

## ACCIDENTAL INEQUALITY: HOW RELIGIOUS YOUTH SOCIALIZATION REPRODUCES SOCIAL INEQUALITY

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*How and why does religious socialization contribute to the reproduction of social inequality? An in-depth case study of religious youth programming provides an empirical investigation of the way that a primary institution that many youth encounter may serve to legitimate the broader field of social stratification. Despite the apparent lack of direct interest of religious congregations in maintaining a system of religious youth group from which some participating youth can benefit more than others, a neo-institutional analysis reveals systematic tendencies toward reproducing stratification. Mimetic isomorphism to schools is one explanation for the socially stratified patterns in religious youth programming.*

The majority of American youth participate in a religious youth group during their adolescence (Smith 2003a), and participating in religious youth groups has been linked to a number of positive religious and life outcomes (e.g., Donahue and Benson 1995; Ellison and Levin 1998; Varon and Riley 1999; Smith 2003b). Yet few sociological studies investigate religious youth groups as primary sites of adolescent socialization. Previous research indicates variance in the availability and type of religious youth programming that may serve to promote the reproduction of socioeconomic inequalities. This study asks: *how* and *why* does religious socialization contribute to the reproduction of social inequality?

This study applies insights from organizational literature and theories of neo-institutionalism to an in-depth investigation of religious youth programming. The case study provides an investigation of the way that an organization that many youth encounter may serve to legitimate the broader pattern of social stratification by reproducing taken-for-granted categories of interaction. Despite a lack of interest of religious organizations in maintaining a youth group system in which some participating youth benefit more than others, a neo-institutional analysis reveals systematic implicit tendencies to maintain unequal youth groups.

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## BACKGROUND

My previous research indicates socioeconomic inequalities in the prevalence and type of religious youth programming available within different areas. In previous studies, I employed an ordinal variable, labeled “place SES” to represent geographical concentrations of socioeconomic information, including annual household income, percent below poverty, educational level, occupation types, and race and ethnicity (Snell 2011a, 2011b). Place SES thus represents a socioeconomic status rating of the neighborhood in which a religious congregation is located. The four ordinal categories of place SES are “low,” “mid-low,” “mid-high,” and “high.” The place SES of the area in which congregations were located related to differences in types of programming available for religious adolescents. Organized religious youth programming was more heavily concentrated in wealthier areas, and religious congregations located in wealthier areas provided a greater variety of youth activities and had more organizational resources available to support youth programming. Even after controlling for denominational type, church size, and budgetary resources, congregations located in wealthier areas were significantly more likely to provide designated youth leaders, youth Bible studies, retreats, social service projects, missions, and social-recreational activities.

I also found significant differences in youth minister interviews in the stated purposes and goals of youth programming by socioeconomic status location (Snell 2011b). Religious congregations located in poorer areas had youth ministers who on average described their style as providing practical directives aimed at changing this-worldly skills and behavior. Those located in lower-middle socioeconomic status areas tended to describe their style as focused on providing other-worldly meaning by connecting youth to sacred, divine relationships. Youth ministers in middle-high locations typically described their style as focused on creating this-worldly relationships among youth and other congregation members. And youth ministers in congregations located in wealthy areas tended to describe their goals as developing other-worldly, cognitive, critical understandings of faith traditions. These studies indicate a pattern of inequality in religious youth programming that could serve to reproduce larger societal trends in socioeconomic inequality. Though there may be various reasons why this pattern exists in the first place, its existence can subsequently lead to a further reproduction of social stratification through perpetuation of differential expectations and opportunities. What remains unclear from these previous studies is *why* do inequalities in religious youth programming exist?

For answers to this question, I turn to organizational literature and specifically examine neo-institutionalism theories. Demerath et al. (1998) assert that religion is irretrievably organizational, and insight can be gained from an examination of religious organizations through a neo-institutionalist lens. Neo-institutionalism as applied to religious organizations stresses a combination of structure and culture (DiMaggio 1998). Swidler and Ardit (1994) turn to organizations for the explanation of how socioeconomic inequalities come to structure natural and engrained social distinctions. Powell and DiMaggio (1991) assert that a certain taken-for-granted quality pervades institutions and legitimates inequality through unexamined and routine practices. Within these contexts, individuals participate in activities that may not serve their best interests under the supposition that the institution is worthy and that

the rules and norms it supports should be followed. From a neo-institutionalist perspective, socioeconomic inequality may be legitimized and reproduced through religious institutions.

One insight of neo-institutionalism is that organizations maintain legitimacy by their connection to the societal structure and the confidence assigned to it (Meyer and Rowan 1978). To navigate the contradictions between practical needs and legitimacy, organizations often decouple formal structures from informal practices (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Homogeneity among organizations is explained by their response to three types of isomorphism—coercive, mimetic, and normative. Heightened uncertainty, ambiguous goals, and a need for credentials and legitimacy causes increased modeling of other organizations.

Organizations tend to have primary “institutional logics” which pattern the way they make decisions and navigate various tensions (Alford and Friedland 1985). These institutional logics are often based on other organizational models. The process of adaptation of one organizational model to another is called “institutional isomorphism.” Stout and Cormode (1998) argue that organizations respond to other organizations for two reasons: (1) connectedness to other organizations that share resources, and (2) structural equivalence with non-connected organizations which are seen as institutional role models and peers. When organizations borrow institutional logics from other organizations, this is called cultural isomorphism. Role model organizations are those that exist within the field of an organization and are implicitly copied in a desire to gain legitimacy (Arum 2000).

