institutions operated and controlled by African Americans. Religious organizations have served a range of functions within Black communities, from individual and collective self-help to racial socialization and political mobilization (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). In addition, recent studies demonstrate that contemporary African American congregations sponsor a wide array of programs, including ones that provide aid to the poor, promote community development, assist families, foster health education, encourage civil rights, and support at-risk youth (Billingsley, 1999; Johnson, 2001; Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

Moreover, by virtually any conventional indicator, African Americans tend to be more religious than Whites from comparable social and economic backgrounds. This pattern extends to levels of church membership, frequency of church attendance, and levels of participation in other congregational activities, as well as nonorganizational practices (e.g., frequency of prayer, reading religious materials, and religious media consumption), religious beliefs (e.g., regarding God, scripture, life after death), religious salience, and subjective religiosity (for a review, see Taylor et al., 2004).

A growing literature documents links between religious involvement and the health and well-being of African Americans. For instance, religious involvement has been associated with higher life satisfaction (St. George & McNamara, 1984; Thomas & Holmes, 1992); greater feelings of self-esteem and personal mastery (Ellison, 1993;

Krause & Van Tran, 1989); lower levels of depression and psychological distress (Brown, Ndubuisi, & Gary 1990; Jang & Johnson, 2003; Krause, 2002); lower levels of alcohol and substance use/abuse and risk-taking behaviors (Johnson, Larson, Jang, & Li, 2000; Wallace & Forman, 1998); and favorable overall physical health status and self-rated health (Ferraro & Koch, 1994). Although the evidence is not unequivocal, several comparative studies have suggested that the relationships between religious involvement and mental health outcomes may be stronger among African Americans than non-Hispanic Whites from similar backgrounds (Krause, 2004; St. George & McNamara, 1984; Thomas & Holmes, 1992).

Much less is known about patterns of religious involvement among the diverse U.S. Latino/a population. On one hand, some sources in the 1960s and 1970s suggested that, on average, Latino/a Catholics are less devout and attend services less often than their non-Hispanic White counterparts (Grebler, Moore, & Guzman, 1970; Greeley, 1979). However, more recent studies based on nationwide surveys have reported relatively high levels of organizational and nonorganizational religious involvement among most segments of the Latino population (Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo, 1998). In addition, U.S. Latino groups also maintain vibrant traditions of popular religiosity, often combining elements of Catholicism with diverse indigenous symbols and cultural practices (Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo, 1998; Pena & Frehill, 1998). Mexican American religiosity often involves home rituals, as well as devotional practices focused on the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is regarded as the patron saint of the Mexican people and may have particular resonance as a symbol of empowerment for Mexican American women (Pena & Frehill, 1998; Rodriguez, 1994).

It is also possible that the protective effect of religious involvement may be greater among members of racial and ethnic minority populations, compared with non-Hispanic Whites. For example, Krause (2004) conceptualizes and measures 16 different dimensions of congregational support and finds that African Americans score significantly higher on 14 of them. Our argument is not that these supports are absent in White churches; rather, African Americans tend to rely on and receive more assistance from religious congregations to a greater degree than Whites. In particular, a considerable body of research has documented the role of religion in reducing feelings of depression, distress, and other negative emotions, as well as mitigating the effect of economic and other social stressors on well-being among African Americans (and, to a lesser extent, among Latinos). For African Americans, several mechanisms may underlie this relationship; for instance, African American religious congregations are centers of informal support networks and formal support programs, some of which are aimed specifically at helping families under stress (Billingsley, 1999; Krause, 2002). African Americans turn to prayer as a coping resource more frequently and in a wider range of circumstances than other persons, and they tend to derive considerable satisfaction from this form of coping (Ellison & Taylor, 1996). Among African Americans, clergy members can play an important and multifaceted role, as sources of assistance, information, and advice in many different situations (Neighbors, Musick, & Williams,

1998). Many, although certainly not all, African American church services are characterized by distinctive worship styles, including enthusiastic, uplifting music and preaching; high levels of member participation and expressiveness; and other experiences that may help to articulate and release negative feelings (anger, frustration, grief), and lead to emotional catharsis (Gilkes, 1980). Additionally, at least one study has linked religious involvement (specifically, frequency of attendance at services) with subjective quality of family life, frequency of interaction with immediate and extended family members, and other salutary family outcomes (Ellison, 1997). Thus, in these varied ways, religious involvement may be especially pivotal in reducing the incidence of domestic violence among African Americans, compared with other groups.

