

# Religious Participation and Network Closure Among American Adolescents

CHRISTIAN SMITH

*A large body of empirical studies shows that religion often serves as a factor promoting positive, healthy outcomes in the lives of American adolescents. This research note reports findings of one test of a "network closure" explanation of these religious effects. It uses the national Survey of Parents and Youth (1998–1999) data to examine the relationship between religious participation and five measures of network closure. The findings support the hypothesis that participation in American religious congregations increases network closure between the parents of youth and their children's friends, their children's friends' parents, and their children's teachers.*

Several decades of social scientific studies have shown that in the lives of American adolescents religion is often a factor influencing their attitudes and behaviors in ways that are commonly viewed as positive and constructive. Various measures of religiosity are associated with a variety of healthy, desirable outcomes across a diversity of areas of concern, including juvenile drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, and delinquency (Evans et al. 1995; Cochran 1993; Cochran and Akers 1989; Pawlak and Defronzo 1993; Wallace and Williams 1997); suicide (Donahue 1995); depression and hopelessness (Wright, Frost, and Wisecarver 1993); adolescent health-enhancing behaviors (Jessor, Turbin, and Costa 1998; Wallace and Forman 1998); life satisfaction, involvement with families, and skills in solving health-related problems (Varon and Riley 1999); effective coping with problems (Balk 1991; Shortz and Worthington 1994); risky sexual behaviors (Lammers et al. 2000; Murry 1994; Thornton and Camburn 1989); pro-family attitudes and values (Brody, Stoneman, and Flor 1996); academic achievement (Muller and Ellison 2001; Regnerus 2000; Scharf 1998); political and civic involvement (Serow and Dreyden 1990; Smith 1999); and commitment to and involvement in community service (Youniss, McLellan, and Yates 1999). Within the relevant bodies of literature, individual publications normally suggest causal mechanisms explaining their particular findings. Altogether, these many studies are very helpful, but as a whole they present the contemporary researcher with a disjointed and fragmented account for religious influences in the lives of American teenagers. What is needed instead is a more coherent, systematic account of how and why religion exerts significant positive effects on American youth.

## THEORIZING NETWORK CLOSURE

As a step in this direction, I have elsewhere (Smith 2003) has suggested that religion may exert positive, constructive influences in the lives of American youth through nine distinct but connected and potentially mutually reinforcing factors that cluster beneath three larger conceptual dimensions of social influence. The nine specific factors the author has hypothesized are: (1) moral directives, (2) spiritual experiences, (3) role models, (4) community and leadership skills, (5) coping skills, (6) cultural capital, (7) social capital, (8) network closure, and (9) extra-community links. The three larger dimensions under which they group, the author has suggested, are (1) moral order, (2) learned competencies, and (3) social and organizational ties (see Smith 2003).

*Christian Smith is Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599. E-mail: csmith@email.unc.edu*

This research note reports findings on one attempt to test the hypothesized network closure factor (8). The idea is that American religious congregations can provide relatively dense networks of relational ties within which youth are embedded, involving people who pay attention to the lives of youth, and who can provide oversight of and information about youth to their parents and other people well positioned to discourage negative and encourage positive life practices among youth. The thinking here is that American religious congregations represent one of the few major social institutions in which adolescents participate extensively (Smith et al. 2002) that emphasize continuity of interaction and yet are not rigidly stratified by age. In these religious organizations, American adolescents gather together in congregations with fellow believers of all ages and life course stages. Although some religious programming may be age-stratified, most central congregational functions (worship services, fellowship gatherings) mix participants of all ages. As a result, youth are exposed to many adult members of their religious communities.

The often unique cross-generational relationships that religious congregations thus facilitate may structure relational networks that facilitate more informed and effective oversight and control of youth by adults who care about them. Coleman has theorized the importance of network closure, suggesting that higher densities of social relationships between youth, parents, and other interested adults, and among parents whose children are friends, are associated with improved youth outcomes (1988; Coleman and Hoffer 1987). Others have also suggested that high levels of social network closure benefit youth indirectly by enabling parents more effectively to monitor and supervise their activities, communicate with other parents about their expectations and behavior, and feel supported in their own parenting (see Fletcher et al. 2001).

