



# The ties that bind: Linking religious organizational segregation to the individual level closure of *close* friendship network's<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Understanding the consequences of organizational membership has long been of concern to social scientists and the degree to which these belongings affect individual behaviors is often at the heart of this concernment. This study introduces a conceptual framework through which structural conditions associated with religious segregation is examined in relation to its manifestation as micro-level consequences. The literature is spattered with acknowledgements of segregation in religion at the organizational level through the proclamation that religion is “Divided by Faith” and that it creates “Closed Communities”. Drawing on data from the Panel Study on American Race and Ethnicity (PS-ARE), these conditions are linked to variations in the diversity of individual-level small group social networks, nested within a multidimensional, and newly developed, measurement of religiosity as an indicator of the strength of the tie the individual has to the organization to which they belong. The results suggest that the strength of the tie one feels with their religious organization is both multidimensional and denominationally specific in its explanation of variations in the diversity of close friendship networks. At a broader level these results suggest a linkage of micro behaviors to macro conditions that exists in a top-down hierarchy in which individual behaviors are shaped by structural conditions, but to what degree depends on the strength of the relationship between person and organization.

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## 1. Introduction

Within the social sciences, there has been a long-standing concern with the causes and consequences of voluntary group association and institutional belonging (for a brief review see Tolbert, Lyson, & Irwin, 1998). In regard to this interest, a majority of the existing literature has been primarily concerned with variations in the demographic and psycho-social characteristics of individuals whom do and do-not join such organizations, and the related associations that group members make as a consequence of organizational belonging. However, relatively little attention has been given to the effects of the

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macro-level structure of the marketplace in which the group is embedded and its impact on variations in individual outcomes associated with such belonging. We would expect that such outcomes would vary given the marketplace context in which the organizational belonging occurs. Furthermore, the level of “belonging” that the individual reports should also have a direct impact on the role that the organization/institution plays in impacting the individual’s life. For instance, someone who is very loosely affiliated likely exhibits a very loose connection with the organization, its beliefs, and the larger structural conditions in which the organization exists. In contrast, someone that is embedded in an organization, through a strong meaningful affiliation, is likely to internalize the organizational beliefs and to be affected by the structural conditions in which the organization is situated.

At the structural level, researchers have hypothesized that certain institutions within American society tend to serve a divisive role limiting intergroup contact through both explicit and implicit processes of limiting entrance into the group (Emerson & Smith, 2000). Given the above set of assumptions, it is likely that individuals within these institutional settings are affected differently depending on the degree to which they are embedded within the organization. Among those that are highly embedded and feel a strong connection, this would likely translate into a pattern of separation in their own lives. While this structural pattern is not ignorable; especially given the politically correct rhetoric surrounding the championing of diversity and multiculturalism, we are much less likely to recognize its effect on individual’s level of tolerance, racial belief systems, and separation because of the variations that exist within these groups. However, it is likely that such variations are systematic in nature and directly related to the ties one has to the larger organization.

Understanding the effect of such organizational belonging allows for a better understanding of the underlying dynamics associated with the attractiveness of membership. It may be that individuals choose certain types of organizations as a way of withdrawal from the larger society as a whole, while others are simply looking to broaden their own life-experience. For example, recent work by Emerson and Smith (2000) has documented the divisive nature of religious belonging and the economically-driven rational choice congregations make to serve a demographically homogenous group of individuals.<sup>1</sup> The authors point out that in order for religious congregations to flourish they must meet the demands which draw individuals to religion and in doing so they must focus on the similar demands experienced by individuals from a relatively similar background and set of life circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, this phenomenon has resulted in the predominately racialized congregations of modern day and the continued interest in understanding the effects of organizational belonging and the in-group/out-group dynamics they help to establish.

Still others have shown that belonging, even in religious context, is positively associated with a higher likelihood of being tolerant of more diverse surroundings (Porter & Brown, 2008; Porter & Emerson, 2013), but directly affected by the Macrosociological limiting of opportunities to meet others unlike oneself (Porter, 2010). Along those same lines, in a cross-national comparative study on civic engagement in North America, Smidt (1999) found that religious tradition and attendance promote civic engagement in the greater community. However, there continues to remain contradictory research which reports that the effect of religious membership causes strong in-group ties and cause a withdrawal from the greater civil society (Putnam, 1993).

Why do we see such differences in the existing literature and such dramatic variations within these organizational contexts? In the current research, the interest lies not only in the belonging of an individual to a religious organization, but also to the level of importance that religion plays in the individual’s life. Recent research has highlighted the fact that forty-seven percent of the population in the U.S. categorizes religion a “very important in their life” (Putnam & Campbell, 2010). The strength of such a bond is taken into account here and the actual connection of the individual to the organization in which they belong is examined in an attempt to link these individual behaviors to the segregated structure of religious organizations within the larger religious economy.

One may assume then, that individuals that are members of religious congregations and affiliated with specific types of religious organizations are likely to experience lower levels of racialized diversity in their close friendship network given that organizations ‘place’ within the larger religious economy. However, these levels of diversity are further likely to be tempered by measures of the strength individual connection to the larger organization. This connection is hypothesized to be directly related to the embeddedness, satisfaction, and overall importance the individual feels in relation to the organization and what it stands for. Furthermore, one would expect higher levels of membership involvement and attendance to positively be associated with these indicators of affinity. In order to adequately test this conceptual framework, it is important to first understand the indicators of such a connection in theory and then to appropriately measure/examine them in application.

In *application*, this research introduces a multidimensional approach to measuring the strength of one’s tie to their religious organization, in an attempt to push forward a formal discussion on understanding the complex construct of religiosity (in particular religious salience) and related issues of satisfaction and embeddedness of individuals in their chosen congregation. In *theory*, there is less of an issue as the indicators of religiosity, and by relation an individual connection to the structural

<sup>1</sup> This statement should be taken with the understanding that structural issues (i.e. homophily, geographic mobility, etc.) also contribute heavily to the homogeneity of congregations. The modern day result of racially divided congregations is simply the continuation of a larger historical trend in which religious belonging is dependent on ethnic and cultural background.

<sup>2</sup> This argument is the product of a larger argument centered around the idea of homophily. The argument most completely put forward by McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001), outlines the conscious choice of individuals to be with others like themselves and is a useful extension for those interested in the topic of group formation and diversity (see McPherson et al. for more information).

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