Far fewer studies have investigated the role of religion in shaping coping practices and psychological well-being among U.S. Latinos. Nevertheless, several recent studies indicate that aspects of religious involvement (e.g., attendance at services, use of religion in coping, overall religious salience) are linked with salutary mental health outcomes among Mexican-origin adults, including lower levels of depressive symptoms, particularly among women (Ellison & Finch, 2001; Levin, Markides, & Ray, 1996); reduced risk of alcohol/substance abuse or dependence; and lower levels of manic symptoms (Tovar & Ellison, 2000).

Unfortunately, aside from ubiquitous statements emphasizing the close interplay between Catholic religion and Mexican culture, which is often said to include both familism and machismo, the links between religion and family life among U.S. Latinos remain understudied.

Nevertheless, taken together, these various strands of research suggest the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: The protective effect of religious involvement on perpetration of violence against women will be stronger among African Americans and Latinos, as compared with non-Hispanic Whites.

Method

To explore the relationship between religious involvement and partner violence, we analyzed data from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH-1; Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988). Directed by social scientists at the University of Wisconsin at Madison during 1987–1988, the NSFH-1 is a cross-sectional national probability sample of 13,017 men and women, aged 18 and older, residing in the contiguous United States. Our study analyzes data on a subsample of the NSFH-1 primary respondents who were married to, or cohabitating with, a person of the opposite sex at the time of the interview. These selection criteria resulted in a study sample of 3,134 men and 3,666 women. It should be noted that we used

data from the first wave rather than more recent waves of the NSFH, because attrition among minorities in subsequent waves reduces the already small *N* significantly, and thus would have made it impossible to conduct the statistical analyses in this article.

Dependent Variables

Perpetration of domestic violence. In self-administered questionnaires, NSFH-1 primary respondents and their heterosexual partners were asked whether any of their arguments during the preceding year “became physical.” Primary respondents who responded affirmatively were then asked: “During the past year how many fights with your [partner] resulted in you hitting, shoving, or throwing things at him/her?” Their partners also completed self-administered questionnaires in which they were asked, “During the past year how many fights with your [partner] resulted in him/her hitting, shoving, or throwing things at you?” To reduce bias associated with self-reports, we combined reports from both partners. If either the primary respondent or his/her heterosexual partner reported that the respondent had engaged in domestic violence, the respondent is identified as perpetrating domestic violence. Because very few respondents reported multiple acts of violence, we created dichotomous measures of domestic violence perpetration (1 = *reported perpetrating violence at least once*, 0 = *did not report perpetration*).

Victimization by domestic violence. Similarly, reports from NSFH-1 primary respondents and their partners were combined to create a dichotomous measure of domestic violence victimization. If either the respondent or his/her partner reported that the respondent was victimized by a domestic assault during the past year, the respondent is coded as having experienced victimization (1 = *victim*, 0 = *did not report experiencing victimization*).

Religious involvement. We used frequency of religious attendance as our measure of religious involvement. Consistent with previous research, self-reported church attendance as an indicator of religious involvement is the most commonly used survey measure of religious involvement, including the previous studies on domestic violence. The NSFH inquires about the religious attendance patterns of primary respondents. We use an eight-category measure of religious attendance by the primary respondent: 0 = *Never*, 1 = *Less than once a year*, 2 = *About once or twice a year*, 3 = *Several times a year*, 4 = *About once a month*, 5 = *Two to three times a month*, 6 = *Nearly every week*, 7 = *Every week*, and 8 = *Several times a week*.

