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# A model of religious involvement, family processes, self-control, and juvenile delinquency in two-parent families



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## ABSTRACT

Family processes, adolescent religious involvement, and self-control may serve as important mechanisms that mediate the relationship between parental religious involvement and delinquency. However, at present no study has systematically investigated the relationships among these factors and how these mediating mechanisms work. To address this gap, path analyses are conducted to test the hypothesized pathways whereby parental religious involvement operates to discourage delinquent behaviors of offspring. The study variables are taken from three waves of the study of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 and its descendent NLSY79 Child and Young Adults at two year intervals (2000, 2002, and 2004). 1020 American adolescents who are 10–14 years old in 2002 are selected for final analyses. The findings suggest that parental religious involvement does not affect adolescent delinquency four years later directly, but indirectly through its influence on adolescent religious involvement, parenting practices, inter-parental conflict, and their interactions with adolescent self-control.

A growing number of studies have been conducted to investigate the role of parents' religious involvement in children's propensity to engage in criminal behavior. These studies demonstrate that parental religious involvement is a protective factor of adolescent antisocial behavior, in which higher parental religious involvement is associated with lower levels of deviant behaviors, such as alcohol use, female delinquency, and externalizing problems (Foshee & Hollinger, 1996; Pearce & Haynie, 2004; Regnerus, 2003). Though this relationship has been established, the mechanisms by which religious involvement influences adolescent delinquency is not well understood, including both its direct and indirect effects on delinquent behavior.

As is often found, parental religious involvement can have a direct effect on adolescent delinquency, but in theory, there could also be indirect effects whereby additional factors mediate the relationship between parental religious involvement and the delinquency of their children. For instance, it has been suggested that the effects of parental religious involvement may influence attitudinal, motivational, familial, or other social mechanisms (Li, 2013; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009; Myers, 1996; Simons, Simons, & Conger, 2004) that could then lead to delinquency. At present, though, there have been few tests of these potential mediating mechanisms. To this end, the current study tests the hypothesized pathways whereby parental religious involvement operates to discourage delinquent behaviors of offspring. The study design was based on a comprehensive model of adolescent delinquency including parental and adolescent religious involvement, family processes, and adolescent self-control. In the following sections, the background of the research approach and the theoretical basis for its predictions are discussed.

## 1. Theoretical pathways for the effect of religious involvement on delinquency

Based on existing theories, several plausible pathways whereby parental religious involvement might be expected to influence the

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probability that an adolescent will engage in delinquent behavior exist. These theoretical accounts highlight three specific mediating mechanisms: family processes, adolescent religious involvement, and self-control.

### 1.1. Family processes

One potential pathway from parental religious involvement to adolescent delinquency is family processes, such that parental religious involvement enhances the quality of important family processes, including inter-parental relationships and parenting practices, which are important determinants of whether a child becomes delinquent. Attachment theorists typically invoke the internal working model (IWM) (Bowlby, 1969, 1982) to explain how early attachment impacts on individuals' later attitudes and behaviors. Experiences with parents help the child develop IWMs of self, others, and the world, which creates the foundation for one's future interpersonal relationships (e.g., parenting and romantic relationships). Secure attachment to parents due to sensitive caregiving increases the likelihood that the child will form IWMs with love, attention, and security. As it pertains to religious involvement, strong and secure attachment to religion helps parents form IWMs characterized by love, attention, trust, and mutual respect that promote secure and reliable interpersonal relationships (Cassibba, Granqvist, Costantini, & Gatto, 2008; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992), including stable marital and parent-child relationships. Parents with higher levels of religious devotion are more likely to adopt more positive and effective parenting practices and have lower levels of inter-parental conflict (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996; Mahoney et al., 1999; Simons et al., 2004; Smith & Kim, 2003; Wilcox, 2002).

Existing theories have specifically linked family processes in parental relationships to adolescent delinquency. With regard to the role of parenting practices in the development of delinquent behavior, one of the most influential theoretical perspectives is Hirschi's (1969) social bond theory. According to this theory, adolescents develop a social bond (i.e., attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief) to conventional society through the socialization process, which affects their tendencies to commit delinquent behavior. The stronger the bond to conventional goals or values adolescents hold, the stricter the social control, and then the lower the likelihood of delinquent and criminal behavior. With respect to social bonds within the family, the theory and available evidence have highlighted the role of child-rearing practices in further explaining the social bond. It has been suggested that effective parenting practices characterized by frequent involvement, close monitoring, consistent discipline, and/or great emotional support improve the social bond that decreases the likelihood adolescents will get involved in delinquency and crime (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, Capps, & Zaff, 2006; Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000; Macmillan, McMorris, & Kruttschnitt, 2004). In line with these theoretical predictions, parental religious involvement may be expected to increase the quality of parenting, which would then decrease adolescent risk for antisocial behavior.

In addition to social bonding theory, social learning theory suggests that inter-parental conflict can operate as an important source of influence for delinquent behavior. Social learning theory proposes a direct relationship between inter-parental conflict and children's antisocial behavior (Bandura, 1977). Children may learn from observing parents' behaviors, and this learning is then manifested in their future behaviors. Adolescents whose parents employ ineffective conflict management skills—using contemptuous and aggressive behaviors—to address everyday problems might learn inappropriate coping strategies to resolve social problems, resulting in a series of problem behaviors (Gerard, Krishnakumar, & Buehler, 2006). Evidence has shown that families characterized by high levels of inter-parental conflict, particularly the tendency to engage in arguments that involve verbal and physical aggression, tend to have children who engage in delinquent behavior (Cummings, Taylor, Merrilees, Goeke-Morey, & Shirlow, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2008; Vanassche, Sodermans, Matthijs, & Swicegood, 2014). Given the influence of religious involvement, it is expected that parental religious involvement may result in the decrease of inter-parental conflicts, which in turn, protects children from being involved in delinquency.

Few empirical studies have been conducted in terms of this proposed pathway, whereby family processes mediate the relationship between parental religious involvement and delinquency. Among the existing research, there is support demonstrating that greater parental involvement in religious activities can lead to less inter-parental conflict and more effective parenting practices, such as close supervision and monitoring, strong parental support, positive parent-child relationships, family cohesion, and appropriate praise and punishment (Brody et al., 1996; Farmer, Sinha, & Gill, 2008; Landor, Simons, Simons, Brody, & Gibbons, 2011; Li, 2013; Manlove, Logan, Moore, & Ikramullah, 2008; Simons et al., 2004). These factors can, in turn, decrease children's risk for involvement in a variety of deviant behaviors. However, many of these studies are based on local or regional samples, limited measures of deviant behavior, and/or cross-sectional relationships, which limit the generalizability and causal inferences of the findings.

### 1.2. Adolescent religious involvement

An alternative pathway from parental religious involvement to adolescent delinquency is adolescent religious involvement. Specifically, religious parents tend to encourage frequent attendance at religious services and commitment to religion among their children, which then reduces the probability that children will engage in antisocial behavior. According to Good and Willoughby (2008), adolescence is a critical period for shaping personal religious involvement with the gradual development of intrapersonal, cognitive, and neurological ability. During this time period, children are highly likely to explore religious knowledge, be vulnerable to religious values, and make commitments to religious beliefs (Good & Willoughby, 2008). Although numerous influences, such as neighbors, communities, mass media, and peers, are imposed on adolescents, parents play a relatively important role during their early development. Thus, it is no surprise that adolescents can develop their religious beliefs and moral values under the influences of parental religious involvement. Parental influences on children's antisocial behavior can be activated by transmitting religious beliefs and values. Religious parents tend to employ religion to impart children with moral values and assist them in establishing controls on

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