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## AN INTERACTIVE MODEL OF RELIGIOSITY INHERITANCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY CONTEXT\*

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*I use an intergenerational data set that is uniquely suited to estimating the magnitude of religiosity inheritance. Interviews with 471 parents in 1980 and their adult offspring in 1992 address three related issues: (1) What are the effects of childhood, parental, and family influences on the religiosity of adult offspring? (2) What factors condition the ability of parents to transmit their religiosity? (3) How do the recent experiences of adult offspring modify earlier family influences on religiosity? The results suggest that three sets of variables aid the transmission of religiosity—parental religiosity, quality of the family relationship, and traditional family structure. One's religiosity is determined largely by the religiosity of one's parents. Parent's marital happiness, parent-child support, moderate strictness, and a working husband/nonworking wife increase the ability of parents to transmit their religious beliefs and practices. Although the recent experiences of adult offspring affect their religiosity, these experiences do not reduce the influence of parents and family context.*

An institution's perpetuation and success in the United States rely on continuous widespread participation. The persistence of religion largely depends on how successfully one generation indoctrinates its offspring. To understand religious participation at the national level (Greeley 1989; Hout and Greeley 1987), we must first un-

ravel the process of intergenerational inheritance. Any lapses in the inheritance of religiosity jeopardize the future stability of religion as an institution.

Religiosity, like class, is inherited. Requisite data for studying the intergenerational transmission of religiosity are scarce, however. Unlike the study of class inheritance, in which respondents can simply be asked about their parents' work, education, and so on, the study of religious inheritance requires that both generations be interviewed. Moreover, these interviews should take place at different points in time: We want to know parents' religious beliefs and practices when their children are at home growing up, whereas we want to know the religiosity of their offspring after the children have become adults.

As a result of these unusual data demands, much less is known about religious inheritance than about class inheritance. For example, although the literature suggests that the "inheritance coefficient" is rather modest for religiosity (Cornwall 1988; Erickson 1992), the magnitude of that coefficient is still debated. Is religiosity largely inherited or is it a function of one's age, education, in-

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come, marital status, and so on? Just how effectively do parents transmit their religiosity (or irreligiosity)? If religiosity is inherited, are there parenting styles and socialization contexts that are more effective than others for transmitting the parents' religiosity to their offspring? How do the adult experiences of offspring modify the transmission of the parents' religiosity?

Recent studies attempt to explain religiosity and church attendance in young adulthood (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1994; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995; Wilson and Sherkat 1994). Most models focus on high school, college, and nuptiality experiences. However, these models omit important logically and causally prior determinants—the influences of the family of origin. In national probability samples, Stolzenberg et al. (1995) and Wilson and Sherkat (1994) find that the most important determinant of adult religiosity is religious beliefs and participation between the ages of 18 and 20, yet they do not explain how religiosity at ages 18 to 20 develops.

Research on the effect of parents' religiosity on the religiosity of their offspring has inconsistent results. Parental influence is a strong determinant of church attendance in adolescence, but decreases as offspring age (Francis and Brown 1991). Willits and Crider (1989), studying high school students in rural Pennsylvania, find an association between parental religiosity and adolescent religiosity, but the relationship declines markedly over time and even becomes inconsequential for adult female offspring. In a study of adults confirmed in Presbyterian churches, Hoge et al. (1994) conclude that parents' church involvement does not determine the religious beliefs or church attendance of adult offspring. In fact, mothers' religiosity was negatively associated with the church involvement of their offspring. These ambiguous findings are partly a result of data collection techniques. In most research, parents' religiosity is measured from the offspring's perception of their parents' religiosity (Erickson 1992; Hoge et al. 1994). Finally, Nelsen (1990) finds among a national sample of youths that interdenominational marriages are more likely to lead to no religious preference in the offspring. Thus, parents with different levels of religious beliefs may have

more difficulty transmitting their religiosity than parents with similar religious commitments.