Sociodemographic variables. Our analyses include statistical adjustments for many of the factors shown by previous research to affect domestic violence. We include controls for: respondent’s age (measured in years); education (in years); employment status (1 = *at least one partner unemployed and looking for work during*

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Select Variables for Men and Women

Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>	
	Men	Women
Domestic violence		
Perpetration of domestic violence	0.08	0.08
Victimization by domestic violence	0.09	0.07
Ethnicity		
African American	0.13	0.12
Hispanic	0.07	0.08
White	0.79	0.80
Religious attendance		
0–8	4.37 (2.50)	4.93 (2.48)
Attends weekly (0–1)	0.32	0.42
Other controls		
Age	43.16 (15.71)	40.38 (14.86)
Education	12.55 (3.11)	12.58 (2.65)
Cohabiting	0.09	0.09
Unemployed	0.18	0.16
Total <i>N</i>	3,143	3,695

previous year, 0 = all others); marital status (1 = *cohabiting without marriage, 0 = married*); and race/ethnicity (1 = *Hispanic or Latino/a, 1 = African American, 0 = Anglo/non-Hispanic White*).

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics on all variables used in this study for the subsample used in this study. An equal number of men and women in our sample (8%) reported ever having perpetrated an act of domestic violence. Similarly, 7% of women and 9% of men in this sample reported that their partner hit, shoved, or threw things at them during the past year. As in most samples, religious involvement in this sample is substantially higher among women, compared with men. Whereas 32% of men reported attending religious services every week, a full 42% of women in this sample reported the same level of attendance. The ethnic breakdown of the sample is roughly equal for men and women, with non-Hispanic Whites making up the majority (approximately 80%), followed by African Americans (12% of women and 13% of men), and Latinos (7% of men and 8% of women). The men in this sample are slightly older than the women (approximately 43 years on average vs. 40 years). On average, men and women in this sample completed 12 years of education, equivalent to a high school diploma. Nine percent of the couples in the sample were cohabiting (as opposed to being married), and the levels of unemployment were fairly high; approximately 18% of men and 16% of women reported that they or their partner was unemployed and looking for work at some point during the year prior to the interview.

Table 2
Exponentiated Logistic Regression Coefficients (Odds Ratios)
for Victimization by Domestic Violence

Variable	Women		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
African American	1.34	1.43	2.42*
Hispanic	0.84	0.90	0.69
Age	0.94***	0.94***	0.94***
Education	0.97	0.98	0.98
Unemployment	1.52**	1.52**	1.52**
Cohabiting	2.11***	1.97***	1.98***
Attendance at religious services		0.95 [†]	0.96 [†]
African American			0.90
Hispanic			1.05
Model chi-square	193.93	197.02	198.80
Significance of model change			
From Model 1		†	
From Model 2			
<i>N</i>	3,666	3,666	3,666

[†]*p* < .10. **p* < .05. ***p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

Analytic Strategy

Using logistic regression, we report odds ratios (ORs) for both violence perpetration and violence victimization. In this analysis, we examined how two characteristics—race and religious involvement—help predict both the perpetration of and victimization by domestic violence. We estimated a series of three models in this analysis: The first model includes only key sociodemographic factors, including race/ethnicity; the second model adds a measure of religious involvement—specifically, attendance at religious services; and the third model includes cross-product terms to test for possible interaction effects between religion and race/ethnicity. In all cases, models are estimated separately for men and for women. ORs for the logistic regression models are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Given the specificity of our hypotheses in terms of the direction of the effect, one-tailed tests of significance are appropriate for our purposes.

In addition to these logistic regression models, we also calculate predicted probabilities of male domestic violence perpetrated separately for non-Hispanic Whites, African Americans, and Latinos for three levels of religious attendance: low (1 standard deviation below the mean), medium (mean), and high (1 standard deviation above the mean). These findings are presented for illustrative purposes to highlight key findings from interaction effects that are sometimes difficult to describe with

Table 3
Exponentiated Logistic Regression Coefficients (Odds Ratios)
for Perpetration of Domestic Violence

Variable	Men		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
African American	2.14***	2.40***	3.53***
Hispanic	0.93	1.05	2.21†
Age	0.94***	0.94***	0.94***
Education	0.94*	0.95*	0.94*
Unemployment	1.99***	1.96***	1.98***
Cohabiting	1.73	1.54**	1.54*
Attendance at religious services		0.91***	0.94*
African American			0.91†
Hispanic			0.83*
Model chi-square	247.33	257.67	261.64
Significance of model change			
From Model 1		***	**
From Model 2			†
<i>N</i>	3,134	3,134	3,134

† $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

only coefficients. To isolate the effects of race/ethnicity and religion, we control for variations in age and educational status among the three groups. For example, a predicted probability of 10% indicates that an individual with the specified set of characteristics has a 10% chance of perpetrating violence against his partner.

