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Emerging Adults' Concepts of God: Parenting Styles,  
Gender Differences, and Religious Fundamentalism

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## Abstract

Religion plays an important role in the lives of most people. Individuals' concepts of God stem largely from the socialization they receive from parents. The literature on religion draws heavily on the attachment relationship as the foundation for spiritual development; however, only a few studies have directly examined the effect of parenting styles. The current project expanded on the limited research on parenting styles and examined gender differences and religious fundamentalism in emerging adults' concepts of God. It was expected that males and those with authoritarian parents would have a concept of God as more powerful, whereas females and those with authoritative parents and women would have a concept of God as more nurturant. It was further predicted that a positive relationship would exist between religious fundamentalism and concepts of God as powerful; whereas a negative relationship was expected between religious fundamentalism and God as nurturant. College students ( $N = 198$ ) completed questionnaires that assessed their concepts of God, religious fundamentalism, their perception of their parents' parenting styles, and demographics. An independent samples t-test revealed no gender differences in concepts of God. Through correlation analyses, two hypotheses were partially supported. Results demonstrated that as religious fundamentalism increased, concepts of God as powerful also increased. Unexpectedly, as fundamentalism increased so did concepts of God as nurturant, suggesting that individuals who hold more fundamentalist views tend to think more about the nature of God in relation to their lives, over those who hold less fundamentalist views. With regard to parenting styles, maternal authoritative parenting was positively correlated with children's views of God as nurturant; whereas, paternal authoritarian parenting was positively correlated with children's view of God as powerful. These results show that parenting styles of mothers and fathers contribute to concepts of God differently.

Emerging Adults' Concepts of God: Parenting Styles, Gender Differences,  
and Religious Fundamentalism

In the last few decades, the psychology of religion has attracted increased attention by researchers. Studying religion through a psychological perspective is of value because religion is often a driving force in life. In the United States, approximately 83% of individuals report belonging to a religion (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). Only about 16% of the U.S. population identify themselves as unaffiliated, which consists of individuals who indicate they are atheist, agnostic, or “nothing in particular.” A large portion of the population in the United States, therefore, finds religion important, which may have implications for a wide range of human behavior. In particular, individuals may use religion as the foundation for their sense of morality. Although there are many ways to study religious beliefs, the concepts individuals have of God is one area that may contribute to the existing literature on the psychology of religion.

The research on concepts of God has included topics such as perceptions of God's gender (Ladd, McIntosh, & Spilka, 1998), perceptions of God's distance (Eshleman, Dickie, Merasco, Shepard, & Johnson, 1999), and perceptions of God's involvement (Jensen, 2009). There is evidence that having a positive concept of God may be beneficial. For example, when using positive and negative religious coping strategies, individuals who perceived God as caring tended to have more optimal outcomes (Greenway, Phelan, Turnbull, & Milne, 2007). Additionally, conceptions of God may also affect one's assessment of one's self-worth. Research has demonstrated that self-worth has been positively associated with concepts of God as loving, whereas negative associations have been found between self-worth and concepts of God as rejecting (Francis, Gibson, & Robbins, 2001).

Concepts of God have been defined in many ways. Researchers have measured concepts of God by assessing the extent to which one holds a theological concept of God or an anthropomorphic concept of God (Morewedge & Clear, 2008). The former views God as a being who is all-knowing, omnipresent, and all powerful; whereas the latter is more concerned with God's human-like qualities, such as beliefs and emotions. Concepts of God have also been defined by one's perception about God's behavioral characteristics (e.g., De Roos, Iedema, & Miedema, 2004), which is the definition used in the present study. Specifically, concepts of God as nurturant or powerful were the main focus of this project. One way to assess nurturance is to examine individuals' perceptions about God's acceptance and presence in their lives (Lawrence, 1997). Researchers define acceptance as the loving and good nature of God. God's presence is measured through involvement in people's lives. To assess God as powerful, researchers have looked at characteristics such as influence and providence, which reflect how much control God has in people's lives.

The purpose of this study was to investigate differences in emerging adults' concepts of God as these differences are related to participants' gender and religious fundamentalism as well as their parents' parenting styles. Late adolescence and emerging adulthood is an interesting time to study the role of religion because many individuals enter a period of identity exploration, either through pursuing academic careers or entering the workforce, while also holding on to the values of their parents (Longest & Smith, 2011). The research on concepts of God in emerging adulthood often focuses on young adults' attachment relationship with their parents. Thus, the literature draws heavily on attachment theory; yet, interestingly, only a few studies have directly examined the effect of parenting styles on concepts of God (e.g., Dickie, Eshleman, Merasco, Shepard, Vanderwilt, & Johnson, 1997). To fill this gap, the present study focused on the

parenting style young adults were raised with and its relation to their concepts of God. Possible gender differences in concepts of God were also examined as well as religious fundamentalism.

The literature review will first introduce research on the theoretical frameworks for studying concepts of God. Second, it will consider the gender differences that have been found on concepts of God. Third, the effects of parenting on concepts of God will be explored and fourth, the effects of religion on parenting styles will be described. This literature review provides the foundation for the current study.

### **Theoretical Frameworks for Studying Concepts of God**

There are two dominant theoretical approaches in the study of concepts of God. The first is the social learning approach which examines religious concepts through parent-child relationships, emphasizing the importance of parental roles, as well as contextual and sociocultural factors (Boyatzis, 2005; Cecero, Marmon, Beitel, Hutz, & Jones, 2004). For example, De Roos and colleagues (2004) found that mothers' concepts of God as loving were positively related to children's concepts of God as loving and caring. In addition, there was a positive relationship between mothers' strict parenting and children's concept of God as potent and punishing. Thus, research shows that children's concepts of God and children's perceptions of their parents are related, lending support for the social learning approach (Dickie, et al., 1997). These findings support the idea that parents, particularly mothers, have a fundamental role in how children develop their concept of God. That is, primary caretakers serve as models by which children learn about different views of God. In turn, this may contribute to how children form their own concepts of God.

