

Religion and Youth Delinquency

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Abstract

This project looks at the impact that religion has on youth delinquency. The project examines religion through social control theory and explores religion as an agent of social control for its members, in particular youth. The project analyses the relationship between religious affiliation and youth delinquency and considers how belonging to a religious community decreases the likelihood of youth participating in delinquent behaviors. The analysis suggests that being part of a strong community and having a positive value system reduces the likelihood of youth becoming delinquent. Additionally, this implies that there are ways to reduce the likelihood of delinquency occurring and that involvement in a religious community is a valuable method for keeping youth from becoming delinquent.

Introduction

This project looks at youth, which has a wide range of definitions that vary between cultures and among generations. The concept itself is a social construction in that it didn't always exist and it was created by society to define a group of people in transition between child and adulthood. When it comes to defining the term youth, there is a significant grey area in that different sectors of society have different criteria for what classifies an individual as a youth; young people are then treated differently according to those criteria. For example, in the legal system, youth are classified as those under the age of 18 and once a youth turns 18, they are considered an adult and receive the same treatment as other adults. This presents a problem for society in that not all community resources see those who are 18 as adults and feel they should be treated as such. For this project, the term will refer to those between the ages of 13 and 23. This project will look at religion, which like youth can hold different meanings for different people and cultures. In some cases, religion can refer simply to spiritual practice, which doesn't always involve interaction in a specific institutional setting such as a church. In other cases, it can refer to active participation in a church community. In this case it will refer to spiritual practice and active community belonging and engagement within a religious organization or church setting. The specific aim of this paper is to look at the impact on youth delinquency by a sense of belonging and community provided by religion.

When looking at delinquency in youth, the main sociological theory that will be applied is Hirschi's (1969) social control theory. Social control theory speaks to the idea that the more

connected individuals are to others around them, the more likely they are to maintain status quo and not participate in delinquent behaviour. It is through social control that individuals are bonded together and follow social norms and values. The feeling of belonging is a key element in the reason individuals choose not to participate in delinquent behaviours. Those youth who don't feel connected and feel that they are on the outside of society are more likely to participate in delinquent acts. Religion is one important connection for youth that can provide them a sense of belonging and purpose, which in turn will cause them to be less likely to participate in delinquent behaviour.

Social Control Theory

For Hirschi there are four elements to social control: attachment, commitment, involvement and belief (Wiatrowski, Griswold, & Roberts, 1981). Attachment refers to the ties or bonds youth have with others. Commitment is their investment in the conventional world, which affords the youth access to certain privileges that youth would risk if they participate in delinquent behaviours. Involvement speaks to the time spent in active involvement in conventional activities which direct their actions; additionally, the type of activities and the level of significance they have on the youth's future are key in limiting chances of delinquent actions. The element of belief refers to the acceptance of a positive value system. When looking at Hirschi's social control theory it will be easy to see how religion fits into it as a concept of social control.

Attachment

Belonging, sense of purpose, and bonds to others are all factors that make up attachment. Dollahite and colleagues (2009) note that one of the main reasons youth make religious sacrifices, such as observing a holy day, abstaining from certain activities (such as sex before marriage), eating special meals, or fasting, is that the action provides meaning and a sense of purpose for their lives: it connects them with something greater than themselves. King and colleagues (2014) point out that youth have a strong desire to connect to something bigger than themselves. Both of these articles point to the desire youth have for community, which is a form of attachment, as they want to belong to something and have meaning for their lives. Rodell and Benda (2005) speak to the desire for secure attachment and positive parental relationships, which provide feelings of worth; the quality of relationships youth have with their parents and the type of attachment in those relationships impacts youth. This is a key aspect of attachment for youth because it can be a determining factor in their decision making. Having strong relationships or secure attachments with their parents is a contributing factor to youths' decisions because the actions of the parents influence the actions of their children. If a parent doesn't respect religion, it can become a negative influence on the youth and lead to them using the ideas and rules as they see fit, rather than following them like a road map.

