

## RESEARCH

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# Liberal and Conservative Conceptions of Family: A Cultural–Developmental Study

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This is a cultural–developmental study of conceptions of family. It compared religiously liberal and conservative lay believers in young, midlife, and older adulthood on their conceptions of diverse aspects of family life, including spousal roles, the balance between family and work, and child-rearing approaches ( $N = 120$ ). Results showed a marked division between liberal and conservative believers, which was particularly strong in midlife. Also, young and older adults within each religious group differed. In light of comparable historic survey results, this age group difference is likely to be partly generational. The study found few gender differences.

This study aims to examine how diverse conceptions of family, including spousal roles, balancing family and work, and child-rearing goals, are both culturally and developmentally situated. Following cultural psychology, culture is defined in terms of worldview rather than nation (e.g., Jensen, 1997a; Shweder et al., 1998). Thus, the comparison here is of religiously liberal and conservative groups. In regard to development, the study included a cross-section of young, midlife, and older adults.

The focus is on family because it may be a sphere in which differences between liberal and conservative believers are particularly strong (Hunter, 1991). Furthermore, conceptions of the organization and goals of family bear on psychological

and social relations within the family as well as more encompassing conceptions of how to govern society. For example, Lakoff's (1996) linguistic analyses of the writings of religious leaders suggest that endorsement of "nurturing parent" and "strict father" family models are associated with liberal and conservative political orientations, respectively.

## LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE RELIGIOUS BELIEVERS

From a cultural psychology point of view, an interesting and important phenomenon that has taken place in recent decades is the accelerating differentiation between religiously liberal and conservative groups. Social observers have used different terminology to describe this differentiation, but they have all pointed to the occurrence of the same phenomenon in the United States and internationally (Bellah, 1987; Hunter, 1991, 1994; Marty & Appleby, 1993; Merelman, 1984; Wuthnow, 1989).

Whereas research on religiously liberal and conservative leaders and organizations has highlighted divisions across a wide range of areas including politics and economics (e.g., Hunter, 1991; Lakoff, 1996), the limited amount of research with lay believers has primarily found differences on family and "individual liberties" issues (Fleishman, 1988). Using subsamples from a national GSS survey, Davis and Robinson (1996) found that religiously liberal and conservative believers consistently differed on issues pertaining to children's schooling, sexuality, abortion, and the roles of women and men. The groups, however, did not differ markedly on issues pertaining to race and economic inequalities (e.g., school busing, government welfare spending). Similarly, Olson and Carroll (1992), in a questionnaire survey of lay believers and seminary faculty, found divisions between liberals and conservatives on abortion and remarriage but not on issues pertaining to the military, welfare, and aid to poor countries.

Interview research with liberal and conservative lay believers has shown that for family and "individual liberties" issues, such as abortion and divorce, the groups differ not only on evaluations (i.e., whether a behavior is regarded as right or wrong) but also in their reasoning (i.e., explanations for why a behavior is right or wrong). Jensen (1997a, 1998a, 1998b) found that conservative believers often reasoned in terms of an "Ethic of Divinity," invoking concepts such as God's authority, scriptural injunctions, and the virtue of holiness. Liberal believers seldom used these concepts. Instead, they often used an "Ethic of Autonomy," speaking of individual rights, and psychological and physical harm to individuals. The two groups did not differ on their use of an "Ethic of Community." Both groups quite frequently spoke of familial and communal obligations. However, this cannot be taken to mean that they hold similar conceptions of family or share similar family practices.

In fact, some research is available that focuses on a particular set of child-rearing practices, and it shows differences between liberal and conservative believers. Conservative Protestant parents are more likely to approve of and use corporal punishment with their preadolescent children, compared with mainline or unaffiliated parents (e.g., Ellison & Sherkat, 1993a, 1993b; Gershoff, Miller, & Holden, 1999; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeswar, & Swank, 2001). Compared with mainline and unaffiliated fathers, conservative Protestant fathers are also more likely to engage in one-on-one conversations with their children, show affection in the form of praise and hugs, and take part in daily dinners and youth activities (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Mahoney et al., 2001; Wilcox, 2002). Research also suggests that some of these differences are mediated by religious beliefs or ideology rather than by religious participation or conventionality (Wilcox, 2002).

