

Social Organizations as a Path to Self-control:
Does Religious Participation Promote Character Development?

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Does religious participation have benefits for character development? For most of American history this question would have seemed foolish. Most Americans would have responded that religious participation was essential for character development. Today, however, the value of religion is being questioned. Historian Paul Johnson notes the recent change: "Until the second half of the 20th century, religion was held by virtually all Americans, irrespective of their beliefs, or non-belief, to be not only desirable but an essential part of the national fabric." (Johnson, 1997, p. 967). Authors such as Richard Dawkins have argued that people who participate in religious activities are less moral than those who do not. Indeed these authors claim that the religious are responsible for most of the world's evils. So we need to address the question of whether religious participation promotes character development in modern America.

Dawkins claims go far beyond character development. His claims include an argument that people of faith are deluded, for example. The extensiveness of these claims is beyond the scope of this paper. Interested readers should consider *The Dawkins Delusion?* by McGrath and McGrath.

Our foray into the issue of the potential benefits of religious participation will focus on behavior as opposed to generalized religiosity. Many people today report that they are spiritual or religious without demonstrating a commitment to a religious community or a belief system. The benefits of religion for character development, however, seem most likely to come from participation in a community and commitment to a belief system rather than a generalized spirituality. This is because a belief system and community result in expectations for, and demands upon, behavior that spirituality, or general religiosity, does not. Our conceptualization of religious participation is broad,

however, including behaviors such as considering religion's teachings when making decisions, prayer, and regular reading of sacred texts.

Two primary themes will be woven through this paper. The first is that based on established psychological theory, religious participation *should* promote character development. This is different from the question of whether religious participation *does* promote character development. We must be open to the possibility that in practice, religious participation makes no difference to, or even hinders, character development. Still, our point of view is that there are sound theoretical reasons to expect religious participation to promote character development.

The second theme is that the best empirical evidence suggests that religious participation does promote character development. We will argue that the empirical evidence is suggestive, not that the empirical evidence will constitute proof. This is because all of the empirical evidence we will consider is correlational. Researchers cannot practically or ethically manipulate people's level of religious participation. Alternative explanations for apparent effects of religiosity, therefore, cannot be ruled out.

Measuring Religious Participation

One of the most important factors in evaluating the quality of empirical research on religiosity is the measurement of the construct. A straightforward method which has been commonly used to measure religious participation is to ask people how often they attend church. This measure has typically been considered satisfactory as it assesses people's behavior rather than their denominational affiliation or feelings of commitment.

When the effects of religion have been examined empirically, many researchers have found relatively small effects. One reason for this may be due to measuring religiosity using only the single item measure of frequency of church attendance. To find relations between variables, there must be heterogeneity. Relying on single items constricts the possible heterogeneity. Furthermore, single item measures have more measurement error than multiple item measures (all else being equal). Thus, many studies may have underestimated the strength of the relation between religious participation and other variables such as parental involvement (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). Studies which rely on a single item, such as frequency of church attendance, or general measures of religiousness have produced conflicting results and results with trivial to small effect sizes. More consistent results with larger effect sizes have been found using more comprehensive assessments of religiosity (Snarey & Dollahite, 2001).

For example, King (2003) found that using a single behavioral item, frequency of church attendance, did not predict fathers' levels of involvement in their children's lives. When using a measure with multiple items, however, most of which were behavioral such as considering one's religious beliefs when making decisions, fathers' religiosity did predict their involvement in their children's lives. More religious fathers were more involved in their children's lives (King, 2003). This supports the claim that studies which use single items underestimate the associations between religiosity and other factors.

Thus, from a theoretical perspective, we are interested in people's religious behavior, and the role of religion in their lives, rather than whether they feel spiritual. From an empirical perspective, we will focus on studies which use multiple items to

assess people's religiosity. These studies will include behavioral items such as frequency of church attendance, but may also ask why people engage in religious behavior—intrinsic vs. extrinsic religiosity. We would expect differences in character development between adolescents who attend church to meet members of the opposite sex when compared to those who attend out of love for God.

What is Character?

Any discussion of character development begs the question of defining what one means by *character*. *Character* is a multifaceted construct. Researchers and theorists have considered many of these facets, such as humility, engagement in healthful behaviors, academic honesty, and work ethic. We believe that there is a common cornerstone to these facets—self-control.

