



The Association Between Educational Attainment in Parents and the Level of Religiosity of Their Adult Children



Anika Frutman, Applied Data Analysis, Wesleyan University

Introduction

- When the General Social Survey began in 1972, 90% of Americans identified as Christian and only 5% identified as unaffiliated. Christianity has trended downwards, 63% in 2024, and unaffiliated trended up, 28% in 2024 (Smith et al., 2025).
- Interestingly, this trend is leveling off as the population of Christian-identifying adults was relatively stable from 2019-2024 (Smith et al., 2025).
- Households that have at least one parent with a higher degree are significantly more likely to have children that complete college. (Fry, 2021)
- The amount of adults with a bachelor's or associate's degree has increased in the last decade, with women outperforming men (Pew Schaeffer, 2022).

- In institutions of higher education, the tendency to encourage students away from traditional authority undermines the methods of enforcing religious beliefs (Beyerlein, 2004).
- However, 70% of Americans now believe that higher education is headed in the wrong direction (Parker, 2025).
- Gap in literature: the education of individuals as associated with their religiosity has been highly studied, however the relationship between the education of respondent's parents and individual religiosity has not.

Research Questions

- Will respondents who have parents that obtained an education past high school report lower religiosity than those whose parents do not have a higher education?
- Does this relationship vary between men and women?

Methods

Sample

- This sample was collected from the 2024 edition of the General Social Survey (GSS). It collects data on contemporary American society and is administered annually. The edition includes 3,309 respondents who are United States Residents aged 18 or older. The final sample consists of 865 respondents.

Methods

Measures

- Respondents were asked to self-report answers on these questions: "What is your religious preference?" "In what religion were you raised?" "How often do you attend religious services?" "About how often do you pray?" "Would you call yourself a strong ([religious preference]) or a not very strong ([religious preference])?" "To what extent do you consider yourself a religious person? Are you very religious, moderately religious, slightly religious, or not religious at all?" These variables were summed to create a religiosity score for each respondent, lower values for low religiosity, and higher values for high religiosity. The lowest score was 0 and the highest score was 14.
- Respondents were asked how many years of education their parents had obtained, 0-20. Three categories were created, one for respondents who's parents did not receive education past high school ("neither"), a category for respondents with one parent educated past high school ("one parent"), and a category for respondents who's parents attended some level of higher education ("both").

Discussion

- The results of this study suggest that parental educational attainment is an important correlate to religiosity and should be explored as a potential factor of the trends identified by previous research
- If the trends identified in previous research are accurate – that more people are distrusting higher education – the leveling off of religious identification may be associated with a similar leveling off of educational attainment if the amount of people with a higher degree that go on to raise children does not increase.
- Further research should explore if there is a difference between whether the mother or the father is the educated parent, as more women obtain higher degrees

Results

Simple Linear Regression

- There is a significant difference between the predicted religiosity score of a respondent in the "neither" group compared to a respondent in the "both" group.
- The p-value of this relationship is significant because it is 0.005, p-value = 0.00036. The R² value is 0.01485, meaning about 1.5% of variance in religiosity score can be explained by parent educational attainment.
- The average religiosity score for someone with two parents who have an education past high school is 7.35. On average it increases by 1.24 if neither parent has an education past high school. Having one parent with an education past high school is not statistically significant, but the equation predicts that it would increase the religiosity score by an average of 0.75.

Multiple Linear Regression

- Multiple linear regression finds that when including sex of the respondent as another explanatory variable, there is still a significant difference between the predicted religiosity score of a respondent in the "neither" group compared to a respondent in the "both" group. Additionally, there is a significant difference in average religiosity score between males and females across all three categories of parent education.
- The p-value of this relationship is significant because it is 0.005, p-value = 0.0007. The R² value is 0.0336, meaning about 3.4% of variance in religiosity score can be explained by parent educational attainment and respondent sex.
- The average religiosity score is similar when incorporating sex as an additional variable, and the averages across categories of parental education are similar as well. Notably, when the respondent is male the average score is predicted to decrease by 1.2.