In sum, research from different disciplines indicates that the differentiation between liberal and conservative believers is important. Among lay believers, this division may find particularly strong expression in regards to family. A limited number of studies have included lay believers, however, and these studies have addressed a fairly narrow range of conceptions and practices pertaining to family. An examination of a wider range of family issues is necessary.

### AGE AND GENERATION

With respect to conceptions of family, age or generation, or both, may be important sources of heterogeneity among liberal and conservative believers. Findings from Davis and Robinson's (1996) survey of lay believers showed that age correlated positively with more conservative positions such as regarding premarital sex as wrong and regarding wives as best suited for homemaking. Hunter (1984, 1987) compared the "coming generation" of young evangelical adults attending elite biblical colleges and seminaries to older generations of evangelicals and found that young evangelicals favor more equality in spousal roles and more androgyny in gender identities. Age and generation, then, merit more research because they may account for noteworthy heterogeneity among liberal and conservative believers.

### GENDER DIFFERENCES

Hunter's (1987) research with young and older evangelicals showed a few gender differences. More men than women agreed that husbands should have final authority in family decisions and that, if possible, husbands should support the family while wives remain at home. Other studies of liberal and conservative believers have not shown gender differences, however (e.g., Davis & Robinson, 1996; Olson & Carroll, 1992).

## THIS STUDY

This study compared liberal and conservative lay believers in young, midlife, and older adulthood on conceptions of diverse aspects of family life, including spousal roles, the balance between family and work, and child rearing. Some conceptions were selected to go beyond the items customarily included on national and other surveys. Other conceptions were selected to overlap with the family items used by Hunter (1987) in his study of evangelicals and Yankelovich (1981) in an historical analysis of American views more generally. By including overlapping items, some findings from this study could be held together with results from other groups and historical periods. This allows for consideration of the difference between age and generation for this cross-sectional study in which developmental and generational effects otherwise cannot be separated (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Elder, 1974/1999).

In accordance with the literature cited earlier, one hypothesis was that liberal and conservative believers would differ on most conceptions of family. A second hypothesis was that age-group differences would occur on some conceptions—specifically, those pertaining to spousal roles and authority. Insufficient research in this area is available, however, to suggest hypotheses in regards to gender differences or interactions between the variables of religion, age, and gender.

This study constitutes a strong test of age-group differences because participants had self-selected into the same congregations. They were not a sample of randomly selected religiously liberal and conservative individuals belonging to different age groups. Persons belonging to the same congregation would be likely to become members of the congregation on the basis of shared views and to come to hold more similar views over time as they take part in congregational activities together. Hence, age-group differences would be particularly noteworthy for the present sample.

## METHOD

### Participants

The study included 120 participants: 60 fundamentalist Baptists and 60 mainline Baptists. Participants in each group of Baptists were selected to fit evenly into three age groups ( $n = 20$ ): young (aged 19–27,  $M = 23.2$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ ), midlife (aged 35–56,  $M = 46.5$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ), and older adults (ages 65–84,  $M = 72.7$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ). Thirty-six of the fundamentalists were women (10 young, 13 midlife, and 13 older), as were 32 of the mainline Baptists (12 young, 10 midlife, and 10 older). Almost all participants were White and resided in a medium-sized Midwestern city.

The fundamentalists attended four independent Baptist churches that self-identify as “fundamentalist.” The mainline Baptists attended a church that has a dual

affiliation with the American Baptist Churches/USA and the Southern Baptist Convention. The latter affiliation, however, is regarded as historic. Even though the fundamentalists attended four different churches, their theological views were highly similar when assessed on a questionnaire that asked them to select from among a set of items (with options that ranged from conservative to liberal) the one closest to their own view (Table 1). The table also shows that the fundamentalists

TABLE 1  
Theological Conceptions (%)