## DATA AND METHODS

Data analyzed are from the Northern Indiana Congregation Study (NICS). NICS was a collaborative, mixed-methods research project that collected data in five phases, beginning in 2007 and concluding in 2009. The first phase consisted of phone surveys conducted with all congregations located in three mid-sized contiguous cities with a response rate of 98.9% ( $N = 269$ ). Next, U.S. Census (2000) data was linked to the congregational survey data by postal codes. Third, in-person interviews were conducted with a stratified quota sample of youth ministers from these congregations ( $n = 42$ ). The first three phases of data collection are detailed more thoroughly in Snell (2011a, 2011b). The fourth phase entailed a continuation of the project via content analysis and participant observations with four religious congregations selected to represent each of four aggregated Christian denominational categories defined by Steensland et al. (2000) as mainline Protestant (MP), evangelical Protestant (EP), black Protestant (BP), and Catholic (CA). Religious worship services, youth groups, Bible studies, confirmation classes, Sunday schools, and other congregational meetings were observed throughout the course of a year. A total of 229 discrete events were observed with a total of 724 recorded pages in field notes in each of the congregations (EP: 83 events and 311 pages, MP: 62 events and 162 pages, BP: 13 events and 34 pages, CA: 71 events and 217 pages). Content analysis included mission statements and other belief explications located on website and printed materials.

Finally, the fifth phase of the study consisted of additional in-person interviews with congregation members, youth participants, and parents of youth participants ( $n = 233$ ) with a response rate of 87.6%. Youth participants were stratified quota

sampled in order to talk to youth who had been participating in church activities for many years or for only a short time, as well as spanning different age ranges, frequency of attendance levels, perceived race and ethnicities, perceived socioeconomic status, and perceived interest and engagement in youth activities. Parents were selected to match interviews with participating youth who were interviewed for this study. The interviews lasted an average of an hour in length and were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. At the evangelical Protestant church, a total of 84 interviews were completed with an 89.4% response rate. Interviews were conducted with one pastor, one youth minister, two financial officers, 35 congregation members, 26 participating youth, and 19 parents of the participating youth. Interviews at the mainline Protestant church were conducted with a total of 70 respondents with a 90.9% response rate. The interviews consisted of one with the pastor, one with the youth minister, two with financial officers, 30 with congregation members, 23 with participating youth, and 13 with parents of participating youth. At the black Protestant church, a total of 20 interviews were completed with a 90.9% response rate. These interviews consisted of one youth minister, 12 participating youth, and 7 parents of participating youth. The interviews at the Catholic parish were conducted with a total of 59 respondents with an 81.9% response rate. The interviews consisted of one priest, one youth minister, 32 congregation members, 15 participating youth, and 10 parents of participating youth.

The current analysis combines findings from all five phases of data collection to investigate explanations for inequality in types of religious youth programming. In-person interviews with youth ministers, participating youth, and their parents are linked and analyzed for multiple perceptions of religious youth activities and their intended goals and purposes. Neo-institutionalism will be considered an explanation for socioeconomic inequality reproduction through religious youth programming if: (1) youth ministers evidence ambiguity in knowledge of how to structure religious youth groups, (2) youth groups show evidence of organizational exigencies and institutional isomorphism via homogeneity in activities, (3) youth programming shows socioeconomic variance in types of programming that cannot be explained by formal, explicated beliefs and intentions for youth programming, (4) youth groups demonstrate isomorphism with organizational peers, and (5) the presence of competing institutional logics shows a commitment to ideals which compete with actual practice.

## RESULTS

### Youth Minister Ambiguity

The interviewed youth ministers voiced a considerable amount of ambiguity regarding youth ministry goals and best practices for conducting religious youth activities. The vast majority of the 42 youth leaders interviewed—from various denominations with variance in church size, number of attending youth, annual budgets, educational backgrounds, and so on—stated that they had received little to no training regarding leading a religious youth group. A minority of the youth ministers expressed that they received training and education prior to becoming a youth minister. However, even those who had been to seminary expressed that youth ministry was something about which they were never specifically taught. One youth minister

stated, “Nobody in seminary taught me how.” Another stated, “It’s hard when you have the young adult phase because you don’t really know what they want, and you don’t really know what they are looking for.” As stated by a third youth minister, “One of the areas that we do not have is an acute understanding of what the teens are actually going through today.”

Many of the youth ministers expressed concern about how to reach out to more youth and get them involved. One stated, “I would most like to know the best methods or techniques for reaching them.” Another stated, “I would want to know what does the church need to do so that teenagers say, ‘You know that is the place I want to be.’” Similarly, many youth ministers expressed a desire to know what it was that youth sought to take away from religious youth programming. One said, “I would like to know what they actually want.” Another stated, “What does that kid want from the church or from the youth group, or just in life?” A third said, “What is it that attracts them to church? What would make a youth make a decision, instead of going for instance to a football game, to go to church.”