A second dominant paradigm in the study of concepts of God is the cognitive-developmental approach (Boyatzis, 2005). Within this framework, researchers have used

cognitive models to explain how individuals' conceptualizations about God progress over time. Therefore, the argument is that growth occurs in stage-like models, starting out simply, and becoming more complex with age. Although the cognitive area of this research is valuable, Boyatzis (2005) posited that cognition cannot explain everything about concepts of God. He suggests that researchers should also consider the role of culture and religion in the development of concepts of God. Thus, it may be inferred that other theories that focus on the quality of the parent-child relationship should be considered in concepts of God research.

One way to bridge the gap and integrate the two theoretical views is through social cognitive theory. This view may also help deepen understanding of how emerging adults think about God. This paradigm highlights the idea that there is a reciprocal exchange between the individual and the environment in shaping human behavior (Bandura, 2001; 2004). As agents, people manipulate the environment and this facilitates the necessary actions required to achieve some goal. Social cognitive theory captures the important roles that both the individual and the environment have in influencing behavior. Bandura (2001; 2004) refers to human beings as agents who have control over their own behavior. Despite the changing environments they encounter, individuals are able to extract information from their surroundings and respond appropriately. At the same time, their actions are altering the environment. This notion suggests that the individual and environment are not static. Instead, these entities are constantly evolving as they interact.

In this context of social cognitive theory, it is likely that individuals learn about God through environmental factors, including parents. In early childhood, parents may serve as the primary source of information. That is, parents hold particular concepts of God and transfer this knowledge to their children. Parents also model behavior, particularly through parenting styles;

therefore, children may learn and imitate their parents. The quality of the parent-child relationship is important to consider regarding how individuals form their concepts of God.

Parents play an important role in the type of beliefs and attitudes their children form about the world. Emerging adults are at a stage in life when they can either hold on to or deviate from the beliefs their parents have taught them. When the quality of parenting is high, it may be more likely for individuals to adhere to the values of their upbringing. However, when the quality of parenting is poor, it may be more difficult to adhere to such values. Additionally, when children have good relations with their parents, they are more likely to have positive concepts of God (e.g., nurturant); whereas when the quality of the parent-child relationship is poor, individuals may be more likely to have negative concepts of God (e.g., punishing). Thus, based on social cognitive theory, children's relationship with their parents is likely an important factor in how they develop their own concepts of God. As the literature has indicated, gender is another important variable to consider when examining individuals' views of God.

### **Gender Differences in Concepts of God**

The ways in which individuals form their concepts of God are influenced by various sources. Three factors that may influence one's conception are gender, parenting, and religion. There is some evidence that males and females hold different views of God, which is likely a product of socialization. However, due to the dearth of literature on gender differences in concepts of God, gender warrants further research. In one of the few studies that examined gender, Ladd and colleagues (1998) found that boys' drawings of God were more gender neutral, whereas girls' drawings were more masculine. In another study, Dickie et al. (1997) found gender differences in perceptions about God's power, such that boys perceived God as more powerful than mother and father, whereas girls perceived mother as more powerful than God and

father. Moreover, gender differences were demonstrated for concepts of God as controlling (Steenwyk, Atkins, Bedics, & Whitley, 2010). For men, as concepts of God as controlling increased, their hopelessness decreased. However, for women, as concepts of God as controlling increased, their hopelessness increased. These findings indicate the importance of examining how gender may contribute to individuals' concepts of God. Furthermore, the role of parenting in spiritual development is another resourceful avenue to better understand this phenomenon.

### **Effects of Parenting on Concepts of God**

Parents are instrumental in how individuals form their own concepts of God. There is considerable literature regarding attachment and concepts of God in emerging adults. Two main hypotheses have gained considerable attention: the correspondence hypothesis (Granqvist, Ivarsson, Broberg, & Hagekull, 2007; Granqvist, 2002) and the compensation hypothesis (McDonald, Beck, Allison, & Norsworthy 2005). The correspondence hypothesis holds that individuals' bonds are stable across attachment figures. The opposing view, the compensation hypothesis, posits that when relationships are lacking security, individuals tend to seek attachment elsewhere. McDonald and colleagues (2005) concluded that college students' parental attachment and attachment to God supported the correspondence hypothesis. Specifically, they found that outcomes associated with insecure attachments with parents were related to insecure attachments with God. Thus, it has been suggested that when children have insecure attachments with their parents, they compensate for this by having a secure relationship with God. Additional support for the correspondence hypothesis was demonstrated by a positive relationship between loving parents and a concept of God as loving (Granqvist et al., 2007; Granqvist, 2002). In contrast, evidence for the compensation hypothesis was shown by the link between adults having rejecting parents and turning to religion during times of hardship.

Although studying the attachment relationship is a valuable approach in understanding how individuals view God, there are other useful ways to study this phenomenon, such as through parenting styles.

The available studies that have investigated the effects of parenting style on concepts of God have been done with young children. For example, De Roos et al. (2004) found a positive relationship between maternal concepts of God as loving and children's concepts of a loving God. Additionally, authoritarian mothers and maternal concepts of God that emphasized power tended to foster children's perceptions of an authoritarian view of God. They found that girls were more likely than boys to be disciplined through love-oriented means. This type of discipline consists of taking away privileges and reasoning, whereas power-oriented discipline involves yelling, corporal punishment, or threatening. Furthermore, girls perceived God as less nurturing when power-oriented discipline was reported, whereas this effect was not found in boys. In addition, girls perceived God as less powerful when power-oriented discipline was reported but more powerful when love-oriented discipline increased. These results suggest that childrearing practices affect how children view God, such that parental warmth may contribute to children's perception of a loving God, whereas parental control may lead to a view of God as powerful.