	<i>All Baptists</i>		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>Mline</i>	<i>Fund</i>		
<b>Bible</b>				
The inspired word of God, accurate in its statements and teachings and is to be taken literally, word for word	3	92		
The inspired word of God, accurate in its teachings but is not always to be taken literally in its statements concerning matters such as science and historical reporting	55	2	201.2	*
Becomes the word of God for a person when he or she reads it in faith	25	0		
Ancient book of legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man	12	0		
<b>Life after death</b>				
Only hope for heaven is through personal faith in Jesus Christ	18	93		
Only hope for heaven is through personal faith in Jesus Christ <i>except</i> for those who do not have the opportunity to hear of Jesus Christ	30	7	59.0	*
A divine reward for those who earn it by their good life	15	0		
Don't know	33	0		
<b>Origin of human beings</b>				
God created Adam and Eve, which was the start of human life	25	92		
God began an evolutionary cycle for all living things but personally intervened at a point in time and transformed man into a human being in His own image	47	5	79.8	*
Humans evolved from other animals	17	0		
<b>Origin of world</b>				
Was created in six 24 hour days	8	75		
Was created in six days but each day corresponds roughly to a geological age or period	20	5	144.2	*
Biblical account is intended to be symbolic and not literal	33	0		
Biblical account reflects what was know of the origin of the world at the time it was written	17	0		

*Note.* Fund = fundamentalist; Mline = mainline. For the sake of simplicity, this table does not include a few answers that were never or very rarely selected. Analyses of variance were used for statistical analysis, but percentages are reported in the table for ease of interpretation.

\*  $p < .001$ .

indeed were highly conservative in their theological conceptions. In comparison, the mainline Baptists were significantly more theologically liberal.

Recruitment of participants took two forms because ministers differed on what would be most appropriate for their churches. In larger churches (the mainline and one fundamentalist church), ministers provided the author with a list of active members who were then contacted by the author (first with a letter and then by phone). Eighty-one percent of those contacted agreed to participate (79% from the mainline church and 86% from the fundamentalist church); 49% of all participants were recruited this way. The remainder of the participants volunteered to take part in the research project after the author had described it at a service (oral presentations along with handouts).

Table 2 shows additional demographic characteristics of the sample. There were no significant group differences in the representation of women and men. Compared with the fundamentalists, the mainline Baptists had fewer children, more education, and a higher family income. The largest discrepancies in education and income between the religious groups occurred among older adults. With respect to age, predictable differences were present. Young adults constituted the highest proportion of singles and had the fewest children. Midlife adults had the highest levels of education and family income. Older adults were the most likely to be widowed (15% in each group of Baptists vs. 0% of young and midlife adults).

## Materials

Participants filled out a questionnaire on conceptions of family that was part of a larger assessment. The conceptions of family measure consisted of 22 items. The items pertained to a range of aspects of family life, including the desirability of marriage, the balance between family and career, spousal roles and power, and child rearing. Participants rated items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). With the exception of four items added by the author, questionnaire items came from Hunter's (1987) study of young evangelical Protestants. In turn, Hunter derived some of his items from surveys by Yankelovich (1981). Table 3 lists the 22 items.

A principal components analysis (PCA) with a Varimax rotation was conducted on the 22 items to identify factors. The Varimax rotation was used to minimize the number of items with high loadings on each factor. The Eigenvalue cutoff for factors was set at 1.00, and the cutoff for items within factors was set at .58. The decision to set the cutoffs at these levels was made to adhere to standard practice, to have no items load onto more than one factor, and to yield interpretable factors. The analysis yielded six interpretable factors (Table 3): (a) Conservative Husband, (b) Conservative Wife, (c) With Marriage Comes Children, (d) Family Before Career, (e) Happy Without Marriage, and (f) Independent Religious Children. Some of the items reflecting points of view that were not conservative were reverse