American religious congregations provide ideal settings for increasing closure in networks involving youth. In religious congregations, adolescents are able to form relationships with youth ministers, Sunday school teachers, choir directors, parents of friends, and other adult acquaintances who can relationally tie back to the adolescents' parents. These ties can operate as extrafamilial sources reinforcing parental influence and oversight. For their part, parents of adolescents in religious congregations—compared to, say, schools or sports teams—are, due to the nature of the social setting, better able to build relationships over time with their children's friends and the parents or kin of their children's friends. Moreover, these relationships are very likely to exist among people who share similar cultural moral orders, facilitating higher levels of agreement and cooperation in collective oversight and social control. We should expect all of this to create conditions of increased support for and supervision of youth, encouraging positive and discouraging negative behaviors among youth.

The hypothesis that this research note tests, therefore, is this: *parents of American youth who together with their adolescent children regularly participate in the life of religious congregations will manifest higher levels of network closure than those who do not participate together or do not participate at all.*

Previous studies of youth and network closure have focused on outcomes such as community integration (Darling et al. 1993), educational outcomes (Carbonaro 1998; Morgan and Sorensen 1999), and child adjustment (Fletcher et al. 2001). A large number of helpful studies have examined religious social networks using samples of adults (for example, Cavendish, Welch, and Legee 1998; Krause et al. 2001). However, the existing literature contains few to no extant studies of religion as a source of social network closure for American adolescents and their parents. One exception of note (Muller and Ellison 2001), which informs this analysis, does focus on the effects of religious involvement on adolescent social capital and network closure, and the role of these in mediating the links between religious involvement and educational outcomes. More empirical work remains, however, to examine the possible influence of religiously-based network density and closure on a greater variety of youth outcomes as a test of the larger theoretical framework above. As a step in that direction, this research note first seeks to answer the antecedent question posed by the above hypothesis: whether, net of other factors, greater religious involvement in fact increases network closure in social networks involving American adolescents.

### DATA AND VARIABLES

This research note tests this hypothesis using data from the Survey of Parents and Youth (SPY), conducted in 1998–1999. SPY was designed by Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing in conjunction with the National Evaluation Team for the Urban Health Initiative at the Center for Health and Public Service at New York University Robert F. Wagner Graduate School, and was funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. SPY was designed to monitor trends in youths' access to parental and community resources. The survey includes interviews with parents and youth. The youth survey generated information on parent-child relationships, involvement in supervised activities, and outcomes such as health status, educational expectations, and school achievement. The study was administered as a random-digit-dial (RDD) telephone survey to a nationally representative sample of youth ages 10–18; and to oversamples of youth in five selected cities (Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, Oakland, Richmond, and Chicago). Parents were screened and then interviewed, after which point the interviewers asked permission to interview the youth. In some households, two adolescents were surveyed, for which regressions below controlled. SPY achieved an adult response rate of 89 percent and a parent consent rate for youth interviews of 74 percent. SPY was conducted in English, Spanish, or Chinese, and lasted an average of 30 minutes for youth, and 20 minutes for parents. Since this analysis is interested in nationally representative statistics, and not the urban oversamples, the latter are eliminated; only analyzed here are the national sample of youth, providing an unweighted *N* of 1,418 (see Winship and Radbill 1994).

The present analysis uses three questions for dependent variable measures of network closure related to friends and their parents, the exact survey wordings of which are as follows: (1) "Do(es) your parents/mother/father know the first and last names of all, most, some, or none of your friends?" (2) "Do(es) your parents/mother/father know your closest friends' parents? Would you say they know most, some, or very few of them?" and (3) "How often do(es) your parents/mother/father talk to your close friends' parents? Do they talk to them at least once a year, 2–3 times a month, 2–3 times a year, or hardly ever?" The analysis also uses two questions for dependent variable measures of network closure related to teachers, the exact wordings of which are as follows: (1) "Do your parents know the names of all, most, some, or none of your teachers?" and (2) "In the past 12 months, how many times have your parents met with or spoken to any of your teachers?" All these questions were asked of the youth respondents.

Theoretically, the three questions about friends and parents are the best measures available in these data of the kind of network closure discussed above. However, since the religious congregations and schools of many families are often geographically proximate, it is not unreasonable to think that the network ties parents enjoy through their religious congregations also enable them to connect better with their children's schools. If their children's teachers do not attend the same religious congregation, they might perhaps attend another one nearby that may create a relational tie through a church softball league, ecumenical soup kitchen, or other local religious activity. Alternatively, even if one's children's teachers are not religiously active themselves, children's religiously active friends may quite likely also attend the same school as one's child, which may create more links between the survey respondent parents and their children's teachers. This analysis therefore includes the two parent-teacher questions as a supplemental test of the network closure hypothesis.

