

RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT AMONG YOUTH OF HIGHER AND LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC
BACKGROUNDS: EXPLORING INFLUENCES ON EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS
AND ORIENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

BO HYEONG LEE: Religious Involvement among Youth of Higher and Lower Socioeconomic Backgrounds: Exploring Influences on Educational Expectations and Orientations
(Under the direction of Lisa Pearce)

The literature on the effects of religiosity among youth theorizes that being religious has a generally positive effect on educational outcomes. However, much of this discourse has been limited in the extent to which individual contexts are examined as significant frames within which experiences and opportunities unfold. Using both survey and interview data from the National Study of Youth and Religion, I explore more thoroughly *how* the influence of religious involvement among youth upon educational expectations and orientations may differ by family socioeconomic contexts. Inductive analysis of youth's responses reveals that there are significant differences in what being religious means to youth from lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds, which critically impacts how youth talk about education in relation to what it means to be religious and what mechanisms are present linking religious involvement to educational opportunities.

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the ongoing inquiry into the relevance of religion in the lives of youth, many scholars have found that religious involvement among adolescents is significantly correlated with a number of positive outcomes, including physical, emotional, and social well-being (Evans et al. 1995, Regnerus 2003, Wallace & Williams 1997), and in particular, related to educational expectations, academic achievement, and staying on track in school (Muller & Ellison 2001, Regnerus & Elder 2003). Organized religious participation provides youth with opportunities to learn and practice various forms of cultural capital, form and maintain social and organizational ties, and develop a “sense of moral order” through relationships with role models—all of which are likely to have a positive impact on education (Smith 2003).

However, taking into account the socioeconomic contexts that critically shape individual experiences of both religion and education, some research suggests that the positive impact of religious involvement may be dampened by the structural constraints faced by lower-SES youth (Schwadel 2008), while others find that the lack of institutional support for lower-SES families renders the impact of structured religious participation even more significant (Regnerus & Elder 2003). The literature remains largely inconclusive about how the relationship between youth’s religiosity and educational outcomes may be moderated by family socioeconomic status (SES).

The aim of this project is to explore the processes through which religious involvement influences the educational expectations and orientations of youth, using (1) evidence from survey data analyses showing the relationship between religious involvement and educational expectations is modified by family socioeconomic status, and (2) an inductive analysis of qualitative data to better understand how religious involvement relates

to educational orientations in unique ways based on one's family socioeconomic background. I use survey data and interview data drawn mostly from Wave II of the National Study of Youth and Religion (2005) to show that the relationship between religious involvement and educational expectations is moderated by family socioeconomic status, and that various mechanisms play into this relationship.

II. BACKGROUND AND THEORY

Educational Trajectories of Youth

Education stands as one of the experiences most central to American youth, especially in considering the implications it may have for the trajectory of youth transitions into adulthood. Drawing from the broader body of educational research, there are critical distinctions to be made among various measures of education, including *educational aspirations, expectations, planning, and attainment* (Brookover et al. 1975, Mau 1995, Trusty 2000, Schoon & Parsons 2002, Feliciano 2006). Here, *aspirations* refer to the general educational goals and ambitions expressed by youth; *expectations* capture the levels of education that youth more concretely and realistically foresee to complete in the future; *planning* indicates the specific course of actions that individuals prepare for and carry out as a means to reach higher levels of education; and *attainment* identifies the number of years or level of education actually completed at a given point in time.

While there is support in the literature for considerable associations between many of these educational measures and parents' expectations or students' level of success in school, studies show that adolescent educational aspirations have come to be fairly high and consistent across a wide range of socioeconomic and academic achievement levels. Even

considering that adolescents from higher family socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to have better educational opportunities, as well as greater access to financial resources and social networks (Schulenberg et al. 1984, Breen & Jonsson 2005), youth express high and stable aspirations to attend college independent of their own academic performance or parents' education levels (Mickelson 1990). Scholars thus suggest that it is more so the variations in youth's expectations and planning that help to predict later educational attainment (Trusty 2000, Feliciano 2006). Also, perhaps shifting the focus of empirical work on education more towards exploring the complexities of youth's educational experiences, *educational orientations* may be considered as ways in which youth internalize and externalize their understanding of education's value and meaning in comparison to other aspects of their lives, such as religion and family. Overall, there is much empirical evidence that would suggest that the risk of not having high or comparable completed levels of education is now greater than ever (McCall 2000, Rumberger & Palardy 2005), which makes the question of youth's transition into post-secondary education an especially important one to understand how subsequent experiences in the life course may unfold. Based on the evidence cited here, the focus of this paper is to examine how the impact of religious involvement on the educational expectations and orientations of youth varies based on family socioeconomic status.

Religion among Youth in Relation to Education

Religion is a significant part of the lives of many youth in the US. According to Smith and Denton's *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2005), about eighty percent of all teens report believing in God, and seventy

percent of all teens attend a religious organization that also sponsors youth groups. More than fifty percent of teens report that their families pray regularly, and about sixty percent of teens report that faith is extremely important in their daily lives.

Because youth is also a time with heavy investments in educational activities and planning, it is important to study the significance of religious involvement as it relates to educational outcomes during this stage of the life course. As a number of studies focusing on the effects of religion on education find (Brown & Gary 1991, Regnerus 2000, Regnerus & Elder 2003), religious involvement among youth indeed shows a positive relationship with various measures of education. Especially among the highest and lowest academically performing students, higher parental educational expectations, more communication with parents about schooling, more advanced course taking, and more time spent on school assignments are found to be closely associated with youth religiosity (Muller & Ellison 2001).

In the literature linking youth and religion to education more broadly, one longstanding perspective focuses on differences in educational outcomes by specific religious affiliations, perhaps most notably between Protestants and Catholics (Lenski 1961, Coleman et al. 1982). Echoes of this perspective are evident in more recent work by scholars who find a negative relationship between conservative Protestant affiliations and individual educational aspirations and attainment; strong attitudes of divine control in everyday life and strict gendered stereotypes held by women are found to be significant to this relationship (Keysar & Kosmin 1995, Damell & Sherkat 1997, Sherkat 2000, Beyerlein 2004).

