

Family Functioning Among Returnees to Orthodox Judaism in Israel

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The role of religious conversion in marriages and family functioning has been little explored. The current study examined family functioning and parenting stress among returnees to Orthodox Judaism with adolescent children. Possible explanatory factors for difficulties, such as attachment insecurity, religious discord in families, and poor community integration, were also explored. Randomly selected samples of returnee and nonreturnee Orthodox Jews with adolescent children ($N = 1632$) completed measures of attachment, community integration, marital functioning, and parenting stress. Results indicate that returnees report greater family disengagement (lack of warmth), family chaos (lack of control), and parenting stress. They also reported higher religious discord, higher attachment insecurity, and poorer community integration, which all correlated with higher parenting stress, family disengagement (lack of warmth), and family chaos (lack of control). Moreover, differences between returnees and nonreturnees on family functioning and parenting stress were largely mediated by differences in the explanatory factors. These results substantiate previous anecdotal reports and suggest possible avenues for intervention among Orthodox returnees with family difficulties. They also support the relevance of religious factors in family functioning.

Keywords: Jewish, religion, spirituality, attachment, stress

Psychological study of religion's role in the family is longstanding, yet sporadic, with research primarily focusing on demographic and sociological factors, and excluding proximal psychological influences (Holden, 2001; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). Nevertheless, religion is important to many (Gallup, 2009), and an accumulating body of research suggests that it is a significant and complex part of family life, with adaptive functions (see Mahoney et al., 2001, for a review). Religious conversion has also been a subject of some research, with particular focus on causes and consequences among Christians (e.g., Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). Although limited, this research suggests that conversions, like many aspects of religion, are complex and multifaceted with intrapsychic, interpersonal, and sociological aspects that likely have lifelong influence (Spilka, Hood, Hunsberger, & Gorsuch, 2003). To our knowledge, however, no previous research has explored the family functioning of returnees. Consequently, the current research initiates this study by exploring the family and parenting patterns of returnees to Orthodox Judaism in Israel.

Return to Orthodox Judaism and Family Functioning

Orthodox Judaism is a broad categorization, including a variety of religious groups that share, unconditionally, acceptance of the Torah's (the Jewish Bible) divine origination and strict adherence to Talmudic laws (e.g., dietary restrictions, prayers, holiday rituals, and prescriptions for family life), which infuse everyday life with religious consequence (Huppert, Siev, & Kushner, 2007). Orthodox Judaism also espouses a comprehensive meaning system premised on belief in God, acceptance of God's commandments, and eventual messianic redemption (Maimonides, 1990). Orthodox Jews generally form sheltered communities organized around this religious ideology and limit contact with the outside world (Huppert et al., 2007).

Over the past 50 years, Orthodox groups increasingly developed outreach programs designed to educate unaffiliated and non-Orthodox Jews regarding traditional practice, and have accordingly experienced an influx of newly religious individuals (Danzger, 1989). Although data concerning the extent of this phenomenon, called "Teshuva," or return, is scarce, reports suggest that it is considerable (Danzger, 1989; Kaufman, 1991; Sands, Spero, & Danzig, 2007). For example, one international organization dedicated to the religious education of these returnees reported that over 100,000 individuals attend its various programs annually and that over a million unique individuals visit its Web site monthly (Aish International, 2011). These returnees appear to successfully integrate into their adopted religious communities, and most eventually marry and raise children (Snow, Zemon, Schechter, Pirutinsky, & Langner, 2008). Nevertheless, return to all-encompassing Orthodox religiosity requires a complete transformation of belief, behavior, and identity, and the long-term effect of this transformation remains unclear.

Given the emphasis on family and children within Orthodox religious culture and the centrality of the family unit to the trans-

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mission of religious values (Pirutinsky, Rosen, Shapiro, & Rosmarin, 2010), there is particular interest in marital and family functioning among returnees. Returnees face challenges such as adjustment to community boundaries, acculturation to religious-culture norms, and the establishment of new social connections (Danzger, 1989), all of which may impact the family. These challenges may be particularly salient in families with adolescent children, since religious change (Good & Willoughby, 2008) and individuation from the family (McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010) is heightened during this developmental period. Moreover, parenting within the Orthodox Jewish community involves unique challenges, as adolescents may question religious beliefs and challenge religious-culture boundaries (Agudath Israel of America, 2006).

Accordingly, anecdotal and clinical observations suggest that returnees with adolescent children experience particular challenges to family functioning and increased parenting-related stress. For instance, a recent unpublished study of almost 4,000 Orthodox Jews in the United States found that significantly more newly observant respondents expressed concern about their adolescents' behaviors (Schnall & Pelcovitz, 2010). To our knowledge, however, this possibility has not been directly tested. Consequently, the primary aim of the current study was to assess family functioning and parenting stress among returnee families with adolescent children compared with both population norms and a control sample of Orthodox Jewish nonreturnees. We also explored three possible factors that may explain problems in family functioning and parenting stress among returnees—attachment insecurity, lack of community integration, and marital discord around religious issues.