This analysis constructed its main explanatory independent variable using two of the survey's religion questions. The first was asked of parents: "How often do you attend church or synagogue? Once a week, 2–3 times a month, once a month, a few times a year, or never?" The second was asked of the youth respondents: "Did you participate in a religious or church youth group in the last seven days? [Yes or No?]" Because this analysis is interested in the interaction effects of parental attendance and adolescent youth group participation, and not their separate effects net of each other, it did not employ these two questions as distinct variables with subsequent

interaction effects. Instead, it used them to create four categorical dummy variables, as follows. Of the weighted survey's parent/youth pairs constituting completed cases, 341 were those in which the parent attended church two to three times a month or more *and* the youth participated in a religious youth group in the previous week. In the tables below, these are labeled "Religious involvement: Both." Cases in which the parent attended only once a month or less and yet the youth *did* participate in a religious youth group in the previous week are labeled "Religious involvement: Youth only" ( $N = 88$ ). Cases in which the parent did attend two to three times a month or more and yet the youth did *not* participate in a religious youth group in the previous week are labeled "Religious involvement: Parent only" ( $N = 309$ ). And cases in which the parent attended church or synagogue two to three times a month or less *and* the youth did *not* participate in a religious youth group in the previous week are labeled "Religious involvement: Neither" ( $N = 335$ ). The main analytical strategy below is to compare in bivariate and multivariate contexts the levels of network closure between these four different religiously involved groups.

Because we have reason to believe that the density of relational ties is correlated with factors other than religious participation (Cross 1990; Fischer 1982; Leach and Braithwaite 1996), the analysis below controls for a number of demographic variables. These include, for the youth respondents: age, sex, and race. For the parent respondents, control variables include: age, parent's education, family income, number of children under 18 years of age living in household, marital status, region of country (south, west, midwest, northeast), and community context (urban, suburban, rural). In addition, since parental conversations with and visits to teachers may be more related to children's bad grades than parental networks per se, the regression model for that variable below also includes a control for whether the youth respondent received any Ds or Fs on their last report card (labeled "Bad Grades" at the bottom of Model 5), which should help to remove any bad-grades effect.

The analysis begins with a bivariate cross-tab, examining in Table 1 the distribution of variance in the five network closure dependent variables across the four religious types. Because the answer categories of all of the five dependent variables are neither categorical nor continuous, but rather ordinal, the analysis employs ordered logit regression to conduct the multivariate analysis. This ordinal regression technique allows one to model the dependence of an ordinal response on a set of predictor covariates. Table 2 reports the estimates of the ordinal regression and results of significance tests.

## RESULTS

Table 1 reveals a fairly consistent pattern in the relationship between religious participation and the five dependent variable measures of network closure: the more religiously involved are American youth and their parents, the higher levels of network closure they exhibit in their social relationships. Those parents who do *not* attend church or synagogue regularly and whose children had *not* participated in a youth group almost invariably were the *least* likely to know their children's friends' names, to know their parents, to speak with their parents; and to know their children's teachers' names or to have met or spoken with them. Religious participation by either the youth or the parent alone is associated with greater network closure as measured by these five variables. Overall (with the one exception of knowing friends' names), between the two mixed types, the "Youth only" group seemed to associate with higher network closure than the "Parent only" group. Finally, those parents who attend religious services regularly *and* whose children had been involved in a church or religious youth group the previous week tended to manifest the highest levels of network closure (speaking with friends' parents and with teachers being minor exceptions). Compared to the religiously inactive parents, 8 percent more of them know most or all of their children's friends' names; 23 percent more of them know most of their children's close friends' parents; 12 percent more of them speak to their children's close friends' parents weekly; 9 percent more of them know their children's teachers' names; and 6 percent more of

**TABLE 1**  
**NETWORK CLOSURE IN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT FAMILY**  
**SOCIAL TIES (PERCENTS)**

Network Closure Variables	Religious Type			
	Both	Youth Only	Parent Only	Neither
<i>Parents knows names of youth's friends (N = 1,073)</i>				
All	23	14	19	19
Most	48	53	43	44
Some	26	30	30	32
None	3	3	7	6
<i>Parents know the parents of youth's close friends (N = 1,060)</i>				
Most	71	66	56	48
Some	16	18	22	25
Very few	14	16	22	26
<i>How often parents speak with close friends' parents (N = 1,054)</i>				
Once a week	37	38	30	25
Few times a month	37	37	32	31
Few times a year	9	12	10	13
Almost never	17	14	29	31
<i>Parents know the names of youth's teachers (N = 1,013)</i>				
All	36	33	31	27
Most	35	33	36	34
Some	23	27	24	32
None	6	6	9	7
<i>Parents have met or spoken with teachers in last 12 months (N = 1,006)</i>				
3+ times	23	29	19	21
1-2 times	52	43	48	48
Never	25	28	33	31
Total percents	100	100	100	100

*Source:* Survey of Parents and Youth 1998. Total weighted  $N = 1,073$ ; final weighted  $N$  for each bivariate relationship reported for each cross-tab above.

them had met with or spoken to one of their children's teachers in the last year. This bivariate analysis therefore seems to support the hypothesized relationship between religious involvement and network closure for families of American youth.

