



# Not a lonely crowd? Social connectedness, religious service attendance, and the spiritual but not religious



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## ABSTRACT

Using the 2006–2014 General Social Survey and 2006–2012 Portraits of American Life Study, I find that on three dimensions of social connectedness: social interaction frequency, core discussion network size, and number of close ties, that religious service attenders are more connected than religious non-attenders and then either spiritual nor religious, but there are few differences between attenders and the spiritual but not religious. Difference-in-differences and fixed-effects models show little evidence that switches between categories are associated with changes in connectedness, and additional models show that prior social connectedness explains only a small amount of future switches. This paper challenges assumptions that the non-religious are a homogenous group lacking the benefits provided though the social networks of religious congregations and has implications for research on what it means to be spiritual, measuring religion and spirituality, and understanding the role of formal organizations in social life.

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## 1. Introduction

Cries of increasing American individualism and diminished social engagement have been raised by concerned scholars and pundits alike. In seeking to explain what underlies these asserted shifts, some have suggested an important factor may be changes in the religious landscape such as declining religious service attendance, growing numbers of “religions nones,” emerging forms of privatized or alternative religions, or the apparent supplanting of religion by spirituality. Are these trends indeed tearing away at the social fabric? Or what do they suggest about the social connectedness of Americans?<sup>1</sup>

It is well established that a great deal of social life occurs *inside* American congregations. The recent well-documented increase in the religiously unaffiliated (Hout and Fischer, 2002, 2014; Putnam and Campbell, 2010) and decline in religious service attendance (Chaves, 2011) suggests similar declines for social connectedness. However, little research has explored the role of religion and spirituality in social life *outside* of religious congregations, and in particular, social life that may take place within “alternative” or “spiritual” communities. For example, many have assumed that those who identify with labels such as “Spiritual But Not Religious” are necessarily individualistic and practice their beliefs in private ways, but scholars have presented a number of recent examples of non-religious communities and groups of individuals that practice forms of spirituality together (e.g., Bender, 2010; Oh and Sarkisian, 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> The scope of this paper is the United States. Some parts may be generalizable to other parts of the world, but religion and non-religion in America are often quite unlike anywhere else in the world.

This paper compares the social connectedness of regular religious service attenders (Attenders) with three types of non-attenders: Religious Non-attenders (RNA), the Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR), and the Neither Spiritual Nor Religious (NSNR).<sup>2</sup> Using seven waves of data from two nationally representative surveys, I show that Attenders are more connected than the RNA and NSNR, while differences between Attenders and the SBNR are small or non-existent, depending on the measure. Difference-in-differences and fixed-effects models provide little evidence that switches between categories are associated with changes in connectedness. Models that use lagged measures of connectedness to predict switching show there may be some selection effect in explaining why the RNA are less connected, but do not explain why Attenders and the SBNR are more connected than the NSNR. Thus, this paper challenges existing assumptions that those with no religion or who do not participate in religious services are less connected, and it joins other scholars (e.g., Ammerman, 2013b) who suggest social scientists need to pay greater attention to the heterogeneity of those who do not affiliate with or participate in conventional religious traditions.

The paper proceeds as follows: First, I outline the concerns that have been raised regarding the consequences of the increase in the religiously unaffiliated and decline in religious service attendance for both individual social well-being and the social cohesiveness of American life. Second, I briefly summarize the current state and limitations of knowledge about the connectedness of the religiously unaffiliated and the spiritual but not religious, and I map this knowledge onto four sets of testable hypotheses. Third, I test these hypotheses with cross-sectional and panel analyses of three different measures of connectedness using the 2006–2014 General Social Surveys and 2006–2012 Portraits of American Life Study. Finally, I discuss the implications of my findings for ongoing research into what it means to be spiritual, measuring religion and spirituality, and understanding the role of formal organizations in social life.

## 2. The concerns

Social scientists have long been interested in the quantity and nature of the social connections that people have, with particular concern raised for those who may be especially socially isolated or less connected (e.g., Durkheim [1897], 1951; Riesman et al., [1950], 2001; Bellah et al., 1985). Social connections through friends, neighbors, co-workers, and family are generally seen as valuable for a number of reasons. They are sources of social support (e.g., Wellman and Wortley, 1990), socialization to norms and values (e.g., Heckathorn, 1988), and valuable information and resources (e.g., Podolny and Baron 1997; Granovetter 1973)—particularly in difficult times (e.g., Hurlbert et al., 2000). For these reasons, it is not surprising that positive associations have been found between the extent of one's social connectedness and one's physical, mental, and economic well-being (Berkman and Syme, 1979; House et al., 1988; Podolny and Baron, 1997; Bearman and Moody, 2004).<sup>3</sup>

Given the importance placed by scholars on social connectedness, it should be no surprise that particular interest has been paid to the religiously unaffiliated because they frequently miss out on one of the most common forms of social interaction—conventional religious worship. Indeed, Hout and Fischer (2014) note that those “who prefer no religion seldom if ever attend religious services” (p. 432). Thus some argue that the religiously unaffiliated may miss the benefits that typically come from the social networks that arise from being part of a congregation.

Reduced social connectedness through religious communities has, at times, been discussed directly in the context of a larger debate on possible downward trends in social connectedness in the U.S. (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Fischer, 2011). For reasons noted above, reduced social connectedness from religious communities could have negative effects across a variety of outcomes. For example, higher levels of religiosity have long been associated with greater life satisfaction, but Lim and Putnam (2010) argue that religious people are more satisfied with their lives specifically because they regularly attend religious services and build social networks in their congregations, and not because of private or subjective aspects of religiosity. In their words, “For life satisfaction, what matters is how involved one is with a religious community, not whether that community is Baptist, Catholic, or Mormon” (p. 920). Lewis, MacGregor, and Putnam (2013) take it yet a step further, arguing that religious service attendance is positively associated with several civic and neighborly outcomes primarily because of the network of friends that people have in their congregations.

Furthermore, it has also been argued that the content of congregation-based social connectedness is uniquely valuable. First, congregations develop civic skills and recruit for engagement and service (Verba et al., 1995; Putnam, 2000), something the religious unaffiliated may miss out on.<sup>4</sup> As their numbers increase, the concerns are further magnified because decreased participation in congregations may reduce the resources they have to continue in this developmental function. Consider Chaves' (2011) summary of the state of American religion:

<sup>2</sup> Some who do not identify as religious still regularly attend religious services, but this population is very small (Hout and Fischer, 2014). The emphasis in this paper is on the connections from religious service attendance, so I only count SBNR and NSNR who do not attend religious services regularly. However, my findings are robust to including religious-service-attending SBNR and NSNR in their respective categories. More description is in the Methods section.

<sup>3</sup> Though the net effects of social ties seem positive, not all social ties are beneficial, as discussed by Parigi and Henson (2014) and Smith and Christakis (2008).

<sup>4</sup> Readers familiar with the arguments that follow may recognize that some of it comes from studies of “social capital.” Given the omnibus nature of the term “social capital,” I think its use here would be more confusing than helpful (see Fischer, 2005). This paper focuses on specific measures of social network size and social interactions, though these could be thought of as measures of the associational aspect of “social capital.”

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