Results

Table 2 presents the estimated net effects of race/ethnicity, religious attendance, and covariates on the odds of women's victimization by domestic violence. Several key findings deserve attention. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, the frequency of religious attendance is inversely associated with the likelihood of victimization ($OR = .95$, $p < .10$). Specifically, each one-unit increment in attendance is related to a 5% reduction in the odds of experiencing domestic violence. Although at first glance this effect size appears small, it means that, on average, compared with a woman who never attends religious services, a woman who shares similar demographic characteristics but attends several times a week is roughly 40% (e.g., $[1 - .95] \times [8 - 0] = .40$) less likely to be a victim of domestic violence.

These analyses reveal mixed support for Hypothesis 2. In the initial model, racial/ethnic differences in victimization are nonsignificant. Once religious attendance is

controlled in Model 2, the estimated net effect for African Americans becomes significant and positive ($OR = 1.43, p < .10$). Thus, compared with a non-Hispanic White woman with similar demographic characteristics and levels of religious attendance, on average an African American woman is 43% more likely to experience domestic violence. The difference between Latinas and their non-Hispanic White counterparts is consistently nonsignificant.

In Table 2, there is no support for Hypothesis 3. In Model 3, when Race/Ethnicity \times Religion cross-product terms are added to the main effects model, the OR for African American women increases substantially, indicating that African Americans are nearly 2.5 times more likely than non-Hispanic White women to be victims of abuse. However, the estimated net effect of religious attendance on women's victimization does not appear to vary across racial/ethnic subgroups, and the addition of these multiplicative terms does not enhance the overall model fit.

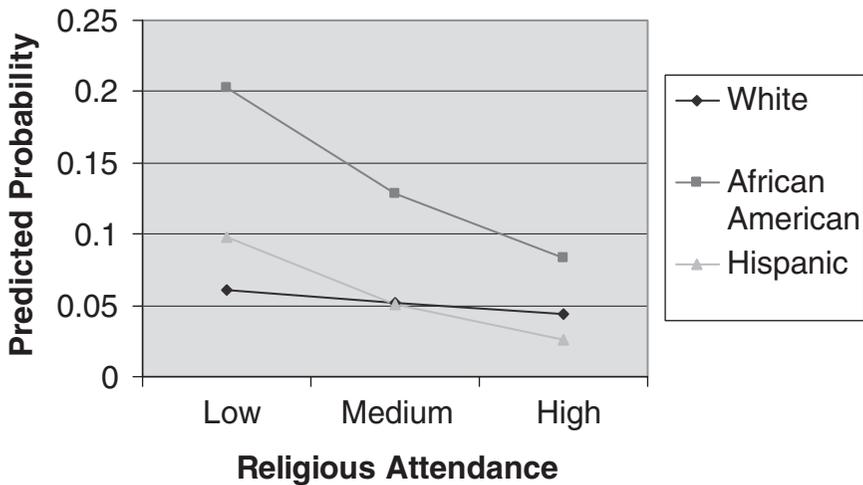
Table 3 presents analogous models of domestic violence perpetration by men. These results offer strong support for Hypothesis 1; religious attendance bears an inverse relationship to the perpetration of violence ($OR = .91, p < .001$). According to these estimates, each one-unit increment in attendance is associated with a 9% decrement in the odds of committing abuse, suggesting that men who attend religious services several times a week are 72% less likely to abuse their female partners than men from comparable backgrounds who do not attend services.

Here, Hypothesis 2 finds more consistent support than in Table 2. African American men are more than twice as likely to commit acts of abuse than their non-Hispanic White counterparts; this gap is increased slightly with controls for religious attendance ($OR = 2.40, p < .001$).