A minority of the youth ministers did not describe themselves as lacking training and experience and described their congregation or denomination as providing previous or ongoing training opportunities. These youth ministers generally felt well-connected to other youth ministers and met often with colleagues with whom they could discuss best practices, vent frustrations, and generally learn from one another. But viewed on the whole, the vast majority of religious youth ministers expressed a great deal of ambiguity regarding what a youth group should be, how to reach out to youth, and how to know what motivates youth to participate in religious programming. Neo-institutionalism predicts that when ambiguity exists, organizations will be relatively homogenous in adopting the legitimate models of other organizations.

### **Youth Group Homogeneity**

Every youth minister interviewed described entertainment as a primary activity, and even the main purpose, of religious youth group. In theory, it is not specifically necessitated that entertainment must be one of the primary aims of religious youth groups. However, every youth group incorporated entertainment into some or all of its activity time. Youth ministers made comments such as “church ought to be something fun” and we have “fun fellowship events, like our barbeque.” The list of activities provided included events like watching movies, playing basketball, going bowling, playing board games, and just “hanging out.” One youth minister described what activities the youth group consisted of by stating, “We will do your typical youth group fun stuff like games, bowling, putt putt, and that stuff.” Another stated, “I would love to get an Xbox or a Wii or any number of things and have a place for kids to come and hang.”

Many of the youth ministers explained that providing entertainment as a component or primary element of youth group was not their choice, but rather something that they saw as necessitated by the broader cultural environment. One stated, “I think every church struggles with how do they reach out to young people, and some churches have done that by making worship an entertainment.” Another stated, “Younger people want contemporary rock band concert music, show, entertainment.

I think churches are struggling really hard with that.” One youth minister explained this cultural isomorphism in the following way:

I think the church’s primary frustration is that when people make the list of the things they need to do, church isn’t one of them. We come up with the programs and activities, and people expect a personal invitation, a post card or a phone call in order to find out about it. But if they were involved in basketball, they wouldn’t expect their coach to call every time they have practice. So I think the biggest frustration is that twenty years ago parents made their kids come to church. Now they don’t, and so everything that we do has to be something that is attractive to them on an entertainment level.

Another stated, “Many times it is very easy to get them to come out to ministries that are more entertainment, if you will. I don’t want to use entertainment because it is a manner of worshipping and praising God, but because you can get them to come out to a concert.” Thus, youth ministers demonstrate, sometimes unwilling, isomorphism to a norm of entertainment.

### **Socioeconomic Variance in Youth Group Styles**

The four congregations examined in this analysis represent four different denomination and socioeconomic status configurations, as well as representing variance in majority race and ethnicity. In previous studies (Snell 2011a, 2011b), I demonstrated a congregational pattern of socioeconomic variance in youth minister reported youth group activities, purposes, and goals, net of denomination and majority race and ethnicity. I showed that even net of the socioeconomic variance predicted by denomination and majority race and ethnicity, there still appears to be a concentration effect of socioeconomic status at the congregational level. This current analysis explores explanations for the inequality pattern found in religious youth groups, focusing on four congregations in which participating youth and parents were interviewed and linked to youth minister interviews.

**Mid-high to high SES MP.** The mainline Protestant congregation, hereafter referred to as “MP,” is an average size, majority white congregation located in an inner-urban area. The congregation is located in a low place socioeconomic status area. However, members and leaders of MP often express pride in the fact that members drive in to the congregation for their participation, and not a single congregant has an address located in the immediate or surrounding vicinity to MP. Instead, the members and leaders all drive in from upper middle class areas, and the socioeconomic status of the members is reported to be in the mid-high to high range, with nearly 50% of the interviewees reporting an annual household income level of \$80,000 or more. MP has a fairly substantial annual budget, especially given its size. Divided across the number of regular attendees, the annual budget equates to more than \$2,000 per person.

The youth group is a modest size, and all the youth group participants attend youth activities with a high level of frequency. MP provides youth with opportunities to participate in many different types of youth group activities. The youth minister describes the youth who participate by stating, “My experience with my teens is that

they may have a lot of personal issues going on, as far as divorce or family personal issues, but that they are not really dealing with any kind of bigger issues in the world. I wouldn't say that they are all very happy and content because half of them are on anti-depressants or dealing with divorce and things like that, but they are not really dealing with any socioeconomic issues in their lives. They are all very comfortable." The stated goals of the youth groups are to serve the congregational community and to reach out to the surrounding community to learn how to serve in love.

A full-time, paid youth pastor leads the youth activities, with the additional aid of a number of volunteer parents. The youth minister described the activities of the youth group as falling into three categories: fellowship activities, service projects, and congregational projects. She said that the purpose is "to really teach the kids what it means to be a faithful Christian and what it means to be a responsible member of the community of faith." The most rewarding part of the job to her is the relationships she creates with the youth and knowing how important she is to them. She stated that she thinks the program is successful in meeting its goals.