How do the religious participation variables fare in a multivariate analysis? Table 2 shows the ordinal regression estimates for the relevant explanatory and control variables. The reference group for the entered three religious involvement dummy variables is the "Religious involvement: Neither" group. Controlling for a variety of key youth and parent variables, we find in Table 2 that for all five models the "Religious Involvement: Both" group is significantly more likely to have higher levels of network closure than the "Neither" group. Models 2 and 3 also show that parents in the "Religious involvement: Youth only" group are significantly more likely than parents of the "Neither" group to know and to talk with their children's friends' parents, and to have met or spoken with one of their children's teachers. In Models 2, 3, and 4, parents who attend religious services regularly but whose child is not a regular religious youth group participant exhibited statistically significant higher levels of network closure—measured as knowing and talking to friends' parents and knowing child's teachers—than those of the "Neither" group. In sum, even accounting for the effects of multiple control variables, families whose members exhibit

**TABLE 2**  
**ORDINAL REGRESSION ON NETWORK CLOSURE IN AMERICAN ADOLESCENT**  
**FAMILY SOCIAL TIES (ESTIMATES)**

Variables	1. Parents Know Names	2. Parents Know Parents	3. Parents Speak to Parents	4. Parents Know Teachers	5. Parents Meet Teachers
Religious involvement <sup>1</sup>					
Both	0.343**	0.960***	0.657***	0.465***	0.338*
Youth only	0.117	0.852***	0.807***	0.204	0.282
Parent only	0.121	0.382**	0.304*	0.273*	0.004
Youth age	-0.008***	-0.161***	-0.161***	-0.241***	-0.112***
Youth female	0.172	0.261*	0.001	0.010	-0.002
Youth race <sup>2</sup>					
Black	-0.900***	-0.637***	-0.102	-0.405*	0.323
Hispanic	-0.584***	-0.532**	-0.239	-0.430*	-0.007
Other	-0.446*	-0.471*	-0.349*	-0.228	0.109
Parent age	0.000	0.000	0.005	-0.001*	0.007
Parent education	0.006	0.004	0.004	0.158***	0.009**
Family income	-0.002	0.152***	0.007	0.004	0.000
# children < 18	-0.007	-0.004	0.002	-0.110**	-0.002
Parent married	0.154	-0.009	0.002	-0.141	-0.006
Region <sup>3</sup>					
South	-0.117	-0.114	-0.007	-0.006	-0.452**
West	-0.251	-0.308	-0.264	-0.161	-0.0140
Midwest	-0.103	-0.254	-0.268	-0.262	-0.008
Community context <sup>4</sup>					
Urban	-0.562***	-0.287	-0.008	-0.565***	0.249
Suburban	-0.377*	-0.003	-0.132	-0.381*	0.107
Bad grades	—	—	—	—	0.254*
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.083	0.118	0.084	0.151	0.048
$\chi^2$	118.752***	169.110***	117.470***	211.911***	62.955***
(Unweighted Ns)	(1,371)	(1,350)	(1,342)	(1,293)	(1,272)

Source: Survey of Parents and Youth 1998.

<sup>1</sup>Reference category = neither.

<sup>2</sup>Reference category = white.

<sup>3</sup>Reference category = northeast.

<sup>4</sup>Reference category = rural.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ .

multiple kinds of participation in organized religion—in both church services and in religious youth groups—enjoy significantly higher levels of closure in their social network ties with families of friends and with school teachers.