Studies on the intergenerational transmission of religiosity attempt to measure family influences, such as parents' marital conflict or demographic attributes. Children are influenced more by parental religiosity when conflict is low in their parents' marriage (Nelsen 1981). Family disruption in childhood weakens the association between origins and destinations (Biblarz and Raftery 1993) because reconstituted families are at considerable risk of disruptions and strains in intergenerational bonds (Aldous 1987). Finally, parental education, income, and class have no significant effects on the religiosity of offspring (Francis and Brown 1991; Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith 1982). However, Wilson and Sherkat (1994) caution that offspring from highly educated parents may actually resemble their parents less than offspring from households with low education because well-educated parents may encourage their offspring to be independent and autonomous and may view conformity as less important than individual development.

Transmission of religiosity may also depend on the accumulation of religious capital during childhood, through household participation and beliefs (Iannaccone 1990) and parent-child relations. This accumulation may be facilitated in more devout, stable, and harmonious households in which parents invest more time in the socialization of their children. Parents are not equally capable of successful value transmission (Wilson and Sherkat 1994)—parental control, support, and whether the father or the mother is more influential in socialization are important aspects of parenting styles.

Many studies concentrate on the relationship between religiosity and events and experiences in adolescence and adulthood. Cultural broadening theory (Hoge et al. 1994) assumes that as youths enter college or leave home they encounter more liberal and less traditional behaviors and attitudes than their parents possessed. These new influences may provoke hostility toward traditional religious teachings, relativism about religious authority, and tolerance of alternative lifestyles. Hoge et al. (1994) find that recent adult ex-

periences determine adult religiosity more than do earlier parental influences.

Recent research finds that marriage and parenthood increase church attendance (Chaves 1991; Stolzenberg et al. 1995) and religiosity (Chaves 1991), decrease the likelihood of defecting from a religious identity, and increase the likelihood of returning to a religious identification among those who had dropped out earlier in life (Wilson and Sherkat 1994). Other research argues that increased rates of religious participation after marriage and parenthood are simply a life cycle or age effect. Firebaugh and Harley (1991) find that church attendance is simply a result of aging. That is, as individuals age, they typically marry, settle down in a community, and have children. At each successive stage, they are more inclined to attend church, net of marriage and parenthood. Finally, the channeling hypothesis posits that friendship networks have the strongest direct effect on the church commitment of adults (Cornwall 1988).

I use an intergenerational data set that is uniquely suited to estimating the intergenerational transmission of religiosity and comparing the intergenerational effect with the effects of other determinants of religiosity. I overcome problems associated with previous research on parent-child transmission of religiosity. The measurement of variables is not hindered by the same-source bias and retrospective data problems that characterize multigeneration cross-sectional studies. Research shows that retrospective recall is affected by memory lapses and is differentially affected by current behaviors and attitudes (Amato 1991). Data were collected from parents in 1980 while offspring were still residing in the parental home and from their offspring in 1992 after they reached adulthood. These reliable measures of parent and household variables are used in order to distinguish the effects of past and recent life events. Three related issues are examined: (1) I estimate the effects of childhood, parental, and family influences on the religiosity of adult offspring. (2) I use an interaction model to investigate what factors condition the ability of parents to transmit their religiosity. (3) I examine how the recent experiences of adult offspring modify earlier family influences on religiosity.

## RESEARCH PROCEDURES

### *Sample*

A national sample of 2,033 married persons in the United States was interviewed in 1980, and then again in 1983, 1988, and 1992. In 1980, sample households were chosen through a random-digit dialing procedure, and the husband or wife was selected for interview by a second random process. Only married individuals under age 55 in 1980 are included in the sample. The fourth wave of interviews (1992) included a random sample of offspring who had resided in the household in 1980 and who were 19 years of age or older in 1992. Of the 58 percent of the original sample who were successfully reinterviewed in 1992, one-half (575) had offspring 19 years of age or older who had been in the parental household in 1980. Eighty-six percent (496) of the parents gave names and telephone numbers of their offspring. Interviews were obtained with 471 offspring for an overall completion rate of 82 percent. This research includes 468 adult offspring with complete parent-offspring files.