TABLE 2  
Demographic Information

	<i>All Baptists</i>		<i>Mline Baptist</i>			<i>Fund Baptist</i>			<i>Main Efect</i>		<i>Int</i>
	<i>Mline</i>	<i>Fund</i>	<i>Yng</i>	<i>Mid</i>	<i>Old</i>	<i>Yng</i>	<i>Mid</i>	<i>Old</i>	<i>Rel</i>	<i>Age</i>	
Gender (%)											
Women	53	60	60	50	50	50	65	65	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>	<i>na</i>
Men	47	40	40	50	50	50	35	35			
Marital (%)											
Single	23	18	70	0	0	40	10	5			
Married	63	70	30	75	85	60	90	60	<i>ns</i>	***	<i>na</i>
Other	13	12	0	25	15	0	0	35			
Children ( <i>n</i> )	1.5	2.0	0.1	1.9	2.5	0.3	2.5	3.2	*	***	<i>ns</i>
Education (%)											
< HS diploma	0	13	0	0	0	0	0	40			
HS diploma	12	17	5	0	30	10	10	30			
Some college	22	27	45	10	10	45	20	15	***	***	*
College degree	18	20	20	5	30	35	15	10			
Post-college	48	22	30	85	30	10	50	5			
Yearly family income (%)											
< \$20,000	15	31	35	5	5	40	0	55			
\$21–35,000	22	30	30	0	35	25	25	40	**	***	**
\$36–50,000	18	15	10	30	15	20	25	0			
> \$50,000	42	20	20	60	45	10	50	0			

*Note.* Percentages do not add up to 100 if participants did not provide the requested information. Chi-square analyses were used for gender and marital status. Two-factor analyses of variance were used for number of children, level of education, and yearly family income. Efect = effect; Fund = fundamentalist; HS = high school; Int = interaction effect; Marital—Other = divorced or remarried or widowed; Mid = midlife adults; Mline = mainline; Old = older adults; Rel = religious group; Yng = young adults; *ns* = not significant; *na* = not applicable.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

coded for the two factors pertaining to being a conservative husband and wife (see Table 3). The factor pertaining to the conservative wife included statements about specific approaches to discipline of children. Of the 22 items, 4 did not fit into any factors, and these items were not part of subsequent data analyses. The six factors accounted for a total of 70% of the variance.

### Procedure

Questionnaires were mailed to participants' homes along with a stamped return envelope, and follow-up phone calls were placed. Each participant was offered \$10 for returning a questionnaire. The return rate was 90%.

TABLE 3  
Family Factors and Items

	<i>Factor Loading</i>
Factor 1: Conservative Husband (17% of variance)	
A husband should have the “final say” in the family’s decision making	.82
A husband should primarily be responsible for the spiritual well-being of the family	.82
A father should primarily be responsible for disciplining the children	.86
If one parent stays at home when the children are young, it should not necessarily be the wife rather than the husband (reverse coded)	.61
Factor 2: Conservative Wife (16% of variance)	
If possible, it is best if the wife stays at home and the husband works to support the family	.66
If possible, the wife should stay at home when the children are young	.58
A married woman should not work if she has a husband capable of supporting her	.63
Strict, “old-fashioned” upbringing using physical punishment when necessary is still the best way to raise children	.60
Spanking is a form of parental punishment that has a tendency to produce violence (reverse coded)	.65
A working mother can establish as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work (reverse coded)	.61
Factor 3: With Marriage Comes Children (12% of variance)	
A married woman who does not want at least one child is being selfish	.90
A married man who does not want at least one child is being selfish	.92
Factor 4: Family Before Career (10% of variance)	
A man should put his wife and children ahead of his career	.85
A women should put her husband and children ahead of her career	.85
Factor 5: Happy Without Marriage (9% of variance)	
A woman can live a full and happy life without marrying	.92
A man can live a full and happy life without marrying	.91
Factor 6: Independent Religious Children (6% of variance)	
Children should be taught to be independent and self-reliant	.58
Children should be taught to believe in God	.69
Remaining items	
Sensitive and gentle men are less appealing than men who have more traditional male characteristics	
Assertive and self-reliant women are less appealing than women with more traditional female characteristics	
Children should be taught to be respectful and obedient to their parents	
It is not necessary that parents stay at home to take care of their young children	

## RESULTS

Analyses of covariance ( $2 \times 3 \times 2$  ANCOVAs) were conducted with religion (mainline, fundamentalist), age (young, midlife, older), and gender (female, male) as between-subjects variables. Education and income were entered as covariates as the two religious groups differed significantly on these variables. The covariates were not significant in any analyses and will not be discussed further. A priori "Simple" contrasts between young and older, and midlife and older adults were also carried out.

