The Role of Religion in the Family Formation Processes of Young Adults

David Eggebeen

Jeffrey Dew

Department of Human Development and Family Studies

Population Research Institute

The Pennsylvania State University

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Young adulthood is in the midst of a demographic revolution. Delays in marriage, rising rates of cohabitation, high rates of non-marital childbearing, delays in marital births, combined with changing patterns of schooling and work has meant that the movement into adulthood has become even less a predictable sequence of events that it once was (Settersten, Furstenberg, & Rumbaut, 2005). Understanding the social, economic, demographic and developmental precursors of these family formation processes has increasingly preoccupied researchers. The purpose of this paper is to add to this literature by focusing on a potentially important, but largely overlooked, factor in the changing landscape of young adulthood: the role of religious values and behavior in shaping family formation choices.

The connections between religion and family life have begun to attract more attention from scholars. Recent work has examined the role religious practices and beliefs play in parenting behavior (Ellison, Bartkowski, and Segal, 1996; Wilcox, 1998; 2004), marriage (Booth et al., 1995; Call and Heaton 1997; Thornton, Axinn, and Hill, 1992; Xu, Hudspeth, & Bartkowski, 2005), intergenerational ties (Pearce & Axinn, 1998; King and Elder, 1999), and demographic behavior (Lehrer, 2000; 2004a; 2004b; McQuillan, 2004). However, few of these new studies have focused specifically on the post teenage years, when youth are laying the foundations for their subsequent adult lives by making decisions about romantic relationships, cohabitation, and marriage (see Arnett & Jensen (2002) for an exception). In addition, many of these studies use simple indicators of religion, focusing on one or two dimensions of religious experiences, or

combine several dimensions into a single scale. Even fewer studies have gone beyond the initial transition to examine subsequent patterns of union stability or dissolution.

This paper will begin to address these gaps in the literature. Making use of the first and third waves of the National Study of Adolescent Heath (Add-Health), we will examine how three dimensions of religious beliefs and behavior in adolescence affect the likelihood of cohabitation and marriage in young adulthood. It is our contention that understanding the effects of religion on family formation behavior must consider the interplay between religious identity, the extent or importance of religious beliefs, and how often the person attends places of worship. Specifically, we expect that adolescents who regularly attend churches that emphasize the sanctity of marriage and whose beliefs are held to be very important are the most likely to make a transition to marriage, and the least likely to make a transition to cohabitation over the next five years, relative to other combinations of religious beliefs and experiences.

We also will examine how religious behavior and beliefs in adolescence might be related to specific patterns of cohabitation experiences. Previous work has demonstrated that religious identity and religiosity reduce the odds of the first union being cohabitation (Lehrer, 2004a). Nevertheless, a significant proportion of religiously inclined youth still choose to cohabit. One possibility we will explore is the extent to which religious beliefs and experience shape the subsequent patterns of cohabitation. We anticipate that the religiously inclined are more likely to have fewer cohabiting experiences, briefer spells of cohabitation, that are more likely to end in a marriage. Put another way, religious beliefs and behavior in adolescence is likely to predispose young adults to use cohabitation as part of the marriage process.

Data and Methods

      The data for this study are drawn from the first and third waves of the National Study of Adolescent Health. The Ad Health survey is longitudinal nationally representative sample of 20,745 middle and high school students first interviewed in 1995-1996. A second wave of interviews was conducted one year later, and a third round of 14,738 persons was interviewed in 2001. Response rates for Wave 1 and 3 were 78.9% and 77.4% respectively. The number of respondents who participated in both waves 1 and 3 were 11,710. A more detailed description of the data can be found in Harris et al. (2003).

Variables

<u>Religion</u>: We measure three dimensions of religious beliefs and behaviors: religious affiliation or identity, religiosity or fervor, and religious attendance. In wave 1, respondents were asked to identify their particular denominational affiliation (e.g., Adventist, Assemblies of God, etc.). We recoded these 29 choices into five categories: No religious affiliation, Conservative Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, and Other, using a classification scheme derived from two sources: The RELTRAD method of classifying denominations described in Steensland et. al. (2000), and a scheme used by Christian Smith (2005). These schemes allow us to categorize specific denominations into groups that share a common underlying theological or doctrinal similarity when it comes to perspectives on marriage and sexual behavior. Conservative Protestant denominations emphasize the centrality and importance of marriage for family life. Marriage is seen sacred, and the only legitimate setting for sexual behavior. In contrast, Mainline Protestant denominations are less likely to emphasize marriage as the center of

family life, and are more tolerant of premarital sexual behavior. Catholics are distinguished because of their size (they represent 24.3% of the sample), although Catholic teaching on marriage and sexuality is not markedly different from Conservative Protestants. All other religious or denominational affiliations that could not be classified into the above three groups are lumped together in the "other" category (5 percent). Finally, about 14 percent of the respondents indicated they had no religious identify or affiliation, and were classified as "none".