To assess how attrition affected the sample of offspring, the 1980 characteristics of individuals who had children eligible for an interview in 1992 (that is, individuals with a child 7 years old or older living in the household in 1980) are compared with the 1980 characteristics of the parents of offspring interviewed in 1992. In general, the 1980 characteristics of parents interviewed in 1992 are similar to parents in the 1980 sample. Similarities include father's and mother's ages, sex of respondent, household size, presence of children, region of the country, and metropolitan/nonmetropolitan residence. Some attrition occurs in predictable categories: African Americans, renters, and persons in households in which husbands had no college education. However, in all cases the differences are modest. Thus, in large part the findings are generalizable to the 1980 sample and therefore to the national U.S. population from which the sample is drawn.

### *Measure of Religiosity*

The religiosity of adult offspring is measured by six items that capture behavioral aspects

of religion: (1) daily influence of religious beliefs (very much, quite a bit, some, a little, or not at all); (2) frequency of reading the Bible; (3) frequency of viewing/listening to religious broadcasts; (4) frequency of engaging in prayer; (5) frequency of participation in church-related activities (not service); and (6) frequency of church attendance. Possible responses for items 2 through 6 are: daily, weekly, monthly, less than monthly, or never. The religiosity measure is created using a principal component factor analysis with Varimax rotation. All six items have factor loadings greater than .60, and five of the six items have factor loadings greater than .76. The scale has an alpha coefficient of .86, which indicates significant homogeneity among the factors. Parents' religiosity is measured in the same way. Belief homogamy refers to parental agreement on religiosity and is measured by the response to the question: "How religious would you say you are compared to your (husband/wife)? Would you say you are much more religious, more religious, about the same, less religious, or much less religious?" Belief homogamy is coded 1 if the response was "about the same," 0 otherwise.

### *Moderating Variables*

Parental education and income refer to 1980 levels. Parental marital happiness is a scaled measure that taps both global evaluations (overall happiness) and the parent's feeling about specific aspects of the relationship (e.g., understanding, affection, agreement, and sexual relations). High scores represent greater marital happiness. A child socialized in a stepfamily is coded 1, 0 otherwise. Mother's and father's weekly hours worked are self-reported items; individuals not in the labor force are coded 0.

Parental power is measured by a question asking which spouse, generally, has the last word in the majority of decisions. This variable is coded 1 if the husband usually has the last word, -1 if the wife usually has the last word, and 0 if equal. Parental strictness is a 4-item scale measuring the number of household rules, closeness of supervision, the number of decisions the offspring are allowed to make, and general strictness. Because prior research demonstrates that a moderate level of strictness rather than a high or low level is

more efficient at forging parent-child relations (Gecas and Seff 1990), strictness is coded 1 if moderate, 0 otherwise. Maternal and paternal support are assessed with five items tapping how frequently the parent helped the child with school work or personal problems, the parent and child had talks together, and the parent showed affection toward the child. The fifth item rates the closeness of the parent-child relationship.

Adult offspring are coded 1 if they are currently attending college, 1 if they are married, 1 if they have children, and 0 otherwise for these variables. Social involvement indicates the number of memberships in clubs and organizations. Social integration reflects the involvement of adult offspring in politics and the community and is measured by the question: "How involved are you in community and political organizations? Would you say very involved, somewhat involved, slightly involved, or not involved at all?" A final variable is number of friendships.

### *Control Variables*

Variables known to affect reports of religiosity—age, sex, and race (White/non-White) are controlled (Clark and Worthington 1987).<sup>1</sup> Debates continue on the importance of religious denominations for religious identity. Wuthnow (1988) argues that the importance of denomination is fading, giving way to special interest groups. However, Carroll and Roof (1993:346) argue that denominations are the primary vehicles of religious belonging and meaning and have considerable staying power. Therefore, denominational influence is captured by a set of four dummy variables: liberal/moderate Protestant, conservative Protestant, Catholic, and other (Roof and McKinney 1987).

### *Analytic Strategy*

OLS regression techniques test the effect of family of origin on the religiosity of adult offspring. After examining the effect of family of origin, I assess the degree to which this effect is modified by variables measuring the

<sup>1</sup> Separate analyses for males and females reveal no significant differences. Therefore, the analysis reported combines males and females.

