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**FAMILY, FAITH, AND FRIENDS: INCORPORATING SOCIAL NETWORKS  
INTO THE STUDY OF FAMILY AND RELIGION**

A Dissertation in

Sociology

by

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## ABSTRACT

Although past studies indicate that social relationships play an important role within families and religious communities, we know very little about how these two important contexts of social ties relate to one another. Scholars theorize that families and religious communities rely on each other to thrive, so this interdependency should also exist on the micro level through social ties. Nonetheless, questions remain. Specifically, how do family relationships impact friendships within religious congregations and vice versa? Do families turn to congregational friendships for social support, and do these religious friendships seem to matter to families? Using longitudinal data from the Portraits of American Life Study (PALS, 2006-2012), this dissertation explores the social ties between families and religious groups by testing: 1) the effect of family formation on social ties to religious congregations; 2) the multidimensional role of religion, including congregational friendships, on marital happiness; and 3) the impact of social networks on family religious activities. In general, findings suggest that family relationships and congregational friendships are reciprocally related on the micro level through social ties. Moreover, these social ties operate in complex and surprising ways, revealing the nuanced interconnections between families and religious communities.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the dissertation, providing a brief overview of past research as well as a justification for a social networks approach to family and religion. Chapter 2 describes the PALS data source in detail, including sampling strategy, data collection, important survey items, as well as benefits and limitations. Chapter 3 examines the ways in which family formation (e.g., getting married and rearing children) impacts close social ties to religious congregations. Findings suggest that marriage decreases congregational social ties while childrearing increases them. Chapter 4 tests the multidimensional role of religion on improving marital happiness, uniquely incorporating the role of religious social networks. Results suggest that close congregational friendships positively predict marital happiness, and this relationship is actually strongest among the less religious. Chapter 5 examines the role of social networks in predicting the prevalence of religious discussions with family members. Although social networks matter, their effects weaken in contexts where spouses differ in religious importance. Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by connecting main findings, discussing limitations, and providing future areas of inquiry for those interested in incorporating social networks into the study of family and religion.

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# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

Close social relationships have a powerful impact on people's everyday lives (Felmlee and Sprecher 2000). It is through personal connections that society is structured (Fischer 1982). Social integration provides meaning and moral guidance for individuals, often countering the destructive tendencies of *anomie* (Durkheim 1951 [1897]). Research in the area of social networks highlights how social ties (i.e., social relationships) influence a broad array of individual outcomes, including life satisfaction (Lim and Putnam 2010), health (Christakis and Fowler 2009), economic opportunity (McDonald, Lin, and Ao 2009), and crime (Fader 2016). Moreover, it can be argued that a social networks approach provides an opportunity to observe many important macro-level sociological processes on the micro level, a phenomenon known as *sociological miniaturism* (Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2011). Whether it is the reproduction of social inequality through access to social capital (McDonald et al. 2009; Pichler and Wallace 2009), the promotion and early development of social movements (Krinsk and Crossley 2014), or the formation of shared social attitudes and values (Friedkin 2001), these important areas of sociological interest often originate from and are reinforced through one's close social network. In essence, social ties simply matter, and the study of social networks provides a lens to understand the power of social forces on the micro level.

Family and religion provide two important social contexts where social ties clearly matter. First, social ties within and outside the family are meaningful and influential. As one of the most powerful socialization agents in one's life, family relationships tend to have a strong impact on individual values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (Macionis 2014), although the importance and intimacy of these social ties certainly vary across the life course (Riley 1983). Of all the closest relationships one may have in his or her life, family relationships tend to be both the closest as well as the most problematic (Fingerman, Hay, and Birdtt 2004). Whether they are spousal or parent-child relationships, the quality of these social ties tend to impact family wellbeing (Mechanic and Hansell 1989), financial stability (Swartz et al. 2011), intergenerational transmission of social traditions (Bengston 2013), family formation decisions of adult children (Seiffge-Krenke, Overbeek, and Vermulst 2010), happiness (Uusitalo-Malmivaara and Lehto 2013), violent behavior (Cui et al. 2010), and health (Ailshire and Burgard 2012). Moreover, the removal of a close family tie, either through divorce or death, also impacts individual wellbeing (Amato and Anthony 2014). The maintenance of family relationships also tends to depend on external friendships ties, as families with strong and supportive friendship networks tend to experience improved marital and parent-child relationship quality (Bryant and Conger 1999; Widmer et al. 2006). In this way, the social ties within the family as well as those externally supporting the family are pivotal for wellbeing.