It is impossible to have character without self-control, or the ability to delay gratification (we will use these phrases synonymously). Self-control alone does not determine character. One could be a sociopath with the ability to delay gratification. Making moral choices, however, requires that one be able to choose what is right even when it is difficult or disadvantageous to oneself. Whether one defines character as humility, work ethic, or making healthful choices, self-control is required. We will focus, therefore, on the ability to delay gratification as we believe it is the cornerstone of all facets of character.

Theory and Research Linking Religiosity and Character

Fundamental psychological principles suggest that religious participation should be related to character development. When considering religious participation, our examples will be based on Christianity in the United States. The same psychological

principles likely apply to other religions and other places. Our examples are not intended to exclude other options, but are used because they are familiar to ourselves and our readers.

Those who participate in religious activities receive religious instruction. The themes of this instruction often illustrate the desirability of delaying gratification. The account of the Good Samaritan shows that the moral will sacrifice their time and money for others. Daniel was thrown into the lions' den because he sought a better reward than he would have gotten by choosing to pray to the idol. Thus, a fundamental tenet of religion is that there are ideals for which one should strive even if there is a large personal cost in the present, because a larger reward exists in the future.

Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) argues that people are motivated to behave in ways that are consistent with their beliefs, or conversely that people are motivated to hold beliefs that are consistent with their behavior. Festinger argues that it is disquieting to have one's beliefs and behavior in conflict. Thus, people who attend religious services should be more likely to delay gratification because they are encouraged to believe that delaying gratification is virtuous. We would expect a direct effect of religious participation on young people—that those who attend religious services would choose to exercise more self-control to avoid cognitive dissonance.

The character challenges that adolescents face are usually situations with much less at stake than Daniel faced when confronted with death in the lions' den. Still adolescents often encounter choices about whether to delay gratification. Religious instruction applies to these common situations. Practical examples of delaying

gratification would include such things as choosing sobriety over drug use, holding one's tongue when one knows the perfect insult, and choosing to do homework before watching television. We would expect adolescents who accept religious teaching to avoid many dangerous behaviors and to have better relationships with family and friends. According to cognitive dissonance theory, adolescents who chose to be rude to family members while embracing teachings about love and forgiveness would eventually be moved to reject the religious teachings or bring their behavior in line with their beliefs.

Note that cognitive dissonance would only work in this fashion for young people who attend religious services by choice. This is because one must choose the belief that delaying gratification is virtuous rather than to experience disquietude when failing to live up to the standard. Those young people who are required to attend religious services may not hold the values of religion. Behaving in ways that conflict with religious values then would produce no disquieting feelings.

Clearly, however, children who are not exposed to religious teachings have no opportunity to accept them. That cognitive dissonance will promote character development in children who attend church only if they choose to attend does not mean that parents should not require their children to attend religious programs or provide moral instruction. Rather it simply reflects that until people internalize the beliefs of a religious system, they will not be motivated to live by them. Adolescents will need to form their own identities making their own decisions about what to believe.

Parental Influence

Parents do have a role in guiding their children's choices in life. For religious parents this is a God-given role. Parents function in this role even if they do not choose to accept it. Observational learning theory (Bandura, 1986) explains how people learn from watching others. Children will learn from the parents' ability to delay gratification or from the parents' lack of ability to delay gratification. Thus, parents who use chemicals for relaxation or who shout out insults during disagreements tend to have children who behave similarly. Children learn behaviors from their parents with notable ease. "Do as I say, not as I do" is unlikely to be an effective parenting technique.

There is more to parenting than modeling behavior. Parents who attend religious services will be taught the importance of moral living and the virtue of delaying gratification. Parents who believe that they are responsible for the moral upbringing of their children are going to be more likely to monitor and guide their children's activities than parents who do not value delaying gratification.

Parental monitoring includes more than being aware of children's activities. It includes having rules and expectations for the children's behavior. When considering dimensions of parenting, this broad conceptualization of monitoring is often referred to as demandingness. When parental monitoring (or demandingness) is combined with warm, responsive parenting, the resulting style is called authoritative parenting (Baumrind, 1971). Authoritative parenting has been shown to have many benefits for children.

For example, children of authoritative parents are much less likely to use illegal drugs (Baumrind, 1991; Shedler & Block, 1990). They are more likely to have a mature identity (Welton & Houser, 1997). On the other hand, parents who are warm and

responsive, but use little monitoring are more likely to have children who are not engaged in school (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991). If parents demonstrate high levels of monitoring, but little warmth and responsiveness, their children tend to have low self-esteem (Lamborn, et al., 1991). Indeed, the psychological adjustment advantage for children raised by authoritative parents is so great that young adults who were raised by authoritative parents are better prepared for life under the authoritarian system of the military (Mayseless, Scharf, & Sholt, 2003).

