



# Meta-analysis of relationships between religiosity and constructive and destructive behaviors among adolescents

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## ABSTRACT

In view of the substantial number of recent studies on relationships between religious involvement and constructive or destructive behavior among adolescents, it is time to consolidate knowledge about these relationships through a meta-analysis. The meta-analysis conducted in this study involves 40 studies published from 1995 to 2009, covering adolescents with an average age of 16.45 years. Results show a weak overall effect ( $Z_r = .19$ ). Moreover, religious involvement exhibits a stronger relationship with constructive behavior than with destructive behavior. Compared with private religious involvement, public religious involvement shows a weaker relationship with constructive or destructive behaviors. Furthermore, non-representative sampling generates a stronger relationship than does representative sampling.

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## 1. Introduction

Favorable youth development involves the promotion of constructive behavior and prevention of destructive behavior. Constructive behavior leads to prosocial, volunteering, academic, and socially cohesive goals (Bohart & Stipek, 2001; Smith, 2003). By contrast, destructive behavior refers to behavioral problems, such as substance and alcohol abuse, risky sexual activity, gambling, reckless driving, interpersonal violence and weapon use, and self-cutting (Cotton, Larkin, Hoopes, Cromer, & Rosenthal, 2005; Falnner, Hussey, & Jefferis, 2005). The recent approach to youth development emphasizes engaging the youth in structured activities, such as religious involvement (Jones, 2004; Regnerus, 2003). Essentially, this approach rests on some theory and research about the contributions of religious involvement to youth development. However, in the face of recent alternative theories and research findings, the contribution of religion to youth conduct is not yet certain. This may result from the moderation of the religious contribution due to the valence of the behavior, the properties of religious involvement, and the sampling method used. Some of the moderation tends to be justified by cultural fit theory. This theory maintains that something is beneficial when it matches the sociocultural context (King & Roeser, 2009; Levin & Chatters, 1998). The theory thus provides the rationale for examining the moderation of religious contribution in this study.

Two ways of understanding the possible contribution of religious involvement to constructive behavior and the reduction in destructive

behavior are theories of asset building and social control. Religious involvement refers to an individual's attitudinal or behavioral attachment to a church or to another religious institution. The expected contribution of religious involvement comes from the proposition that religion is an external asset that supports, empowers, and guides constructive youth development. Importantly, religion may foster caring, integrity, honesty, responsibility, restraint, and other virtues and strengths among the youth (Benson, 2007; Mannes, Roehlkepartain, & Benson, 2005). The fostering prominently operates through people's internalization and practice of religious doctrines and affiliation (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). These religious phenomena converge toward an emphasis that people faithful to a religion can receive the blessing or support from a supernatural power associated with the religion (van Dyke & Elias, 2007). Religion, in striving to sustain moral order and social capital among people, is therefore a potentially constructive force behind youth development (Regnerus, 2003a). Religious involvement is also possible to reduce destructive behavior, as explained by social control theory (French et al., 2008). Accordingly, religion encourages attachment to conventional institutions and fosters commitment to religious or moral beliefs that prohibit deviant tendencies (Baier & Wright, 2001). The religious community, doctrines, and the clergy all possibly serve the function of social control in preventing destructive behavior among adolescents.

However, some research findings are not supportive of the contribution of religious involvement to adolescent behavioral development (Levine, Pakvis, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2000; Sheldon & Kasser, 2001). In line with these findings, the critical perspective suggests that religious involvement is old-fashioned and destined to erode with secularization and modernization (Habermas, 1981). The

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perspective maintains that religion restrains people from the intellectual freedom and orientation that they require to fully realize and develop their potential. This problem arises from the imposition of a foreclosed identity by religion, which impedes the achievement of a full-fledged identity. Consequently, for religious causes, religion may foment intolerant, discriminating, hostile, violent, and other destructive behaviors among its believers (Templeton & Eccles, 2005). This viewpoint further suggests that religion stifles constructive behavior by disempowering people, making individuals superstitious and dependent on supernatural and external powers (Hay, Reich, & Utsch, 2006). This alternative outlook casts doubt on the favorable relationship between religious involvement and youth behavior, and this doubt is the impetus for conducting this study.

## 2. Relationships between religious involvement and behavior

Some earlier studies and reviews found that empirical relationships between religious involvement and behavior are ambivalent. Despite expectations about the positive relationship between religious involvement and favorable, constructive, or non-destructive behavior, an early study failed to establish solid support for such a relationship (Hirschi & Stark, 1969). Similarly, the insignificant effects of religious involvement on destructive behaviors, such as delinquency and risky sexual activity, have evolved from a number of studies (Junger & Polder, 1993; Starrels & Holm, 2000). More unexpected findings have shown the positive effects of religious involvement on problem behaviors, such as tobacco smoking, alcoholism, delinquency, discrimination, and risky sexual activity (Gruber & Zinman, 2001; Parcel & Dufur, 2001). The instigation of destructive behavior may be attributable to the possibility that religious involvement increases social interaction and mutual reinforcement among the youth (Davidson, 1993). Conversely, delinquency tends to raise religious involvement, probably as a way to atone for wrongdoings (Benda, 1997). Religious involvement has also appeared to impede constructive behavior, such as planning for one's future (Moore & Aweiss, 2003). These findings indicate either a null or an unfavorable relationship between religious involvement and constructive or non-destructive behavior.

