



Intergenerational transmission of religious beliefs and practices and the reduction of adolescent delinquency in urban Thailand

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A B S T R A C T

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This study examines the intergenerational transmission of family religion as measured by parent's and adolescent's beliefs and practices in Buddhism, and its relation to delinquent behaviors among early adolescents in Thailand. The data set is from the Thai Family Matters Project 2007, a representative sample of 420 pairs of parents and teens in Bangkok. A structural equation model is employed for the analysis. The intergenerational transmission and the direct and indirect association between parents' and adolescents' beliefs and practices in Buddhism and adolescents' minor and serious delinquent behaviors are revealed to be significant, controlling for secular parental monitoring. Spirituality within the family can play an important role in preventing delinquency among early adolescents. Policies in the areas related to family empowerment and delinquency prevention may need to consider integrating both secular and non-secular program inputs in their implementation design.

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The ability of parents to deter their children from delinquent pathways is an important parental role in all cultures. To raise children to become law abiding citizens providing to the productivity of the community is an important social function of the family throughout all cultures across the ages. Much of the research on how parents prevent their children from becoming

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delinquent has been focused on parents functioning in a secular world, adopting family functioning processes that promote healthy child development.

A large majority of researchers have recently focused on the effect of secular parental monitoring, the set of behaviors that controls and allows for awareness of children's whereabouts, conduct, and companions (Barnes & Farrell, 1992; Byrnes, Miller, Chen, & Grube, 2011; Dishion & McMahon, 1998; Ingram, Patchin, Huebner, McCluskey, & Bynum, 2007); and on family management practice (Herrenkohl, Hill, Hawkins, Chung, & Nagin, 2006). Such family process affecting adolescents' problem behaviors also includes the forms of family loyalty, parental attachment, and other parent–adolescent connections (Delsing, van Aken, Oud, De Bruyn, & Scholte, 2005; Ingram et al., 2007; Smetana, Crean, & Daddis, 2002). These interests in family process are usually value-free, pragmatic and focus on utilitarian functions mainly of ensuring teens' safety, aiming to public health intervention or secular social or educational measures.

Although such secular monitoring by parents when children are very young is crucial, it is certainly not sufficient to protect the future incidence of undesirable or criminal behaviors, perhaps if the spiritual aspect of child rearing, and the spiritual role model of parents is not equally emphasized. The addition that spirituality addresses is that it is more than just behaviors and concerns for physical safety. It is also a reflection of parental norms and values about how one should conduct oneself as a teen and the belief that there are underlying morality codes that add something more than simply behavioral assessments. This is because, at least in the US, teens learn spiritual practices through moral directives and develop pro-social ties through collaborating with others participating in the spiritual practices (Miller, 2005). It is important to compare with settings where religion/spirituality is an embedded component of the culture as most US and western based programs do not have these elements. Thus an in-depth understanding of the cultural context for the development or adaptation of any public health or family support program involving both secular and spiritual elements becomes inevitable.

The importance of religion on social bonding and conformity to societal laws and beliefs has been scientifically recognized by sociologists under the social control theory (Baier & Wright, 2001; Hirschi, 2002). Family socialization should prevent delinquency and other problem behaviors because it helps youths internalize their parents' expectations for behavior, thus helping them develop conventional values which protect them from deviant behavior (Bell, Forthun, & Sun 2000). According to the social control theory along this line, family religion is suggested to deter delinquency (Baier & Wright, 2001; Hirschi, 2002; Mapp, 2009). The investigation of the effect of adolescent religious commitment on delinquency by Johnson, Jang, Larson, and De Li (2001) confirmed the significance of religion. Using latent-variable modeling and analysis of longitudinal data, the authors demonstrated the theoretical importance of religion as a social institution of informal social control and socialization in understanding delinquency (Johnson et al., 2001).

The relationship between religiosity and delinquency under the social control theory is challenged by the psychological explanation under the "arousal" theory. Under this theory, the religion–delinquency relationship is seen to be dubious or believed to be only spurious. Because of variations in brain functioning, individuals are different in their sensation seeking behavior. Lack of interest in religious engagement as well as involvement in delinquent activities, are both related to their arousal or the "thrill-seeking perspectives" (Cochran, Wood, & Arneklev, 1994; Ellis, 1987). The true causal association between delinquency and religiosity is therefore challenged.

However, the above studies may lack the social control perspectives when they do not take into account all the family process within the larger context rather than only the individual level framework. Family spiritual connection and control through religious beliefs and by setting examples of religious practices especially among very young teens in addition to the effective parental monitoring may be able to explain delinquency among teens more comprehensively. Under the social control framework, the design to include intergenerational family process in the study of the religion–delinquency relationship is therefore important to clarify the spurious hypothesis and to maintain that perhaps religiosity is developed in the family and not the result of the low arousal stimulation at the individual level.

Under the social control theory, the effect of religion should therefore be investigated in the total family context including two generations, rather than only on the level related to individual adolescents. Religion of the family involving both parent and teen, rather than only particular individuals should be emphasized. Also in this regard, Miller (2005) saw the importance of a systematic way to investigate both parents' and teens' spirituality since there is a family process of intergenerational transmission of religiousness from parent to teens. The intergenerational forces described by Miller (2005) help to point out how teens' moral reasoning process and moral modeling is developed, and specifically, how the family that is well bonded has a better chance of transmitting social and cultural morality norms.

The need to look at both parents' and teens' religiosity rather than at only one generation (Thornton & Camburn, 1989) also stems from the important work of Regnerus (2003) where an intergenerational model of religious influence was developed and tested successfully to explain delinquent behavior especially for girls. An intergenerational model was also investigated by Pearce and Haynie (2004), when the concept of familial conflict as well as harmony of religious beliefs was introduced. According to Pearce and Haynie (2004), the influence of adolescents' religiosity on delinquency was found to vary according to parents' level of religiosity as well.

Studying the effect of religion by including both parental supervision and family religiosity in the same model in order to investigate their total and separate effects on adolescent delinquency had been found to be important (Benda & Corwyn, 1997, 2000; Petts, 2009; Pickering & Vazsonyi, 2010). These studies showed that investigation of religion controlling for other factors in the family domain had helped to shed more light on the direct effect of religion on delinquency. In order to replicate

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