Youth described the purposes and goals of youth group primarily as a place to have fun and spend time with friends. One stated, "Sometimes, I just think it's to have fun." Another stated, "To get to know each other and learn more about each other." Participating youth described the activities as, "Just getting to know everyone better and like, getting and like, playing games and just kind of hanging out." Another stated, "We do a lot of games that like, go along with the Bible, like trivia-type questions and games and stuff like that." A third described, "During youth group, we really don't like study the Bible. Like, we have fun and like get to know each other." Finally, one participating youth stated simply, "Sometimes we play ping-pong." Youth also described the purpose as religious, but always within the context of community, relationships, and friendships. One described the purpose as, "Bringing people closer together and closer together with God." Stated differently, "I think we're trying to accomplish, like, Christian friends. And we don't really talk about God that much I guess you could say." The parents at MP also described the primary purpose of the youth group as a social interaction. As one parent described, "They do more social than they do religious."

In summary, the overwhelming majority of participating youth describe the MP youth group as primarily about having fun and spending time with each other. This described purpose exists despite the fact that a closer relationship to God is what youth state they would most like to get out of their participation. This purpose is also the stated goal of the parents of participating youth and the youth minister. Another goal often described by the parents and youth minister is to teach youth how to be service and community oriented. This is the primary formal goal listed in the mission of the group. And yet, a minority of participating youth described service as a goal of the group. Thus, having fun and developing relationships were the most prominent goals.

**Mid-low to mid-high SES EP.** The evangelical Protestant congregation, hereafter referred to as "EP," is a somewhat large, majority white congregation located in a mixed urban-rural area. The congregation is located on the cusp between a mid-high and mid-low place socioeconomic status area. The overall socioeconomic status of the members is spread fairly evenly from mid-low to mid-high, with a nearly

50/50 split in the estimated socioeconomic status of youth group participants. EP has a fairly substantial annual budget. Even divided across the somewhat large congregation size, the annual budget equates to nearly \$2,000 per person.

The youth group is fairly large with an average attendance of nearly 200, and there are a number of different types of activities and groups provided. EP provides youth with a number of opportunities to participate in an organized youth group. There is a paid, full-time youth minister, who involves several adult volunteers for regular participation, especially as small group leaders during the large youth group meeting. The youth minister described the youth who participate in the following way: "I think we have a great group of teens in this area. They can be knuckleheads sometimes and make really unwise choices. I feel that there is a sense of a need, and this goes back to positive relationships, which there are a lack of. I would say that they are somewhere in between doing well and not doing well." He described youth in the area as not receiving the guidance and support from parents that they need. When asked about the primary activities of the youth group, the youth minister said, "Some activities are just to hang out, but most of them usually have a purpose behind them." The youth leader described the primary purpose of the group this way, "Our goal is to at some point and time encourage them and help them in their heart to make a decision for Christ. Our goal is to see them come to Christ and develop a relationship with Christ and that is what it is all about." He described the success of the group in terms of having a large number of youth participating and said the most rewarding part of his job is to see kids make positive changes in their lives.

Youth overwhelmingly described the purposes and goals of youth group as to bring them closer to God. One participating youth stated, "I think the main purpose is to lead us on to like a path of righteousness or like close to it. Try to make a better life for us and make us realize that God is love." Another described the purpose as: "To learn about God and, that's pretty much it." Spending time with friends was mentioned, but always within the context of growing closer to God. One youth exemplified this in his describing the youth group's purpose as, "Wanting to get people closer to God or closer to the Bible and try to get your heart or whatever closer to God and also try and have a good time while you're at it or whatever and also being with your friends and having a good time." Another youth stated the purpose is not about friendships "and liking each other, but all having one goal of serving God."

Youth at EP were much more likely to report growing closer to God as one of their favorite aspects of the group, though they still overwhelmingly mentioned spending time with friends as an important component. The EP youth were much less likely to mention fun as a reason for attending, and the vast majority said that worship and a relationship with God was their primary desire for the group. The vast majority of interviewed parents described the youth group goals by saying, "Definitely our goal is to bring kids to Christ, to make them feel like they have a place where they can come and be loved and love others and be united with the Lord" and "To develop a strong relationship with Jesus Christ, that the children would know who he is and desire to have a relationship with him." Another parent stated the goal was that teens, "should always be to reach out to non-believers and evangelize." The vast majority of parents thought EP youth group was a success.

The participant observations of this youth group tell a slightly different story than the cohesive accounts provided by the youth minister, participating youth, and

their parents. While it is true that observers reported the same activities and same stated purposes, it was also the case that another level of purpose appeared to be taking place. This implicit goal seemed to be one of fitting in and looking cool in front of one's peers. As one participant observer stated, "This isn't about a sacrificial, pensive faith; it's about being accessible and part of the in-group. It's about making Christ look cool to other teens." The youth minister and youth all appeared to be interested in wearing trendy clothes and often commented on each other's appearances. A female participant observer had the experience of being told she looked cute also and described it as such, "I think a compliment on physical appearance or noticing something different is a way of reaching out and welcoming someone into the group, to say 'you are accepted here.'" Thus, an informal goal of this youth group is not so much the formal goal of reaching out to others in faith but more about appearing hip or trendy in front of others.