When considering parenting styles we see the potential double edged sword of religious involvement. If religious teaching emphasizes either warm parenting or demandingness while minimizing the other dimension, then undesirable outcomes result. In our present discussion it is important to emphasize that parents who exercise rigid or coercive monitoring of their children do not tend to see desirable outcomes. Teaching self-control is necessary but not sufficient for character development. Parents must also show warmth and responsiveness toward their children.

As religion emphasizes love in addition to the virtue of being able to delay gratification, we expect that religious participation by parents will influence character development in children. Some religious leaders, however, teach that parents should be authoritarian, requiring unquestioning obedience from children. Authoritarian parenting predicts adolescents who show “self”-control only when being watched. A religion that promotes demandingness without warmth and acceptance would not promote character development.

Indeed, it has been found that religious participation is significantly correlated with family harmony (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996). These researchers found that

families with religiously involved parents engaged in less conflict. This assessment of family harmony was based on observations of lifelike situations (playing a competitive board game and discussing a controversial social issue) that were designed to give the family members an opportunity to show any disharmony present in their relationships. In a previous study these researchers found that parental religiosity predicted moms and dads supporting each other in parenting. Religious parents were more likely to discuss their childrearing practices together and were more likely to help each other with child raising activities (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary 1994). The authors suggest that religious parents have more harmonious families because of their acceptance of religious teachings on such things as forgiveness and compassion.

Family harmony was found to predict self-control in adolescent children. Religious participation by parents, therefore, predicts adolescent self-control indirectly by creating harmonious family relationships which predict self-control (Brody et al., 1996). It could be argued that these results also show that religious participation by parents predicts adolescent self-control directly as well, if we agree that harmonious relationships require self-control. Surely harmonious relationships do require self-control; to have family harmony in situations such as conflictual discussion requires, for instance, the discipline to refrain from making snide remarks.

Observational learning theory is underpinning the findings of Brody et al. (1996). Parents model interactional behaviors. Children are learning the behaviors they observe as the behaviors of parents and children are correlated. There is consistency between theory and observation.

If children learn from their parents' behavior, do children learn from the parents' beliefs? Authoritative parents would share their own thoughts about religious beliefs with their adolescents. This would reflect the demandingness dimension of authoritative parenting as parents communicate their standards to their children. Authoritative parents would also allow adolescents to freely share their thoughts on religious beliefs with the parents. This would reflect the warmth dimension of authoritative parenting as the children's views are respectfully listened to and considered (but not necessarily endorsed). In families with this respectful two-way communication about religious beliefs adolescents are more likely to adopt their parents' religious beliefs than in families where either the demandingness or warmth is missing (Flor & Knapp, 2001).

Parenting style is a direct influence of parents on children. An indirect parental influence is through gatekeeping, which refers to parental control over the peers to which their children have access. Thus some researchers have come to prefer the term *channeling* (Martin, White, Perlman, 2003), which suggests a more active role for the parents than the traditionally used gatekeeping. Clearly parents have more influence through gatekeeping over younger children than older children. Still parents have some gatekeeping influence over adolescents. Parents can meet their teen's friends or instead believe it is not their business. Parents can have rules about places their children may go, or ignore their children's choices. Parents also have some choice about their neighborhood and their children's schools which limits the universe of potential peers.

Choosing a church is a particularly important gatekeeping tool for low income parents to direct their children toward interactions with more desired peers while

steering their children away from less desired peers. Low income parents have little choice in their neighborhoods and schools, but do have the freedom to choose a church. Religious participation predicts parents having more interaction with their children's peers as well as with the parents of the peers (Smith, 2003). Thus, religious participation may promote more active monitoring by parents. Does channeling adolescents into religious communities produce desirable outcomes?

Social Capital

In addition to the substantive elements available in religious participation (e.g., systems of beliefs and practices), such participation also provides a functional element represented in the psychological and social purposes available in religion (Mahoney et al., 2001). Churches are driven by social networks, similar to other social institutions. They are places where friendships develop between people with similar values, interests, and activities. Churches also provide social support for those in need, giving the person who attends church not only opportunities to help others, but to receive help as needed. Such social support can be crucial in terms of improved health and wellbeing, especially for the giver (Brown, Nesse, Vinokur, & Smith, 2003).

