



The relevance of social and cultural contexts: Religiosity, acculturation and delinquency among Korean Catholic adolescents in Southern California

Gang Lee^{a,*}, Kisun Yim^b, Theodore Curry^c, S. Fernando Rodriguez^a

^a Department of Criminal Justice, University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, TX 79968, United States

^b Catholic Diocese of Daejeon, Dong-gu Yongjeon-dong 15-1, Daejeon 300-824, South Korea

^c Department of Sociology, University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, TX 79968, United States

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ABSTRACT

Although research shows an inverse relationship between religiosity and delinquency, this association is not well understood. Scholars have attempted to explicate these findings in a number of ways, including arguments that: (1) the religiosity–delinquency relationship is limited to certain types of delinquency, (2) other theoretical variables explain or interpret the relationship, and (3) the relationship is stronger in the context of what are termed moral communities. We address these issues using a sample of Korean-American adolescents attending Catholic Sunday school. Within this relatively homogeneous moral community, one religiosity measure demonstrates an initial inverse association with three different delinquency measures, but the inclusion of control variables renders this relationship spurious. Additional results show that acculturation increases delinquency as well as interacts with religiosity to influence delinquency.

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1. Introduction

Classical social theory often highlights the importance of religion, pointing to its role in shaping society and controlling human behavior. For example, Durkheim (1951) asserts that religion is a basic integrative mechanism for maintaining social order and fostering common beliefs and values. More specifically, religion may promote conformity and restrain deviance in a variety of ways, such as encouraging the internalization of moral values and the acceptance of social norms, participating in religious activities, developing a stake in conformity, and fearing supernatural

sanctions (Tittle & Welch, 1983). However, Hirschi and Stark (1969, p. 212) declare that religion is largely unrelated to delinquent behavior and that “the church is irrelevant to delinquency,” a view that echoes those of some other early scholars (Bonger, 1916; Lombroso, 1918). In contrast, a growing body of recent research, mainly focusing on adolescents, tends to show that measures of religion are associated with reduced levels of delinquency. A systematic review of the literature by Johnson, Jang, Larson, and Li (2000) shows that 30 of 40 studies reviewed find the expected inverse association between measures of religion and delinquency, and that multidimensional measures are more likely to show this association (Baier & Wright, 2001; Rostosky, Wilcox, Wright, & Randall, 2004). The precise nature of this relationship is, however, complex and continues to be explored, and some studies find mixed or unresponsive results (Benda & Corwyn, 1997). The present study addresses several key conditions under which religiosity may be more likely to influence delinquency

* Corresponding author at: Department of Criminal Justice, University of Texas at El Paso, LART 116, El Paso, TX 79968, United States. Tel.: +1 915 747 6577; fax: +1 915 747 5751.

E-mail addresses: lgang@utep.edu (G. Lee), kisunyim@hanmail.net (K. Yim), trcurry@utep.edu (T. Curry), tabfernando@utep.edu (S.F. Rodriguez).

(Jensen & Erickson, 1979). First, we test whether regarding the religiosity–delinquency association certain types of delinquency and whether this relationship is explained or interpreted by secular factors, such as social bonds and peer influence. Next, through the use of from a sample of Korean adolescents who attend Catholic Sunday school, we also contribute to knowledge regarding what Stark, Kent, and Doyle (1982) term a moral community, where religiosity effects may be more likely and, most importantly, we advance the issue of cultural context by testing the influence of acculturation upon the religiosity–delinquency relationship.

