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Religion and verbal ability ☆

Darren E. Sherkat

Department of Sociology, Southern Illinois University, MC# 4524, Carbondale, IL 62901, USA

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ABSTRACT

Religion has a powerful influence on learning and development, and this provides an important cultural foundation for stratification processes. Findings from prior studies of the connection between religion and educational attainment are mixed, but most studies point to negative effects of sectarian Protestant affiliation and fundamentalist beliefs in the inerrancy of sacred texts on educational attainment, aspirations, occupational attainment, and wealth. Verbal ability provides an important potential mechanism through with conservative religion anchors stratification outcomes. I examine the impact of religious affiliation, religious participation, and beliefs in the inerrancy of the Bible on verbal ability. Using data from the 1984–2006 General Social Surveys, I find that both inerrantist beliefs and sectarian affiliations have substantial negative effects on verbal ability. Religious participation has a modest positive effect on verbal ability, but its influence is mostly confined to sectarian Protestants and biblical inerrantists. Importantly, the positive effect of age on verbal ability is substantially weaker among sectarians and biblical inerrantists, suggesting that their closed social networks hinder learning throughout the lifecourse.

1. Introduction

Verbal ability is one of the most important factors motivating status attainment (Farkas, 2003). Facile communication in the dialect common among elites is essential for selection into formal educational structures, occupational attainment, and occupational mobility (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977; DiMaggio and Mohr, 1985). Cultural orientations and associations also guide interactions with educational and occupational opportunities, as members of cultural and religious groups seek to maximize cultural benefits which may be difficult to jointly produce or consume alongside worldly gain (Akerlof, 1997; Battu et al., 2007; Iannaccone, 1988). Religious and other cultural orientations of disadvantaged groups are often seen as a potential cause of negative stratification outcomes (Darnell and Sherkat, 1997; Keister, 2003, 2008, 2009; Ogbu, 2004; Parcel and Geschwender, 1995). Yet, cultural orientations and institutional attachments may also stem from structural positions, rather than structural positions being a function of cultural orientations and institutions (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey, 1998; Wacquant, 2002). Focusing on religious influences in the United States, scholars have identified cultural influences on a variety of stratification outcomes; linking religious beliefs and affiliations to educational, occupational, and wealth distributions (Darnell and Sherkat, 1997; Lehrer, 2004a,b, 1999, 1995; Fitzgerald and Glass, 2008; Glass and Jacobs, 2005; Keister, 2003, 2007, 2008, 2009; Read and Oselin, 2008; Stryker, 1981).

Network connections over the life course also factor into the development of verbal ability, and cultural orientations have been linked to network composition and structure (Lizardo, 2006; Vaisey and Lizardo, in press). Studies have found that sectarian Christians and people who view the Bible as the inerrant word of god tend to have narrow and consolidated social

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E-mail address: sherkat@siu.edu

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networks, excluding individuals and associations outside of their faith communities (Pescosolido and Georgianna, 1989; Smith, 2003; Welch et al., 2007). Consolidated social networks are also known to reduce trust in others (Miller and Kanazawa, 2000; Simpson, 2006; Welch et al., 2007), and fundamentalists are notable for favoring familiar sources of meaning derived from the sacred texts of their tradition and viewing other sources of knowledge with skepticism and hostility (Hood et al., 2005). Together, narrow social ties and limited sources of intellectual legitimacy could lead to substantial linguistic deficits among religious fundamentalists. In contrast, religious participation may place individuals in social situations where intellectual stimulation and learning are possible, and generates social support and connections which could benefit linguistic ability (Ellison and George, 1994). Further, religious participation fosters normative constraints on behaviors, such as substance abuse, which could undermine verbal ability (Regnerus, 2000; Sherkat and Ellison, 1999).

I analyze data from the 1984–2006 General Social Surveys (GSS), which contain a verbal examination used in several recent studies (Wilson and Gove, 1999; Alwin and McCammon, 1999; Hauser and Huang, 1997; Yang and Land, 2006). These years of the GSS include items which enable an examination of the effects of sectarian religious affiliation, commitments to biblical inerrancy, and religious participation on verbal ability. Since I hypothesize interactions between life course factors and religion, I compare coefficients from split sample models contrasting the effects of covariates among sectarian Protestants and supporters of biblical inerrancy with those found in models for other respondents.