Explanatory Factors Underlying Problems in Family Functioning Among Returnees

Insecure Attachment

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) proposes that humans possess an innate behavioral system, which, when activated by distress, seeks support from powerful attachment figures (e.g., parents). The success or failure of these early interactions evolves a stable set of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions called "attachment orientations" (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Positive interactions with available and responsive attachment figures produce a secure attachment orientation that includes the development of effective emotion regulation strategies and interpersonal skills. In contrast, unavailable and unreliable attachment figures engender insecure orientations, either anxious or avoidant, characterized by ineffective interpersonal skills and emotional dysregulation (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007, for a review). Although these attachment orientations are fairly stable over time and persist into adulthood (Fraley, 2002; Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000), they can be altered by important life events and changes across the life span (e.g., marriage, divorce, life habit changes) that affect a person's beliefs about the feasibility of attaining safety, protection, and comfort (e.g., Baldwin & Fehr, 1995; Davila & Cobb, 2004). There is extensive evidence that these attachment orientations in adulthood are manifested in the quality of romantic relationships (Feeney & Noller, 1990), marriages (Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994), and families (Cummings & Davies, 2002). Insecure attachment has been linked to longitudinal declines in marital

satisfaction and relationship quality (Davila & Bradbury, 2001), and negative, relationship-damaging behaviors during dyadic interactions (Collins & Feeney, 2000).

A small but consistent body of research indicates that religious converts report higher levels of attachment insecurities—such as an anxious preoccupation with close relationships or an avoidant dismissal of the need for close relationships (see Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008, for a review and discussion). Research among Orthodox returnees corroborates these accounts, indicating that returnees reported higher attachment anxiety and avoidance than Orthodox Jewish nonreturnees (Pirutinsky, 2009). We believe that these insecurities might be heightened by the return process, which involves loss of past sources of security, feelings of rejection and social exclusion from the nonreligious family of origin, and worries and doubts about being accepted by the Orthodox religious community, and may then explain returnee's problems in family functioning and heightened parenting stress. On this basis, we hypothesized (a) that returnees' sense of attachment security would be shattered during the return process and then report higher attachment insecurities than nonreturnees, and (b) that these insecurities would mediate the link between return to religion and family difficulties.

Community Integration

Although family research typically focuses on intrafamilial dynamics, it is widely acknowledged that the broader social context is relevant to family functioning (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Increased integration of the family within a community has been shown to correlate with positive outcomes as diverse as increased family cohesion and marital satisfaction (Booth, Edwards, & Johnson, 1991; Voydanoff, 2004), decreased child maltreatment (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992), improved school attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002), and positive health behaviors (Franks, Campbell, & Shields, 1992). Correspondingly, lack of communal integration and support is a well-established risk factor for families and adolescents (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

These factors may be even more relevant to religious converts, who must form families and raise children in an unfamiliar social, cultural, and religious context (see Aiken & Ladderman, 2009). In regard to returnees, research suggests that although they no longer identify with secular communities, many do not feel fully integrated into Orthodox Judaism (Tallen, 2002; Sands, 2009). For instance, Sands (2009) found that the majority of returnees reported alienation and marginalization from the broader Orthodox community and preferred to socialize with other returnees. We therefore hypothesized that poor community integration may explain problems in family functioning among returnees, and may be an additional mediator of the link between return to religion and lowered family functioning and increased parenting stress.

Marital Religious Discord

Research suggests that differences in values and worldviews among family members can be a significant source of conflict and disunity (Baltas & Steptoe, 2000; Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). For many, these values and worldviews are intimately tied to a religious meaning system (Paloutzian, 2005), and, accordingly,

religious disagreements within couples and families appear particularly to be detrimental to family functioning (Heaton & Pratt, 1990; Joanides, Mayhew, & Mamalakis, 2002). Marital religious discord correlates with various negative outcomes such as increased familial conflict (Mahoney, 2005), adolescent delinquency (Pearce & Haynie, 2004), and divorce (Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009). Given that converts' levels of religious belief, observance, and identification may fluctuate over time (Paloutzian et al., 1999), religious discord within the families of converts may be more likely and may lead to increased difficulties. Thus, we hypothesized that returnees may experience increased religious discord within the family, which, in turn, may result in problems in family functioning and parenting stress.