In summary, the overwhelming majority of participating youth describe the EP youth group as primarily about having a closer relationship with God/Jesus. This described purpose matches with the expectations of the youth minister and parents of participating youth. The stated purpose matches somewhat with the formal purpose and goals insofar as youth describe the goal as moving toward a closer relationship with Christ and sharing fellowship. However, youth do not describe the formal mission of the church to teach about sin and forgiveness, nor do they describe evangelism, another primary formal goal, as their main aim or desire in youth group participation. In fact, youth often describe "outreach kids" as distracting, disruptive, and not part of the success of the youth group. An informal practice also exists that is loosely coupled to the formal goal of supporting one another in faith, but in youth group this goal becomes an implicit need to be accepted by each other, to look trendy in appearance, and to project a "cool" sense of self to others while having fun and being entertained.

**Low to mid-low SES BP.** The black Protestant congregation, hereafter referred to as "BP," is a small-sized, majority black congregation located in an inner-urban area. The congregation is located in the area in this study with the highest concentration of poverty and lowest socioeconomic status. The overall socioeconomic status of the members is slightly more than the immediate area, and the majority of the interviewed youth are estimated to have mid-low socioeconomic backgrounds. BP has a fairly substantial annual budget for such a small congregation. Divided across the small congregation size, the annual budget equates to nearly \$1,380 per person, making the resources available within the congregation relatively comparable to MP and EP.

The youth group is very small, and there are a few different types of activities. The most regularly occurring of these is a monthly social outing to play games and hang out together with no formal program. Youth also have the opportunity to serve on boards and committees in the congregation, and hosting activities for youth in the community is a goal of the youth group as well. The youth Bible study and praise dance are led by two part-time volunteer youth pastors who are long-time members of the congregation. The youth minister described youth in the area as impoverished spiritually but doing well academically, with more educational opportunities available than for his generation. He described the community as less connected than it

was in the past, which presents a particular problem to the church and specifically the youth group in terms of trying to get community members to be more involved.

When asked to describe the activities provided during youth group, the youth minister talked about a computer lab located in the church that youth were allowed to use. The primary intention is to have them use the computers for Bible challenges and verse memorization, but he describes this as lasting about fifteen minutes, followed by free time. He says he tries to get them to use the computer time for school work, but they often browse the Internet and have fun on the computers as well. On this point, he stated, "Our approach is that it is better to teach them the proper way to use it [the computer] and to teach them what to look out for, as opposed to telling them that they are restricted from going to them." This computer time is accompanied by a regular Bible study. He describes the primary purpose of this youth group as, "To bring the youth to a knowledge of Jesus Christ and to provide meaningful experiences that would help them grow towards being a well-rounded person in society." He would like to see participating youth be committed and compassionate as a result and believes they would evidence this by having better behaviors and making better choices for their lives.

The majority of youth described the purpose of the youth group as "to teach you skills and behaviors." They described it as successful and said their participation positively affects them. The parents described the youth group as having importance in setting them on "the right road" by knowing how important it is to "know the Word and to learn the Word." The activities were described as such, "They spend time on the Word. You have a speaker, 20 to 45 minutes max, and then you have singing and stuff like that." One parent described the purpose of youth group by stating, "The goal is to teach them to have a relationship with the Lord and to really know what it's about and how important it is to have the Lord in their life."

Participating youth unanimously described the primary purpose of the youth group being to help them grow closer to God. One youth stated, "I think the main purpose is for us to get closer to God, and for us to like, instead of being in the streets doing something else or we could be in trouble, we come to church, and we have our time here. We can spend our time here and know we're doing something good." Another stated, "It's like service on Sunday is about your daily lives and how God wants you to live. Sunday school and Bible study is like a smaller version of that, but it's also telling you the main things like what you need to be ready for, what you need to get, what you need to have, what you need basically, things you need to have inside of you." The praise dance group is described as providing a way for teens to express their worship with their bodies, and to keep them out of trouble.

During participant observations, it was obvious that youth at BP tend to prioritize the praise dance over the Bible study. Many of the youth stated explicitly that this was their favorite activity, and the youth pastor made a number of comments during Bible study meetings about wrapping up so that they could "get on to what they really came for," as praise dance occurred immediately following Bible study. They seemed to value the expressive nature of the dancing, as one youth described, "Dancing, I feel, I guess, it'd more be the inside part where I come out of practice and I'm like 'man, I can't wait to do that song Sunday.' And when we perform it's the same way. Just after, it's just a feeling like you did something right, and

it's just a really good feeling." Thus, the primary activity for youth seemed to be an active, expressive form of worship rather than a written, literate teaching.

Thus, the vast majority of youth parents and the youth minister describe the primacy of the youth Bible study at BP, while the vast majority of the youth describe the primacy of their praise dancing. Although the formal goals of the congregation are to lead people to salvation by an acceptance of Jesus and adherence to the Bible, the primary function of youth activities are loosely coupled with this goal and instead enact a more bodily, expressive form of activity that is not as specifically focused on salvation or the Bible. Nevertheless, youth describe youth group as causing them to grow closer to God and state that it influences their lives by helping them to make better decisions. Worship in this BP context then seems to be primarily about following rules and expectations in order to have Biblically-oriented skills and behaviors.

**Low to mid-low SES CA.** The Catholic congregation, hereafter referred to as "CA," is large-sized, majority Hispanic congregation located in an inner-urban area. The congregation is located on the cusp between a low and mid-low place socioeconomic status area and many of the members are from working class backgrounds, with more than 50% of the youth coming from mid-low socioeconomic households. CA did not report their annual budget during the phone survey, but our participant observations during their annual Bishop's campaign revealed that the congregation is in a significant amount of debt to the diocese, primarily due to the school that the congregation supports.