Perceptions about God's involvement within one's personal life have also been studied. For instance, Jensen (2009) examined conceptions about God and the devil in a sample of children, teenagers, and adults. She found that children described God and the devil in more concrete ways, whereas adults and teens made more abstract descriptions. Eshelman and colleagues (1999) found a positive correlation between parental quality time and God's distance, such that as time spent with parents increased, individuals' perceived distance to God increased. Furthermore, older children reported higher levels of closeness with God when compared to

younger children. Their findings lend support for Kirkpatrick and Shaver's (1990) attachment theory model, which holds the idea that God serves as a “substitute” parental figure as the parent-child relationship typically becomes more distant as children age. In other words, older children believed that their parents were less involved in their lives and thought of God as being closer. Overall, the limited research suggests that parenting styles may be instrumental in understanding how emerging adults view God as nurturant or powerful.

### **Effects of Religion on Parenting Styles**

Baumrind's (1966) typology of parenting styles has made an impact on the research on parenting. The three main parenting styles are authoritarian, permissive, and authoritative. Authoritarian parents are characterized as being very strict, in terms of setting rules, standards, and punishment (the punishment may or may not be physical, the choice depends on the parent). A permissive parenting style occurs when parents are very lenient, nurturing, and supportive of their children, but offer little discipline. Consequently, permissive parents do not believe that they are responsible for shaping their children's behavior. Authoritative parents raise children with firm control, but are also affectionate toward them. An authoritative parenting style is thought to be the most functional in most cases, as children whose parents have this style have been found to have positive well-being (Gonzalez, Holbein, & Quilter, 2002), greater psychological competence (Steinberg & Dornbusch, 1991), and better emotional adjustment (McKinney, Milone, & Renk, 2011).

Parenting style likely influences the outcomes for developing children. For example, researchers reported a relationship between parenting styles and behavioral problems (e.g., internalizing behaviors such as anxiety or withdrawn behavior, and externalizing behavioral problems such as aggression or delinquency) from childhood through adolescence (Williams,

Degnan, Perez-Edgar, Henderson, Rubin, Pine, et al., 2009). Negative parenting styles, classified as authoritarian and permissive, were related to an increase in internalizing behaviors and an increase in externalizing behaviors, respectively. Dimensions of parenting, particularly parental warmth, have been found to be stable over time (Rimehaug, Wallander, & Berg-Nielsen, 2011). Together, these findings suggest that parenting styles may be relatively stable throughout development.

Religious influences on parenting style are important to understand, as this may provide the foundation for how children learn about God. Studies have shown the effects of religion on parenting style in adolescence, such that compared to authoritarian parents, authoritative parents tend to pray more (Snider, Clements, & Vazsonyi, 2004), have children of higher religiosity (Heaven, Ciarrochi, & Leeson, 2010), and tend to be more religious themselves (Snider et al., 2004). A number of factors such as disciplinary styles, religious affiliation, and parental religiosity may contribute to how children are raised.

The disciplinary strategies utilized by conservative religious groups have inspired much interest within this area of research. Evidence for child obedience and physical punishment within conservative families suggests that this group is oriented toward strict disciplinary styles, commonly associated with authoritarianism (Danso, Hunsberger, & Pratt 1997). Religious fundamentalism (Danso et al., 1997) and theological conservatism (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Segal, 1996) may be linked to physical punishment. In particular, Danso et al. (1997) found that parents who identified themselves as religious fundamentalists were concerned with having obedient children and were more likely to condone physical punishment (i.e., spanking). Ellison and colleagues (1996) also found that conservative groups reported the highest spanking frequencies of all parents assessed. These findings suggest those who hold conservative religious

views may be oriented toward an authoritarian parenting style more than those with less conservative views.

Research demonstrates how parental religiosity contributes to parenting style. For example, Snider et al. (2004) found that parental religiosity was positively related to both authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles, but not to permissive parenting; this was consistent with the results of Heaven et al. (2010) and supports the idea that parents' level of religiosity may contribute to a preference for either an authoritative or authoritarian parenting style. Snider et al. (2004) also found that authoritative parents were perceived by their adolescents as highly religious and they tended to monitor their children very closely. Although authoritarian parents also monitored their teens carefully, the teens of authoritarian parents perceived their parents as being lower in religiosity, when compared to teens of authoritative parents. From these findings, it may be inferred that religiosity influences parenting styles on the discipline dimension of parenting.

Additionally, particular aspects of religion may also contribute to parenting styles. For instance, Snider et al. (2004) found a positive relationship between prayer and authoritative parenting. It may be inferred that because authoritative parents and their children are involved with each other's lives, there may be more opportunity for religious discussion and they may practice the act of praying together. Perhaps the interplay between religiosity and authoritative parenting facilitates the process of building strong bonds between parents and their children. Authoritative parents encourage autonomy and social responsibility in their children; whereas authoritarian parents feel that strict discipline is more important in shaping behavior (Baumrind, 1966). Collectively, this suggests that the role of parenting is important when examining religiosity.

### **Current Study**

Parents have a fundamental role in their child's formation of concepts of God (e.g., De Roos et al., 2004; Dickie et al., 1997). Maternal concepts of God as loving have been positively linked with children's concepts of God as loving (De Roos et al., 2004). A positive relationship between maternal concepts of God and children's concepts of God as potent (defined as omniscient, all-knowing, all-powerful) have also been found. The current study examined gender differences and the perceived parenting styles with which participants were raised and religious fundamentalism on concepts of God. The following hypotheses were tested:

Hypothesis 1a: Children of parents with more authoritarian styles would have more powerful concepts of God.

Hypothesis 1b: Children of parents with more authoritative styles would have more nurturant concepts of God

Hypothesis 2a: Women would have a concept of God as more nurturant than would men.

Hypothesis 2b: Men would have a concept of God as more powerful than would women.

Hypothesis 3a: Individuals higher in religious fundamentalism would have concepts of God as more powerful than would those lower in religious fundamentalism.

Hypothesis 3b: Individuals lower in religious fundamentalism would have concepts of God as more nurturant than would those higher in religious fundamentalism.

In addition to the hypotheses, several research questions were addressed:

1. Are differences in views of God as nurturant or powerful based on level of spirituality?
2. Are differences in views of God as nurturant or powerful based on Sunday school attendance as a child?

3. Are differences in views of God as nurturant or powerful based on ethnicity/race?
4. Are differences in views of God as nurturant or powerful based on religious affiliation?