The Current Study

The current research assessed problems in family functioning and parenting stress among returnees to Orthodox Judaism with adolescent children (compared with Orthodox Jewish nonreturnees), and examined the relevance of attachment insecurity, lack of community integration, and religious discord to these outcomes. It should be noted that Orthodox Jews are generally reticent to participate in psychological research. Consequently, the vast majority of previous studies have utilized self-selected, clinical, or convenience samples. Given that we aimed to characterize family functioning within this community, the selection bias inherent in these methods was a serious threat, and, as described below, considerable efforts were made to obtain a representative sample of both returnee and nonreturnee Orthodox Jews.

Method

Procedure

The study was conducted in Israel with the aid of Orthodox Jewish outreach organizations and religious institutions, whose leadership approved the study and aided recruitment by providing their complete membership lists. The study was reviewed and approved by the university's institutional review board. Research assistants obtained informed consent and administered instruments to local participants at their homes or another convenient location. To ensure a reasonably representative sample, we randomly selected 1908 returnees from these lists who fitted three selection criteria: (a) returnees were married at the time of the study, (b) they have at least one child with this spouse aged between 12 and 18 years, and (c) the return process happened before marrying the current spouse (size of the pool of participants that fit these three criteria was around 4000 families). The last selection criterion was included in order to exclude families in which children returned to religion when their parents were nonreligious and this children's return later led parents to return to religion. We contacted these returnees by phone and invited them to participate. Of these, 508 (26%) declined and 1400 (74%) agreed to participate. Those consenting were subsequently visited at home by researchers who introduced the study and provided the questionnaire. We randomly targeted one member of each couple (wife or husband) and asked him or her to complete the questionnaires. Respondents completed the questionnaire alone and researchers returned a few days later to collect them. From the initial list of 1908 returnees, 1012 partic-

ipants (58%) agreed to participate in the study. All of the participants who agreed to participate in the study completed and returned the questionnaires. Throughout the entire procedure, numbers of women and men were balanced.

The procedure for the control group of Orthodox Jewish nonreturnees was similar. Community religious institutions provided membership lists from which 900 nonreturnee individuals who fit selection criteria (married with a child aged between 12 and 18 years) were randomly selected and contacted. Of these, 190 (21%) declined and 720 (79%) consented to participate. The final sample included 620 (69%) participants who completed and returned the questionnaire. Again, we assured that the sample included similar numbers of women and men. Participants were given food vouchers or cash (75 shekels) for completing the survey.

Participants

A total of 1632 individuals (1012 returnees and 620 nonreturnees) residing in the central area of Israel (e.g., Jerusalem, Haifa, Tel Aviv, Kiryat Sefer, Betar) participated. Demographic, religious, and family characteristics of each group are provided in Table 1. Returnees differed significantly from nonreturnees in several variables. Notably, returnees were older, had smaller families, reported higher incomes and educational level, and were more likely to have been born in Asia and Africa than nonreturnees. Consequently, we controlled for these group differences in all the reported statistical analyses.

Measures

Problems in family functioning. Previous research and theory suggests that problems in family functioning can be most parsimoniously categorized along two key dimensions—lack of warmth and lack of control (e.g., Amato & Booth, 1997; Baumrind, 1995). Lack of warmth describes the absence of emotional closeness and affection within the family, and lack of control describes the absence of clear-cut roles, rules, and expectations. These two dimensions were examined using two subscales of a Hebrew version of the FACES-IV, which contains 14 items scored on a 5-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (5). The reliability and validity of this questionnaire has been shown in American and Israeli samples (Mikulincer & Florian, 1999; Olson, 2011). Lack of warmth was measured using the Disengagement subscale, which includes seven items assessing emotional distance between family members (e.g., “Family members seem to avoid contact with each other when at home”). Lack of control was measured using the Chaos subscale, which includes seven items assessing difficulties with roles, organization, and expectations within the family (e.g., “Things do not get done in our family”). In the current study, internal reliabilities were adequate, α s of .65 and .74. On this basis, we computed two total scores for each participant by summing items belonging to each subscale, with higher scores reflecting more disengagement and chaos within the family. American norms for these two subscales were obtained from the developer (D. H. Olson, personal communication, May 18, 2011).

Parenting stress. Parenting stress was measured using the Stress Index for Parents of Adolescents (SIPA; Sheras, Abidin, & Konold, 1998). This 112-item scale is scored on a 5-point scale

Table 1
Participants' Demographic, Religious, and Family Characteristics by Returnee Status

	Nonreturnee	Returnee
Age* (mean [SD])	40.80 (5.97)	42.88 (6.52)
Income* (mean [SD])	3.02 (1.14)	3.22 (1.08)
Gender		
Males	296	501
Females	296	499
Country of Birth*		
Israel	503	797
W. Europe, America, Australia, S. Africa	61	103
Asia/Africa	15	69
Eastern Europe	10	26
Education*		
Partial degree	232	218
High school diploma	104	340
Vocational certificate	122	209
College or graduate degree	101	196
Family size* (mean [SD])	5.17 (1.30)	4.24 (1.64)
Marriage length (years; mean [SD])	19.07 (5.65)	19.26 (5.92)
Family composition		
Two biological parents	582	974
Other composition	9	25