Three questions were used to construct our measure of religious fervor: "Do you agree that the sacred scriptures of your religion are the word of God and are completely without any mistakes?"; "How important is religion to you?"; and "How often do you pray?". Responses were combined to form a scale ranging from 2 to 10 (mean 7.07), with higher scores indicating higher fervor or religiosity. Chronbach's alpha for this scale was .75.

The third dimension of religion we employed was attendance. Attendance was drawn from two questions. The first was: "In the past twelve months, how often did you attend religious services?" Answers ranged from 1=Once a week or more to 4=Never. The second question used was: "Many churches, synagogues, and other places of worship have special activities for teenagers—such as youth groups, Bible classes, or choir. In the past 12 months, how often did you attend such youth activities?" Answers to this questions also ranged from 1=Once a week or more, to 4=Never. Both variables were reverse coded, such that higher values indicated greater attendance.

We also created a composite variable that represents combinations of affiliation, high and low fervor, and high and low attendance (attendance at either a worship service

or a youth oriented church event, which ever was higher). Thus, we divide Conservative Protestants into four groups: those with high attendance and high fervor, those with low attendance and high fervor, those with high attendance and low fervor, and those with both low attendance and low fervor. We divide Catholics and mainline Protestants in the same fashion. We do not divide respondents who are in the "other" or "none" affiliation categories. There are too few respondents in the "other" affiliation category to divide into four groups, and those who have no religious affiliation have virtually no distribution on the attendance and fervor variables.

Other Independent Variables: Other variables included in the multivariate models include age, race, total family income, mother's education, and family structure.

Analytic Approach:

Following previous work by Thornton et al. (1992) and Lehrer (2000; 2004a), Cox proportional hazards models are estimated that treat marriage and cohabitation as competing risks. That is, we model the length of time until first union transition for both transitions (marriage and cohabitation) while statistically accounting for the fact that couples may choose to enter either type of union first. The analyses used the Efron method for handling ties.

We begin by examining the effect of each dimension of religion (Table 1). Each model in Table 1 also contains variables measuring age, race, gender, family income, parent's education, and family structure. We then proceed to explore the effect of various combinations of the three dimensions of religious beliefs and behavior for time to first union. Table 2 contains a series of dummy variables representing the 14 combinations of the affiliation, attendance, and fervor, as well as the set of control variables. Finally,

among those whose first transition was to cohabitation, we explore religious differences in the number and duration of cohabitations, and the likelihood of the cohabitation ending in marriage.

Results

Consistent with the findings of others, we find that affiliation, attendance, and religious fervor are all strongly related to making a transition to either marriage or cohabitation. As expected, the greater the attendance at either worship services or youth oriented services, the higher the odds on marrying. Attendance at worship services, but not youth services reduces the odds of cohabitation. We also find that the stronger the religious fervor, the higher the odds of marriage, and the lower the odds of cohabiting.

The effects of affiliation are somewhat unexpected, however. As expected, Conservative Protestants are significantly more likely to marry.   However, both Mainline Protestants and Catholics are significantly less likely to cohabit that Conservative Protestants.   This difference is clear in the last column, which displays the percent in marriage or cohabiting for each affiliation group. Over 40 percent of Conservative Protestants, surprisingly, had transitioned to a cohabiting union as a first union—a proportion that is the highest of among the religious groups. How can we make sense of this?

The analyses in Table 2 help clarify the picture. This table displays the odds on transition to marriage or to cohabitation for 13 combinations of the three religion dimensions, relative to Conservative Protestants who are high attendees and have high fervor. Focusing first on the three groups of Conservative Protestants, we see that, with one exception, taking into account attendance and fervor seems to matter little when it

comes to the transition to marriage. However, we observe distinct differences in the odds

on cohabitation among Conservative Protestants, depending on their attendance and

fervor. Relative to those who are frequently attend services and evidence high fervor,

Conservative Protestants who are less faithful are significantly more likely to cohabit.