Finally, our results provide strong support for Hypothesis 3 as well. When cross-product terms are added in Model 3, we find that (a) religious attendance is still inversely related to domestic violence perpetration for non-Hispanic Whites ($OR = .94, p < .05$), but the apparent protective effect of religious involvement is stronger for African American men ($OR = .91, p < .10$) and Latino men ($OR = .83, p < .05$), compared with non-Hispanic Whites. Moreover, in Model 3, the ORs representing the estimated racial/ethnic differences among nonattending men are substantial for African Americans ($OR = 3.53, p < .01$) and Latinos ($OR = 2.21, p < .10$). In view of these patterns, it is not surprising that the addition of the interaction terms resulted in significant improvements in model fit.

To illustrate the magnitude of the interaction terms in Model 3, we present predicted probabilities in graphical format in Figure 1. Separate lines for non-Hispanic White, Latino, and African American men represent the predicted probability of perpetrating domestic violence for three categories of religious involvement (low, medium, and high) for each group. The graph shows that, although the predicted probability of perpetrating domestic violence varies dramatically by racial/ethnic group at low levels of religious involvement, these differences converge at higher levels of religious involvement, with the decline being most steep for African American men. In fact, at the highest levels of religious involvement, the predicted

Figure 1
Perpetration of Domestic Violence by Men



probability of perpetrating domestic violence is actually slightly lower for Latino men than for non-Hispanic White men.

Although our study has focused primarily on the additive and interactive effects of race/ethnicity and religious involvement, several findings involving control variables also deserve brief mention. Consistent with prior research, cohabitation and unemployment appear to increase the risk of abuse, both male perpetration and female victimization. Domestic violence is also more common among young persons; the odds of both male perpetration and female victimization decline by 6% with each additional year of age. Finally, men's education is inversely associated with the likelihood of perpetrating violence, but women's education is unrelated to the risk of experiencing abuse.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research, our analyses reveal differences in levels of domestic violence by ethnicity. Compared with non-Hispanic Whites and Latinos, African Americans in particular have higher levels of domestic violence and are more likely both to perpetrate and be victimized by this sort of violence than are non-Hispanic Whites and Latinos. Our findings also suggest that religious involvement, specifically church attendance, protects against domestic violence and that this

protective effect is stronger for African American men and women and for Latino men—groups that, for a wide variety of reasons, are at high risk for this type of violence. Although the protective effect of religious involvement is evident for both men and women in all three ethnic groups discussed here, the magnitude of the effect for African Americans leads us to ask why, with regard to domestic violence, religious involvement appears to “matter” more for this population.

The effect of religious attendance on reducing the probability of domestic violence is most likely both direct and indirect. As suggested by previous research, involvement in a religious organization may reduce factors known to be correlated with domestic violence, such as problem drinking, social isolation, and depression. Because it has been suggested that the salutary effects of religious participation are greater for African Americans than for other groups, we may be tempted to rely on this finding to explain the differential effects revealed here. However, previous research has also shown that the effects of religious involvement cannot be reduced to the sum of these indirect effects. It is worth noting here that attendance at religious services per se may not actually be the key aspect of religious involvement that is affecting patterns of domestic violence but merely an indicator of such. In analyses such as the ones presented here, attendance may serve as a proxy for prayerfulness, positive religious coping styles, self-discipline, or other such factors. Therefore, a key priority of future research in this area should be the development and testing of broader theoretical arguments about the potential role(s) of multiple dimensions of religion and spirituality in this area.

Religious congregations are sources of both formal and informal support for their members and, as previously discussed, in the absence of other institutions, the role of the African American church has been particularly strong in the African American community. Compared with other religious institutions, African American congregations may be more active within their communities and may consequently have a greater effect on the most critical challenges facing them. Religious life is also tied very closely to family life for both African Americans and Latinos. The fact that religious involvement often involves members of the immediate and extended family may mean that these relationships are actually being strengthened through religious involvement, minimizing the risk not only of domestic violence, but also of other forms of family violence as well. As noted in the Results section, race/ethnic interactions in models of male perpetration of domestic violence are of considerable interest and importance. The findings presented here show that frequent attendance among African American men brings their odds into line with their non-Hispanic White counterparts, whereas African American men who attend sporadically or not at all are much more likely to commit violence than nonattending non-Hispanic Whites. This brings into sharp relief the gap in family lifestyles between religious and nonreligious men among African Americans.

