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Structural and cultural sources of community in American congregations

Samuel Stroope [a,*], Joseph O. Baker [b]

[a] Department of Sociology, Louisiana State University, United States
[b] Department of Sociology and Anthropology, East Tennessee State University, United States

A B S T R A C T

Religious institutions are among the deepest reservoirs of social belonging in America, but what determines whether belonging is cultivated in these institutions? Previous research shows that individuals' social network composition is a primary predictor of feelings of belonging. However, less is known about how group characteristics condition the influence of social networks on belonging. We use data from the 2001 U.S. Congregational Life Survey and multilevel modeling to examine how organizational characteristics such as group size, in-group network density, and aggregate ideological uniformity moderate the effects of individual social networks on sense of belonging. Results indicate that both structural (network density, church size) and cultural (ideology) characteristics of groups significantly condition the effects of individual social networks on belonging. Smaller group size, network density, and ideological unity cultivate contexts that amplify the relationship between personal networks and belonging.

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1. Introduction

Few needs are as fundamental to social life as feelings of belonging in face-to-face groups. Scholars have long studied community with an interest in the sources and maintenance of belonging, including the role of religion (e.g. Tönnies [1935] 1957). Durkheim ([1912] 1995) outlined the connections between community belonging and religion in explicit detail in *Les Formes Élémentaires*. More recently, Putnam's (2000) influential analyses of "the collapse and revival of American community" emphasized the role that religion plays in community efficacy. Recent empirical research also indicates that factors such as traditional religious culture and shared moral order promote community feelings (Davis and Robinson, 1996; Ryle and Robinson, 2006; Vaisey, 2007).

The kind of community-building cultivated in religious groups is important not just for its emotional qualities; communal bonding is associated with a variety of social consequences. At the ecological level, strong belonging in religious congregations may be "too much of a good thing," linked to outcomes within the broader local community such as elevated crime rates (Beyerlein and Hipp, 2006), higher mortality rates (Blanchard et al., 2008), reduced economic development (Mencken et al., 2006; Tolbert et al., 2002, 1998), and social isolation (Emerson and Smith, 2000; Schwadel, 2005).

* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Sociology, Louisiana State University, 126 Stubbs Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, United States. Fax: +1 (225) 578 5102.
E-mail address: sstroope@lsu.edu (S. Stroope).

On the other hand, researchers have found that individuals' well-being and health are positively influenced by social integration in congregations (Ellison and George, 1994; Lim and Putnam, 2010) and feelings of belonging in congregations (Idler et al., 2009; Koenig et al., 2001; Krause and Wulff, 2005). Congregational belonging can potentially have both negative and positive effects. Unraveling the social processes that shape religious participants' sense of belonging remains an important puzzle.

Recent scholarship consolidates theoretical explanations of community feeling that are suggestive for the study of belonging in religious congregations. In keeping with structuration theory (Giddens, 1984; Sewell, 2005), community-building processes are seen in two primary categories, structure and culture (Smith, 2003a). Prominent structural factors include characteristics of social ties, distribution of power, form of hierarchy, and the way objects and spaces are organized (see Martin, 2009). A general statement of the structural sources of belonging is the idea that community feelings flow from social encounters and networked connections among people. Empirical research on congregational belonging is consistent with this perspective, showing that indicators of structural integration such as congregation-based social relationships and service attendance are associated with stronger individual sense of belonging (Krause and Cairney, 2009). As confirmations of the effects of network embeddedness accumulate, new questions about the structural sources of belonging arise. Of particular interest is understanding under what conditions network embeddedness facilitates feelings of belonging more or less effectively.

Structural explanations of community-feeling, however, may not fully account for culture (Mische, 2010), another proposed determinant of belonging feelings. Cultural explanations of belonging are consistent with Etzioni's (2001) argument that the experience of community does not simply arise out of social structural relations, because there are "moral underpinnings of trust and social capital" embedded in culture (Vaisey, 2007, p. 865). Cultural approaches argue that shared beliefs are necessary to undergird belonging because it is collective cultural schema that help actors interpret social and structural relations as meaningful (Smith et al., 1998).

Scholars of religion argue that a primary function of religious congregations is cultivating "a place of community and belonging" (Ammerman, 2009, p. 572). Although extant theory and research outlines the connections between structural and cultural processes of community-feeling, as well as individual-level sources of congregational belonging, much remains unknown about links between group and individual levels of analysis and feelings of belonging. Using data on 78,895 worshippers in 399 congregations, we assess how organizational structure and culture interactively influence individuals' sense of belonging. We draw on and contribute to sociological literatures on community, religion, organizations, and social capital by explicitly testing whether and how group characteristics affect belonging and condition the influence of social networks on feelings of belonging.

2. Background

2.1. Structure and belonging

Clearly, "strong social ties, relatedness, and a sense of belonging" are often strongly connected (Kanter, 1972, p. 70).[1] However, it is important not to equate a sense of belonging with the kinds of social ties from which belonging arises (Paxton and Moody, 2003; Moody and White, 2003). These elements are distinct; relational ties and community feelings are not synonymous. One reason why the presence of social relations should be differentiated from feelings of belonging is that it is possible to have relationships with people without also feeling belonging among the relations. These constructs are distinct and partitioning the two is necessary for examining the relationship between them, and presently for examining the relationship between congregation-based social networks and sense of belonging.

2.1.1. Social network embeddedness

The literature on structural relations and "social capital" features a prominent split between studies focusing on the effects of "network closure" and "structural holes" (see Burt, 2005). Closure refers to the degree to which an individual's social network is "dense," that is, that each node in a network is connected to the others. Conversely, structural holes examine brokerage across otherwise unconnected social networks. Structural holes are vital for business productivity because they facilitate innovation, change, and flexibility (Burt and Ronchi, 2007), while network closure facilitates trust and stability (Burt, 2001a). As is often the case, much of the debate over the relative influence of these dimensions of social networks hinges on two interrelated issues: (1) what researchers mean when employing the concept of social capital; and (2) what outcome is being examined. Indeed, extensive reviews of the literature on social capital highlight a multiplicity of uses for the concept and a corresponding divergence of findings depending on the topic of examination (see Portes, 1998, 2000).

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[1] Although advances in communication technology have challenged the need for physical co-presence, teleconferencing in for holiday dinners has yet to become common. Similarly, while beaming a preacher's sermon into a satellite worship is on the rise in some churches, this form of remote pastoral contact is unlikely to benefit participants' sense of belonging as much as a sermon delivered in person. This is one of the reasons that multi-site megachurches attempt to address this issue by hiring "site pastors" and aggressively integrating members into smaller cell groups, which enhance belonging, participation, and financial giving (Dougherty and Whitehead, 2010).