We observe similar patterns for Mainline Protestants and Catholics. Members of these

groups who are high attendees and who evidence high fervor depart significantly from

their less faithful brethren when it comes to cohabitation.   Interestingly, these devout are

significantly less likely than devout Conservative Protestants to be in any kind of union.

In sum, we find that adolescents who identify themselves as Conservative

Protestants are significantly more likely than adolescents of other faiths to transition to

marriage in early adulthood. The picture is more complex when it comes to cohabitation.

Where either attendance or religious fervor are low, Conservative Protestants are much

more likely to cohabit.

One of the more interesting findings is that significant fractions (approximately

a third) of religiously inclined youth subsequently enter cohabiting unions. Does

religiosity moderate their cohabitation experience relative to young adults with no

religious affiliation? Table three contains some data that, in very preliminary fashion,

addresses this question. What we see in these data is that religious affiliation appears to

matter little for the number of subsequent cohabitations. There is some evidence,

however, that the length of cohabiting spells is modestly smaller for Conservative

Protestants. Also, the fraction of cohabiting unions that that transitioned into marriage is

lowest for those with no religious affiliation. Overall the evidence for differences by

affiliation alone appears modest. Work remains to address the effects of the other

components of religious life.

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Table 1

Relationship between Religious Variables and Time until First Union Formation in Early Adulthood

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Percent in Union	
	Marriage	Cohab.	Marriage	Cohab.	Marriage	Cohab.	Marriage	Cohab.
No Affiliation[a]	.41***	1.14***					6.93	51.17
Mainline Protestant[a]	.48***	.90*					7.62	38.70
Catholic[a]	.30***	.74***					6.54	34.87
Other Religion[a]	.55***	N/S					8.64	36.54
Worship Service Attendance			1.08*	.86***				
Youth Group Attendance			1.20***	N/S				
Fervor					1.14***	.94***		

[a] Comparison group is conservative protestant (13.61% married, 40.39% cohabited)

Note. Control variables in every model are age, race, gender, total family income, parent's (usually mother's) education, and family structure.

Table 2

Relationship between Composite Religious Variables and Time until First Union

Formation in Early Adulthood

Affiliation	Attendance	Fervor	Union		Cell Size	Percent in Union	
			Marriage	Cohab.		Married	Cohabited
None [a]	N/A	N/A	.38***	1.32***	1614	6.93	51.17
Other Religion [a]	N/A	N/A	.51***	N/S	513	8.64	36.54
Conservative Protestant [a]	High	Low	N/S	1.49***	307	11.07	48.11
Conservative Protestant [a]	Low	High	N/S	1.30***	568	14.24	49.93
Conservative Protestant [a]	Low	Low	.61**	1.52***	474	8.86	52.73
Mainline Protestant [a]	High	High	.55***	.83**	1496	9.83	31.73
Mainline Protestant [a]	High	Low	.40***	1.23*	302	6.54	42.63
Mainline Protestant [a]	Low	High	.47***	1.21*	498	7.58	43.40
Mainline Protestant [a]	Low	Low	.17***	1.34***	650	3.05	49.32
Catholic [a]	High	High	.88***	.67***	1382	7.26	27.79
Catholic [a]	High	Low	.11***	1.38***	283	2.15	48.85
Catholic [a]	Low	High	.38***	N/S	378	9.09	42.22
Catholic [a]	Low	Low	.24***	N/S	556	5.26	40.37

[a] Comparison Group is Conservative Protestant with High Attendance and High Fervor

(cell size = 2657, Percents = 14.62% Married, 35.25% Cohabited).

Table 3

Youths' Cohabitation Experience by Affiliation

Variable	No Affiliation	Conservative Protestants	Mainline Protestants	Catholic	Other
	M (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)
Cumulative Number of Cohabitations	1.29 (.60)	1.29 (.66)	1.27 (.66)	1.22 (.55)	1.25 (.54)
Cumulative Months in Cohabitation	17.98 (17.52)	16.62 (15.74)	17.02 (15.26)	17.00 (14.70)	19.26 (18.96)
% of 1st Cohabitations Transitioning to Marriage	13.23	19.18	18.54	15.72	21.53

Note. Inclusion for this table is conditional on having ever cohabited.