Coleman (1988) developed the concept of social capital to describe the resource that is embodied in the relationships among people. According to Coleman, social capital is facilitated in all social relations and by all social structures, including the family and the community. Furstenberg and Hughes (1995) suggest that social capital resides in social organizations that provide something of value for the individual involved and can consist of three types: first, the obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness embodied in social structures; second, the information provided in social relations; and

third, the norms and effective sanctions within communities. Parents represent a great source of social capital, especially when they are in relationships with others in a community linked together by social ties and common values. The communal nature of Christian infant baptism, or dedication, where the congregation vows to help the parents in the religious training of the child, recognizes the importance of community in fostering these common values.

In addition, Furstenberg and Hughes (1995) suggest that social capital is important in helping to explain how and why some children, despite coming from economically disadvantaged environments, manage to become economically successful in adulthood. There are good reasons to believe that the social capital provided by church attendance would be beneficial to economically disadvantaged children. Frequent church attenders have larger social networks than those who occasionally or never attend church (Ellison & George, 1994). These social networks provide a rich source of support as frequent church goers are more likely to say that they are “feeling cared for and valued” and that their relationships are “more validating and nurturing” (Ellison & George, 1994, p. 57). Religious high school students have been found to have more social capital than less religious students. Social capital has been found to predict lower levels of smoking, alcohol use, drug use and delinquency (Wagner, Furrow, King, Leffert, & Benson, 2003).

The importance of these community resources is indicated in the research of King and Furrow (2004) who reported that social capital resources mediate the influence of religiousness on moral outcomes in adolescents. The moral outcomes these researchers considered were empathetic concern, perspective-taking, and

altruism. That social capital mediates the influence of religiousness on moral outcomes means that adolescent religiousness did not directly predict the moral outcomes.

Adolescent religiousness, however, predicted social capital which predicted the moral outcomes. Thus, it is not religiousness per se that predicted the moral outcomes, but being part of an intergenerational community with shared values and expectations.

Churches are prototypical intergenerational communities with shared values and expectations. This is consistent with our approach of viewing religiosity as reflecting behavior rather than as general spirituality.

Neural Development in Adolescence Related to Self-control.

To the extent that self-control can be seen as necessary for character, one can expect changes in the ability to exercise this aspect of character across development. Recent findings suggest a role in brain development during adolescence in not only intellectual function but also in executive function, social cognition and resistance to peer influence (Blakemore, & Choudhury, 2006). Much brain development occurs during infancy and childhood (before puberty), but changes in brain maturation continue after puberty as well. Both increases in myelination and fine-tuning of neural networks are seen throughout adolescence and into early adulthood, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, a region especially important in exercising impulse control and good judgment. The prefrontal cortex is also implicated in moral reasoning, social behavior and empathy, and damage to this area can result in deficits in each of these qualities as well as antisocial behaviors (Anderson, Bechara, Damasio, Tranel, & Damasio, 1999; Moll et al., 2002; Adolphs, 2003).

Our ability to control and coordinate our thoughts and behavior is referred to as executive function in the psychological and neuroscientific literature. The prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain that does not reach maturity until late adolescence or early adulthood, is important in maintaining executive function. It is also instrumental in exercising social cognition and higher-level cognitive functions such as self-awareness and theory of mind, which is “the ability to understand other minds by attributing mental states such as beliefs, desires and intentions to other people” (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006, p. 302). Neural factors in the frontal and parietal lobes are also thought to be involved in the ability to resist negative peer influence. Taken together, these studies suggest that self-control should not only improve during normal adolescent development, but that any environmental factor (such as religion) correlated with greater self-control will interact with the underlying neural mechanisms developing across adolescence and into early adulthood. Such interaction might take the form of the environmental factor facilitating this neural maturation or being limited in its effect by the immaturity of the adolescent brain.

When adolescents choose risky behaviors such as accepting a ride from an intoxicated friend or engaging in sexual activity, they are failing to delay gratification. Steinberg (2007) suggests that adolescents are most likely to make risky behavioral choices under two conditions: 1) when they are in the presence of their friends, and 2) in emotional situations. Examined individually in the lab, adolescents can reason just as logically about risky decisions as adults. Yet experience suggests that in the real world adolescents do not reason as well as adults. Lab studies have found that when placed in an emotional situation in the presence of peers, adolescents make much riskier

choices than when alone in emotionally neutral situations. The context of the situation has rendered their understanding of the need to delay gratification moot as they choose to enjoy the moment. Steinberg too sees the risky choices, that adolescents are more likely than young adults to make, as being directly linked to development in the prefrontal cortex. Steinberg's conclusion is that adolescents need more adult supervision and guidance (2007).