Alternatively, and more closely tied to the present research, scholars have also examined the broad influences of religious participation upon youth's experiences in various settings. In a theoretical framework proposed by Smith (2003), American adolescents who

participate in religious institutions are likely to benefit from developing (1) a “sense of moral order” by which decisions are guided by moral directives, role models, and religious leaders; (2) community and leadership skills, coping skills, and cultural capital; and lastly, (3) social and organizational ties, whereby network closure and extra-community skills may be achieved. In particular, related to the third dimension of social and organizational ties, substantial empirical evidence has been found to support that participation in a religious institution contributes to more positive educational aspirations, expectations, and norms of achievement through ties with adults and “important others” in a multigenerational community of support (Bankston & Zhou 1996, Coleman 1988, Portes 1998, Rauner 2000). While most of the aforementioned studies examining the link between religion and education employ survey data analyses and provide considerable evidence for this overall association, a central aim of the present study will be to elaborate upon specific mechanisms and examine through interview responses how different family socioeconomic backgrounds may modify youth’s experiences of religion and education.

Socioeconomic Context as a Moderator of Religious Influence

Discussed to varying degrees in some of the above mentioned studies on religion and education, a crucial and often more elusive element of analysis is the socioeconomic contexts in which educational experiences are embedded or from which trajectories stem. Studies find consistently that adolescents’ educational expectations are closely related to their families’ socioeconomic characteristics (Hauser & Anderson 1991, Jacobs et al. 1991, Teachman & Paasch 1998, Feliciano 2006), which influence youth’s conceptual frames of reference, practiced skills, and in particular, formal and informal social ties garnered from experiences

in and outside of school (Lin and Dumin 1986, Coleman 1988, Portes 1998, Jodl et al. 2001, Hitlin 2006). As such, the significance of youth's socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds raises important theoretical questions for the interplay between religious involvement and educational experiences.

Foremost, in examining socioeconomic differences across religious organizations at large, it is notable that the distribution of American religious groups by SES has remained largely stable and persistent for several generations (Smith & Faris 2005, Pyle 2006). Significant differences in educational outcomes across religious affiliations may be attributed at least in part to the already existing structure of inequality across religious groups differentiated by social class. This stratified religious structure is, indeed, so closely associated with broader social inequalities in the US that considerations of such sustained socioeconomic differences are essential to examining religious effects on individual expectations and experiences (Keister 2003, McCloud 2007, Davidson 2008).

More explicitly highlighting the differences in experiences of religious involvement among youth from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, Schwadel (2008) discusses the contrasting nature of public and private religious practices (i.e. institutional vs. personal practices) across high and low socioeconomic contexts. While studies of youth's religiosity have tended to focus on the public or institutional effects of religious involvement, Schwadel clarifies that economically disadvantaged teens are more likely to practice and be influenced by religion on personal terms by praying and expressing high levels of faith, while upper-class teens more frequently report attending religious services and participating in organized religious activities. Similarly, Pearce and Denton (2011), in their study on variations among religious teens, also illustrate a direct relationship between family socioeconomic

backgrounds and youth's religious conduct. Results show youth from households with parents of lower than average levels of education and income are more likely to be characterized as "adapters," with lower levels of formal religious conduct and inconsistent religious participation, which may be attributed to logistical challenges in attending religious services on a regular basis as a result of limited transportation, frequent residential moves, and irregular or inflexible parents' work schedules.

Even so, in a robust study of religion's impact on youth "on-track" school performance in different neighborhood contexts, Regnerus and Elder (2003) examine whether involvement in religious organizations in less affluent areas—despite such aforementioned limitations and challenges—can actually offset conditions of poor opportunity and high risk. As the authors discuss, religious organizations often establish and reinforce norms of pro-social attitudes and behaviors, and in doing so, have critical potential for providing participatory and social capital-building communities amid environments of low institutional support to youth (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). Through a series of multi-level models using survey data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health and framing socioeconomic contexts as neighborhood risk, the authors find religious service attendance to function as a protective mechanism with greater impact on youth's "on-track" school performance more so in high-risk neighborhoods than in low-risk ones (Regnerus & Elder 2003).

Indeed, scholars of religion and education have to date contributed in various ways to an extensive discussion on the relationship between religion and education, addressing relevant questions about the possible effects of socioeconomic differences on this relationship. Building on this foundation, the present study seeks to explore further through a

multi-method approach the mechanisms of how religious involvement influences youth's educational expectations and their orientation toward education, taking into account the differing nature of religion and educational trajectories for youth from different family SES backgrounds during their transitions into adulthood.

III. DATA AND METHODS

The National Study of Youth and Religion

This study uses, first, data from the survey component of Waves I and II of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) to examine the interaction effect between religious participation and family SES upon youth's educational expectations. The NSYR is a longitudinal and nationally representative study that was launched in 2002 with the aim of researching the shape and influence of religion and spirituality in the lives of American youth. In the first wave, a random-digit-dial sample of adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 in English and Spanish speaking households (N = 3,290) were surveyed by telephone, as was one parent of each respondent. Then, in 2005, the Wave II survey was conducted with a similar design, re-interviewing Wave I respondents on many of the same topics but not re-interviewing the parents (N = 2,604). The present analysis consists of mainly measures of youth's educational expectations from Wave II, regressed on demographic and religious measures from Wave II and family socioeconomic characteristics provided by parents from Wave I.

In addition, data from the NSYR's Wave II semi-structured in-person interviews are used to explore the influence of religion upon youth's orientation toward education and the mechanisms of religion that contribute to this relationship. Of the respondents selected for

the survey in Wave I, a stratified quota subsample of participants was selected for follow-up in-person interviews (N = 267), representing a range of demographic and religious characteristics and taking into account region, urban/suburban/rural, age, sex, race, household income, religion, and school type. Subsequently, Wave II interview participants between the ages of 16 and 21 were selected from all those who participated in the Wave I in-person interviews and also participated in the Wave II survey (N = 119). Participants were paired to their original interviewer from Wave I as much as possible, and the majority of interviewers and participants were matched on gender and race, with all black participants interviewed by minority interviewers. A total of sixteen Wave II interviewers conducted 119 interviews across 28 states—each interview lasting an average of 107 minutes and digitally recorded.

Survey Measures and Analysis

RELIGIOUS INVOLVEMENT

Religious involvement is represented by two measures from the NSYR survey for the present analysis. First, as an attempt to capture the public or institutional aspects of religious participation, I use the measure of religious attendance, which asks youth, “About how often do you usually attend religious services?” The categories have been simplified as 1=at least once a month, and 0=less than once a month or not at all. Also included in the analysis in order to capture at least in part the personal aspects of religiosity is the survey measure that asks youth, “How important or unimportant is religious faith in shaping how you live your daily life?” The categories for this variable are also simplified as 1=faith is somewhat important or very important, and 0=faith is not very important or not important at all.

FAMILY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

As employed in a number of previous studies on religion and social class differences, socioeconomic status (SES) may be delineated as the integrated and accumulated effects of education, income, and occupation on an individual's position in society (Smith & Faris 2005, McCloud 2007). Broadly, the concept of social class may indeed include questions of how certain group boundaries are externally ascribed or reflexively constructed as subcultural identities. However, social class in the present analysis will be more in accordance with Bourdieu's (1985) approach and examined as persistent and relevant social structure, on account of the large role that differential material conditions play in shaping the trajectory of individual's lives.

Adapted from Lareau's (2003) study of divergent family processes in varying socioeconomic contexts¹, distinctions across different family socioeconomic backgrounds in the present analysis are made based on parents' occupational status, highest level of parents' education, and household income. Given that parents' occupational prestige is not readily available in the NSYR data, I use parents' occupational status, which is defined as either mother or father working full-time; highest level of parents' education (i.e. mother and/or father with less than high school education, high school or some college education, or a bachelor's degree or higher); and household income, which is determined by the approximate combined income of parents as reported at Wave 1.

I create a composite 'Family SES' variable using these socioeconomic measures to match youth respondents to either higher or lower family SES groups. Youth of higher²

¹ Lareau differentiates SES groupings (middle class, working class, poor) primarily based on parents' occupational prestige—e.g. level of authority in the workplace, educational requirements for jobs

² Middle-upper

family SES backgrounds are generally identified as having at least one parent working full-time, at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or higher, and a household income of more than \$50,000³ (Family SES=1). Youth of lower family SES backgrounds are identified by parents working irregularly or part-time, parents with less than a bachelor's degree, and a household income of less than \$50,000 (Family SES=0). This 'Family SES' variable⁴ is used as a moderating variable in the survey analysis regarding the relationship between religious attendance and educational expectations. The Family SES variable is also used to identify interview cases as belonging to the higher or lower family SES category, and analyses proceeded to compare these groups in the ways they talk about religion, educational plans and orientations, and the interface between the two.

EDUCATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

The measure for educational expectations consists of youth's responses to the question: "Given realistic limitations, how much education do you think you will actually complete?" Categories for this ordinal variable include: (a) less than high school, (b) high school, (c) vocational or technical school, (d) some college or associate's degree, (e) bachelor's degree, and (f) graduate degree or professional school.

ANALYTIC METHOD AND CONTROLS

In examining the statistical relationships between measures of religious involvement, family SES, and educational expectations, I use ordered logistic regression models, since educational expectations is measured with an ordinal variable. First, I assess whether

³ \$50,000 selected to approximate the US median household income (US Census Bureau)

⁴ For individuals with responses that did not correspond with having a parent working full-time *AND* a parent with a bachelor's degree or higher *AND* a household income of at least \$50,000, priority was given to parents' education level (i.e. those whose parents have a bachelor's degree or higher *AND* are working full-time *OR* make a household income of at least \$50,000 as 'higher SES')

religious involvement and family SES have independent and statistically significant relationships with educational expectations—testing separate measures of family SES in Model 1 and a composite measure of family SES in Model 2. I then investigate whether there is a statistically significant interaction between religious attendance and family SES that helps to explain variations in educational expectations, as will be shown in Model 3. In all models, gender, age, and race/ethnicity are included as controls.

Analysis of Qualitative Interview Data

For the inductive examination of youth’s religious involvement in relation to their orientations toward education, the analysis is guided by emergent themes, focused on a subsample of religious youth selected from the initial Wave II sample of 119 interview participants. This analysis explores how religious involvement impacts youth’s educational experiences, as opposed to whether there is such an influence—namely, to examine the process more so than the presence of the effect already identified through the survey data analysis. Therefore, the qualitative data analysis focuses on a subsample of religious participants (n=84). The distinction between whether youth are or are not included in the “religious” subsample is based on: (1) whether the individual self-identifies as “religious” in the interview, and (2) expresses some form of active religious involvement, either by institutional participation, such as religious service attendance, or private practice, such as prayer or meditation. Preliminary coding and matching between survey and interview data show that some youth who provide a response other than “non-religious” to the survey question about religious affiliation do not affirm their religious identification in their responses to the interviewer; such youth are not included in the inductive transcript analysis.

Employing again the ‘Family SES’ variable⁵ used in the statistical analysis to group the subsample of interviewed religious youth, I identify 41 interviewed youth as having lower family SES backgrounds and 43 youth as being of higher family SES backgrounds (see Table 1 for the delineation of interview transcripts by family SES and religious affiliation).

Table 1. Youth’s Interview Transcripts by Religious Affiliation and Family Socioeconomic Status (SES), NSYR Wave 2.

	Total Transcripts (Proportion of Total)	Lower SES	Higher SES
	27	14	13
Mainline Protestant	0.23	0.52	0.48
	11	6	5
Conservative Protestant	0.09	0.55	0.45
	15	6	9
Catholic	0.13	0.40	0.60
	11	7	4
Black Protestant	0.09	0.64	0.36
	7	4	3
Mormon/LDS	0.06	0.57	0.43
	6	2	4
Jewish	0.05	0.33	0.67
	7	2	5
other religion	0.06	0.29	0.71
	35	21	14
not religious or religiously active	0.29	0.60	0.40

As an additional tool for research, I used Dedoose, a web-based qualitative analysis application, which allows for qualitative data and quantitative indicators for given cases to be integrated and effectively explored. This interface was particularly useful in the present study to match quantitative family SES data with interview transcripts, specific sections, and

⁵ Notes provided by interviewers about the participants’ family and neighborhood socioeconomic contexts also taken into account and crosschecked when survey responses did not match all SES criteria of parents’ occupational status, parents’ education level, and household income

analytic codes therein. Applying Charmaz's approach of qualitative coding (2006) to guide the analysis by the emergence of categories rather than using predetermined ones, I employ inductive reasoning to identify patterns and conceptual categories from analytical and theoretical interpretation of the data. After conducting a full reading of all 84 interviews followed by "open" coding of the transcripts, I used "focused" coding to explore and develop themes around the meanings that youth of various backgrounds associate with education and religious involvement. Sections of the interview that came to be particularly important to the "focused" coding process included the Family, Religion, School, Organized Activities and Work, and Future Plan and Prospects sections.

IV. STATISTICAL RESULTS AND OVERVIEW

As shown in Table 2, I ran three ordered logistic regression models of educational expectations reported by youth in Wave II of the NSYR on measures of religiosity, family SES, and demographic controls— with Model 2 displaying the composite measure of family SES and Model 3 testing the interaction effect between religious attendance and family SES. Results show that the estimated conditional coefficients of religious attendance and family SES are statistically significant in all models predicting youth's educational expectations. The interaction term, as well, between religious attendance and family SES is moderately significant in Model 3 ($\alpha=.10$). This negative interaction coefficient suggests that, although there remains a positive effect of religious attendance for higher SES youth, the effect of religious attendance may actually be greater for youth from lower family SES backgrounds.

Table 2. Ordered Logistic Regression Results of Youth's Educational Expectations on Demographic, Religious, and Family SES Characteristics, NSYR Wave 2.

	Educ Exp Model 1	Educ Exp Model 2	Educ Exp Model 3
Female	0.528*** (0.0758)	0.490*** (0.0752)	0.493*** (0.0753)
Age at W2	0.0611** (0.0277)	0.0673** (0.0276)	0.0660** (0.0276)
Black	-0.0296 (0.110)	-0.0252 (0.108)	-0.0262 (0.108)
Latino	-0.0170 (0.144)	-0.0144 (0.139)	-0.0130 (0.139)
Asian	0.663** (0.336)	0.635* (0.330)	0.636* (0.330)
Other race	0.386*** (0.141)	0.307** (0.139)	0.308** (0.139)
Religious attendance	0.236*** (0.0909)	0.284*** (0.0903)	0.420*** (0.121)
Faith is very important	-0.0527 (0.0833)	-0.100 (0.0826)	-0.0957 (0.0826)
Parents less than HS educ	-0.279 (0.171)		
Parents educ bachelor's or higher	0.621*** (0.0953)		
Family income less than \$40k	-0.371*** (0.0968)		
Family income \$70-\$100k	0.339*** (0.111)		
Family income more than \$100k	0.806*** (0.125)		
Parent full-time work	0.377*** (0.121)		
Family SES categories		0.920*** (0.0777)	1.121*** (0.143)
Religious attendance * Family SES			-0.278* (0.166)
Constant	3.205*** (0.521)	2.909*** (0.500)	2.984*** (0.502)
Observations	2,600	2,600	2,600

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Illustrating graphically the interaction between religious attendance and family SES, Figures 1 and 2 display the predicted probabilities of expecting to achieve a certain level of education for four distinct groups of analysis: youth of lower family SES backgrounds who do and do *not* attend religious services, and youth of higher family SES backgrounds who also do and do *not* attend religious services. In particular, differences across groups and the impact of religious attendance in each reveal notable patterns at the ‘bachelor’s degree’ and ‘graduate or professional degree’ education levels. While religious attendance raises the educational expectations of lower SES youth for both ‘bachelor’s degree’ and ‘graduate or professional degree’ categories, religious attendance for higher SES youth raises only educational expectations at the ‘graduate and professional degree’ level.

Figure 1. Predicted Probabilities of Educational Expectations on the Interaction between Religious Attendance and Family SES, NSYR W2.

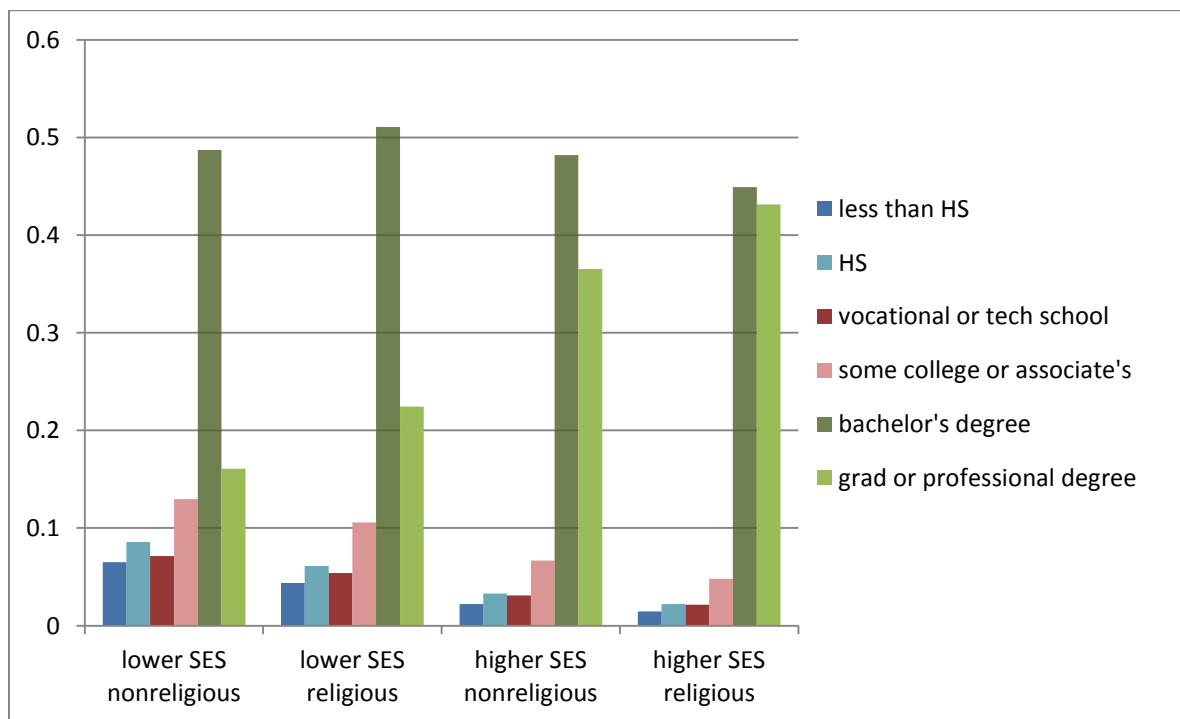
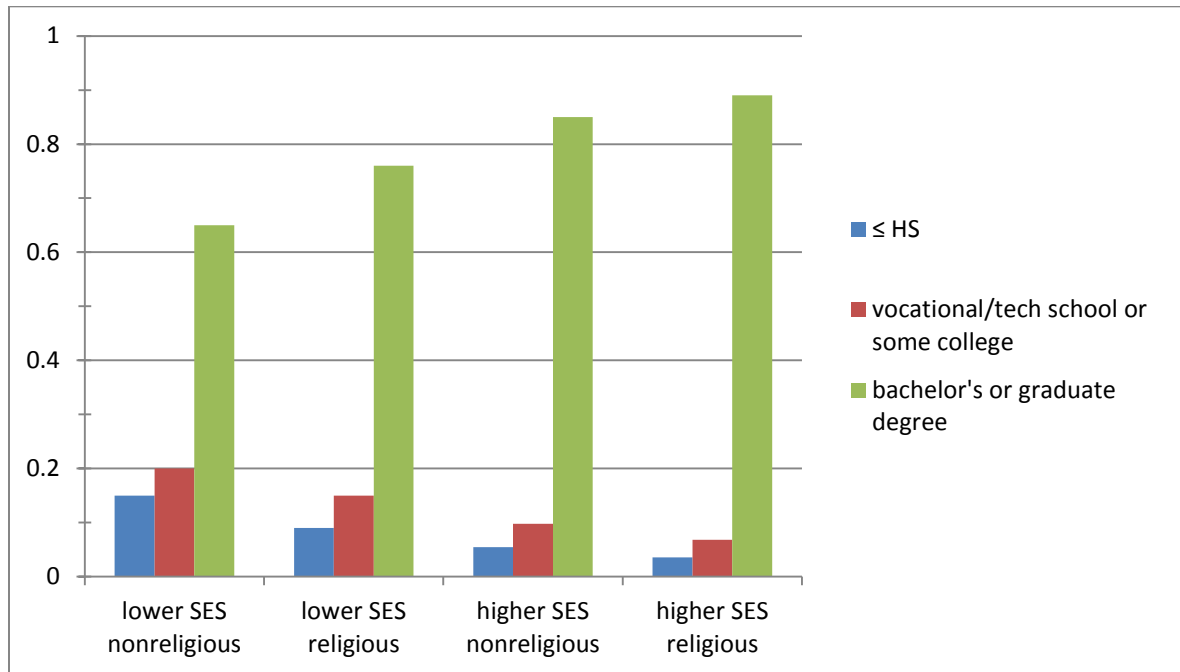


Figure 2. Predicted Probabilities of Educational Expectations (collapsed categories) on the Interaction between Religious Attendance and Family SES, NSYR W2.



Critical comparison of these predicted probabilities—displayed more simply as collapsed categories⁶ in Figure 2—further reveals that the difference in educational expectations at the ‘bachelor’s or graduate degree’ level between religious and non-religious lower SES youth is about twice as great as that of religious and non-religious youth from higher SES backgrounds⁷. However, this overview of results still does not fully address the question of what processes and mechanisms contribute to the distinct influences of religious attendance for youth from higher and lower family socioeconomic backgrounds. The primary goal of the following discussion will be to elaborate upon and add texture to the understanding of *how*

⁶ Results for ordered logistic regression and predicted probabilities recalculated for (a) high school or less than high school; (b) vocational/technical school, some college, or associate’s degree; and (c) bachelor’s or graduate/professional degree

⁷ Predicted probability values at the ‘bachelor’s or graduate/professional degree’ level: lower SES nonreligious (0.649), lower SES religious (0.749), higher SES nonreligious (0.847), higher SES religious (0.896)

religious involvement may impact youth's educational experiences through emergent themes that are identified in the NSYR's Wave II interview transcripts.

V. EMERGENT THEMES FROM QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW DATA

In illustrating the larger frame of how youth talk about religion and education, it is evident that the impact of youth's religious involvement is preceded by varying considerations of what educational experiences are relevant and varying understandings of what it really means "to be religious" by higher and lower family SES backgrounds. Among the responses given in the in-person interviews, performing well on school assignments, receiving good grades, making considerations of college as a plausible option for the future, and working to save money to continue other post-secondary education were some of the most frequently discussed aspects of youth's schooling experiences. While more concrete examples of college preparation, such as SAT scores, college applications, information about financial aid, etc. related to academic planning were relatively sparse, the discourse of youth's orientations toward present and future education emerged as an intriguing distinction between religious youth of higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Overall, I find that varying understandings of what it means "to be religious" impact different frameworks of youth's orientations toward education, and effectively shape a range of youth's educational experiences, especially through social and institutional mechanisms of religious involvement. While personal aspects of religiosity emerge as substantial sources of support as well as ways of seeking meaning and purpose for many religious youth, it is notable that there were not marked differences by family SES backgrounds in the frequency of or emphasis on prayer (Davidson 2008, Schwadel 2008). Indeed, some of the most descriptive accounts of a

personal sense of religiosity were found in the responses of highly religious youth struggling against the odds of lower SES constraints, but more generally, religious youth from higher SES backgrounds were just as likely as their lower SES counterparts to say that they pray when prompted with specific questions about their private religious practices. Moreover, such personal aspects of religiosity, as reflected in the interviews, seem to operate mostly independent of family SES contexts, which also supports the non-significant measure of personal religiosity in the statistical analysis.

Meaning of “Being Religious” among Youth

Consistent for many youth of lower family SES backgrounds, the discourse of what it means to be religious is often associated with various major aspects of well-being or life events, including living a healthy life, getting a good education, raising a family, etc.—articulated by some as the “good life.” In a sense, religious involvement is described as encouraging youth and enhancing the course of youth’s well-being and educational opportunity. Two teenage boys whose parents have less than a college education and who live in neighborhoods that interviewers describe as being economically depressed elaborate on their experiences of being religious as follows:

Male Participant 1: As far as when I, when we left the church, that was then [two years ago]. And now, where I’m at now, I’m understanding it more as it’s helping me to live a good life. Like the things I decide to do, definitely make the right choices and things like that, and so I’m happy with what’s going on in my life now...

I try to pray every night... Just that he continues to watch me and to protect me, bless me, financially, physically, spiritually, just pray for my mother, for my pastor, for my father, my family, all my needs.

Male Participant 2: Well, before, I didn’t believe, but, because like as a child, I guess I was in depression or something and I used to pray all the time but it felt like my prayers was never answered and it’s been within these last two years that I’ve realized

that God is good because I'm healthy, like I've outgrown my asthma, I have no enemies, at least none that's like, antagonize me on a regular basis if at all. Um, my girl is like everything that I ever wanted in life and like she's what makes me happy. You know, she came in my life at the right time, when I was finished with all the nonsense I was doing and I was getting focused on school. That's when I met her and we been in the same school for four years and that's, I don't know, I think it's cool, I definitely believe that God is a good guy. He always on time.

Especially in the second teenage boy's response, the participant's identification with becoming religious and his belief in God as a "good guy" coincide with his recovered health, restored relationships, and refocusing on school. Although there is not substantial support in the interview transcripts for the hypothesis that prayer and other forms of private religious practices are more common among lower SES religious youth (Davidson 2008, Schwadel 2008), religious involvement in both cases above appears to be expressed in conjunction with an empowered sense of hope and encouragement toward numerous practical matters.

In contrast, the discourse of youth of higher family SES backgrounds more frequently involves descriptions of their experience of religion in reference to their family involvement and religious service attendance. More so in line with the framework of institutional religious participation leading to benefits to youth that are transferrable to other settings (Smith 2003), the discussions of higher SES youth's involvement in activities sponsored by religious organizations make for a stronger basis for the argument that religious participation may positively impact youth's educational opportunities. This is illustrated in the conversations involving the following two teenage participants whose parents have completed a graduate or professional degree and make an income of more than \$100,000 per year:

Female Participant 1: I do feel, I do consider myself a very God-fearing person. But I am, I guess like, probably like a step behind the, um, strength in their [parents'] faith.

Interviewer: Okay, so what do you do together, religiously?

Female Participant 1: We go to church... Um, like, once a month. We're very um, very faithful to our church. My great, great, great, great, great somebody help found one of the most historic black churches in the area, um, United Methodist right on um, I don't know what street. But it's the oldest, one of the oldest Black churches in the area, and my grandfather grew up in that church and my dad grew up in that church, I've grown up in that church, my children will grow up in that church. You know, it's a family tradition. We don't go anywhere else, so if we can't make it to church, we won't make it to church, we're not going somewhere else; we go to our church.

Interviewer: So we've talked a little bit about religion, um, I want to talk a little bit more about that. Would you call yourself a Catholic?

Male Participant 3: Yeah. I mean I believe in God, and I taught some CCD [Confraternity of Christian Doctrine] and I felt, I guess I felt that it wasn't important that the kids weren't that into it. Not that I really, I wouldn't say that I follow it by the book, but I mean I go to church... Um, my mom, she's still religious so we still go to church and stuff... I just kind of go through the motions.

I: Do you go weekly? MP3: Yeah.

I: And do your sisters go? MP3: Yeah.

I: And when you say we go through the motions, what do you mean? MP3: Well my mom, I don't really find church that interesting. But we go.

Building upon the findings that religious service attendance is, in fact, a more common form of practicing religion among individuals of higher family SES backgrounds (Davidson 2008, Pearce and Denton 2011, Schwadel 2008), the interview responses of higher SES youth further reveal that *how* youth talk about their religious involvement is largely discussed in reference to religious service attendance and family participation. Although neither participant in the above excerpts would likely be considered exemplars of highly involved or personally committed religious individuals, it is clear that institutional and family-oriented forms of religious involvement play a significant role in how these higher SES youth express their thoughts about what it means to be religious.

*Orientations toward Education and Religious Connections: Conceptual Associations
between Religiosity and Education*

Youth's varying orientations toward education and their conceptual associations between religious involvement and going to college or doing well in school are also found to manifest differently depending on varying family SES backgrounds. Among many lower SES youth, religious involvement is discussed as a positive influence toward educational endeavors—empowering youth to incorporate education into being a part of their expectations and identity. Prompted to describe her understanding of what is the “good life,” one participant who is a young mother of a three-month-old child from a lower SES family background provides the following responses to the interviewer:

Interviewer: One phrase that some people use is that they want to have a good life. What does a good life look like?

Female Participant 2: I guess it's having a good relationship with your family, having a good job, and a good relationship with God.

Interviewer: Okay. Do you know people who you look at and say they're living a good life?

Female Participant 2: Mhum (yes)... Some of my friends, they're out of school, going to work, going to college and very religious, just very happy, got everything anyone would want.

I: When we talked two years ago your parents were going pretty regularly to a Baptist church. What's going on with church stuff now? FP2: I go every once in a while and everyone wants to see the baby...

I: Do you pray at all? FP2: Yes. I: What do you pray about? FP2: My baby. Going back in August [community college]. And getting a job, that's basically it.

To note, specifically among lower SES black religious youth, the distinction of what it means to be religious is expressed not only in association with positive educational experiences, but often related to abstaining from sex and drugs, through an emphasis on leading a healthy lifestyle. One African-American teenage boy who also comes from a lower SES family

background describes how the lives led by his religious friends generally differ from those of his other friends:

Male Participant 4: Well, I notice that my religious friends, they're more positive people you know, they doing school and they not into, involved in a lot of other stuff. They keep themselves busy, they usually never have to worry about, I mean, they never think about using drugs or being getting pregnant and all that, as opposed to my friends who's not so religious, that's an everyday life you know. They not using condoms, they using drugs, you know, they drinking, and not to degrade my friends but, sometimes they seem kinda like, (laughs) I don't know.

Based on overall responses provided by youth in reference to education, it appears that the extent to which lower SES youth are able to engage in actual educational planning remains largely conditional upon the resources and opportunities available to them at various stages of their lives. However, the discourse of lower SES religious youth, in particular, sheds light upon their distinctively positive orientations toward education, which are likely to have a positive influence on the formation of and commitment to higher educational expectations—even if there may be some delay in their educational trajectories, as many lower SES youth work or take breaks from schooling due to financial strain.

In contrast, while more regular institutional religious involvement among higher SES youth may theoretically suggest a higher likelihood of the direct impact of organized religious participation upon educational experiences and opportunities, the conceptual association made between religiosity and education by many youth of higher family SES backgrounds is notably a negative one. Especially among more involved religious youth, commitment to either religion or education is expressed as coming at the cost of the other—differing significantly from the positive orientations toward education present in lower SES

religious youth's responses. As the following conversation with a devout Catholic teenage girl who recently began attending a private college illustrates:

Interviewer: How big of an impact would you say religion and spirituality have on your life?

Female Participant 3: I'd say it's pretty big, they've definitely helped shape my morality... it's shaped a lot of what I believe is right and wrong.

Interviewer: How hard or easy has it been for you to maintain your faith or the kind of religious person that you are?

Female Participant 3: Um, it's been hard, I feel like I've done a really bad job at school maintaining my religious connection. Like it would have been easy to have gone to mass, but I guess, if my mom were there and she was going, I'd go... But like now, I don't know, that sense of like involvement, I just don't feel like I make it a priority here.

This pattern is especially apparent among higher SES girls who identify as Mormon or Latter Day Saints (LDS), for whom loyalty to religious practice and beliefs often stands at odds with individual educational expectations or career aspirations. As one teenage girl articulates in her candid responses about religion and future plans:

Interviewer: Okay, what are your religious beliefs, do you believe in heaven and hell?

Female Participant 4: Yes I do. I believe in, um, there's the telestial, the celestial, and the terrestrial. The celestial kingdom is our top goal, but you have to be married in the temple... I believe um, in families being sealed together in the temple... for all eternity, and not just until death do us part.

I: Do you want to get married someday? FP4: Yes, I do... I think it's like a lot about our church. It's based a lot on family and on marriage and like on the family unit, so I guess it's always been the kind of thing where like, your dream is to go get married.

I: Is there any particular age you think it would be good to get married at?

FP4: I want to have a lot of my school done because I think it's hard to like, having seen different couples, it's hard to like balance your marriage... It's been hard during my school now, during college, often I would try and just get things done school-wise and so I wasn't able to be as spiritual as I would like to have been on my own.

The weight of such a belief that matters of marriage and family impact the course of one's afterlife is undoubtedly difficult to dismiss when considering the conceptual associations that

youth form between religion and education. For this young female participant, not only is schooling difficult to balance with marriage, but getting married is described as being her “dream,” and schooling described as posing a critical challenge to her spirituality.

Moreover, on account of the different assumptions and bases from which youth of lower and higher SES backgrounds conceive of and express what it means to be religious, it is evident that there are significant variations as well in youth’s conceptual frameworks of how religious involvement relates to education. From a more general sense of religious involvement understood as well-being and positive living, especially in terms of physical health, emotional health, and education, many lower SES religious youth express a positive orientation toward education. Alternatively, from a more institutional-based understanding of religious attendance and participation, many higher SES religious youth—though their attitudes toward education or religion may not necessarily be negative—conceive of what it means to be religious and to be a student as more conflicting. While there may be some variance in average experiences of education across lower and higher SES settings, there is a notable irony in the social and institutional mechanisms that stem largely from the very nature of what it means to be religious and how such mechanisms may contribute positively towards the educational experiences of higher SES youth. Considering that educational expectations continue to remain high among religious youth of higher SES backgrounds, Clydesdale’s theory of the “identity lockbox” (2007) would suggest that higher SES youth are likely, not to discard their religious beliefs, but rather to put their religious identities in a “lockbox” while they pursue more immediate educational goals. Furthermore, in spite of negative conceptualizations of the relationship between religion and education and even in the absence of much personal commitment, the potential positive impact of religious

participation especially among higher SES youth is clear, as will be reiterated in the following excerpts.

Social and Institutional Mechanisms of Religiosity that Impact Education

Reflecting rather lucidly the impacts of youth's religious participation upon social networks and support, as well as the practice of community and leadership skills in an organizational setting (Smith 2003), the social and institutional mechanisms of religious involvement are especially evident in the experiences outlined by higher SES religious youth. Three teenage participants—identified as Catholic, mainline Protestant, and Mormon/LDS, respectively, and expressing varying degrees of personal religiosity—provide vivid illustrations of various forms of social and institutional support through religious organizations, all of which contribute significantly to educational opportunities.

Interviewer: Tell me about being a CCD teacher, how did that come about?

Male Participant 3: Uh, community service.

I: So what did you do? Did you teach them Catholic doctrine or did you just have discussions or? MP3: No, not discussions, well I taught 5th grade. So it was more like worksheets and activities and stuff.

I: So you did it because you yourself wanted to do some community volunteering? MP3: Yeah, it wasn't required by school.

I: But was any of your motivation that it would look good on your resume?

MP3: Yeah, well, I wasn't planning on going to Catholic college. But uh, it ended up being a lot of Catholic schools just because I ended up applying to small liberal arts colleges, mostly Catholic.

Interviewer: How have your feelings about your church changed in the last couple of years?

Female Participant 5: I feel like church is a good place to be, like, even if it is true that there isn't a God and all that stuff, it's like the people there who do believe are such good people that why wouldn't you want to be around them, and they're always looking to help out, like my pastor made a donation to my trip to Costa Rica, just because I went through there with the church, nothing more, nothing less.

Interviewer: Okay, so you mentioned you'll start in the fall at [Religiously Affiliated University]. Female Participant 6: MmHmm (yes).

Interviewer: Okay, was there any reason you chose that particular college or university?

Female Participant 6: Well, I guess like, even though I really wanted to go back East, I always kind of knew I was gonna go to [Religiously Affiliated University]. Both my parents went there and my brother went there and he's gonna go there again. My dad teaches there.

I: Oh, your dad teaches there? FR: Yeah, he teaches like a part-time class, journalism. My dad writes for the paper actually.

The above opportunities of community service, financial support, and family connections are facilitated to a great extent by the institutional nature of higher SES youth's religious participation. In exploring the social and institutional impacts of religious involvement in the responses of lower SES religious youth, the following participant, who would be the first male in his family to go to college on a scholarship to play basketball for his school, seeks guidance from his deacon uncle and presents an especially telling case.

Interviewer: I wanted to ask if there's anyone else who's been significant in your life over the past couple of years, any adult who's been real significant?

Male Participant 5: Like I said my high school coach, as far as basketball and the guidance that she gives me. My uncle, he's a deacon and I used to kind of talk basketball with him and how it related to religion. And he kind of grew me up with it, taking me to different leagues and teaching me with his sons. So it was just basketball and church with him.

Interviewer: Is he going to the church you're now going to or the one you used to go to?

Male Participant 5: Well, we was all mostly, my family was at the one that I used to go to, but some things happened there and we've all moved on.

Indeed, some social and institutional impacts of religious involvement may also be identified in the experiences of lower SES youth, but regular participation in the same religious organizations over time or with the adults who provide youth with support is much less taken for granted among lower SES families. While the type or magnitude of positive impacts through such mechanisms may vary considerably by SES backgrounds, social and

institutional mechanisms in conjunction with what it means for youth to be religious and how their educational trajectories relate to their religiosity together provide a more complete picture of how religious involvement may contribute differently to the educational experiences of youth from varying socioeconomic backgrounds.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on this multi-method exploration of the processes through which religious involvement may influence the educational expectations and orientations of youth, I first find support for the interaction between religious attendance and youth's family socioeconomic contexts in relation to educational expectations. While family SES remains substantially influential in predicting youth's educational expectations, the statistical evidence suggests that the generally positive relationship between religious involvement and educational expectations is actually stronger for youth from lower SES backgrounds than those from higher SES backgrounds. Further unpacking this moderating effect of family SES, qualitative analysis of interview transcripts reveals that there are significant differences in what being religious means to lower and higher SES youth, which critically impacts how youth talk about education in relation to what it means to be religious, and affects what mechanisms are present linking religious involvement to educational opportunities. Overall, the positive orientation towards education that lower SES religious youth express in their interviews— together with the negative interaction found between family SES and religious attendance— points to the notion that the positive influence of religious involvement is, indeed, largely significant in lower SES contexts. However, this impact of religion on education among lower SES youth must not be overemphasized, for there remain definite and critical material

constraints for lower SES youth to be able to draw upon the sort of social-institutional resources that are much more readily accessible for higher SES youth.

In essence, the role of religious involvement in encouraging youth of lower family SES backgrounds supports the claim that structured religious participation is perhaps rendered even more significant in the absence of other institutional support (Regnerus & Elder 2003), but the structural constraints discussed by Schwadel and others (2008) are very much a reality that pose challenges to positive religious influences and cannot be ignored. New questions raised as a result of analyses in the present study include whether differences in religious experiences and religious institutional structures may serve as mechanisms for reproducing inequalities that exist in society at large, as well as how the influence of religious involvement might compare with the range and variation of other resources that higher and lower SES youth have access to in pursuing their educational and occupational goals.

One of the main limitations of this study is that qualitative data was not collected specifically to address the research questions that were the focus of this analysis. Especially in the interviews, which were designed to cover a broad range of topics, many of the questions relevant to education were not probed for further explanation. However, seeing such clear connections between religion and education surface even from such limited data bolsters my confidence in the significance of educational orientations and social-institutional mechanisms in the experiences of religious youth. I wish to highlight the contributions of the discussion on how religious youth of higher and lower family SES backgrounds conceptualize education differently—for this may serve as a key factor in understanding the paradox of religion's impact being at once accentuated and constrained for lower SES youth,

while commitments to religion and education are contradictory but sustained among higher SES youth. Future research on religion and education may examine more closely the unique impacts of socioeconomic and structural differences at various levels and intersectionalities, such as neighborhood, region, life stage, religious affiliation or denomination, race, and gender.

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