* Returnee and nonreturnee groups significantly different at $p < .01$.

ranging from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (5) and has previously demonstrated both reliability and validity (Sheras et al., 1998). The current research focused on four broad indices of parenting stress: adolescent domain (AD), parenting domain (PD), adolescent parent relationship domain (APRD), and an index of total parenting stress (TS). The AD scale measures parenting stress attributable to adolescent characteristics, such as moodiness and antisocial behavior. It includes 40 items, such as “My child has sudden changes of feelings or moods” and “I think my child steals things.” The PD measures the effect parenting has had on quality of life and interpersonal relationships and includes 34 items, such as “I find myself giving up more of my life to meet my child’s needs than I ever expected,” “I frequently argue with my spouse/partner about how to raise my child,” and “I feel alone and without friends.” APRD measures stress related to the adolescent-parent relationship and includes 16 items, such as “I cannot get my child to listen to me.” The overall index (TS) is a composite measure of stress of all types. Participants were explicitly asked to select a single child aged between 12 and 18 for whom to complete this measure. For the current study, two bilingual psychologists translated the questionnaire to Hebrew using the back-translation technique. Scales displayed adequate internal reliability in this new Hebrew version, α s of .89, .91, .84, and .95, respectively, and American norms were obtained from the manual (Sheras et al., 1998).

Attachment insecurities. Attachment insecurities were assessed with the Experiences in Close Relationships scales (ECR; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). Participants rated the extent to which each item was descriptive of their feelings and behaviors in close relationships on a 7-point scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (7). Eighteen items measured attachment anxiety (e.g., “I worry about being abandoned”) and 18 items measured avoidance (e.g., “I prefer not to show a partner how I feel deep

down”). The reliability and validity of the Hebrew version of the ECR have been demonstrated in previous studies with Israeli samples (e.g., Mikulincer & Florian, 2000). In the current study, Cronbach alphas were acceptable for both the anxiety items (.86) and the avoidance items (.74). Scale scores were computed by averaging item ratings. Higher scores indicate greater anxiety and avoidance.

Community integration. To measure integration, we utilized the Religious Community Integration scale (Namini, Appel, Jurgensen, & Murken, 2010). It contains five items, such as “Feeling welcome and integrated in the religious community” and “Being able to successfully integrate one’s abilities into the religious community and its practices,” which are scored on a 5-point scale ranging from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (5). For the current study, two bilingual psychologists translated the five items to Hebrew using the back-translation technique. Internal reliability in the current sample for the new Hebrew version was adequate, $\alpha = .83$. A total score was computed for each participant by averaging the five items, with higher scores reflecting greater community integration.

Marital religious discord. Marital religious discord was measured by a single item that read, “How often do you and your spouse experience conflicts regarding differences in your religious observances [translated].” It was scored on a 5-point scale ranging from “never” (1) to “very often” (5).

Statistical Analysis

Differences in problems in family functioning and parenting stress between returnees, and both scale norms and a control group of nonreturnee Orthodox Jews, were computed by t tests, and effect sizes were calculated using Cohen’s d . To examine the potential role of attachment insecurities, community integration, and religious discord in explaining problems in family functioning and parenting stress among returnees, we followed a series of analytical steps. First, we conducted t tests examining differences between returnees and nonreturnees in attachment insecurities, community integration, and religious discord.

Second, we computed Pearson correlations and hierarchical multiple regressions examining associations and unique contributions of these explanatory factors to problems in family functioning and parenting stress among returnees and nonreturnees. We also examined possible interactions (moderation) between each of the explanatory factors and study groups (returnees vs. nonreturnees). In Step 1 of these regressions, we entered returnee status (dummy variable coded) and z -scores of attachment anxiety, attachment avoidance, community integration, and religious discord within the family as predictors. In Step 2, we added product terms representing the two-way interactions between returnee status and each of the explanatory factors. To reduce the risk of inflated Type I error and to increase clarity and concision, we conducted these regressions only on overall parenting stress (SIPA-TS) and the two dimensions of family functioning (disengagement and chaos).

Finally, multiple mediation analyses (Baron & Kenny, 1986), with Sobel tests (Sobel, 1990) and a bootstrapping method (Preacher & Hayes, 2008), were conducted to examine whether observed differences between returnees and nonreturnees in family functioning and parenting stress were mediated by group differences in attachment insecurities, community integration, and reli-

gious discord. All the statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 14, and missing data was deleted stepwise yielding slightly different sample sizes for each analysis.

Results

Problems in Family Functioning and Parenting Stress Among Returnees

Using *t* tests to compare returnee participants to population norms and the control group of nonreturnees, the following differences in problems in family functioning and parenting stress were revealed. First, returnees reported significantly higher disengagement and chaos than nonreturnees and significantly higher disengagement than scale norms (see Table 2). Effect sizes for these differences were small to moderate (ranging from .22 to .53). Second, returnees did not significantly differ from scale norms in parenting stress. However, compared to nonreturnees, returnees reported significantly greater parenting stress across all the SIPA scores (see Table 2), with a small effect size (ranging from .23 to .39). Additional analyses of covariance indicated that differences between returnees and nonreturnees were not significantly altered by the inclusion of demographic, religious, and family structure covariates, and were replicated among both men and women.

Explanatory Factors

Using *t* tests to compare returnees to nonreturnees in attachment insecurities, community integration, and religious discord within the family, returnees reported significantly more attachment anxiety and avoidance, more religious discord, and less community integration (see Table 2). Pearson correlations indicated that attachment anxiety and avoidance, and religious discord within the family, were significantly associated with higher reports of family disengagement and chaos and more parenting stress, *r*s ranging from .18 to .58, *p*s < .01. Community integration was significantly

associated with lower scores in family chaos and less parenting stress, *r*s ranging from $-.22$ to $-.34$, *p*s < .01. These findings (*t* tests and correlations) were not significantly altered by the inclusion of demographic, religious, and family structure covariates, and were replicated in both men and women.

Hierarchical regression analyses, reported in Table 3, indicated that attachment insecurities and religious discord within the family made significant, unique contributions to higher scores in family disengagement, family chaos, and parenting stress (after controlling for demographic, religious, and family structure variables). Community integration also made a significant and unique contribution to less family disengagement and less parenting stress, but not to family chaos. These effects were not significantly moderated by returnee status (see β s in Table 3).

We then conducted multiple mediation analyses examining the roles that attachment insecurities, community integration, and religious discord within the family play in mediating the effects of returnee status (the dummy variable) on overall parenting stress (see Figure 1), and on family disengagement and chaos (see Figure 2). Results indicated that (a) returnee status was significantly related to increased parenting stress and family disengagement and chaos (Path C), (b) returnee status was significantly related to attachment insecurities, religious discord, and community integration (Path A), and (c) these variables were significantly related to parenting stress and family disengagement and chaos (Path B), with the exceptions that community integration was unrelated to family disengagement and avoidant attachment was unrelated to family chaos. Moreover, once we controlled for these variables, the effects of returnee status on parenting stress and family functioning was significantly reduced (Path C'), suggesting that parenting stress and family disengagement were partially mediated, and chaos fully mediated, by attachment insecurities, religious discord, and lack of community integration. Sobel tests and a bias-corrected bootstrapping analysis of these mediation models (5000 subsamples, 95% CI; Preacher & Hayes, 2008) confirmed these findings, as the indirect effect of returnee status through each

Table 2

Means, Standard Deviations, and t Tests for Family Functioning, Parenting Stress, Attachment Orientations, Community Integration, and Religious Discord as a Function of Return to Orthodox Judaism

	Returnees		Nonreturnees		Scale norms		Returnees vs. norms		Returnees vs. nonreturnees	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>d</i>
Family functioning										
Disengagement	15.79	4.35	14.10	4.07	13.23	5.67	9.36**	.53	7.47**	.40
Chaos	13.83	4.63	12.84	12.84	13.14	5.37	2.51	.14	4.10**	.22
Parenting stress										
Adolescent	82.65	18.70	75.54	16.87	85.20	25.70	2.33	-.11	7.10**	.39
Parenting	76.36	18.48	72.18	18.33	76.50	19.80	.15	.01	4.05**	.23
Relationship	33.03	9.28	30.3	8.56	33.20	10.70	.34	.02	5.60**	.30
Total	191.43	39.96	176.63	37.58	194.30	49.70	1.24	.06	6.24**	.38
Mediating variables										
Attachment anxiety	2.90	1.06	2.72	1.06					3.30**	.13
Attachment avoidance	3.56	0.75	3.43	0.90					3.15*	.17
Community integration	3.80	0.89	3.95	0.83					3.33**	.17
Religious discord	1.92	0.95	1.49	0.75					9.35**	.47

* *p* < .01. ** *p* < .001.