## Method

### Participants

One-hundred ninety-eight undergraduates were recruited from the California State University San Marcos Psychology Department's human participant pool (HPP). The study was open to all students enrolled in lower-division psychology courses. Students in the study received class credit as part of the research requirement in lower-division psychology classes. Out of 198 participants, 44 participants were excluded from analysis for not believing in God ( $N = 25$ ), being over 25 years of age ( $N = 9$ ), not fitting into any of the traditional religious affiliation categories ( $N = 6$ ), or having missing data ( $N = 4$ ). Emerging adults' concepts of God were of interest, therefore the data from participants over 25 years of age were not analyzed. The final sample ( $N = 154$ , 72.7% female) ranged from 18 to 25 years of age ( $M = 19.94$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ). The sample was predominantly Hispanic/Latino (42.2%) or Caucasian (36.4%), Catholic or Christian (85.1%), and moderately spiritual (40.3%). For other demographic variables, see Table 1.

Power analyses were conducted to determine the appropriate sample size for each statistical test. These were conducted, calculating the effect sizes from similar studies that examined the effect of parenting styles and gender on concepts of God. Hypotheses one and two were tested via t-tests. Large effect sizes have been reported for parenting styles ( $d = 1.06$ ; Dickie et al., 1997;  $d = 2.22$ , Dickie et al., 2006;  $d = 1.59$ ; De Roos et al., 2004). The effect sizes were averaged ( $d = 1.60$ ). Likewise, large to medium effect sizes were reported for gender differences. ( $d = 1.06$ ; Dickie et al., 1997;  $d = .50$ , Dickie et al., 1997;  $d = 1.59$ , Roos et al.,

2004;  $d = .43$ , Ladd et al., 1998). Effect sizes averaged out to a large effect size, ( $d = .90$ ). However, to be conservative, medium effect sizes were expected. Based on Cohen's (1992) power table, for a medium effect size with alpha set at .05 and a power level .80, the number of participants for sufficient power was 128. Hypothesis three was examined by conducting a correlation. Based on a meta-analysis, Mahoney et al. (2008) found an effect size of  $r = .21$ . For correlations, this would be between a small and medium effect size. A medium effect size was anticipated. Based on Cohen's (1992) power primer, a medium effect size with alpha set at .05 and a power level .80, the number of participants for sufficient power was 85. Given that other analyses required 128 participants, this was the target sample size for the study.

### Measures

Participants completed a survey that included scales assessing parenting styles, images of God, religious fundamentalism, social desirability, and a demographic questionnaire.

**Parenting Styles.** The Parenting Styles Dimension Questionnaire (PSDQ, Robinson, Mandelco, Olsen, & Hart, 2001) is a 62-item questionnaire through which participants rated each parent on 5-point scales, from 1 "never" to 5 "always," regarding the frequency of various behaviors. This questionnaire categorized parents as having authoritarian, authoritative, or permissive parenting styles. There were 27 items for the authoritative dimension. A sample item included "[My father] [My mother] gave comfort and understanding when I was upset." There were 20 items that assessed the authoritarian typology. A sample item included "[My father] [My mother] used physical punishment as a way of disciplining me." The permissive dimension included 15 items. A sample item was "[My father] [My mother] ignored my misbehaviors." Of the 62 items, 3 items were reverse coded. A mean score for each of the three parenting styles was calculated. The scores were combined, resulting in a continuous scale. Robinson et al. (1995)

reported good internal consistency reliability for authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles ( $\alpha = .91, .86, \text{ and } .75$ , respectively). Construct validity has been reported (Kern & Jonyniene, 2012). In the current study, the authoritative parenting subscales had excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .95$  for fathers;  $\alpha = .94$  for mothers). There was also good reliability for the authoritarian subscales ( $\alpha = .90$  for fathers;  $\alpha = .89$  for mothers). There was acceptable reliability for the permissive subscales ( $\alpha = .71$  for fathers;  $\alpha = .71$  for mothers). The final scales for authoritative mothers ranged from 1.19 to 4.81 ( $M = 3.47, SD = .65$ ) and authoritarian mothers ranged from 1.30 to 4.65 ( $M = 2.40, SD = .65$ ). The final scales for authoritative fathers ranged from 1.00 to 4.63 ( $M = 3.43, SD = .86$ ) and authoritarian fathers ranged from 1.30 to 4.25 ( $M = 2.28, SD = .64$ ).

**An adapted version of the God Image Scale.** The God Image Scale (Lawrence, 1997) originally contained 72 items that asked participants to rate various characteristics of God. The original scale contained six dimensions of God: presence, challenge, acceptance, benevolence, influence, and providence. The dimensions of challenge and benevolence were dropped for the purposes of this study. An adapted version of the God Image Scale (Lawrence, 1997) was used in this study. Participants were presented with 60 statements and indicated their agreement using 4-point Likert scales (1 "strongly disagree" to 4 "strongly agree"). From the original version, 23 items were dropped because these questions did not capture the definition for God as powerful or nurturant (e.g., "God doesn't mind if I don't grow very much."). The researcher added 11 new items to the powerful dimension. The new items were incorporated items from published measures (e.g., Adjective Ratings of God, Gorsuch, 1967; God Questionnaire, Rizzuto, 1979) or were newly developed for the current study. The adapted measure contained 60 items. There were 4 subscales which were later collapsed into 2 subscales. The influence and providence

subscales were collapsed into the powerful dimension. There were 35 items for the powerful dimension. These measured characteristics of God as judging, strong, protecting, and having power. A sample item, for the powerful dimension was, “God always provides for me.” There were 25 items for the nurturant dimension. The presence and acceptance subscales were collapsed into the nurturant dimension. These items measured characteristics of God as loving, helping, listening, and caring. A sample item included, “God’s love for me is unconditional.” Of the 60 items, 24 were reverse coded. A mean score for each subscale was calculated. For the original measure, the author reported good to excellent reliability for presence, acceptance, influence, and providence ( $\alpha = .94$ ,  $\alpha = .90$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ , and  $\alpha = .92$ , respectively). Lawrence (1997) also reported convergent validity with his original scales, with correlations ranging from .85 to .94. In the current study, the subscales for God as powerful and God as nurturant had good reliability ( $\alpha = .89$ ,  $\alpha = .88$ , respectively). The final scale for God as powerful ranged from 1.46 to 3.54 ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = .38$ ). The final scale for God as nurturant ranged from 2.04 to 3.76 ( $M = 3.17$ ,  $SD = .37$ ).