## Religion

Table 4 shows that significant main effects for religious group occurred on four of the six family factors. Fundamentalists agreed with conservative conceptions of both husband and wife, whereas mainline Baptists disagreed. Likewise, fundamentalists agreed with the factor that marriage comes with children whereas mainline participants disagreed. Finally, fundamentalists agreed more strongly than mainline participants that family comes before career.

On the two factors for which significant differences did not occur, both groups agreed that people can live happily without marrying and that children should be raised both to be independent and to believe in God.

## Age and Generation

Table 5 shows significant main effects for age group on three factors. The differences occurred primarily between young and older adults. Young adults disagreed that marriage comes with children whereas older adults agreed (young:  $M = 3.53$ ,

TABLE 4  
Family Factors: Religious Group Comparisons  $M$  and ( $SD$ )

Factor	All Baptists		F	p
	Mline	Fund		
Conservative husband	3.95 (0.88)	2.21 (0.81)	104.74	**
Conservative wife	3.11 (0.65)	2.08 (0.61)	71.85	**
With marriage comes children	3.42 (1.11)	2.85 (1.26)	9.88	*
Family before career	2.15 (0.88)	1.51 (0.62)	21.19	**
Happy without marriage	2.41 (1.01)	2.19 (0.91)	3.74	ns
Independent religious children	1.54 (0.47)	1.58 (0.57)	0.00	ns

Note. Lower means entail stronger agreement as 1 = *strongly agree* and 5 = *strongly disagree*. Fund = fundamentalist; Mline = mainline.

\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*  $p < .001$ . ns = not significant.

TABLE 5  
Family Factors: Age-Group Comparisons and Interactions Between Age and Religion *M* and (*SD*)

Factors	Mline Baptist			Fund Baptist			Efect Age		Age Contrasts		Interaction	
	Yng	Mid	Old	Yng	Mid	Old	F	p	Y vs. O	M vs. O	F	p
Conservative husband	3.64 (1.16)	4.17 (0.85)	4.03 (0.46)	2.42 (1.10)	1.93 (0.72)	2.26 (0.44)	0.16	ns	ns	ns	4.46	**
Conservative wife	3.08 (0.66)	3.49 (0.64)	2.82 (0.59)	2.24 (0.64)	1.85 (0.66)	2.17 (0.49)	1.23	ns	ns	ns	6.70	**
With marriage comes children	3.47 (1.22)	3.73 (0.89)	3.08 (1.15)	3.58 (1.07)	2.47 (1.42)	2.50 (0.99)	4.13	*	**	*	4.61	**
Family before career	1.89 (1.04)	2.03 (0.74)	2.50 (0.76)	1.17 (0.34)	1.50 (0.78)	1.87 (0.47)	5.40	**	***	ns	0.15	ns
Happy without marriage	2.16 (0.96)	2.08 (0.95)	2.95 (0.92)	1.97 (0.94)	1.96 (0.76)	2.66 (0.90)	4.76	**	**	ns	0.40	ns
Independent religious children	1.67 (0.42)	1.57 (0.56)	1.40 (0.38)	1.66 (0.80)	1.44 (0.47)	1.63 (0.37)	1.69	ns	ns	ns	1.29	ns

Note. Lower means entail stronger agreement as 1 = *strongly agree* and 5 = *strongly disagree*. Efect Age = main effect of age; Fund = fundamentalist; Mid/M = midlife adults; Mline = mainline; Old/O = older adults; Yng/Y = young adults.  
\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001. ns = not significant.

$SD = 1.13$ ); (older:  $M = 2.79, SD = 1.10$ ). Younger adults agreed more strongly than older adults that family comes before career (young:  $M = 1.54, SD = 0.85$ ); (older:  $M = 2.19, SD = 0.70$ ), and that one can live happily without marrying (young:  $M = 2.06, SD = 0.94$ ); (older:  $M = 2.80, SD = 0.91$ ).