The youth group at CA is modest in size (20–25), and it is quite distinct from another primary form of youth activity at CA, confirmation class. All seventh and eighth graders are required to attend confirmation class, and the focus of their attendance is on teaching Catholic faith traditions. This two-year, oral training may explain why there are no formal written documents regarding the purpose and goals of religious participation for youth. The youth group itself consists entirely of a mentoring program that exposes CA youth to local university students who aid with homework and encourage CA youth to prepare for college. CA has a paid, full-time youth director who is responsible for coordinating college students to volunteer in leading the numerous confirmation classes and mentoring in the youth group.

The youth director began her interview by talking about how throughout her lifetime she has witnessed a large economic decline in the area. She discussed the class structure in the area and stated, "It depends who you are. I guess if you are white and middle class it is all hunky-dory. If you are a minority, it is not. Poorer kids or more recent immigrants have a feeling of class structure, but they can't identify it. We don't talk about class any more." In describing the activities provided by the youth group, she stated that fun activities and outings were offered by her more in the past, but now she no longer has the time to organize them. She stated that she is "always 98 months behind" and needs help to organize these additional activities. Describing the purpose and goals of the youth group, she stated: "The father always says three things: 'Love God, get a high school diploma, and get educated.'" When asked if the model of youth group is working, she described a particular success story of being very excited that one of the participating youth

get a B in a class. But then she quickly followed that by saying she can turn around the next week and watch someone “do something stupid,” which makes her believe that she needs to start all over again.

The participating youth overwhelmingly described the purpose of youth group as to make them more mature, be a better person, and have a better future. One youth participant stated, “I think what youth group is trying to do is like trying to make you mature and trying to make you learn more about life. I think what they are trying to do is just get you ready for obstacles in life.” A few participating youth also described a goal of teaching youth about God and made statements such as, “I think they’re trying to accomplish [teach] who is God, and what he did.” The vast majority of youth described the group’s purpose as, “to teach us skills and behaviors.” Many of the participating youth stated that their participation is required or strongly encouraged by their parents. They expressed being bored, not liking to have to work, and disliking needing to wake up for the confirmation classes as cons of the group. One participating youth stated, “It’s like going to school.” Many stated that participating in the group helped them to have better behavior and make better choices, and they seeing their friends and learning about God.

The parents also often described the purpose and goals as teaching. One parent said this about the goal: “It’s to follow what they are teaching.” When asked what the purpose of youth group was, one parent stated simply “to do homework.” In talking with one parent about her estimation of whether the confirmation classes were effective, she described the following exchange between her and her son:

Well, I think so, although the truth is that, I ask him, “What did they teach you today?” [He says] “Lot’s of things.” I say, “But, what things? Tell me.” [He says] “I don’t remember anymore.” I say, “You don’t pay attention? They don’t give you a book or anything?” He says, “No. Just talking and talking.” That’s what he tells me.

Though the formal mission of the congregation states that the goal is to have a vibrant worship carried out through the community and service to those in need, the primary goal seen during participant observations in CA was education. The meetings were held in classrooms with youth sitting at desks. Participating youth were observed to react to the youth leaders as teachers and were often called “students” by them. Many described their experience as being similar to school and would anxiously wait for the time to end so that they could leave.

In summary, the youth activities at CA are not focused as much on fun and fellowship, as at MP, nor as much about fitting in and feeling connected to God, as at EP, nor following a set of concrete religious rules and directives and expressing worship bodily, as at BP. The youth programming at CA was clearly intended to teach participating youth about their faith and attempt to prepare them for college. There was a noticeable education component that pervaded the youth programming, which reminded youth of being in school. Participating youth saw their participation as particularly about teaching them skills and behaviors, and the informal practice of the group was to maintain control and a certain level of engagement within a mostly didactic environment. This loosely couples with the formally stated mission of the congregation by maintaining the goal of education, but does not obviously

demonstrate a strengthening of families and community, or vibrant worship, or faith formation.

These four congregations thus represent noticeable differences in the style or participation provided for, expected of, and informally acted out by youth. This pattern matches that found in the broader data set in previous studies and extends previous findings by demonstrating the extent of the loose coupling between formally stated purposes and goals and actual practice. The neo-institutionalist literature indicates that loose coupling is a sign of a need for legitimacy within competing institutional logics. The next section explores what institutional logics may be competing with the formally stated religious logics expected to influence youth.

### Structural Equivalence and Cultural Isomorphism

What explains the existence of these inequalities in religious youth programming? Theories of neo-institutionalism point to institutional isomorphism as one potential explanation. If mimetic institutional isomorphism is the cause for the differences in youth group styles, then religious congregations should evidence a desire to mimic the style of some other institutional model that is perceived to be successful in order to project their own legitimacy. The differences in purposes of religious socialization may be explained then by an isomorphism to some other model of socialization which already has a stratification pattern.