**Religious Fundamentalism.** The Religious Fundamentalism Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992) is a 20-item questionnaire that assessed individuals’ degree of beliefs about religious teachings. A sample item included, “To lead the best, most meaningful life, one must belong to the one, fundamentally true religion.” Individuals rated each statement on 9-point Likert scales (1 = “very strongly disagree” to 9 = “very strongly agree”). There were 10 items that were reverse coded. The mean item scores were used to categorize individuals in the high or low groups. The authors reported excellent internal consistency reliability ( $\alpha = .92$ ), and construct validity was demonstrated by correlating the measure with other psychological measures (Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale, Religious Doubts Scale; Altemeyer &

Hunsberger, 1992). In the current study, reliability was consistent with previous research ( $\alpha = .92$ ). The final scale ranged from 1.05 to 8.72 ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ).

**Social Desirability.** Reynold's (1982) short form C (MC-C) of Marlowe-Crowne's (1960) Social Desirability Scale contains 13 items modified from the original 33-item questionnaire. This assessed individuals' tendency to respond to questions in socially acceptable ways. Individuals answered 13 true-false statements about themselves, with responses from 1 to 2 (1 as true, and 2 as false). A sample item was, "I'm always willing to admit it when I make a mistake." There are 8 items that are reverse coded. The MC-C has been shown to have questionable to good internal consistency, ranging from .62 to .76 (Andrews & Meyer, 2003; Zook & Sipps, 1985). Concurrent validity has been established by correlating this measure with the Edwards Social Desirability Scale, as well as construct validity with the validity scales of the MMPI (Reynolds, 1982; Robinette, 1991). In the current study, this measure demonstrated questionable reliability, ( $\alpha = .62$ ). The final scale ranged from 1.08 to 1.92 ( $M = 1.46$ ,  $SD = .21$ ).

**Demographics.** Participants also completed a demographic questionnaire. Items included gender, age, race/ethnicity, and level of education. Demographic information about each parent was also completed. Items included marital status and level of income.

**Religion items.** On the demographics questionnaire, several items regarding religious behaviors were included, such as religious affiliation, level of spirituality, Sunday school attendance of the participant as a child, and attendance at religious services. When asked about religious affiliation, several categories were provided, and if appropriate, participants could select one of the options. If none of the categories were applicable, participants were able to select the "other" category, and were further prompted to provide a short-response to the question. Each of the remaining variables was assessed with one item. For example, participants

indicated their level of spirituality from not at all to extremely. Sunday school attendance was asked by selecting “yes” or “no.” Also, participants indicated the number of religious services attended per week. See Table 2 for more information.

### **Procedure**

After giving informed consent, participants completed the survey on a computer in a private room. The PSDQ (Robinson et al., 2001) was always the first measure to be completed, followed by the Religious Fundamentalism Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992), and the Reynold’s (1982) short form C (MC-C) of Marlowe-Crowne’s (1960) Social Desirability Scale (MC). On the survey, individuals answered “yes” or “no” to the question: “Do you believe in God or a higher being?” If participants answered yes, they completed the God Image Scale (Lawrence, 1997), and the demographics questionnaire. If individuals answered no, they were directed automatically to the demographics questionnaire. Completion of the survey took no longer than 45 minutes. After the session was over, participants were debriefed and given class credit.

## **Results**

### **Preliminary Analyses**

The statistical assumptions for each test were assessed (i.e., t-test and correlation) prior to data analyses. The assumptions included normality, homogeneity of variance, or homoscedasticity, independence of observations, and linearity. Histograms and Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) tests were utilized to assess violations of the normality assumption. Visual inspections of the histograms indicated bimodal distributions on concepts of God as nurturant for gender (females only) and authoritative parents. K-S tests further indicated that normality was violated on God as nurturant, for females ( $p = .001$ ). However, t-tests have been shown to be

robust to violations of normality, thus, analyses were conducted. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was tested using the Levene's test, which demonstrated that the variance between groups was not violated. Independence of observations was met as individuals' responses were not influenced by others.

Prior to running the correlation analyses, the statistical assumptions were tested between religious fundamentalism, parenting styles, God as powerful, and God as nurturant. To test the assumption of homoscedasticity, scatterplots were created, which indicated that the residuals were equally dispersed at both high and low ends of the distribution. Linear relations were assumed. K-S tests revealed that the distribution for religious fundamentalism, God as powerful, and God as nurturant were normal ( $p = .41$ ,  $p = .95$ , and  $p = .08$ , respectively). K-S tests revealed that the distribution for father's authoritative and authoritarian parenting was violated ( $p = .01$ ,  $p = .001$ , respectively). However, Field (2000) suggested that correlations were robust to violations of normality, thus, analyses were conducted. Finally, the independence of observations assumption was met by ensuring that questionnaires were completed independently.

Bivariate correlations were performed to examine if social desirability was highly correlated with concepts of God and religious fundamentalism. There was a small to medium, negative relationship between God as nurturant and social desirability,  $r = -.27$ ,  $p = .001$ . A partial correlation was performed for concepts of God and religious fundamentalism, controlling for social desirability. Correlations between variables were comparable between the two analyses, thus, scales were left in their original state. Because social desirability was not highly correlated with any of the dependent variables, no further analyses were performed using social desirability (see Table 3).