Another aspect of attachment is feeling "plugged in" or connected. Mason, Schmidt, and Mennis (2012) mention that the support religious institutions provide supplements social service agencies and can provide support to help young people feel connected when they otherwise might feel disconnected. Furrow, King and White (2004) point out how religion plays a significant part in the development of identity in youth. Youth who participate in religious communities are more likely to say that they have a purpose and are committed to a personal philosophy. King and Furrow (2004) found that students who report having a stronger sense of belonging within a religious community, or a religious identity, have a clearer sense of personal meaning. When it comes to religion and youth, attachment to the religion is essential to the relationship; without attachment there is a lack of feeling of belonging and desire experienced by the youth toward the religion. It is religion that provides purpose and community for its members, in particular its youth. For youth, a sense of belonging and purpose provides a level of pride and encouragement that influences their decisions and actions. If there is a lack of attachment or purpose, the influence will be negative, whereas if there is a sense of belonging to a positive system such as a religious group, the influence will tend to be positive. This influence is crucial when it comes to youths' decisions – most

importantly, their decision to act in a delinquent manner or not. If there is no attachment or attraction toward something, then it is easier to be influenced by outside, potentially negative influences in the form of peers who partake in actions deemed delinquent by their religious group.

Commitment

Another aspect of Hirschi's theory is commitment, which for the purposes of this project will be accountability, obedience, and following religious teachings. When we think about religion and commitment, typical aspects could be active participation, sacrifice, and following teachings and practices routinely. Dollahite and colleagues (2009) suggest that sacrifice comes from and supports commitment to religious beliefs and practices in the lives of youth. What this shows is that commitment is displayed through actions youth take and the level of commitment they have is evident based on their decisions. Benda and Rodell (2005) mention that religiosity has a bigger influence than delinquency for religious communities, compared to the general population. The type of behaviour that the religious community views as delinquent includes, but is not limited to, drinking, drugs, crime, and sex before marriage.

Furrow and King (2004:18) state that "those who are part of a solid network, often a religious community will see a higher level of participation in moral activities and have similar attitudes" than those who aren't involved or are as committed. This is speaking to the youth following the teachings and instruction from within the religious community, in order to shape their lives and help them to be committed to their religious practices; they are obeying the given guidelines in order to achieve a level of belonging and fulfilment. Pope, Price and Lillard (2014) note that the members and leaders within a religious community monitor the behaviour of the youth within the community in addition to being role models and examples for the youth to aspire to be like and follow. This encourages high levels of commitment among the youth and discourages delinquent behaviours. The youth are being led by example and shown, essentially, how they should behave as members of the religious community. Another point these authors make is that religious groups provide a setting and activities for youth, which leaves the youth with less time to spend around other influences that may be harmful or delinquent, according to the religious community.

Involvement

Involvement is another aspect of Hirschi's theory, which will be defined as participation and active engagement. Cnaan, Gelles, and Sinha (2004) describe involvement as church youth group meetings, Bible classes, revivals, mentoring programs, or other activities. Dollahite and colleagues (2009)

mention that the extent to which youth are expected to participate in religious activities varies across faith, family, age, and sometimes gender. Also, sometimes the decision of youth to make a sacrifice is their own choice, while at other times it is connected to participation within a group, such as a family. Mason and colleagues (2012) point out that attendance of religious services, the feeling support from the other community members, and the importance of religion to a youth causes an inverse relationship to substance use. Furthermore, the significance of religiosity and support shows that a youth's decision to employ healthy choices related to substance use is affected by their involvement within a religion and its community of support. This shows that active involvement within a religious community has an impact on the decision making of youth and how they are influenced and encouraged more by the community they have around them than by those outside of this community. Pope and colleagues (2014) found that, when it comes to youth, there is a relationship between active participation in religious activities and positive social behaviour. They went on to say that youth who are involved in religious communities are less likely to participate in delinquent behaviour such as drinking alcohol, smoking, using drugs, and committing crimes. This is because they have less spare time to get caught up with those who participate in such behaviours, so are less likely to be influenced into participation.