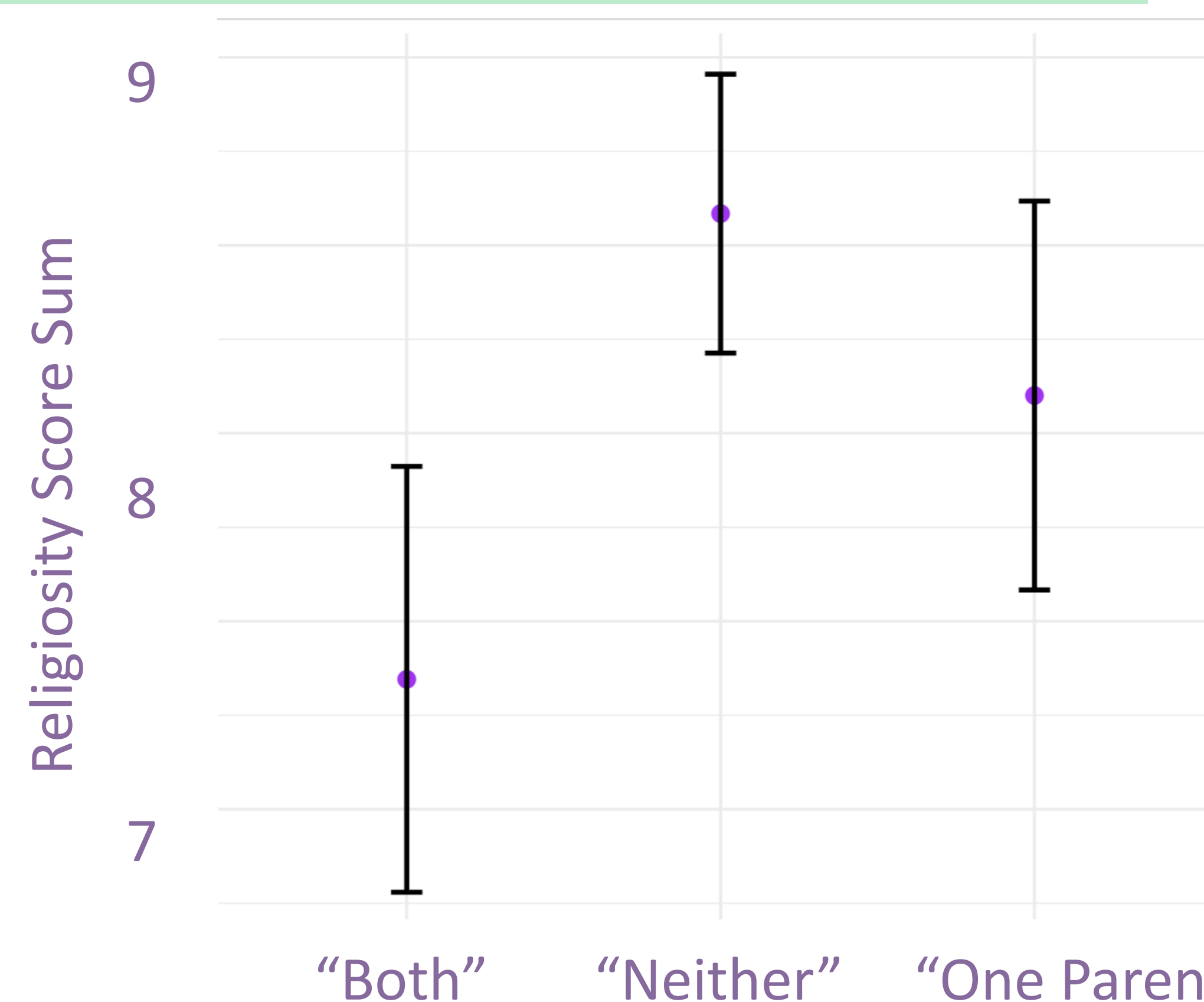


Figure 1: The Distribution of Religiosity Scores in Each Group of Parent Education Level