**Table 1. Standardized OLS Coefficients for Regression of Religiosity on Selected Independent Variables: United States, 1992**

Independent Variable	Reduced Models		Full Model	
	Model 1	Model 2	Main Effect	Interaction Effect <sup>a</sup>
<i>Parental Characteristics, 1980</i>				
Religiosity	.419***	.402***	.371***	—
Belief homogamy	.083**	.081**	.078**	.156**
Conservative Protestant	.092	.054	.062	.088*
Catholic	-.072	-.031	-.035	-.044
Other <sup>b</sup>	-.033	-.054	-.111	.092*
Father's education	.112**	.101**	.089*	.103*
Mother's education	-.062*	-.045	-.049	-.084*
Family income	.002	.003	-.004	.006
Marital happiness	.148*	.122	.120*	.118*
Stepfamily	-.078*	-.082*	-.071*	-.164**
Mother's weekly hours worked	-.113*	-.100*	-.087*	-.075**
Father's weekly hours worked	.111*	.099*	.088	.065
Parental power	.098*	.084*	.078	.136**
Moderate strictness	.108**	.096*	.097*	.123*
Mother's support	.184**	.165**	.171**	.154*
Father's support	.075*	.023	.045	.060*
<i>Adult Offspring's Characteristics, 1992</i>				
Age	.078*	.014	.068*	—
Non-White	-.016	-.019	-.023	—
In college	—	.083*	.018	—
Income	—	-.009	.003	—
Married	—	.203***	.198***	—
Has children	—	.119*	.071*	—
Social integration	—	.218**	.267**	—
Social involvement	—	.131*	.120*	—
Number of friends	—	.039	.013	—
R <sup>2</sup>	.318	.410	.491	
Number of cases	468	468	468	

<sup>a</sup> Coefficients for the interaction between the independent variable and parents' religiosity.

<sup>b</sup> Omitted category is liberal/moderate Protestant.

\* $p < .05$       \*\* $p < .01$       \*\*\* $p < .001$  (two-tailed tests)

recent experiences of young adult offspring. Next, to place religiosity inheritance in a socialization context, interaction terms are created by multiplying each independent variable by parents' religiosity. The interaction coefficients show what situations maximize parents' ability to influence the religiosity of their offspring. To avoid problems with multicollinearity, ordinal and continuous variables used in an interaction term are centered (Aikens and West 1991).

## RESULTS

Table 1 presents the results for both the reduced models (no interaction terms) and the full model (includes interaction terms). Model 1 estimates the effect of family variables on the religiosity of adult offspring, controlling for the age and race of the offspring. Model 2 adds variables measuring the offspring's recent experiences (e.g., marriage, college, social networks) to Model 1

to determine if these recent experiences modify the effects of the family variables. Finally, the full model estimates one equation that includes a set of interaction terms created by combining parents' religiosity with the remaining family variables. Main effects and interaction effects are reported for the full model.

### *The Effect of Parents' Religiosity*

In Model 1, parental religiosity has a significant positive effect on the religiosity of adult offspring. More important, this effect remains large when adult offspring's recent experiences are entered into the equation (Model 2).<sup>2</sup> While adult experiences (college, marriage, children, and social involvement) enhance the religiosity of offspring, these experiences do not weaken the strong influence of religiosity. Additional analysis (not shown) reveals that the religiosity of parents and adult offspring is less similar when parents have high religiosity, compared to more moderate or low parental religiosity. Whether this signifies a "ceiling effect" is not clear. However, it is clear that the great-

est intergenerational decline in religiosity occurs for individuals from the most religious backgrounds (Sharot, Ayalon, and Ben-Rafael 1986). Possibly, offspring from the most religious backgrounds feel constrained to conform to dominant values in the culture and their peer groups.

The offspring of parents who report agreement on religious beliefs tend to have higher religiosity scores. Also, the significant coefficient for the interaction between belief homogamy and parents' religiosity indicates that the effect of parental religiosity is greater when parents have similar religious beliefs than when parents have different religious beliefs. Parents maximize religiosity transmission if they agree on religious beliefs so that offspring do not receive mixed messages about the role of religion in life.