However, more recent studies have shown that the effects of religious involvement on delinquency and prosocial behaviors among the youth are neither insignificant nor spurious (Regnerus, 2003a; Trusty & Watts, 1999). On the one hand, the socially desirable effects of religious involvement are mainly found in reducing destructive behaviors, such as risk taking and delinquency, drug abuse, initiation of premarital sexual intercourse, and interpersonal violence (Francis, 2006; Hui, Lindsey, & Elliott, 2007). On the other hand, the contributions of religious involvement transpire in constructive behaviors, such as civic and community service participation, engagement in volunteer work and other philanthropic behaviors, academic aspirations and attainment, psychosocial adjustment, positive coping strategies, morally concerned attitudes, supportive and caring relationships with parents and friends, healthy diets, and regular exercise (Good & Willoughby, 2006; Regnerus & Burdette, 2006). The foregoing findings lead to the expectation that religious involvement nurtures adolescent life by fostering developmental assets (Furrow, King, & White, 2004; Wallace et al., 2007). However, the finding on mediation by developmental assets reveals that the effect of religious involvement on conduct is indirect and weak (Wagener, Furrow, King, Leffert, & Benson, 2003). The apparent religious effect can also be weak because of the presence of common causes that affect both religious involvement and conduct, such as neurosis, cognitive development, and conformity to social norms (King & Roeser, 2009).

## 3. Hypotheses

A way to reconcile theoretical and empirical inconsistencies about the relationship between adolescent religious involvement and

favorable behavior is the recognition that the involvement is a social activity embedded in a sociocultural context (Sagy, Orr, & Bar-On, 1999). Accordingly, religious involvement is not a purely private practice because it requires endorsement by society. This is the proposition that cultural fit theory derives from structural-functionalist and developmental systems perspectives (Baier & Wright, 2001; King & Roeser, 2009; Levin & Chatters, 1998). The perspectives posit that when religion is functional or fits the overall and constituent social system, religion can be effectively influential in a socially desirable way (Bell, 2009; Turner & Maryanski, 1979). Essentially, cultural fit theory proposes that the fit of religion with the overall and other social systems reinforces the contribution of religion to human behavior, which in turn is favorable to social systems (see Fig. 1). According to this theory, religion, adolescent behavior, and other social systems are also involved in an interrelated cycle, perpetuating one another. The essence of the fit arises from an adolescent's need to integrate knowledge acquired from multiple developmental systems in an aligned way conducive to integration (Lerner et al., 2005). Specifically, when religion fits the cultural norm of society, its functions of socialization and social control are pervasive (Demerath, 2002). In this case, the cultural norm simply lends support to the religion. This explains the functional role of religion, when it is reputable and popular in the United States and other Western societies (Curtis, Baer, & Grabb, 2001; Hadaway, Maoler, & Chaves, 1993). Cultural fit theory therefore is a basis for the core hypothesis that religious involvement maintains a favorable relationship with adolescent conduct in terms of high constructive behavior and low destructive behavior. In addition, the theory helps the formulation of the following three corollary hypotheses about the moderation of the relationship between religious involvement and conduct.

The first corollary hypothesis suggests that religious involvement maintains a stronger relationship with constructive behavior than with destructive behavior in absolute terms. This can happen in a supposed case that the relationship with constructive behavior is .3 and the relationship with destructive behavior is  $-.1$ . Cultural fit theory may provide a basis for the hypothesis, by referring to the religious setting. Accordingly, the religious setting directly furnishes opportunities for constructive behavior, such as opportunities in volunteer services, tutoring, counseling, and various pastoral services (Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999). Religious institutions thereby create the structure that drives people to perform certain behaviors because of the availability or accessibility of the materials and atmosphere required for such actions. Such materials and atmosphere include those for providing moral directives, skills, and social capital (Smith, 2003). In promoting constructive behavior, religious institutions organize services, recruit participants, and provide guidance to facilitate behaviors such as volunteering. By contrast, the religious setting is less directly associated with the prohibition of destructive behavior, particularly when it is likely to be a taboo inside the setting (Saraglou, 2004). The clergy more frequently mention the promotion of constructive behavior than the discouragement of destructive behavior because of the taboo (Cadge & Wildeman, 2008). Due to the taboo, people have fewer opportunities to reduce destructive behavior than to perform constructive behavior in the religious setting. Pertinently, the greater influence of religious involvement on constructive behavior than on destructive behavior is attributable to encouragement for constructive behavior propagated by the religious institution (Sallquist et al., 2010).

The second corollary hypothesis is that private religious involvement engenders a stronger relationship with constructive or destructive behavior than public religious involvement does. Private religious involvement refers to practices that adolescents need not exhibit their practices to other people, such as praying and reading sacred texts by oneself. Public religious involvement signifies observable involvement in the company of other people or in public venues, such as church and religious associations. The hypothesis is

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