In this study, Darren Sherkat and Alfred Darnell investigated the relationship between the level of education achieved by students and their parents’ religious fundamentalism. This relationship was of interest to the researchers because scientific theories and research tend to contradict religious beliefs held by fundamentalist Christians who accept literal interpretations of the bible, and this conflict could impact the degree to which parents support the scientific education of their children. Sherkat and Darnell hypothesized that fundamentalist parents would hamper the education of their daughters more than their sons, that the fundamentalism of the parents would have more of a negative impact on education for their children when the children are not fundamentalists, and that the most negative effect would be found for non-fundamentalist daughters while the least negative effect would be found for fundamentalist sons. The research was conducted using data from the Youth Parent Socialization Panel Study which was a longitudinal study conducted from 1965 to 1982 by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan. Parental fundamentalism was determined by their belief in biblical inerrancy. Logistic regression coefficients were calculated to estimate the effect that parents’ fundamentalism had on planning to attend college or taking college preparatory classes in high school as well as the actual level of education attained.

The data showed the strongest positive relationship between parental fundamentalism and educational attainment when the student was a male who shared his parents’ fundamentalist beliefs. The greatest negative relationship occurred for daughters of fundamentalist parents who did not share the beliefs of their parents. Gender and religious conformity both showed a relationship to the degree of educational attainment, and neither non-fundamentalist sons nor fundamentalist daughters attained significantly different levels of educational attainment coming from households with fundamentalist or non-fundamentalist parents. This suggests that religious conformity was not as important for male
offspring to receive parental support in education, and that female offspring were less likely to receive support and resources which made religious conformity more important. Sherkat and Darnell suggest that fundamentalist parents perceive their fundamentalist sons as being better able to resist religious doubt from a secular education or more worthy of expensive education at private Christian institutions.

This study focuses closely on an area of research with important implications; how parental fundamentalist beliefs affect their attitudes towards science and how those attitudes impact their children. The research developed on previous studies which approached religion more broadly and, by focusing particularly on fundamentalist protestants, Sherkat and Darnell were able to better evaluate the factors influencing parental attitudes towards science and how parental attitudes go on to influence the educational outcomes of their children. While the study did employ a very narrow focus on fundamentalist protestants, it may have benefitted from more demographic information as the only cultural factors taken into account (other than fundamentalism) were whether participants were African American, from the southern USA, or inhabitants of rural areas.

Reference