The effect of parents' religiosity is greater for conservative Protestants than for liberal/moderate Protestants, but this difference is modest. This result supports Nelsen's (1990) finding of greater parent-offspring similarity in conservative Protestant than in liberal Protestant families. To examine whether parents in some denominations are more effective than others in transmitting religiosity, all regression equations are estimated for each denomination separately. The only significant difference is that parents' religiosity has a greater main effect for conservative Protestants than for liberal/moderate Protestants and Catholics. There are no significant differences between liberal/moderate Protestants and Catholics. All of the other variables in the models operate uniformly across denominations. These results support Erickson's (1992) results.

### *Parental Status Effects*

I suggest that parents with more socioeconomic resources are better able to transmit their religious values. The results suggest that parents' education has both direct and interactive effects, but parents' income has no significant effect. Model 1 indicates that father's education is positively associated with offspring's religiosity, while mother's education is negatively associated. The full model reveals a similar pattern: The intergenerational transmission of religiosity is

<sup>2</sup> Some authors argue that religiosity is composed of two modes: personal religiosity (i.e., private behaviors) and institutional religiosity (i.e., public behaviors) (Cornwall et al. 1986). To test this assertion, several exploratory regression analyses are estimated using private and public religiosity as the dependent variables. Two significant results emerge. The effect of parental religiosity is significantly greater for private religiosity ( $\beta = .432$ ) than for public religiosity ( $\beta = .378$ ), and the interaction terms for mother's/father's support and parents' religiosity are significantly greater for private religiosity ( $\beta = .201/.098$ ) than for public religiosity ( $\beta = .158/.051$ ). These results suggest that private religious behaviors like praying and Bible reading may be influenced more by parent-offspring relations and the religious environment of the home than public religious behaviors (e.g., church attendance). However, the lack of consistent differential effects on these two modes of religiosity suggests that the family does not affect one type of religious behavior more than the other. Furthermore, no important distinctions emerge when regression equations are estimated for each religiosity item separately.

modified by parents' educational levels. The effect of parental religiosity is enhanced by a high level of father's education and a low level of mother's education. The negative effect of mother's education reflects the negative association between a mother's education and her own religiosity.

One occupational characteristic—the extent of parental participation in the labor force—affects the religiosity of offspring. Parents who work more hours are less available at home, which, in turn, may decrease parent-offspring interaction. The results demonstrate that the fewer the weekly hours worked by the mother and the more weekly hours worked by the father, the higher the religiosity among adult offspring. However, only mother's work hours condition the effect of parents' religiosity: In the full model, the interaction between mother's weekly hours worked and parents' religiosity is significant suggesting that parents' religiosity has a greater effect in families in which the mother is less involved in the labor force.

Finally, the parental power variable indicates that religiosity of the offspring is higher if the father is the main decision-maker in the family. Also, the effect of parents' religiosity is greater if the father is the main decision-maker (full model). The results of these variables—parents' education, labor force participation, and power relations—all suggest that a "traditional" family enhances the ability of parents to transmit their religiosity. Specifically, a traditional husband-wife relationship results in higher religiosity among offspring and greater intergenerational similarity in religiosity.

### *The Effect of Parental Marital Happiness*

The structure of the family and parents' marital happiness also affect the religiosity of adult offspring. Adult offspring raised in households with high marital happiness have higher religiosity, but offspring raised in stepfamilies have lower religiosity. Thus, negative parental relationships interfere with religious socialization. Also, the interaction terms crossing parent's religiosity with marital happiness and stepfamily are both significant: Religiosity inheritance is enhanced if offspring are raised by both biological parents who have high marital happiness.

### *The Effect of Parental Support and Control*

Moderate levels of parental strictness and high levels of mother's and father's support are associated with higher religiosity in adult offspring (Model 1). Also, the effect of parental religiosity is greater for high levels of mother's and father's support and moderate levels of parental strictness (full model). Consistent with Gecas and Seff (1990), moderate control and strong parental support enhance parent-offspring relations, which may aid intergenerational transmission of religiosity.