Additionally, religious youth have a stronger sense of morals and accountability to their religion, and they spend more time around those also involved in their religious community, which can lead youth to be more aware of their decisions and the ramifications of the choices they make. The connection between involvement in religion and delinquency comes down to how the youth spend their time. A youth who is more involved in a religious community has less time to be influenced by the allure of delinquent actions or peers who make delinquent decisions. This is where having a significant amount of time spent involved in religious activities is crucial to limiting the time around negative or opposite ideas from the religious group's. Being involved in something like religious activities or commitments keeps the youths' focus on their purpose and belonging, which is extremely important for youth; limiting their involvement within the religious community will detract from those feelings and even that can have a negative impact on decisions to act in a delinquent manner. Involvement is crucial for maintaining a sense of belonging and purpose for youth, and this can be the determining factor in their behaviour.

Belief

The fourth aspect of Hirschi's theory is belief, which is represented by having hope, belief in a greater good, and a

positive value system. Dollahite and colleagues (2009) talk about how believers make sacrifices which often come at a high cost, such as time, desires, and possessions. Another point the authors make is that, when compared to other less religious teens, highly religious teens more often report that they have the right amount of freedom to grow and express their views and are comfortable speaking with adults who aren't their parents. Additionally, religious youth say they give value to different things than their non-religious peers, and that they are willing to sacrifice things non-religious peers value. This is an example of how having a value system that differs from others can impact decisions and, ultimately, actions performed by an individual. Rodell and Benda (2005:61) suggest that "religiosity is more relevant when secular values and norms are ambiguous regarding the morality and seriousness of the offense". This shows how belief is significant when it comes to control and behaviour.

Mason and colleagues (2012: 230) speak to the existence of "three dimensions of religiosity: social religiosity, perceived religious support, and private religiosity". Their research describes the dimensions: "social religiosity refers to public behavioural aspects of religious practice"; "perceived religious support refers to both a congregant's feelings of general support and comfort"; and "private religiosity refers to intrapersonal aspects of religious practice". The dimensions of religiosity fit with social control theory in that they are types of religious participation and affect the level of belief and commitment to the practices. How a youth shares or keeps religiosity private is a significant sign of how important it is to them and how likely they are to be committed to it in any situation. They also find that both social and private religiosity are protective against alcohol use, tobacco use, and marijuana use. They also find that youth who are at higher risk for alcohol and tobacco use are those who have a high level of social religiosity, but a low rating of importance toward religion in their lives. This suggests that church attendance alone doesn't decrease the likelihood of participating in delinquent behaviour, and that the youth must also buy into and believe in the teachings for them to impact their level of delinquent behaviour.

King and Furrow (2004) found that religious affiliation protects youth from delinquent behaviour and promotes positive, prosocial behaviour. Additionally, they found that religious youth seem more capable of coping effectively when it comes to stress than non-religious youth. This speaks to the impact that believing in something has on an individual and how it affects their life in more ways than just guiding their behaviour. Pope and colleagues (2014) find that religious groups help youth take moral messages and values to heart. Religious groups plant a specific value system in youths' lives and contribute to the buy in and following of

the religious teachings, keeping the youth from participating in delinquent behaviour.

