

# The influence of parents' religious practices on young adults' divorce attitudes <sup>☆</sup>

Carolyn A. Kapinus\*, Lisa A. Pellerin

*Department of Sociology, Ball State University, 2000 W. University, 205 North Quad, Muncie, IN 47306, USA*

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## Abstract

This study investigates the intergenerational transmission of parents' religious views and divorce attitudes, paying particular attention to the effect of parent–child closeness. We use structural equation modeling to examine a national longitudinal data set containing information from 455 married individuals and their adult offspring. We find that parent religiosity influences young adults' views of divorce via two pathways: by affecting offspring's religiosity and parents' views of divorce. More religious offspring are less tolerant of divorce, but offspring who do not share their parents' religious practices are nonetheless influenced by their parents' religiously-influenced divorce attitudes. While parent religiosity has no effect on parent–child closeness, religious offspring report having been closer to their parents, suggesting that their current religious practices may affect their perceptions of the parent–child relationship.

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## 1. Introduction

*Train up a child in the way he should go, Even when he is old he will not depart from it.*

– Proverbs 22:6

*Hear, my son, your father's instructions, And do not forsake your mother's teaching.*

– Proverbs 1:8

Much attention has been paid to correlates of attitudes toward divorce. Studies have shown that factors such as parental divorce (Amato and Booth, 1991; Thornton, 1985; Trent and South, 1992; Kapinus, 2004), closeness to parents (Risch et al., 2004), and parents' own attitudes (Axinn and Thornton, 1996; Kapinus, 2004) affect adolescents' and young adults' views of divorce. The formation of attitudes toward various aspects of family

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\* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 765 285 5920.

*E-mail address:* [ckapinus@bsu.edu](mailto:ckapinus@bsu.edu) (C.A. Kapinus).

life such as marriage, childbearing, and divorce happen in concert with the socialization of other beliefs and behaviors such as religious affiliation and practice. Religion serves as an integrative force (Durkheim [1897] 1951) that encourages close relationships and greater involvement between parents and children (Wilcox, 2002; King, 2003; Pearce and Axinn, 1998) and this can serve to enhance the transmission of parents' attitudes (Myers, 1996). Moreover, given the strong correlation between religion and views toward family life (Cochran and Beeghley, 1991; Emerson, 1996), parents' religious beliefs and practices are likely to affect their children's religious beliefs and practices which, in turn, influence their children's attitudes toward divorce.

This study examines how both parents' religious involvement and attitudes toward divorce influence young adults' religious practices and attitudes toward marital dissolution. To date, no study has simultaneously considered the role of parents' religiosity and views of marital dissolution in the intergenerational transmission of religious involvement and attitudes toward divorce. We study the relative contributions of these influences using structural equation modeling with a unique, nationally representative, intergenerational data set. In our analyses, we also pay particular attention to how parent–child closeness influences the transmission of religious involvement and attitudes toward divorce. We explore these issues using an intergenerational and longitudinal data set that includes information about religious practices and attitudes toward divorce from men and women in 1980, 1983, 1988, and 1992 and their young adult offspring in 1992.

Most Americans accept the idea that divorce is a justifiable way to end an unhappy marriage and reject the idea that parents should stay together for their children (Thornton and Young-DeMarco, 2001). Furthermore, divorce is a relatively common event; in 1995 an estimated 43–44% of marriages in the United States ended in divorce (Schoen and Standish, 2001). Examining attitudes toward divorce is a particularly relevant area for study as views of divorce are linked with marital experiences. For example, individuals who adopt tolerant views of divorce report subsequent declines in marital quality (Amato and Rogers, 1999) and are more likely to end their marriages (Amato and Booth, 1991). Additionally, Thornton (1991) has proposed that attitudes are an important intervening variable linking parents' and offspring's marital outcomes; thus, investigating how parents influence young adults' religiosity and attitudes toward divorce may shed light on how family of origin characteristics affect marital experiences.

Religious involvement is related to both divorce attitudes and likelihood of divorce among those who marry. Thus, it is important to consider in an examination of beliefs about divorce. Many Christian churches emphasize the importance of marriage and family cohesion (Hadden, 1983; Hargrove, 1983) as do other religions including Judaism and Islam. Marriage in particular is regarded as a sacred promise rather than simply a means of personal fulfillment; this message is repeated in religious texts (such as the Bible), sermons, and church activities (D'Antonio, 1983). Individuals who are involved in formal religion are more likely to have negative attitudes toward divorce (Thornton, 1985) and have lower divorce rates (Aldous, 1983; Booth et al., 1995). People with no religious affiliation have the highest rate of divorce, although the differences in divorce rates across various denominations are small (Call and Heaton, 1997).

Parents' religiosity may influence offspring's attitudes about divorce through the transmission of religious beliefs and practices that are associated with opposition toward divorce. Attendance at worship services provides families with opportunities to develop a shared belief system by hearing similar messages about family life and facilitates the development of social bonds between people with coinciding beliefs (Waite and Lehrer, 2003). Religion may also influence parent–child closeness (Pearce and Axinn, 1998), a factor that affects attitude transmission (Myers, 1996). We draw from two theoretical perspectives to explain how parents' religious practices influence young adults' religiosity, and affect attitudes toward divorce: social learning theory and the channeling hypothesis.

### *1.1. Social learning theory*

Social learning theory asserts that children learn attitudes and behaviors by observing and modeling significant others (Bandura and Kupers, 1964). Daily interaction with parents provides children with numerous opportunities to observe and imitate their parents, leading to the development of similar attitudes and behaviors (Bao et al., 1999). Offspring are more likely to imitate parents when parents engage in warm and positive parenting practices; positive interaction encourages imitation (Bandura, 1969). Thus, social learning theory posits that children learn religious beliefs and practices by imitating their parents, and this is particularly likely

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