

### **Three issues to be addressed in an introduction**

- 1. What is the research question (and perhaps why is it important?)**
- 2. What is the nature of the debate in the literature?**
- 3. How will this research help to resolve the debate?**

### **Introduction**

#### **(The Research Question)**

This paper examines the comparative impact of religious belief and practice (religiosity), Christian fundamentalist beliefs, and religious context on deviant behavior. Religiosity is measured in terms of church attendance, frequency of prayer, and reported strength of religious faith. Christian fundamentalism is measured as attitudes derived from survey respondents using questions drawn from previous literature. Deviance is measured as reported frequency of underage and/or binge drinking, premarital sexual intercourse, marijuana and other illegal drug use. Insight from these findings may serve to identify both risk factors for dangerous behavior as well as suggesting conditions under which religious belief and practice may reduce the incidence and consequences of deviance.

#### **(Prevailing view in the debate)**

Much of the empirical literature correlating religiosity and deviant behavior is directed to the individual level of analysis, largely demonstrating there is an inverse relationship between the two. Individuals who express a strong religious faith and who regularly pray and attend worship, are less likely to drink alcohol illegally, use illegal drugs, or exhibit sexual deviance through pre or extra marital activity (Brown, Parks, Zimmerman, & Phillips, 2001; Cochran and Beeghley, 1991; Cochran, Chamlin, Beeghley, and Fenwick, 2004; Ford and Kadushin, 2002; Jaynes, 2001; Nelson & Rooney, 1982). The inverse relationship between religiosity and

deviance also seems especially prominent among religiously conservative individuals (Cochran, Beeghley, and Bock, 1988; Peek, Chalfant, and Milton, 1979; Peterson and Donnenwerth, 1997; Welch and Leege, 1991).

Explanations for these correlations have focused on the group dynamics associated with belonging to religious groups or organizations through which norms for appropriate behavior are initiated, negotiated, and persist over time. Religious subcultures set limits on adherents' behavior and sanction those whose behavior takes them out of bounds (Bock, Cochran, and Beeghley, 1987; Gay and Ellison, 1993; Wellman, 1999). Friendship networks and selective interaction within religious groups have also produced normative behavior among those so involved (Roberts, Koch, and Johnson, 2001; Stark, 1996). These types of studies build their logic on reference group theory (Merton and Rossi, 1968), arguing that conformity to norms and resistance to deviance are rewarded by those with whom individuals choose to interact in religious groups. Again, this group dynamic seems especially salient among individuals tied to religiously conservative groups (Bock, Cochran, and Beeghley, 1987; Cochran, *et al.*, 1988; Roberts, *et al.*, 2001).

### **(Competing view in the literature)**

This latter body of work emerged after Hirschi and Stark's (1969) astounding assertion that religious behavior and delinquency were unrelated. Stark (1996:163) states, "(W)ord spread quickly that kids on their way home from Sunday School were as likely to strip your car as were kids on the way home from the pool hall." Soon after, other studies replicated the Hirschi and Stark finding (Burkette and White, 1974), while others found the contrary (Cochran and Akers, 1989; Higgins and Albrecht, 1977; Jensen and Erickson, 1979; Rhodes and Reiss, 1970). Subsequent research designed to adjudicate this debate, and to frame the debate inside

sociological theory, led to what has become known as the “Moral Communities Hypothesis.”

Stark (1996:164-165) states:

I suggest that what counts is not only whether a particular person is religious, but whether this religiousness is, or is not, ratified by the social environment. The idea here is that religion is empowered to produce conformity to the norms only as it is sustained through interaction and is accepted by the majority as a valid basis for action. ... Religious individuals will be less likely than those who are not religious to commit delinquent acts, *but only in communities where the majority of the people are actively religious.*

Qualified support for this hypothesis has been demonstrated empirically in that “moral communities” seem to exert a positive influence on individuals by reducing the likelihood of their engaging in deviant behavior. Religious belief and practice, measured in the context of a moral community, correlates with lower probabilities of tax evasion, embezzlement, and abusing alcohol and drugs. Communal religiosity also elevates the likelihood of normative behavior such as seatbelt use, staying out of debt, and taking medication when ill (Welch, Tittle, and Petee, 1991; Welch, Tittle, and Grasmick, 2006; Welch, Xu, Bjarnason, Petee, O’Donnell, and Magro, 2005). These studies use congregational membership, denominational affiliation, and collectivities of individuals expressing personal religiosity as proxies for distinguishing moral communities. Stark (1996:165) critiques such work wherein the religious contexts in question “are analytical constructs having no physical existence.”

**(How this work helps to resolve the debate).**

This research is an effort to define the “moral communities” in this study by their physical existence. The religious schools in this study are both highly selective academically and clearly constituted as carriers of faith in the practice of scholarship. Their mission

statements and student handbooks explicitly link Christian faith with expected standards of conduct for students, faculty, and staff. While the content of these standards does not differ dramatically from those at the two state schools, the religious schools are explicit in the expectation that individual behavior and ethics reflect the standards which define a Christian community. These are the types of specifically religious contexts which are hypothesized to exert a suppressive effect on deviance and delinquency.