### Interactions Between Religion and Age

Table 5 also shows significant interaction effects of religion and age on the three factors endorsing a conservative husband, a conservative wife, and that marriage entails children. For each of these factors, polarization between the religious groups was strongest among midlife adults. Midlife fundamentalists were in particularly strong agreement with the three factors whereas mainline Baptists in midlife were particularly strong in their disagreement. Figure 1 provides an illustration of the nature of the interaction in regard to the conservative wife factor. The pattern was the same for the other two factors.

### Main and Interaction Effects of Gender

Few significant main or interaction effects occurred in regard to gender. There were two main effects. Men agreed more strongly than women that family comes

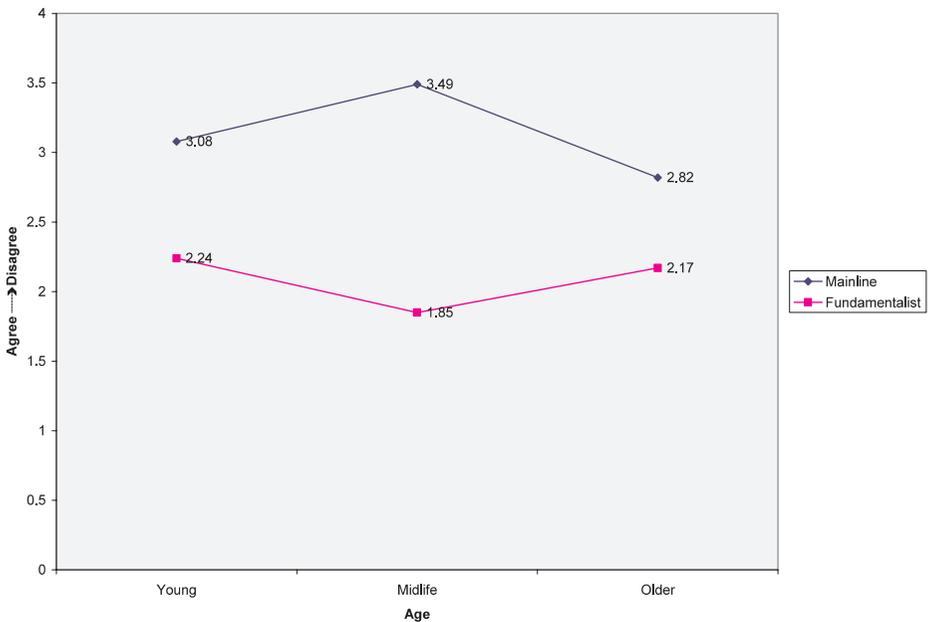


FIGURE 1 Two-way interaction of religion and age on Conservative Wife factor.

before career,  $F(1, 113) = 3.90, p < .05$  (men:  $M = 1.70, SD = .69$ ); (women:  $M = 1.95, SD = .91$ ). Women agreed more strongly than men that children should be raised to be independent and believe in God,  $F(1, 113) = 5.29, p < .05$  (men:  $M = 1.68, SD = .64$ ); (women:  $M = 1.47, SD = .38$ ). There was one three-way interaction on the conservative husband factor,  $F(2, 112) = 5.68, p < .01$ . As illustrated in Figure 2, young men in both religious groups stood out. Among all mainline Baptists, young men were the least likely to disagree with the conservative husband factor. Among all fundamentalists, however, young men neither agreed nor disagreed with this factor, whereas all other fundamentalist subgroups agreed. In fact, young men from the two religious groups were hardly distinguishable (young mainline men:  $M = 3.13, SD = .95$ ); (young fundamentalist men:  $M = 3.03, SD = 1.14$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The results here indicate that liberal and conservative lay believers differ markedly in their conceptions of family. But these groups are not homogeneous. Important variations occur within each group in regard to age or generation and also to some extent in regard to gender differences.