## DISCUSSION

Recent research suggests religious experience as a young adult predicts later adult religiosity. However, a logical and causal antecedent of religiosity in adulthood is family influences. Longitudinal data from a national sample of parents and their adult offspring show that parents' religiosity is the primary influence on the religiosity of their adult offspring. Offspring's experiences in late adolescence and early adulthood have independent effects on religious behavior, but do not diminish the effect of family of origin. Only 3 of the 11 significant terms measuring family of origin in Model 1 become nonsignificant when offspring's recent experiences are considered (Model 2). Further analyses of family characteristics reveal that three sets of factors influence adult offspring religiosity: parental religiosity, quality of the family relationship, and traditional family structure.

With respect to parental religious influence, my results challenge prior studies that question the primacy of parental influence on the religiosity of offspring (Cornwall 1988; Erickson 1992; Hoge et al. 1994). I argue that adult *religiosity is determined largely by parental religiosity*, independent of aging and life course effects. Francis and Brown (1991) find that parental influence in the formation of religiosity decreases as offspring age. I argue, to the contrary, that parental influences have considerable staying power even as offspring move out of the home and form independent households.

The second set of variables that influence the intergenerational transmission of religiosity is family relationships. Offspring who

were raised in households characterized by high marital happiness and with both biological parents present are more likely to resemble their parents in religious beliefs. Cummings and Davies (1994) argue that conflict between parents reduces the efficacy of their socialization efforts and that marital conflict may have indirect as well as direct effects. This study confirms those findings. Stepfamilies also present difficulties for parents and offspring. White (1994) finds significantly less contact and exchange of social support in stepfamilies than in families with both biological parents present. This study suggests that these weaker relationships between stepchildren and stepparents reduce the intergenerational transmission of religiosity.

The quality of the relationships between parents and children while the children reside at home significantly conditions the ability of parents to transmit their religiosity. "Mother's and father's support" interacts with "parents' religiosity" to predict offspring's religiosity. Thus, positive parent-child relationships foster continuity in religious behaviors between generations. Finally, the ability of parents to transmit their religiosity is enhanced when moderate levels of control are adopted. Parents and offspring may better negotiate and compromise regarding family roles and expectations in an atmosphere of warmth and caring. These communication and relationship patterns increase the intergenerational inheritance of religiosity.

Third, no other study finds that a traditional family structure aids the inheritance of religiosity. A mother with little schooling and little involvement in the labor force increases the probability of religiosity inheritance, whereas a well-educated father increases the probability of religiosity inheritance. Also, the effect of parents' religiosity on the religiosity of adult offspring is greater in households in which the father usually has the final word in decision-making. These traditional power relations reinforce the salience of a traditional value—the role of religion in the family. Therefore, offspring from a traditional family structure appear to replicate their parents' religiosity to a greater extent than do offspring from families organized in a less traditional manner.

This study advances research on adult religiosity in three important ways. First, methodologically, the use of longitudinal data and separate reports from parents and adult offspring advances our understanding of the direct and intervening mechanisms that affect religiosity in adulthood. This data set reduces the biases typical of retrospective or same-source data collection techniques. Because the data measure childhood variables in 1980 and adult child variables in 1992, the temporal ordering of events can be correctly specified. Second, I provide strong evidence that parental influence is important for the development of religiosity in offspring. This result suggests that parental influence does not decrease over time (see Francis and Brown 1991), is not replaced by the offspring's more recent activities (Erickson 1992), and does not operate mainly by channeling offspring into religious groups (Cornwall 1988). Finally, I examine a wide range of family-of-origin variables that are not often researched. Rather than simply examining direct effects, the interaction terms capture how the socialization environment of the home conditions the transmission of religiosity. Contrary to recent research that finds little effect of family-of-origin variables on religiosity transmission (Hayes and Pittelkow 1993), I identify three sets of variables that are important in religiosity inheritance—parental religiosity, quality of the family relationship, and a traditional family structure. Thus, this research advances research on family and religion by capturing the specific contexts and family processes that maximize religiosity inheritance.

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