2. Contingencies for the religion–delinquency relationship

2.1. Religiosity and delinquency types

Since Hirschi and Stark (1969) catapulted the topic of religion back into delinquency research, many efforts focus on specifying the conditions under which religiosity may be most likely to influence delinquency. One key advance emerged from Burkett and White (1974) who propose that religiosity may have a weak or non-existent inhibitory effect on serious delinquent acts because secular controls and condemnation for these behaviors are already strong. For acts with weak or ambiguous secular prohibition and stigma, however, religiosity can fill the void and reduce the occurrence of such delinquent acts (Burkett, 1977). As a result, there is a need to compare the effects of religiosity on behaviors that are clearly proscribed within certain religious contexts with behaviors that are more universally viewed as wrong. A vast array of subsequent research finds support for the proposition that religiosity's effects are stronger for acts that are often termed status, victimless, or anti-ascetic delinquency, particularly in the area of teenage abuse of alcohol and drugs (Baier & Wright, 2001; Bjarnason, Sigfusdottir, & Welch, 2005; Cochran & Akers, 1989; Sinha, Cnaan, & Gelles, 2007). However, other studies find that religiosity is inversely related with a wide range of delinquent activities, rather than being limited to specific acts (Benda, 2002; Cochran, 1989; Harris, 2003). Interestingly, Benda and Corwyn (1997) find that evangelism is only related to serious delinquency but that two other religiosity measures are not related to any types of delinquency.

A possible reason for this inconsistency in findings may be rooted in the different sample characteristics. Typically, research samples contain a range of denominations, each of which varies in their relative degree of proscription for certain delinquent acts. For example, fundamentalist Protestant denominations may condemn all use of alcohol, whereas Catholics tend to take a more permissive view of drinking, and even allow young children to drink sips of wine during mass. Religiosity may therefore be more likely to reduce adolescent drinking for fundamentalist Protestants than Catholics because of differences between these groups in their degree of condemnation and control of this act (Jensen & Erickson, 1979). To address this issue, researchers must take into account potential differences across denominations in their view of specific delinquent

acts and perform separate group analyses instead of simply controlling for denomination. Alternatively, researchers can analyze, as is done in the present study, a more homogeneous sample, such as Korean Catholics.

2.2. Secular factors

A second condition that better elucidates the relationship between religiosity and delinquency pertains to secular factors, such as those specified by the theories of social bonding (Hirschi, 1969) and social learning (Akers & Lee, 1996; Akers, 1985). For example, parental attachment or peer associations may substantially weaken an initial or zero-order religiosity–delinquency relationship or render it non-significant. In the case of social bonding theory, it is reasonable to consider that parents influence a variety of religious matters in their children, such as denomination, church attendance, participation in church activities, and degree of religiosity. Within such a framework, parental variables represent a source of spuriousness if they substantially weaken the religiosity–delinquency relationship, or render it non-significant. Alternatively, peer associations may be partially shaped by religiosity and thus represent an intervening variable between religiosity and delinquency. For example, Burkett and Warren (1987) report that the impact of religion on delinquency is largely indirect through its influence on peer selection, where youth with low levels of religious commitment are vulnerable to involvement with delinquent peers and delinquency. Alternatively, highly religious youths tend to select friends who are correspondingly inclined both in attitude and behavior, and thus reject delinquent peers (Simons, Simons, & Wallace, 2004). Other researchers find that, despite a relatively strong zero-order relationship between religiosity and delinquency, religion's contribution as a predictor within a multivariate model on delinquency becomes insignificant (Benda & Corwyn, 1997; Cochran, Wood, & Arneklev, 1994; Elifson, Petersen, & Hadaway, 1983; Evans et al., 1996). However, Bjarnason et al. (2005) find that religiosity reduces delinquency even after controlling for parental monitoring, as well as the relations and network of support from the community including the schools (see also Fernquist, 1995; Harris, 2003; Jensen & Erickson, 1979; Welch, Tittle, & Grasmick, 2006). Although a single study cannot hope to conclusively resolve this issue, the present research will contribute to this scholarship by testing the impact of social bonds and social learning on the religion–delinquency relationship.

2.3. Social context

The social context model suggests that the inhibitory effect of religion on delinquency depends on whether people live in what Stark et al. (1982) term moral communities, or places “where the majority of people are actively religious” (Stark, 1996, p. 165). It is within such contexts that larger communities reinforce religious values and amplify their messages of prohibition and mechanisms of social control. The impact of religiosity is then enhanced by greater legitimacy and prominence in social interaction, thereby producing a greater inhibitory

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