A general religious source of mimetic isomorphism could be national youth group magazines, such as *Group* and *Youth Specialties*. However, these magazines were never mentioned during interviews as a relied-upon source of information. Another potential source of mimetic isomorphism would be internal to the religious sphere and internal to the specific denomination explanations (Chaves 1997) in which religious congregations mimic the youth group style of their denomination. This could be a result of professionalization in which youth ministers are taught, through their training and interactions with their denomination, what a legitimate youth group looks like. The evidence for this explanation in this case is not particularly strong. Some youth groups do mention receiving training from their denominations. It is possible that this kind of training has the effect of conveying a successful model which is mimicked, and it is quite possible that the youth ministers are not aware enough of this level of mimetic isomorphism to articulate it. During the study no denominational meetings or trainings were observed that could contribute to such an analysis, and therefore this possibility is one to explore further in future investigations.

Another potential mimetic isomorphism explanation is one that occurs within the religious sphere but not within the specific religious denomination (Chaves 1997) in which religious congregations mimic the style of other religious congregations that are in their organizational field. As theorized by Stout and Cormode (1998), organizations would therefore evidence a move to resemble other organizations that are perceived to be their institutional equivalents. In order for mimetic isomorphism to exist in this case, it would be necessary for religious congregations to at least be aware of another religious congregation, knowing them by name or having some sort of interaction with them. It is also likely that a network connection to other religious congregations could have this mimetic effect without the youth ministers' full awareness of this possibility. In other words, if youth ministers exhibit a level

of connectedness to other religious congregations in the area, some level of mimetic isomorphism can be hypothesized regardless of whether or not it is specifically articulated.

The youth ministers interviewed for this project did occasionally mention the names of other religious congregations in the area. The frequency of this was not as high as one might expect in mimetic isomorphism, but it did minimally occur. Youth ministers often mentioned the names of other religious congregations within the context of explaining their network of connections to other youth ministers in the area. The one primary exception to this was the mentioning of the name of a local mega church. The mega church seemed to function as a reference point for a high number of the religious congregations. Some mentioned the name of the mega church to talk specifically about what they did not want to be, and others did seem to evidence some perceptions that the mega church was a model of success. When youth ministers described the youth group model of the mega church as successful, they unanimously pointed to the number of youth attending as the metric of this success. It does appear then that this youth group in particular may be causing some level of mimetic isomorphism in other youth group styles. Nonetheless, this explanation does not appear to be able to explain the vast majority of the cases, especially those who claim to be resisting a desire to mimic the megachurch youth group.

The possibility of network connections appears to go further toward explaining a potential route for mimetic isomorphism. At the conclusion of the youth minister interviews, interviewers asked youth ministers if they could give us the name of another youth minister within the area who could be interviewed for the study. Of the 42 interviewed youth ministers, only 15 (36%) provided names of other youth ministers. Of the 15 who did provide us with other names, the Catholic congregations appeared to be the most networked, as 62% (5) of the Catholic youth ministers interviewed provided names for other youth ministers, for a total of 8 non-unique name recommendations. The mainline Protestant youth ministers were the second most networked group. Sixty percent (6) of the mainline Protestant youth ministers interviewed provided names for other youth ministers. The evangelical Protestant congregation came in third, with 40% (4) of the evangelical Protestant youth ministers providing names of other youth ministers. Black Protestant youth ministers did not list the names of any other youth ministers.

The Catholic network was the most diffuse, or flattest network, with four youth ministers listed once each and one youth minister listed twice, for a total of five unique names. The evangelical Protestant network was right in the middle, with one youth minister listed twice, and two youth ministers listed once each, for a total of three unique names. The mainline Protestant network is the skinniest in that one youth minister name was listed by eight youth ministers, two of whom were not even in mainline Protestant congregations, and one youth minister name was mentioned by one youth minister, for a total of two unique names. The name mentioned by eight youth ministers is the youth minister at the same megachurch described earlier, thus providing more evidence that this one congregation may provide a source of mimetic isomorphism for other religious congregations in the area.

In addition to this possibility for mimetic isomorphism to other religious congregations, the youth ministers interviewed also evidenced potential isomorphism to another structural equivalent from a non-religious source: educational organizations,

or schools. Schools came up throughout the vast majority of the youth minister interviews, and youth ministers primarily described them as competing for youth time. As one youth minister stated, “Now the school is taking over those specific days set aside for church purposes. It is really frustrating. There is not one day where I can schedule an event where all my kids can go because they are involved in cross country or any sport, or band or choir or whatever.” The youth ministers described the athletic and other extracurricular activities as specifically problematic for them in terms of finding times in youth schedules for youth group activities. One youth minister stated, “I think the biggest activity that competes with kids having to be involved in the youth program is a lot of good Christian kids in the area are heavily involved in athletics, and athletics is the American form of socialization. And so we don’t try to fight that, but we need to get more creative in the future of doing that.” One youth minister observed that “Nine months out of the year kids are in school and involved in school activities.”

Neo-institutionalist theories point to the fact that competition with other organizations is a sign that mimetic isomorphism may be occurring, and youth ministers nearly unanimously describe schools as competing for youth time. As a result, youth ministers may be drawing upon the models of educational organizations to project legitimacy and attract youth in participating in religious youth groups. One youth minister stated, “Here is what is lacking as far as I can tell in youth ministry, and that is curricula that appeals to them. Even the stuff that I get from Youth Specialties that I have tried to use, they don’t like, and they will tell me this is not authentic. This doesn’t appeal to us. The times that I have been most successful teaching anything to them, is if I have designed the lesson myself.” Due to the high level of involvement in educational organizations, it is likely that any youth minister designing their own “curriculum” may be drawing upon the educational models located around them.