Two caveats are necessary. One is that generalizations are limited by the fact that participants were not randomly selected. They were Baptists residing in the Midwest who were largely White and middle class. The present results, however, although new, are also consonant with the literature on religious divisions in the public arena on family matters as well as with the available findings from research with other samples of lay Protestants. Of the American population, about 33% are mainline Protestants, and about 25% are fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants (General Social Survey, 2002; Roof & McKinney, 1987; Smith, 1990). The second caveat is that generalizability is also restricted by the small sample size of the study. Significant findings were common, however, even in comparisons of the small age groups. This supports the robustness of findings.

### Divisions Between Liberals and Conservatives

Previous research has shown that mainline and fundamentalist lay Baptists differ in their views of a variety of moral issues (Jensen, 1997a, 1997b, 1998a, 1998b), and the results here show that they also are markedly divided on conceptions of family. For example, the fundamentalists agree with family factors that entail conceptions of family as headed by a husband who has final say in a variety of family decisions and who is responsible for the primary household income. His wife is responsible for maintaining the home and providing child care, which when necessary may involve physical punishment. In contrast, mainline Baptists object

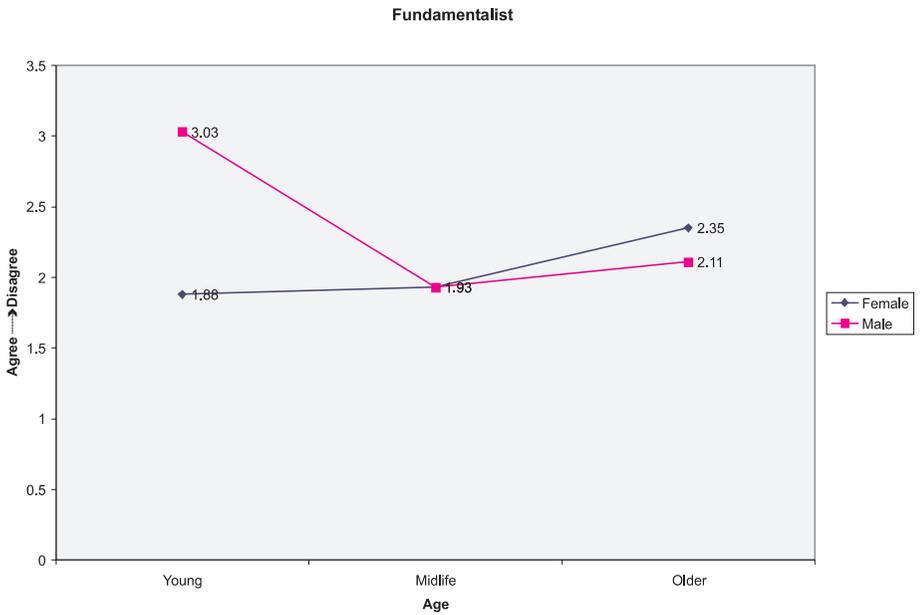
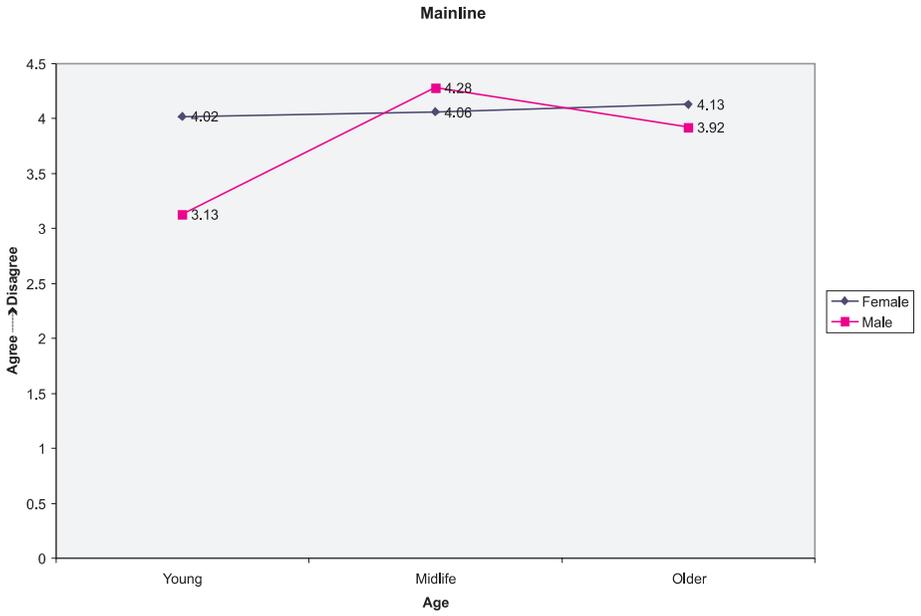