Religious institutions are well suited to providing developmental support during this period of brain maturation. Adolescents who participate in religious activities participate in at least some of their social activities under the guidance of youth program directors. This is in contrast to adolescents whose primary social activities are unsupervised. These latter adolescents more often participate in situations which facilitate making decisions for momentary pleasure over a delayed future benefit.

Can Self-control be Learned?

Given the importance of brain development to self-control, can environmental forces, such as religious participation, promote self-control development? Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall and Oaten (2006) liken self-control to a muscle. In the short term using one's self-control makes it more difficult to delay gratification just as one's muscles become fatigued after exercise. With repeated use, however, one's ability to delay gratification becomes stronger just as when one exercises, one's muscles become stronger over time. Participation in religious programs which teach the virtues of self-control, therefore, should promote the development of self-control in adolescents.

Conclusion

In the introduction we suggested that some weak findings regarding the value of religiosity may be due to measurement issues: using single item measures of religiosity or considering general spirituality. The empirical research that we have considered suggests that using multiple item measures that are behavioral in nature show a clear relation between religiosity and character development.

The social capital research suggests another reason for finding weak relations between religiosity and character outcomes. It suggests that being religious should be viewed as more than a set of behaviors and beliefs. Rather, being religious needs to be understood in the context of religious communities. This does not mean that religious belief is unimportant. It is religious beliefs which motivate people to become part of religious communities where they then have access to increased social capital. Indeed, commitment to common beliefs is part of what holds any community together.

Furthermore, belief and community may work in concert. Anson, Carmel, Bonneh, Levenson, and Maoz (1990) examined members of a religious kibbutz and a nonreligious kibbutz. They found that simply being part of a close knit community did not help in dealing with stressful life events. In addition they found that personal religiosity, such as prayer, did not help in dealing with stressful life events. Yet being part of a religious community did help the members deal with stressful life events. Thus, we see that the combination of belief and community yields benefits that neither factor provides in isolation. The study also suggests that religious organizations may offer more benefits to people than other close knit organizations which are devoid of religion.

In his review of the literature Pargament (2002) concludes “the efficacy of religion may have less to do with specific religious beliefs and practices and more to do with the

degree to which religion is well integrated into individuals' lives." (p. 176). In churches people learn from role-models who have integrated religious principles. Religious communities place expectations of commitment on their members. Religious belief may be a key justification for delaying gratification. Yet the social capital which can only be obtained from religious participation is important for integrating belief into one's life and living a life of character.

Taken together the empirical findings and theoretical justifications support the claim that religious participation should promote character development. When considering the empirical studies the common caveat is that they are all correlational studies. We cannot randomly assign people to differing levels of religious participation. We cannot rule out the possibility, therefore, that some third factor accounts for the relation between religious participation and desirable outcomes.

Correlational studies show an average trend. In every study that we have considered, there were exceptions to the average trend. Exceptions could be the result of some people following harsh religious teachings which do not promote character development (e.g. authoritarian parenting). Other exceptions could be the result of parents who, like Eli the priest from the first book of Samuel, become so involved in church activities that they do not have the time to guide their children. There are some religious teachers promoting harmful practices, and too much of a good thing can be harmful as well.

An alternative explanation for the average benefits of religion that seems quite persuasive on the surface is that people who have their lives in order are more likely to go to church and participate in religious activities. Under this model, religious

participation has no influence on character; it is simply that those who already have character are more likely to be active members of religious communities. According to this line of reasoning, the religious communities have no meaningful influence on people; the apparent effects of religion are illusory.

This claim that belonging to a close knit community would have no influence on people defies sound logic and fundamental psychological theory that we have reviewed. Furthermore, those of us who are part of religious communities have observed that many of our members did not come to church having already formed praiseworthy character. Many of our members came to us with serious character issues such as drug abuse. The character that these individuals have is the result of the transformative nature of religious institutions. This transformative power is supported not only by correlational studies and good theory, but by the lives that have been changed.

The Apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians notes that many of the Christians in Corinth once lived evil lives. That the readers of Paul's letter needed to be reminded of their previous lack of character is a testament to the dramatic transformations of character in the lives of early Christians. Religious participation had a profound impact on people's ability to delay gratification in the first century. Theory and empirical research point to religious participation continuing to be important for character development in the lives of Americans in the 21st century.

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