

Family, Religion, and Well-Being from Adolescence to Young Adulthood: Patterns of Religious Participation and the Influence of Family and Religious Characteristics on Trajectories of Well-Being

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Adolescence is a developmental stage that is often marked by stress and transition. Although many studies have examined patterns of adolescent behavior, much is still unknown about the trajectories that adolescents follow into adulthood and factors that may shape these pathways. This study analyzes trajectories of religious participation and two indicators of adolescent well-being: delinquent behavior and depressive symptoms. Drawing on social integration and social control theories, I also focus on how two social institutions – family and religion – predict and shape these trajectories from early adolescence into young adulthood.

Data is taken from the 1988-2004 waves of the Child and Young Adult Sample of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), and the sample consists of 2,472 youth who have transitioned from early adolescence (ages 10-14) into young adulthood (ages 20-25). Utilizing an innovative group-based method of trajectory analysis, I examine whether family characteristics (e.g., family structure, processes, and resources) and religious characteristics (e.g., religious commitments among family, religious participation, and religious heterogamy) are independent predictors of these trajectories as well as whether family and religious characteristics interact with one another to shape patterns of behavior. I also consider whether family and religious changes that occur throughout adolescence alter these trajectories over time.

Results show that there are a few common trajectories of religious participation, delinquency, and depressive symptoms that youth follow throughout adolescence. For example, although most youth decrease their involvement in religious institutions during adolescence, some youth maintain a constant level of religious participation while others increase their involvement into young adulthood. In addition, many youth report declines in their well-being during adolescence, characterized by increased delinquency and depressive symptoms. Yet, some youth seem to experience consistently high levels of well-being.

I also find that family and religious characteristics are important influences on these patterns of behavior. Having two parents, having parents who are authoritative and supportive, and residing in a religious family all increase the likelihood that youth remain religious throughout adolescence. Similarly, these factors also increase the likelihood that youth maintain low levels of delinquent behavior and depressive symptoms throughout this developmental stage. There is also evidence that family and religion interact to predict patterns of behavior; religion appears to enhance the effects of family support on adolescent well-being and religious participation, and religion also seems to compensate for a lack of social integration and social control in some families. Finally, there is some evidence that family and religious changes during adolescence may affect one's religious participation and well-being in young adulthood.

Overall, this dissertation provides a more comprehensive understanding of individual-level trajectories of religious participation, delinquent behavior, and depressive symptoms throughout adolescence and into adulthood. The results describe how typical developmental pathways vary among adolescents and how both family and religious characteristics continually shape patterns of religious participation and well-being among youth.