Table 3
Standardized Regression Coefficients for Family Functioning and Parenting Stress as Predicted by Returnee Status, Attachment Insecurities, Community Integration, and Religious Discord

Effects	Family disengagement	Family chaos	Parenting stress
Step 1			
Returnee status	.10**	.03	.07*
Attachment anxiety	.20**	.22**	.40**
Attachment avoidance	.12**	.08*	.16**
Community integration	.001	-.11**	-.15**
Religious discord	.17**	.23**	.21**
Step 2			
Returnee Status × Attachment Anxiety	.03	.02	.01
Returnee Status × Attachment Avoidance	-.07	-.07	.03
Returnee Status × Community Integration	.07	.05	.04
Returnee Status × Religious Discord	.09	-.01	.02
ΔR ² (%)	12.92	17.06	38.1
ΔF	36.20**	50.57**	119.49**

Note. The reported standardized regression coefficients were obtained after controlling for age, gender, income, education, family size, and region of birth.
*p < .01. **p < .001.

mediating factor was significant, with the exceptions of community integration to family disengagement and avoidant attachment with family chaos (see Table 4). The addition of gender and other demographic, religious, and family structure covariates did not significantly alter these results.

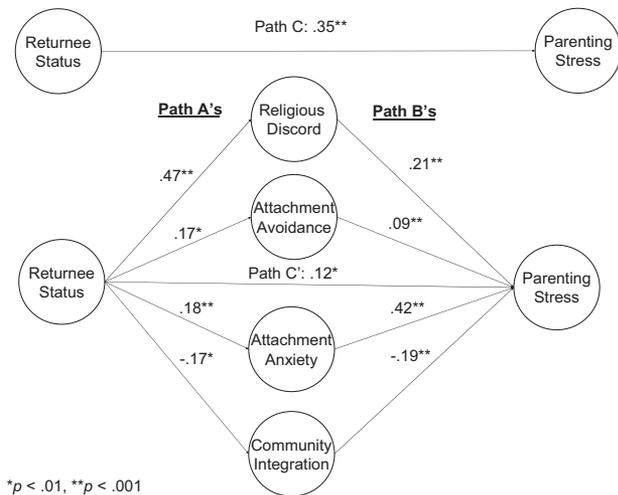
Discussion

Due to the increasing success of Jewish outreach programs designed to educate non-Orthodox Jews regarding traditional practice, Orthodox Judaism has experienced a significant influx of newly religious individuals (Danzger, 1989; Sands et al., 2007). There is particular interest in marital and family functioning among these returnees, since Orthodox religious-culture emphasizes family life and the familial transmission of religious values (Pirutinsky et al., 2010). Qualitative research and clinical reports

(e.g., Schnall & Pelcovitz, 2010) suggest that returnees face particular challenges in these areas, which may be explained by difficulties in acculturation to religious-culture norms and the establishment of new social connections (Danzger, 1989; Sands et al., 2007). Research also suggests that insecure attachment (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008; Pirutinsky, 2009) and fluctuating religiosity (Paloutzian et al., 1999) among converts may be additional sources of risk. The current study therefore investigated family functioning and parenting stress among Orthodox Jewish returnees, and explored the relevance of three explanatory factors—attachment insecurities, lack of community integration, and religious discord within the family.

Results indicated that returnees reported more problems related to family disengagement (lack of warmth) and family chaos (lack of control) compared with both scale norms and nonreturnee Orthodox Jewish participants. Returnees also reported greater parenting stress compared with nonreturnees but equivalent stress compared with scale norms. Moreover, consistent with previous research, returnees reported higher marital religious discord, higher attachment insecurity, and lower community integration. These risk factors significantly and uniquely contributed to problems in family functioning and parenting stress. Importantly, they also largely mediated differences between returnees and nonreturnees. Restated, compared with nonreturnees, returnees reported greater marital religious discord, more insecure attachment, and poorer community integration, which, in turn, contributed to greater parenting stress and more family disengagement and chaos.

These results substantiate previous anecdotal, clinical, and qualitative reports (e.g., Schnall & Pelcovitz, 2010) suggesting that returnees face greater challenges in regard to family functioning and parenting stress. However, the effect of these differences was only small or moderately sized (Cohen, 1988). More importantly, they appeared largely related to increased risk factors among returnees, suggesting important targets for systematic and individual intervention. Interventions with returnee parents that are mindful of insecure attachment and marital religious discord, and that



*p < .01, **p < .001

Figure 1. Multiple mediation analysis for parenting stress.