In addition to these substantive issues, the present findings have theoretical and methodological implications as well. First, the evidence that religious attendance protects against domestic violence suggests that researchers studying religious effects on intimate partner violence need to begin to better conceptualize religious involvement or religiosity as a protective factor. Second, the present study is based on logistic regression analysis of cross-sectional data from a longitudinal national survey. As more appropriate data become available, researchers should expand the methodological scope of the present study by applying, for example, a developmental approach where panel data may be analyzed over time. The use of panel data would enable researchers to examine whether the relationships observed in the present study may vary across stages of the life course. Third, there is a real need for future data collection and research on domestic violence and religion among minorities.

Fourth, there is a need for more quantitative as well as qualitative studies on the relationship between religion and domestic violence. On the quantitative side, we need more research exploring the ecological effect of religion on the prevalence of domestic violence. For example, is the mere existence of churches, synagogues, and mosques associated with decreases in reports of family violence in socially disorganized urban communities otherwise characterized by high levels of crime? On the qualitative side, ethnographic research that explores the formation and intensity of social support networks within congregations, especially among African Americans, and the potential linkages, if any, between these social support networks and the role they play in coping with domestic violence is sorely needed. In addition, we need to know more about women who may be deeply religious but are unable to attend religious services because of a controlling partner who purposefully isolates the victim from these networks of social and spiritual support.

The present study also suggests that future domestic violence research concerning protective factors that overlooks the role of religion, especially for African Americans, may be unnecessarily short-sighted. Finally, although religion may indeed be a protective factor in some circumstances, we do not mean to imply that religion's only influence may be to constrain rather than cause domestic violence. We need research that examines the ways in which clergy, church teachings, and religious leaders have fostered attitudes that justify or even condone domestic violence.

In conclusion, although the particular explanations for its importance have not yet been firmly established, the relationship between religious involvement and domestic violence is becoming increasingly evident. In the past, many researchers have overlooked the role of religion in their studies of domestic violence, but recent works have shown it to be an important factor. However, as this study shows, the effect of religion is not a singular one. The variations in the effect of religious involvement on domestic violence for different ethnic groups discussed in this article remind us that religious phenomena must be examined in all their complexity and positioned within appropriate contexts.

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Christopher G. Ellison is the Elsie and Stanley E. Adams Sr. Centennial Professor of sociology and religious studies at the University of Texas at Austin, where he is also affiliated with the Population Research Center. He is helping to develop a new Center for the Social Scientific Study of Religion. Much of Ellison's research focuses on three broad topics: (a) the implications of religious involvement for mental and physical health and mortality; (b) religious variations in family life, including childrearing, marital relations, gender roles, and family violence; and (c) the role of religious institutions, practices, and values among U.S. racial and ethnic minority populations.

Jenny A. Trinitapoli is assistant professor in the School of Social and Family Dynamics at Arizona State University. She received her PhD in sociology from the University of Texas at Austin in 2007. Her research agenda focuses on three areas: (a) the effects of individual religiousness and broader aspects of religious context on HIV risk, marriage, sexual behavior, and family formation in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Malawi; (b) the role of religious congregations in the provision of health-related social services in the US and sub-Saharan Africa; and (c) the integration of survey and ethnographic methods and data collection and analytic strategies.

Kristin L. Anderson is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology at Western Washington University. She earned her BA in Sociology and English at the University of Northern Iowa in 1990 and completed her PhD at the University of Texas at Austin in 1997. She taught at Drew University in New Jersey before coming to Western Washington University in 2001. Professor Anderson's research examines gender differences in the experiences, interpretations, and consequences of partner violence. Her interest in violence within families was enhanced by her work as a foster care social worker during a break from graduate school in 1992–93.

Byron R. Johnson is professor of sociology and codirector of the Institute for Studies of Religion, as well as director of the National Domestic Violence Fatality Review Initiative, both at Baylor University. He is a senior fellow at the Witherspoon Institute in Princeton, NJ. Johnson's research focuses on quantifying the effectiveness of faith-based organizations to confront various social problems. Recent publications have examined the efficacy of the "faith factor" in reducing crime and delinquency among at-risk youth in urban communities, and several studies examining the impact of faith-based programs on recidivism reduction and prisoner re-entry.