**Hypothesis One: Parenting Styles**

Correlations were conducted to assess the relationships between parenting styles and concepts of God as powerful and nurturant. Two statistically significant findings emerged. As mothers' authoritative parenting style increased, their children's views of God as nurturant increased ( $r = .19, p = .02$ ). This relationship represented a small effect size ( $r^2 = .04$ ). Furthermore, as fathers' authoritarian parenting style increased, their children's views of God as powerful increased ( $r = .16, p = .047$ ). There was a small effect size ( $r^2 = .03$ ) for this relationship. These findings demonstrate that parenting styles are associated with a more powerful or nurturant concept of God, however, these effects are small.

**Hypothesis Two: Gender**

The second hypothesis examined gender differences in concepts of God as powerful and nurturant. It was found that women ( $M = 3.20, SD = .36$ ) did not show any statistically significant differences from men ( $M = 3.09, SD = .38$ ) on concepts of God as nurturant;  $t(151) = 1.67, p = .10$ . Additionally, men ( $M = 2.47, SD = .43$ ) did not significantly differ from women ( $M = 2.52, SD = .36$ ) on concepts of God as powerful;  $t(150) = .63, p = .53$ . Thus, men and women did not show evidence of having different concepts of God as powerful or nurturant.

**Hypothesis Three: Religious Fundamentalism**

The third hypothesis examined the associations between religious fundamentalism and concepts of God. Results indicated that those who scored higher on religious fundamentalism perceived God as more powerful ( $r = .77, p = .001$ ). There was a large effect size for this relationship ( $r^2 = .59$ ). This finding supports the hypothesis. Analyses also considered God as nurturant. Results indicated that, contrary to the hypothesis, individuals who exhibited greater religious fundamentalism viewed God as a more nurturant being ( $r = .55, p = .001$ ). This relationship represented a medium effect size ( $r^2 = .30$ ).

## Research Questions

Additional analyses were employed to examine whether spirituality, ethnicity/race, religious affiliation, and Sunday school attendance would demonstrate differences in concepts of God.

### Level of spirituality

A one-way ANOVA examined whether level of spirituality would show differences in concepts of God among the four categories of spirituality. For God as powerful, there were statistically significant group differences between those who were not at all spiritual or slightly spiritual ( $M = 2.26$ ,  $SD = .28$ ,  $N = 30$ ), those who were somewhat spiritual ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = .27$ ,  $N = 36$ ), those who were moderately spiritual ( $M = 2.58$ ,  $SD = .37$ ,  $N = 62$ ), and those who were extremely spiritual ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = .43$ ,  $N = 24$ ;  $F(3, 148) = 11.39$ ,  $p = .001$ ). This difference represented a small effect size ( $\eta^2 = .19$ ). Post-hoc tests were conducted to test for group differences. It was found that the not at all or slightly spiritual group was significantly different from those who reported being moderately or extremely spiritual. The only groups that were not significantly different from each other were the moderately and extremely spiritual groups.

There were also statistically significant differences in God as nurturant between those who were not at all spiritual or slightly spiritual ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = .22$ ,  $N = 30$ ), somewhat spiritual ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = .30$ ,  $N = 36$ ), moderately spiritual ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = .31$ ,  $N = 62$ ), and extremely spiritual ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = .43$ ,  $N = 25$ );  $F(3, 149) = 21.68$ ,  $p = .001$ . This difference reflected a medium effect size ( $\eta^2 = .30$ ). Results of post-hoc tests revealed that all groups were significantly different, except for the moderately spiritual and extremely spiritual groups which demonstrated no differences to each other. Interestingly, no matter the level of spirituality, all groups perceived God as more nurturant than powerful.

Correlation analyses further examined level of spirituality. A positive relationship was found, such that as spirituality increased, concepts of God as powerful also increased, ( $r = .43, p = .001$ ). This relationship represented a small effect size ( $r^2 = .18$ ). Additionally, those who were higher in spirituality viewed God as more nurturant ( $r = .55, p = .001$ ). This relationship represented a medium effect size ( $r^2 = .30$ ).

### **Religious Group Differences**

A t-test examined religious group differences for God as powerful and nurturant. This revealed statistically significant differences between Christians and Catholics ( $M = 2.59, SD = .32, N = 129$ ), and those who believed in God, but did not identify with any religious affiliation ( $M = 2.04, SD = .32, N = 23$ ) on God as powerful,  $t(150) = 7.41, p = .001$ . This difference represented a large effect size ( $d = 1.72$ ). Also, religious group differences were statistically significant for God as nurturant. Christians and Catholics ( $M = 3.25, SD = .33, N = 130$ ), and those who believed in God, but did not identify with any religious affiliation ( $M = 2.74, SD = .31, N = 23$ ) showed statistically significant differences on God as nurturant,  $t(151) = 6.97, p = .001$ . This difference represented a large effect size ( $d = 1.59$ ).

### **Ethnic Group Differences**

A one-way ANOVA examined ethnic group differences on God as powerful revealing no significant differences among Hispanic/Latinos ( $M = 2.57, SD = .36, N = 64$ ), Caucasians ( $M = 2.46, SD = .34, N = 56$ ) and other/multi-ethnic groups ( $M = 2.46, SD = .46, N = 32$ );  $F(2, 149) = 1.46, p = .24$ . A one-way ANOVA also examined ethnic group differences on God as nurturant revealing no statistically significant differences among Hispanic/Latinos ( $M = 3.23, SD = .35, N = 64$ ), Caucasians ( $M = 3.16, SD = .35, N = 53$ ) and other/multi-ethnic groups ( $M = 3.08, SD = .44, N = 33$ );  $F(2, 150) = 1.97, p = .14$ .

### **Sunday School Attendance**

An independent samples t-test examined religious schooling on concepts of God. Because Levene's test was statistically significant, the corrected values were reported. There were no statistically significant differences for a powerful concept of God between individuals who attended Sunday school as children ( $M = 2.54$ ,  $SD = .35$ ,  $N = 118$ ) and individuals who did not attend Sunday school ( $M = 2.39$ ,  $SD = .45$ ,  $N = 34$ ;  $t(45) = 1.76$ ,  $p = .09$ ). There were no statistically significant differences in perceptions of God as nurturant between individuals who attended Sunday school as children ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = .34$ ,  $N = 119$ ) and individuals who did not attend Sunday school ( $M = 3.11$ ,  $SD = .47$ ,  $N = 34$ ;  $t(43) = .92$ ,  $p = .37$ ).