In fact, 11 of the 42 interviewed youth ministers (26%) are school teachers by trade. These youth ministers made statements such as “I have taught for ten years, I have a teaching degree.” And “I am a high school teacher.” “I am a special ed. teacher.” “I went into college with a music education major and you teach high school, music education is K–12, but I was focusing on high school.” One youth minister explicitly stated the influence of an educational model, “I really think that my education degree got me ready to deal with youth just because anything like peer counseling and working with kids on a specific assignments, giving directions, having people follow.” As did another youth minister who stated, “I pulled on resources through experience in teaching to pull together programs and activities that were exciting to youth and that they participated in and they learned from and they benefited from.”

Teaching appears to be a common model in youth ministry, as the words “teach,” “teacher,” and “teaching” came up a total of 187 times throughout the 42 youth minister interviews. As a reference point, the word “denomination” came up only 86 times and “Jesus” only 73. These statements are further exemplified by one youth minister who said, “You have to teach a child because if you don’t teach them the right and wrong things, and help them to make the right decisions in their lives, then the world out here is going to help them to make that.” The youth ministers seemed to generally think of participating youth as “students” and consistently used the words “students” (253 total counts) and “studying” (179 counts), for a total

of 432 references to studying. As another reference point, the word “teenager” came up only 138 times throughout the interviews. This high level of educational model language may be an indication that youth ministers turn to educational models for how to construct youth group.

## DISCUSSION

These findings show that religious youth socialization contributes to the reproduction of social inequality through isomorphism of ministry practices to institutionally equivalent models of schooling. Results indicate that youth ministers evidence a great deal of ambiguity in understanding how to structure and implement religious youth groups. Some homogeneity occurs across youth groups in response to a perceived cultural norm of entertainment-focused youth. Even those youth ministers who have seminary training describe seminary as not providing them the tools to know how to work specifically with youth. A handful of youth ministers appear to be relatively well-connected and able to draw on denominational or network resources to look to youth group models. But even these models seem to draw heavily on the notion that it is important to respond to and even acquiesce to the broader cultural norm of entertainment as a way to legitimate and make youth group relevant. Thus, their religious youth groups do portray some level of isomorphism to a general model of youth ministry.

However, there appears to be “bounded homogeneity” insofar as youth groups also display categorized differences in the style, purpose, and goals of youth groups. A loose coupling exists between formally explicated goals, based heavily in religious and culture goals, and informally, taken-for-granted practices that appear to be socioeconomically influenced. The mid-high to high level socioeconomic status, mainline Protestant congregation formally states a commitment to developing a service orientation and relationships to God and yet displays a clear focus on developing friendships among the youth participants. The mid-low to mid-high socioeconomic status and evangelical Protestant congregation formally and informally displays a commitment to developing relationships to God and leading youth to salvation, while simultaneously also developing a culture of appearances and pressure to fit in and be liked based on one’s looks. The low to mid-low socioeconomic status, black Protestant congregation formally and informally stresses a commitment to teaching skills and behaviors that will keep youth in line with Bible teachings, while also simultaneously developing an informal culture that promotes expressive bodily engagement with worship. The low to mid-low socioeconomic status, Catholic congregation demonstrated a formal commitment to strengthening families and communities, creating vibrant worship, and forming faith, while simultaneously carrying out an informal goal of didactic instruction and college preparation.

One potential mechanism through which this stratification pattern occurs is a mimetic isomorphism of ministry programs to culturally prevalent models of schooling. The existence of educational isomorphism is one potential mechanism for the way social stratification plays a role in youth group styles. To the extent that youth ministers draw upon educational organization models for youth group styles, they are drawing on socially stratified inequalities in educational approaches. This is evidenced by one youth minister located in a low socioeconomic status area, who

stated, “I think I teach well enough that I can even get the teenagers to understand what I am teaching. That is one of the things that I do when I teach God’s word, I teach it simple enough that an uneducated person or a young person can comprehend what I am teaching.” This model is in high contrast to the educational model described by youth ministers located in high socioeconomic status areas who describe the youth as “willing and able to learn,” desiring “challenges.” Youth ministers in these high socioeconomic status areas talk about focusing on teaching participating youth to “ask challenging questions of their faith” and to “dig deep.” As the sociology of education literature has found a long-standing pattern of social stratification patterns in the educational system, evidence that youth ministers may turn to schools as institutional equivalents helps explain socioeconomic influenced patterns in youth group styles.

Religious youth groups appear to be responding to competing logics in an effort to maintain legitimacy and stay relevant in the lives of youth. On the one hand, they demonstrate a commitment to an institutional logic of religious-based ideals demonstrated through formally stated missions, purposes, and goals. And on the other hand, they appear to be drawing on the institutional logic of the educational system as the method by which to teach and be relevant to participating youth. This appears to create a competition between a socially-stratified model of youth education and a desire to promote effective access to religious ideals. Neo-institutionalist theories help to explain how religious youth groups can unintentionally reproduce unequal socialization styles through the use of competing institutional logics.

### AUTHOR NOTE

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