

Understanding the Faith Factor: Religion, Norms, Social Support, and Relationship Quality among Urban Parents

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ABSTRACT

Our previous research indicates that religious participation is correlated with higher levels of supportive relationship behaviors and with relationship satisfaction among both married and unmarried parents. But little is known about how the association between religious participation and relationship quality may be mediated by family norms and social support. Using data from three waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, we will investigate the role that marriage norms and social support play in mediating the relationship between religious participation and relationship behaviors and quality for both married and unmarried urban parents. In addition, because the literature suggests that men's relationship behaviors are influenced by the institutional contexts of their relationships more than are women's behaviors, we will determine if the effect of religion, marriage norms, and social support on relationships varies by gender.

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INTRODUCTION

The last four decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in family diversity (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Ellwood and Jencks 2004; Ventura *et al.* 2000). Consequently, many children in the United States will spend some time apart from an intact, married household. One-third of all children are now born outside marriage, approximately 40 percent of all children will experience cohabiting parents, and an estimated 50 percent of all children will spend time living in a single-parent or stepfamily household (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Moffit and Rendall 1995; Ventura *et al.* 2000).

Family diversity is especially prevalent among minority and poor and working-class families with children in urban America; in these communities, the majority of children are born outside of wedlock (Ellwood and Jencks 2004; McLanahan in press; Ventura *et al.* 2000). Many of these children are born into “fragile families” where both unmarried parents are raising their children together while maintaining a romantic involvement (Carlson, McLanahan, and England 2004). Consequently, the vast majority of urban American children are born into a married household or a fragile family, where the parents either cohabit or visit one another regularly (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001). Put another way, most urban children are born into families where both of their parents are in some type of intimate relationship.

Religious institutions have historically played a central role in shaping the character and quality of intimate relationships between married parents (Christiano 2000). Yet despite the diversity of family types in contemporary America, recent research on religion and relationship quality has focused only on married relationships. Religion probably influences marital quality by fostering a range of relationship-related values, norms, and social supports that foster higher investments in the marriage, discourage behavior harmful to the marriage, and encourage

spouses to take a favorable view of their relationship (Christiano 2000; Wilcox 2004; Nock *et al.* forthcoming). Religion also has an indirect effect on marriage: religious beliefs and practice tend to promote psychological well-being, prosocial norms, and social support among partners, all of which are also linked to better marriages (Ellison 1994; Gottman 2000; Amato and Booth 1997). Accordingly, most studies indicate that religious practice is associated with higher levels of marital quality (Call and Heaton 1997; Christiano 2000; Greeley 1991; Wilcox 2004; Wilson and Filsinger 1986; Wolfinger and Wilcox 2005; but see Booth *et al.* 1995). Furthermore, our own research indicates that religious participation is also associated with higher-quality relationships among unmarried parents (Wolfinger and Wilcox 2005).

But no research has determined if the effect of religion on unmarried couples is mediated by marriage norms and by the social support facilitated by religious congregations. In urban America, we estimate that 34 percent of unmarried mothers, 26 percent of unmarried fathers, 48 percent of married mothers, and 43 percent of married fathers attend church regularly (defined as several times a month or more). The normative stress that most religious traditions place on marriage may make unmarried couples who attend church more likely to invest in their relationship, and to view their relationship in a positive light (Christiano 2000; Wilcox 2004). Unmarried parents' relationships may also benefit from the social support provided by religious participation, insofar as such social support may provide couples with direction in their relationship or buffer them from the stresses that can otherwise harm a relationship (Ellison 1994). Thus, one of the central aims of this study is to determine if the positive effects of religious participation on married *and* unmarried relationships in urban America are mediated by the marriage norms and social support associated with religion.

Research on religion and marriage also indicates that men's relationship behavior is influenced more by the institutional contexts of their relationships than women's relationship behavior (Nock 1998; Stanley, Whitton, and Markman 2003; Wilcox 2004; Wolfinger and Wilcox 2005). Men seem to be motivated more than women to invest in relationships embedded in institutional contexts—such as marriage and religion—that both stress the normative importance of long-term commitments and accord social support to individuals who invest in their relationships (Nock 1998; Wilcox 2004). Thus, this study also seeks to determine if moral norms and social support are particularly consequential for men's relationship behaviors, thereby accounting for the fact that men's religious participation is more influential than women's religious participation on the relationship quality of urban parents.

Using longitudinal data from the three waves of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001), this paper aims to answer two central questions: (1) Are the effects of religious participation on intimate relationships for both married and unmarried parents in urban America mediated by marriage norms and social support?; and (2) Do the effects of religious participation, marriage norms, and social support on relationships in urban America vary by gender? The answers to these questions are important for two reasons. First, religious institutions are important civic actors in urban America, yet we know little about how they are doing in reaching out to the growing number of fragile families, families who have traditionally been shamed or shunned by these institutions (Ellingson 2004). Second, because parental relationship quality is of paramount importance for the well-being of children (Amato and Booth 1997; Carlson and McLanahan 2004), the effects of religious participation, marriage norms, and social support on the quality of the parental relationship may have important implications for the well-being of children growing up in urban families.