### **Discussion**

The aims of the current study were to (a) investigate whether there would be a relationship between emerging adult children raised with different parenting styles and their views of God, (b) examine possible gender differences in concepts of God, and (c) examine the relationship between religious fundamentalism and concepts of God. From this study, two hypotheses were partially supported. Having an authoritative mother or an authoritarian father was associated with a more nurturant or more powerful concept of God, respectively. Additionally, positive relationships between religious fundamentalism and concepts of God as nurturant and powerful were found. However, there were no gender differences in concepts of God.

### **Parenting Styles**

Correlations demonstrated positive relationships between parenting styles and concepts of God as powerful and nurturant. Results indicated that as the perception of mothers as authoritative increased so did individuals' views of a nurturant God. Furthermore, as fathers

increased on an authoritarian parenting style, views of God as powerful increased. Interestingly, a maternal authoritarian parenting style was unrelated to a powerful concept of God, and a paternal authoritative parenting style was unrelated to a nurturant concept of God. This suggests that each parent may contribute a unique aspect to how children develop their concepts of God. When mothers exhibit warmth and affection toward their children, these behaviors are associated with a nurturant concept of God. Additionally, when fathers demonstrate control and strictness, their children associate these characteristics with views of God as powerful. These behaviors may be explained through gender schema theory, which holds that individuals process information and behave in a way that is consistent with their ideas and beliefs about gender stereotypical roles (Bem, 1981). Thus, parents may align their behaviors to be consistent with gender stereotypes in order to demonstrate femininity and masculinity to their children. Consequently, mothers assume the role of being nurturant because it is typically associated with femininity; whereas fathers who display being powerful are linked to masculinity.

Another explanation for these findings is that emerging adults view their parents similar to God. Some research demonstrates that young children's perceptions of their parents and their views of God are related (De Roos et al., 2004). The current study was consistent with their research because authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles were associated with whether individuals viewed God as more powerful or more nurturant. Thus, it may be suggested that emerging adults use similar cognitive processes to think about their parents and about God. Because parents and God are separate beings, perhaps emerging adults associate certain characteristics with God and parents, and vice versa. Therefore, parenting styles may model certain behaviors that are necessary for cultivating how emerging adults develop concepts of God.

Consequently, the effects of parenting styles on concepts of God were small. Therefore, other factors may be contributing to how emerging adults view God as powerful and nurturant. Some other factors may include religious fundamentalism, level of spirituality, and religious affiliation.

### **Gender Differences**

The results demonstrated that there were no gender differences in concepts of God, thus, the second hypothesis was not supported. It may be that as individuals grow older, adhering to gender norms may not be as important, because ideas concerning these constructs become redefined (Powlishta, 2004; Signorella & Frize, 2008). At a young age, children learn to align their behaviors to be consistent with gender stereotypes. However, these patterns of behavior change over time, as gender role expectations become more complex. For example, Biernat (1991) found that as individuals age, ideas about femininity and masculinity become more differentiated. In particular, she found that younger boys and girls were more likely to apply gender stereotypes than college students when making social judgments. The current study found that men and women held similar concepts of God as nurturant and powerful. Consequently, it may be argued that gender stereotypes associated with the meaning of masculinity and femininity are irrelevant to how emerging adults perceive God.

### **Religious Fundamentalism**

The results revealed that those individuals who were more fundamentalist in their religious orientations viewed God as more powerful and nurturant than those who were less fundamentalist. Whereas the first relationship supported the hypothesis, the second did not. Religions that promote more literal interpretations of the bible may stress the importance of a powerful and nurturant nature of a higher being. As such, those who are more fundamentalist

may tend to strictly adhere to their religious teachings and practices. Because these individuals are immersed in their religious beliefs, it may be speculated that they think about the nature of God on a daily basis. Consequently, these individuals hold more powerful and nurturant views of God because they believe in the importance of keeping close relations with a higher being.

### **Support for Social Cognitive Theory**

Collectively, the findings regarding parenting styles and religious fundamentalism on concepts of God lend support for social cognitive theory. Because authoritative mothers contributed to a more nurturant view of God, whereas authoritarian fathers fostered a more powerful view of God, it may be that parents model more feminine or masculine behaviors through their parenting styles, in respect to their genders. In particular, authoritative mothers model the more nurturant nature of God through their warmth and affection, but still maintain the role of a disciplinary figure when interacting with their children. Additionally, authoritarian fathers demonstrate the more powerful side of God through setting rules, being strict, and their ways of disciplining their children. As such, children may associate their mother's and father's parenting style with how he or she views God. Furthermore, individuals who held more religious fundamentalist views had more nurturant and more powerful concepts of God. While learning from the bible, church, and parents, individuals extract information from each source and form their own views about a higher being. Individuals with more fundamentalist views may value religious teachings and practices on a daily basis, thus, seeking out this type of environment may be prioritized. Collectively, these findings support social cognitive theory because the ways in which the individual thinks about religion greatly contributes to their concepts of God.

**Spirituality, Religion, Ethnicity, and Sunday School**

The question of whether one's personal relationship with God contributes to concepts of God led to examining level of spirituality. Individuals reported belonging to one of four spiritual groups: not at all spiritual/slightly spiritual, somewhat spiritual, moderately spiritual, or extremely spiritual. Significant group differences were found for concepts of God as powerful and nurturant. In particular, individuals who perceived themselves as more spiritual tended to have more powerful and nurturant concepts of God than those who perceived themselves as less spiritual. Correlations further demonstrated that as spirituality increased, so did concepts of God as powerful or nurturant. The construct of spirituality focuses on the idea that the sacred is a personal experience (Paragament & Mahoney, 2002). Therefore, it makes sense that individuals who are more spiritual than others would seek a personal relationship with a higher being. As such, those who look for these types of relationships would hold stronger beliefs about God. Overall, these findings support the notion that one's perception of their spirituality contributes to one's perception of God.