Discussion

When looking at religion and the impact it has on youth delinquency, we can see that religion acts as social control, and it is evident that there is a relationship between religion and youth delinquency. Through each element of Hirschi's social control theory, we can see how religion exists as a form of social control. Social control exists in two forms, internal and external. External social control refers to the control placed on individuals from outside sources, and internal refers to the control that comes from within the individual themselves. In terms of the elements of social control, belief is an example of internal social control because the individual, in this case youth, believe in a specific value system and make their choices based on those beliefs. Involvement is more of an external social control, as the actions of the youth are decided by the group or the leader in accordance with their beliefs. As for the elements of attachment and commitment, they are a combination of internal and external social control; partly dependent on the individual putting effort into belonging, and partly on the group leading youth in a direction that follows the group's value system. Religion combines both internal and external types of social control by offering a sense of belonging and community, a positive value system and providing members, youth in particular, with a sense of purpose or belief in something bigger than themselves. This gives youth a purpose and fills the desire for community and belonging while instilling a value system and morals, in addition to activities and opportunities to use their time in ways that limit the likelihood of them participating in delinquency or associating with those who choose to be delinquent.

Religion acts as accountability for youth and their actions, while instilling values and morals that will shape the decisions youth make when they are not in the company of other religious individuals. Through each element of social control as Hirschi theorized, we can see how religion contributes to social control and reduces the likelihood of youth delinquency. This means that when it comes to youth and delinquency, religion can play an integral part in keeping youth from behaving in a delinquent manner because it provides youth a community and set of standards that youth who are not involved in a religious community don't necessarily have. Belonging to a religious community has a positive impact on youth and the decisions they make, even when they aren't in the presence of other community members. This implies that, in an effort to reduce levels of youth delinquency, having opportunities for youth to become and continue to be part of a religious community can be important. Additionally, providing those youth who have

acted delinquently the opportunity to become involved in a religious community has the potential to decrease the likelihood they will continue to act delinquently and increase the likelihood of more positive decisions. While religion is a form of social control, it shouldn't be forced on youth because that would cause the opposite of the intent to occur. It should be available and an opportunity that is recommended to youth who are at risk of participating in delinquent behaviour or who have been delinquent in the past as a way to decrease the likelihood of further delinquent actions.

If religion was forced on youth, it would cause an increase in likelihood of delinquency, as a form of rebellion. However, if youth are the ones to seek it out and decide to be part of a religious community it can have a greater impact on them and a greater likelihood of decreasing delinquent behaviours. On a larger scale, the result of more youth being part of religious communities would be an overall decrease in delinquency, and a potential increase in youth being able to function and understand commitment and responsibility as young adults and adults. Religion provides a structure for youth that will impact the way they choose to live as they get older and have more freedom and opportunities. Youth who are frequently delinquent have a higher risk of struggling with the transition into adulthood. For example, they may have difficulty with following directions or company policies within their employment opportunities. Youth involvement in religion could also serve as an example for the generations that follow: it could demonstrate the benefits of being part of a religious community and how it can have a positive influence.

In terms of the effect on society, youth who follow a religion or are involved in a religious community have the potential to impact others in society who see what they are choosing to do with their time and actions. If the opportunity for youth to be part of a religion, more specifically a religious community, wasn't available, the likelihood of them behaving delinquently would increase as they search for a community to fill the need for connection that we all have as humans. It would be easier for youth to become involved in delinquent behaviour due to lack of pride and sense of community, through acting delinquently and forming groups of likeminded peers who act in a similar manner in effort to find that community and pride. Society would benefit from youth feeling connected and having a level of pride in themselves and their communities. This has the potential to ripple and create a positive change in society.

Conclusion

As we have seen in through the literature and the connection to Hirschi's social control theory, religion is something that has an impact on youth delinquency levels and reduces the

likelihood of youth participating in acts of delinquency. This is attributed to the relationships created among religious youth and other members, in addition to the morals and value system they buy into and allow to guide their actions. It is religion that provides community and purpose for youth and limits the amount of time they spend around peers who act delinquently and how they view the actions of these peers in comparison to their values and morals, guided by their religion. Being involved in religion reduces the likelihood of youth becoming delinquent and getting involved with what other members would deem the “wrong crowd.” It keeps youth accountable for their actions and gives them hope and purpose for the future and how they can make a positive difference in the world.

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