FIGURE 2 Three-way interaction of religion, age, and gender on Conservative Husband factor.

strongly to factors that entail gender-based divisions of authority and spousal role obligations. In this conception, both spouses may work outside the home, and either spouse may hold primary responsibility for taking care of young children in the home. That the two groups of Baptists differed widely lends support to the argument that family is “the most conspicuous field of conflict” in the division between religiously liberal and conservative groups (Hunter, 1991, p. 176).

The marked division also supports the increasing number of findings showing the importance of taking into account religious worldviews as influential in regard to attitudes and behaviors relating to family (e.g., Cornwall, 1987; Dollahite, 2003; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003; Wilcox, 2002; Wilkinson & Tanner, 1980). To a considerable extent this work has focused on child-rearing practices, but future research might fruitfully examine a broader array of family practices such as the family factors that this study identified.

### Midlife Polarization

The chasm on conceptions of family between the religious groups was particularly wide among midlife adults. Developmentally, midlife is a time when family considerations are highly salient and family decisions are plentiful. Compared with persons in midlife, young adults are less likely to be married and have children. Older adults are more likely to be widowed, and their children are more likely to have left home. Thus, to midlife adults, issues about how final family decisions are reached, who provides a family income, and who takes care of the children involve decisions that are highly salient to their daily lives. They may also be issues that are perceived as bearing on one’s contributions to society and future generations (Erikson, 1950). Hence, midlife may be a developmental point when differing conceptions of family find an especially potent expression between liberal and conservative believers. The cultural–developmental approach of this study allows for a consideration of the intersection of religious worldview and development, showing a midlife polarization among religious groups that has not previously been noted in research.

### Differences Between Young and Older Adults

Young and older adults differed on half of the family factors. To understand better this age group difference, a historical perspective is helpful. In 1957, 80% of the American population held that a woman cannot live a full and happy life without marrying. By 1978, that number had dropped to 28% (Yankelovich, 1981). In our study, only 13% of young adults held that a woman cannot live a full and happy life without marrying (one of two items within the factor “Happy Without Marriage”). The comparable figure was 30% for older adults. Also, in the earlier part of the 20th century, a wife who did not want a child was typically regarded as selfish and by some even as “criminal” (Hunter, 1987). By the late 1970s, however, 59% of the

general population disagreed that “a married woman who does not want at least one child is being selfish” (Yankelovich, 1981). In this study, 53% of young adults disagreed with this view, but only 25% of older adults disagreed (one of two items within the factor “With Marriage Comes Children”). These historical figures show how change has taken place over time. They also suggest that the older adults in this study no longer hold the views that predominated when they were young, but still retain some degree of the views that predominated before the present point in time. Thus the difference between the young and older adults appears at least in part to be generational.

### Gender Differences

Few gender differences or interactions with gender occurred here. The finding that young male fundamentalists were less likely than all other fundamentalist subgroups to endorse a conservative conception of husbands, however, runs counter to Hunter’s (1987) finding that conservative male students were more likely than conservative female students to endorse paternal authority. Clearly more research is needed in regard to gender differences.

### Conclusion

This cultural–developmental study of conceptions of family shows that religion is an important variable for family research. However, it is necessary to distinguish religious worldviews, such as liberal and conservative ones, and to furthermore consider developmental and historical contexts. Finally, conceptions of family such as the ones researched here bear on psychological and social relations within family and perhaps, too, on broader conceptions of societal organization and governance.

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