Because various religious organizations have different ways of teaching religious doctrines, religious group differences were examined and revealed significant differences for God as powerful and nurturant. Concepts of God as nurturant differed between Christians/Catholics and those who believed in God, but did not affiliate with a particular religion. Specifically, those who affiliated themselves as Christian/Catholic held more powerful and nurturant concepts of God than did individuals who believed in God, but did not identify with a particular religion. This finding supports the idea that although one may believe in God, the extent to which one views God as a nurturant and powerful being is linked to a religious belief system. Therefore, religious affiliation appears to have an important influence on concepts of

God. There were issues with sample size, such that Catholics and Christians were the majority religious group. Consequently, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly which specific religions differ in their concepts of God. As a result, the findings may be inconclusive. When possible, future research should further examine more religious groups to see how they differ in their concepts of God, as it may be possible that Western religions as opposed to Eastern or Middle Eastern religions teach individuals about concepts of God as more or less powerful or nurturant.

Previous research has found some evidence of cultural influences in concepts of God (Nazar & Jouzekanani, 2003; Oishi, Seol, Koo, & Miao, 2011). Therefore, ethnic group differences in God as powerful were examined but revealed no significant differences among ethnic groups: Caucasians, Hispanics/Latinos, and other/multi ethnic groups. As with religious differences, examining specific cultural differences for the multi-ethnic/other group category was not feasible due to a small number of participants in this group.

Lastly, religious schooling on concepts of God was not associated with a more powerful or nurturant concept of God. Individuals who attended Sunday school as children did not view God as more powerful or nurturant over those who did not attend Sunday school. This is interesting because churches tend to establish Sunday school services for the youth to learn about biblical teachings; yet, attendance made no difference in concepts of God. Thus, future research should examine other factors that enable children to have differing concepts of God.

### **Limitations and Strengths**

This study had both limitations and strengths. One limitation of the study was unequal sample sizes for gender. The lack of significant findings for gender may be accounted for by inadequate power, which may have failed to detect gender differences that may exist. For adequate power, a minimum of 65 men was required. In this sample, 55 males were recruited;

however, dropping cases for those who did not believe in God resulted in a subsample of only 42 males. Reasonable attempts were made to recruit more males by restricting the study to males only for several weeks. The participant pool administrator also sent out two mass e-mails to encourage males to participate in the study. Thus, further research must make strides to obtain equal sample sizes to compare the two groups. Additionally, parenting style was assessed retrospectively, through college students' completion of questionnaires. Thus, parenting style was determined based on their child's perception which is likely to be biased.

The study also demonstrated some strengths. This study examined how parenting styles contribute to individuals' development of views about God. To date, this is the first study to use Baumrind's typology as the platform from which to investigate individuals' conceptions of God, as other studies have focused on attachment theory. This is important because Baumrind's theory may lead to other aspects of spirituality that may not be captured by attachment theory. Thus, the focus is examining how individuals' (insecure-secure) relationships with parents contributes to concepts of God, rather than looking at dimensions of parenting in relations to views about God. Another strength of the study is that individuals provided information about each parent. When studying the role of parenting on concepts of God, researchers have a tendency to focus only on mothers. However, researchers should strive to obtain information about mothers and fathers as was done in the present study.

### **Future Directions**

Through exploratory analyses, it was found that concepts of God differed between religious groups. Specifically, Christians and Catholics held different concepts of God than those who believed in God, but did not have a religious affiliation. Most studies have been limited to Christian denominations; therefore, the research on religious differences in concepts of God is

scarce. Despite this dearth in the literature, Pnevmatikos (2002) did find religious differences in children's perceptions about God's dwelling. Moreover, others have found that Jewish children had more abstract responses than Protestant children about God's characteristics (Nye & Carlson, 1984). Past research suggests that there are religious differences in views of God; however, the current study is the first to examine how religious groups differ in concepts of God as nurturant and powerful using emerging adults. Future researchers should ensure that their samples are more religiously diverse instead of separating different Christian denominations. This approach may help in understanding how religious groups differ in their concepts of God.

### **Conclusions**

This study failed to replicate gender differences in concepts of God. Results regarding the relationship between religious fundamentalism, parenting styles, and concepts of God were statistically significant. Additionally, there was some evidence that different religious groups have different concepts of God. Collectively, the implication of these findings is that religious institutions as well as parents have strong bearings on individuals' development of views about God. The preliminary finding for religious group differences suggests that some religions portray God as more or less powerful and nurturant than others, which may be used as a mechanism in influencing human behavior. Therefore, the resources used to learn about God may contribute to how individuals think about right and wrong. Thus, parents uniquely contribute to the development of concepts of God. Lastly, it may be argued that individuals who are more fundamentalist in their views tend to perceive God as more nurturant and more powerful because religion carries more relevance in their everyday encounters.

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Table 1

*Demographics of the Sample*

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	Percent%
<i>Gender</i>	
Females	72.7%
Males	27.3%
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
Hispanic/Latino	42.2%
Caucasian	36.4%
Other	21.4%
<i>Year in School</i>	
Freshman	34.4%
Sophomore	25.2%
Junior	28.5%
Senior	10.6%
Other	1.3%

Table 2

*Religious-related Items for the Sample*

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	Percent%
<hr/>	
<i>Religious Affiliation</i>	
Catholic/Christian	85.1%
Spiritual, but no affiliation	
<i>Level of Spirituality</i>	14.9%
Moderately	
Somewhat	40.3%
None/slightly	23.4%
Extremely	20.1%
<i>Sunday School</i>	16.2%
Yes	
No	77.9%
	22.1%

Table 3  
*Correlations among Study Variables*

	Social desirability	Powerful God	Nurturant God	Religious fundamentalism
Social desirability		-.08	-.28**	-.07
Powerful God			.63**	.77**
Nurturant God				.55**
Religious fundamentalism				
Controlling for social desirability				
Powerful God			.63**	.77**
Nurturant God				.55**
Religious fundamentalism				

*Note.*  $p = .001$  level