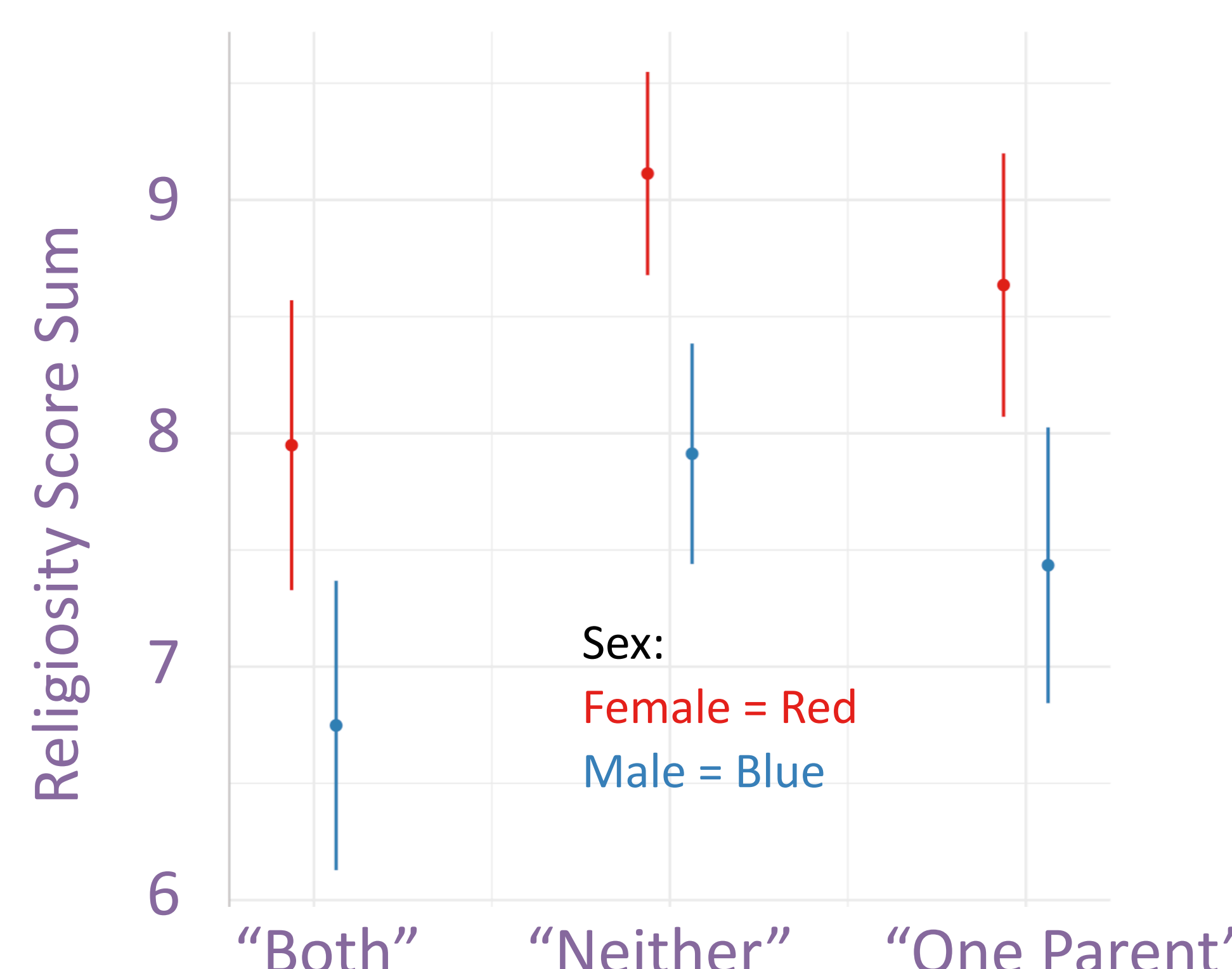


Figure 2: The Distribution of Religiosity Scores in Each Group of Parent Education Level Separated by Sex of the Respondents

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