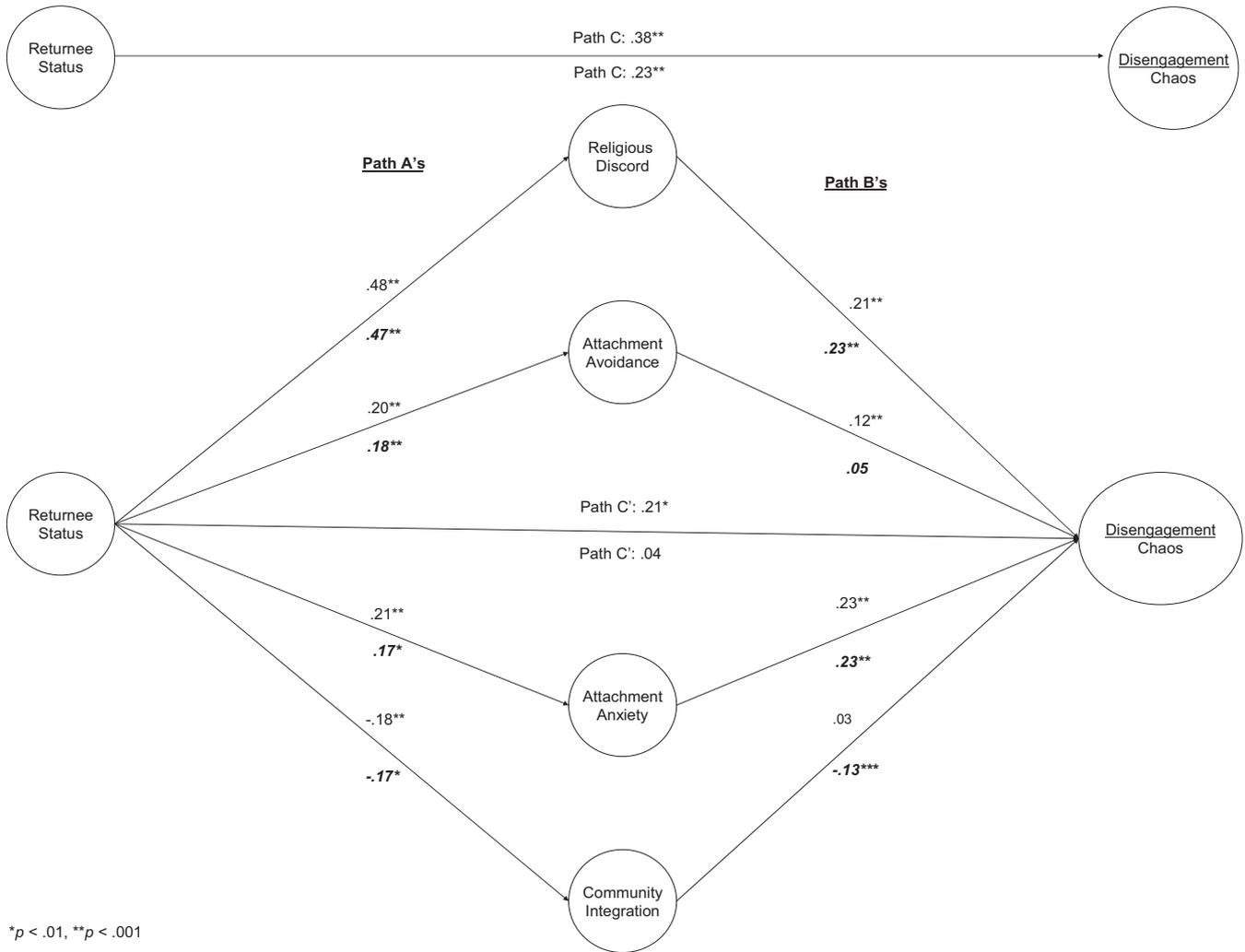


Figure 2. Multiple mediation analysis for family functioning.

provide culturally sensitive services, may be particularly beneficial (Loewenthal & Rogers, 2004). Spiritually integrated treatments may be particularly beneficial, as previous research suggests that several aspects of religion and spirituality correlate attachment security (Lopez, Riggs, Pollard, & Hood, 2011) and increased family functioning (Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003; Sullivan, 2001), and spiritually integrated treatments appear particularly amenable (Pirutinsky, Rosmarin, & Pargament, 2009) and efficacious (Rosmarin, Pargament, Pirutinsky, & Mahoney, 2010) within this community.

Furthermore, consistent with findings in other populations (e.g., Mahoney & Stattin, 2000), returnees reporting less integration into their adopted religious community reported higher levels of both family dysfunction and parenting stress. A sense of community may be particularly important within the more collectivist Orthodox Jewish culture (Cohen, 2009). However, although Orthodox outreach programs put extensive resources into the religious education of returnees, few continue to support their increased integration as they marry and raise children. Our results indicate that this lack of integration is related to long-term difficulties, high-

lighting the need to provide effective ongoing support for returnees.

Limitations and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this study. First, we used a correlational, cross-sectional design. Thus, although we modeled theory-based causal paths (e.g., the effects of attachment insecurities on family functioning), it was impossible to test the direction of causality using the present design. Moreover, with regard to attachment insecurities, one cannot discern whether these insecurities were part of returnees' personality before the return process or were heightened by the challenges imposed by the return process itself. Therefore, one should be cautious in interpreting findings in terms of personality disorder or psychopathology of returnees. Our rationale is that the process of return to religion might heighten attachment insecurities due to loss of past sources of security and problems in getting new sources. However, only future studies examining this issue longitudinally and prospectively from the earliest stages of religious conversion through

Table 4
Mediating Effects of Religious Discord, Attachment Insecurity, and Community Integration

	Effect ^a	SE	Z	Bootstrapping CI (95%)	
				Lower	Upper
Disengagement					
Religious discord	.10	.02	6.30**	.33	.76
Attachment avoidance	.02	.01	3.06*	.02	.12
Attachment anxiety	.05	.01	3.73**	.07	.30
Community integration	-.01	.005	1.24	-.06	.04
Total	.17	.02	7.30**	.33	.76
Chaos					
Religious discord	.11	.02	6.82**	.31	.64
Attachment avoidance	.01	.004	1.63	-.01	.13
Attachment anxiety	.04	.02	3.17*	.08	.18
Community integration	.02	.01	2.85*	.01	.18
Total	.18	.03	7.30**	.54	1.02
Parenting stress total					
Religious discord	.10	.01	6.84**	2.89	6.46
Attachment avoidance	.02	.01	2.63*	-.47	1.43
Attachment anxiety	.07	.02	3.36**	1.31	5.6
Community integration	.03	.01	3.08*	.27	2.36
Total	.22	.03	6.57**	5.83	13.01

^a "Effect" estimates the indirect effects of returnee status on each predicted variable through each mediator. These effects are calculated by multiplying Path A (from returnee status to mediator) by Path B (from mediator to predicted variable). The values of Paths A and B are presented in Figures 1 and 2.

* $p < .01$. ** $p < .001$.

family formation and parenting would allow us to reach more valid conclusions.

Second, another limitation deals with the exclusive use of self-report measures, which raises the possibility of biased responding and common method variance. In addition, the assessment of marital religious discord was limited to one item. Future research should include a multiple-items scale of marital religious discord and additional types of measures, such as interviews or observational coding, as well as multiple informants. Moreover, only U.S. general population norms were available for these instruments and these may not fully reflect Israeli family functioning.

Third, the impact of religiosity and spirituality on family functioning is likely multifaceted and was not directly explored in this study. Future studies could more explicitly examine proximal religious factors such as religious commitment (Lopez et al., 2011), sanctification of marriage (Mahoney et al., 2003), spiritual struggles (Pirutinsky, Rosmarin, Pargament, & Midlarsky, in press), and positive and negative religious coping (Pargament, 1998). Fourth, it is important to note that the current study assessed adult attachment rather than early parent-child attachment, which have shown differential relations to religious variables (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001). Further research on the association between attachment, religiosity, community integration, and marital discord could also assess attachment to God, which is theoretically linked to both parent-child and adult attachment (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2008).

In addition, our recruitment method and sample had both advantages and limitations. It was large and reasonably representative, which is a major extension of previous research and allows for greater reliability and generalizability of our findings. On the other hand, significant demographic differences between the sam-

ple of returnees and the sample of nonreturnees may have influenced results. However, these likely reflect true differences between these populations, and findings remained unaltered after controlling for them. Moreover, we targeted parents of teenagers and therefore cannot directly generalize our findings to families in which the children were younger or older. Future studies should include families of returnees and nonreturnees with children at various developmental stages, or construct longitudinal, prospective designs examining trajectories of family functioning and parenting distress from offspring's infancy to young adulthood. Another limitation concerns the lack of data collection from both wives and husbands. We targeted only one member of the couple to answer the questionnaires and therefore could not examine actor-partner-interaction models of family functioning and parenting distress in returnee and nonreturnee samples. Future studies should fill in this empirical gap by including both members of a couple within their sample. Lastly, the sample consisted exclusively of Orthodox Jews living in Israel. Given that the impact of religion varies across religious cultures, generalizability of these findings to other religious communities, including the sizable Orthodox Jewish communities in the United States, is limited. However, findings in related areas suggest that other collectivist and traditional religious cultures share some of these patterns (see Cohen, 2009; Pirutinsky, Rosen, Shapiro, & Rosmarin, 2010).

In summary, the current findings support theoretical predictions and anecdotal reports regarding the link between conversion to Orthodox Judaism and lower family functioning, lower sense of communal integration, higher marital religious discord, and higher attachment insecurities. In addition, lower levels of family functioning and higher levels of parenting stress among returnee parents were largely explained by higher level of religious discord

between couples, higher attachment insecurities, and lower levels of community integration among returnees. This suggests that religious conversion and religious experience generally is of life-long relevance to family functioning.

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