We may suspect that race, community context, and religious tradition interact with the parental and adolescent religious participation variables in significant ways. To explore these possibilities, the author ran interactions using the “Religious Involvement: Both” variable (the most frequently significant variable in Table 2) with (1) the “black” race variable, (2) different community context variables (urban, suburban, rural), (3) a conservative Protestant variable, and (4) a Catholic variable. None of these interactions proved significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. Thus, the religion-closure effect does not appear to operate particularly for blacks, urban residents, conservative Protestants,

or Catholics, compared to their reference groups. Furthermore, although these data do not contain precise religious denomination variables, they do contain general religious tradition variables for parent respondents (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, etc.). They also contain self-identity variables for Protestants, Catholics, and Jewish parents (evangelical, fundamentalist, mainline, liberal Protestant; traditional, charismatic, liberal Catholic; reform, conservative, orthodox Jewish). To explore other possible religion effects, regressions were run entering conservative Protestant, mainline-liberal Protestant, other Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and other religion (with nonreligious as the reference category) both controlling and not controlling for parental attendance. None of these religious tradition/identity variables were significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level. It seems, then, that it is religious participation across traditions, per se, and not difference between the traditions themselves, that has observable religion-network closure associations.

The control variables reveal some associations also worth noting. Network closure, for example, is correlated with age of child. Net of the other control variables, as we might expect, parents of younger children tend to be more closely tied to their children's friends, their parents, and teachers than those of older children. Racial minorities tend to be associated with lower levels of network closure in many of the models. No interesting patterns of significance emerge from youth's sex, the parent demographic variables, or the region variables. Compared to residents of rural areas (the reference category), urban and suburban resident parents are significantly less likely to know the name of their children's friends or teachers. Finally, as expected, parents of students with bad grades on their most recent report cards were significantly more likely than those without to have met or spoken with their child's teachers.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analytical purpose of this research note was to assess the hypothesis that parents of American youth who together with their adolescent children regularly participate in the life of religious congregations will manifest higher levels of network closure than those who do not participate together or do not participate at all. The explanatory variables were constructed as categorical dummy variables (rather than testing for separate interaction effects) to capture the interaction effects of both adult religious service participation and adolescent religious youth group involvement. The results confirm the theorized hypothesis, suggesting that—net of all control variables—the dual participation of both parent and youth is significantly associated with increased network closure with friends, other parents, and teachers. The participation of youth alone in religious youth groups (without regular parental church attendance) is significantly associated with increased levels of network closure for two of our dependent variables. And parental religious service attendance only (without teenage youth group participation) is significant with higher levels of network closure for three of our dependent variables. In the ordinal regression models, the religious participation factor is one of only two variables (the other being youth's age) consistently significantly associated with network closure across all five dependent variable measures.

It is important to put these findings into broader context, and to understand their limits. First, while the religious participation effects are consistently significant, they are not enormous. Although involvement in organized religion clearly affects the density of people's network ties, it is not the only factor that does so. Second, nothing in these findings explicitly demonstrates that the marginal increases in network closure for the more religiously involved (compared to the less involved) are accomplished directly through religious participation. We do have reason to believe this is likely how the process works, and little reason to believe otherwise, but the SPY survey itself did not ask questions that could have established the precise source of these network ties leading to greater closure. An alternative explanation worth considering is that certain parents are, for whatever other reason, "joiners" who are oriented toward multiple social involvements and relational ties of all sorts, including religious, social, and school based; in which case, increased religious participation and network closure are both outcomes of their antecedent, more general

“joining” orientation. Further studies, especially using longitudinal data, will have to test these alternative interpretations. Third, this analysis has not demonstrated that the higher levels of network closure among religiously active youth and parents observed here actually and definitely explain the positive religious influence on outcomes in youth’s lives noted above. Establishing that connection will require a separate analysis bringing in other dependent outcome variables. Nevertheless, this research note’s findings do help empirically to verify a relationship that fills in one missing piece of the much larger explanatory theory of religious effects among American adolescents, about which the author has written elsewhere (Smith 2003). Future empirical work can extend and build on these findings with an eye toward confirming, invalidating, specifying, or revising the larger theoretical account of religious influences on youth.

To conclude, accumulated scholarship provides ample empirical evidence that religion is a factor in the lives of American adolescents that often influences their attitudes and behaviors in ways that are commonly viewed as positive and constructive. In a number of areas of concern, different measures of religiosity are correlated with a variety of healthy, socially desirable outcomes. Scholars now need to develop a more comprehensive and coherent theoretical account of religious influences in the lives of youth than currently exists. This research note represents a modest step in that direction. It has sought to test for the existence of an empirical relationship between the religious participation of youth and their parents and higher levels of closure in their social networks—finding that such a relationship does indeed exist. In so doing, this research note contributes an important missing piece of evidence that helps to build up a larger, more coherent theoretical account for why and how religion matters in shaping the lives of American youth.

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