2. Christian fundamentalism and anti-intellectualism

In the contemporary United States, fundamentalist Christian religious communities are hotbeds of both organizational separation from and ideological hostility towards secular education (Darnell and Sherkat, 1997; Deckman, 2004; Page and Clelland, 1978; Peshkin, 1986; Rose, 1988; Sherkat and Darnell, 1999). Many conservative Christians, particularly those adhering to fundamentalist views on sacred texts, scorn secular education and devotees have organized social movements and targeted educational institutions as sources of sinfulness, sacrilege, and blasphemy (Page and Clelland, 1978; Sikkink, 1999; Sikkink and Hill, 2005). Given the propensity for organizational hostility towards education and learning, it is likely that many members of conservative Christian communities follow the lead of religious activists who serve as issue entrepreneurs (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), and view secular knowledge with considerable suspicion and disdain. According to some activists and adherents in conservative Christian communities, the search for knowledge is often equated with a sinful predisposition towards self-love and pridefulness—and juxtaposed with the fundamentalist ideal of faithful and unquestioning servitude (Hood et al., 2005). Educational institutions tend to be singled out in part because of their promotion of specific beliefs that conflict with religious dogma (i.e., the divine creation myths of the Abrahamic tradition), but also because of the promotion of abstract non-hierarchical thinking and modernist values of cultural tolerance and personal fulfillment (Darnell and Sherkat, 1997; Deckman, 2004; Rose, 1988; Sherkat and Darnell, 1999; Sikkink, 1999; Sikkink and Hill, 2005).

Fundamentalist institutions and orientations seek to purify information flows, accepting knowledge only from trusted sources (Hood et al., 2005), and members of conservative Christian communities tend to be less trusting of others (Welch et al., 2007). Newspapers, magazines, television, and now internet sites are chosen or dismissed based on their fealty to conservative Christian doctrine. Cadre workers from conservative Christian organizations frequently rail against the evil nature and false doctrines of the "liberal media." Richard Land, the head of the political arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, implores his faithful to carefully select their media choices: "God's Spirit allows us to practice discernment so we can embrace what is true and reject what is false. As students of culture, we need to ask God for His wisdom to recognize the difference" (Land, 2007). Conservative Christian media critics often single out publications such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and broadcasters like National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting System. Notably, these media targets are also known for presenting detailed and complicated information, and for using more extensive vocabularies (Fowler and Smith, 1979; Baum, 2003).

Communication from trusted sources, in contrast, tends to follow familiar scripts, limited to vocabularies and concepts endemic to movement discourse (Somers, 1992, 1994). In line with fundamentalist orientations towards knowledge, assessments of validity are most often generated a'priori—requiring little assessment of the relative fit between events or data and abstract concepts (Hood et al., 2005). For many committed fundamentalists, the "truth" is known based on understandings and interpretations of fundamentalist Christian sacred texts. Hence, for committed believers, wars between nations, the behavior of individuals, environmental degradation, or any other topic of concern tend to be "explained" by loose references to prophecy and pronouncements from sacred texts. From this perspective, people do bad things because they are inherently evil and filled with satanic influence, and wars and disasters are predicted by biblical prophecy. The orientation towards knowledge which tends to permeate conservative Christian belief systems precludes a systematic examination of the complexities of human conflict or the natural world. Further, for many religious devotees outsiders are viewed as having pernicious motivations, and complex events are often attributed to the spiritual deficiencies of the actors involved. Abstract concepts like freedom, justice, and liberty tend to be reinterpreted in light of intratextual scriptural references (Hood et al., 2005). For committed Christians adhering to fundamentalist orientations, abstract processes like disease, plate tectonics, or the scientific method can have diminished cognitive consequence, since ultimately the gods are responsible for the dynamics of earthly matter. Given the cognitive–emotive orientation and preference for limiting information found among many conservative Christians, there can come to be limited interest in assessing facts in a systematic manner (Kuran and Sunstein, 1999; Zajonc, 1980, 1984). The potential influence of conservative Christian anti-intellectualism suggests two hypotheses: