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RELIGIOUS GROUPS, PSYCHOSOCIAL COVARIATES OF

The psychosocial covariates of religious groups create diverse organizational goals and outcomes for their members. Religious groups range from formal to informal, with new religious movements marking the border between these two poles. Religious groups can facilitate socialization and the perpetuation of societal norms, and assist parents with child-rearing tasks. They accomplish these goals through religious schools, youth programs, social hours, and similar organizations formed for adults. Religious groups affect individuals' attitudes regarding social and moral issues, happiness, and life satisfaction, and generate an increased sense of meaning and control over life events. Understanding the influence of religious groups is an important part of understanding the link between the development of individual attitudes and people's integration into society.

VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Religious groups appear to show tremendous diversity in the specific beliefs they espouse. Nevertheless, when one examines the effects of religious groups on individuals and on society, important similarities emerge among those groups. The most basic distinction to recognize is that of formal versus informal religious groups. Social scientists place religious groups along a continuum ranging from informal, unorganized social movements such as social networks and friendship groups to highly structured institutional systems such as churches, synagogues, and mosques (Kearl & Gordon, 1992). Formal denominational

groupings provide a stable substructure for the religious expression of the individuals involved. Marking the border between formal and informal religious groups are various renewal movements, which bring heightened levels of emotion to extant churches and which periodically lead to new denominations (Melton, 1999). Although informal religious groups have been recognized, formal religious groups have garnered the greatest degree of attention in terms of their effects and social dynamics.

Social scientists who reside mainly in North America and Europe have focused primarily on Christianity because of its role in shaping Western society. In this context, church-sect theory is used to differentiate religious organizations in terms of their orientation toward their social environment. A *church* is classified as being conservative to the social order, maintaining broader societal norms, while a *sect* displays some degree of tension with its social environment because of its focus on personal perfection and fellowship among members (McGuire, 1997). *Cults*, also known as "new religious movements" by those who study them, are in even greater tension with society by virtue of their unusual practices and beliefs. This continuum reflects the institution's support of society's prevailing norms and mores.

Religious groups play many important roles in society, perhaps none more important than that of socialization. Next to kinship or family groups, religion provides the single greatest force for social integration by capitalizing on a person's need for immortality (Kearl & Gordon, 1992). Religious groups attempt to improve society through sanctioning personal behavior, a function performed by teaching values and norms that unify the culture and promote harmony within the society (Hoge, 1996). This is facilitated by family, friends, and authority figures within the group who demonstrate desirable behavior and punish undesirable behavior. Through a fear of rejection, deference to others who are believed to have a better understanding of matters, and other means, religious groups have particular influence over behaviors that can be publicly observed by group members. In this regard, emotionally laden methods of dealing with deviance have been considered more effective than rational methods. Socialization also is affected by a strong collective identity that is crystallized when threatened by out-groups (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975).

Surveys conducted in the United States indicate that some 90% of parents want their children to have some religious education (Hoge, 1996). When religious training starts at an early age and is advocated by parents who assert religion's importance, children are more likely to remain affiliated with that religion. Religious training can assist parents with their child rearing, and the effects of this socialization process can be seen through the life cycle. For example, children from religious families report attitudes regarding socially acceptable behavior that are more consistent with societal norms than do children from nonreligious families. This pattern remains true even of young adults, who tend to be the least religious of all age-groups (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975).

ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Religious groups use different organizational solutions to facilitate socialization. Sunday school is the main Christian institution that parents introduce to their children. In comparing Sunday schools, the Mennonites and other "European Free Church" Sunday schools started the earliest, and over time have proven relatively helpful in retaining children in the church as they grow older. Likewise, the so-called family churches that combine adult church services with children's Sunday school are relatively effective in retaining children within the church (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975). Religious groups frequently use other programs, such as day care, vacation Bible schools, camps, youth programs, and Girl or Boy Scout troops. Similar opportunities frequently exist for adults, such as organizations developed specifically for men or women, interest groups focused on specific topics such as athletics or homemaking, and social hours that strengthen bonds within the community or group as they promote socially desirable norms and attitudes. It is important to note that Muslim community centers and Jewish synagogues perform the same functions, encouraging socially desirable behaviors in children through formal classes, social and sporting activities, and informal interactions with adults.

EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Religious groups can affect views on a variety of attitudinal and other self-report measures, such as opinions

regarding moral issues, happiness, and life satisfaction. Discernible patterns exist regarding these topics, with an overall trend in religious bodies toward more choice for members to decide things for themselves. Jews tend to be the most liberal on sexual issues, with the evangelical Protestant community most conservative (Hoge, 1996). These relative effects are maintained across age-groups, and even though the elderly show some decrease in public religious observance because of reduced health capacity, privately they address religious behavior with a greater sense of resolve. Religious teens, adults, and elderly adults report greater levels of happiness and life satisfaction relative to nonreligious peers, perhaps because they find in religion increased meaning and control over life events (Kearl & Gordon, 1992).

Religion's role in the future has been the subject of intense debate and analysis under the rubric of secularization theory. Advocates of secularization theory report data, garnered mainly from Europe, suggesting that religion's influence in society is on the decline as the role of science increases. Data from much of the rest of the world, however, is less supportive of the secularization thesis, and seems to indicate that religious groups will continue to exert their influence on socialization processes and individuals' integration with society (Hoge, 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

Religious groups facilitate the socialization of the child and assist parents with child rearing. Children and adults are influenced by these groups in many ways, such as their attitudes on social issues and heightened levels of happiness, as well as their ability to cope with stress. Effects such as these are attributable to the support of the group members and to their belief system, which enhances one's sense of purpose in life. In this way it is constructive to view religious groups as resources. To society, these groups facilitate the adoption of values and perpetuation of mores, providing a stabilizing force in the community. By virtue of the central role they play in the lives of their members and in the community, religious groups enable the application of developmental theory in a field setting to improve the lives of children, their families, and their communities.

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See also FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

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