Second, friendships maintained in religious contexts also matter in one's life. As one of the most popular voluntary association organizations for all age groups (Rainie, Purcell, Smith 2011), religious congregations provide a social context for individuals to

establish close bonds with likeminded individuals who share similar values and beliefs. Indeed, the social composition of the average person's social network tends to exhibit religious homophily (Fischer 1982; Louch 2000; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Marsden 1988; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010; Verbrugge 1977), suggesting that shared religious beliefs matter to friendship formation. The effects of close friendships in religious contexts (e.g., congregational friendships) are extensive and noteworthy, as research shows that they tend to impact health (Ellison and George 1994; Ellison and Levin 1998; Krause 2008), civic engagement (Beyerlein and Hipp 2006; Musick, Wilson, and Bynum 2000), life satisfaction (Lim and Putnam 2010), political attitudes/behavior (Djupe and Gilbert 2008; McKenzie 2004; Putnam and Campbell 2010), pro-social behavior (Merino 2013a; McClure 2015), and social tolerance toward out-groups (Himmelstein 1986; ; Merino 2013b; Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006). Moreover, the religious and spiritual contexts of close friendships make these social bonds "morally freighted in a way that most secular ties are not" (Putnam and Campbell 2010:477), allowing individuals to provide reliable social support to one another in times of need (Goodman and Dollahite 2006; Merino 2014; Wuthnow 2007).

Clearly, the importance of social ties is evident in the contexts of family and religion, but do these different types of social relationships correlate with one another in any way? In theory, they certainly have the potential to impact one another. Scholars have theorized that families and religious communities are interdependent social institutions, as families rely on congregations for social support and moral training for their children while religious congregations rely on families to provide reliable membership (Edgell 2005). Returning to the concept of *sociological miniaturism*, this

macro level interdependence between families and religious institutions should be reflected on the micro level through social ties. In the search for social support, family formation should lead to an increase in congregational friendships. Likewise, increases in congregational friendships should provide needed social support and improve family relationships (see Edgell 2005; Mahoney 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Moreover, religious friendships ties may reinforce religious behavioral norms for families, such as in-home devotionals, family prayer, and involvement in congregational activities. Thus, studying the social ties connecting families and religious groups would help scholars better understand the micro processes underlying these two important and interdependent institutions.

However, we actually know very little about the social ties that bind families and religious groups. Much of the research on the reciprocal effects of family and religion are narrowly focused on family relationships and *religiosity*, not religious friendships. For example, studies have found that the formation of new family ties (e.g., marriage and childbirth) is positively associated with religious attendance and affiliation (Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992; Stolzenberg et al. 1995). Likewise, religiosity tends to positively predict parent-child relationship quality (King 2003; Pearce and Axinn 1998) as well as marital relationship quality (Schramm 2012). Besides often ignoring serious concerns regarding problematic selection effects (e.g., see Schleifer and Chaves 2014; Uecker et al. 2007), these studies actually do not measure religious friendship ties. Much of the work on family and religion focuses on dyadic family ties and religiousness, but not the ties of religious community per se (see Figure 1-1). This is problematic for a number of reasons. First, religious involvement and religious friendship ties do not always operate

congruently, as some individuals have low religious participation yet high social integration into a religious community (Lenski 1961). Second, religious involvement is best understood as a “distal” (and often weaker) predictor of social outcomes (see Mahoney 2010), but religious friendship ties function as more proximal predictors and produce stronger effects (Lim and Putnam 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010). In essence, these studies may be underestimating the power of religion by focusing on more distal measures over more preferable proximal measures, like religious social ties. And third, by failing to measure religious social ties, the powerful *social* role of religion is ignored. George Simmel (1905: 366) noted that “the essential, the substance, of religion, is first a relation between individuals,” a sentiment that also is echoed in Durkheim’s (1965 [1915]) seminal work on primitive religion. By focusing on individual religious characteristics, but not religious social ties, past studies largely ignore the powerful social dynamics that are at the core of the scientific study of religion. In sum, the study of family and religion is missing how these two institutions are connected in a relational way, and I suggest that this area of inquiry is in dire need of a social networks approach to understand the micro processes connecting these two important and interdependent institutions.

As a corrective, this dissertation explores the social ties between families and religious friendships using longitudinal, nationally representative survey data from the Portraits of American Life Study (2006-2012). Specifically, this dissertation examines the social connections between families and religious groups by testing: 1) the effect of family formation on social ties to religious congregations; 2) the multidimensional role of religion, including congregational friendships, on marital happiness; and 3) the impact of

social networks on family religious activities. Based on these studies, this dissertation has three main research goals. The first goal is to test the ways in which families and religious groups function as important interdependent institutions on the micro level through social ties. If indeed families and religious groups rely on one another to thrive, then family relationships should impact congregational friendships and vice versa. This would highlight how a social networks approach to family and religion is a valuable means to highlight *sociological miniaturism* -- seeing large scale social phenomena in small-scale everyday contexts (see Stolte et al. 2001). The second goal is to re-examine past assumptions in the area of family and religion in light of better social network measures. Indeed, measuring social ties often reveal surprising findings (see Christakis and Fowler 2009), and this dissertation is no different. Whether it is challenging the assumption that marriage increases social ties to religious communities or proposing that congregational friendships help marriages the most among the less religious, this dissertation proposes that a social networks perspective provides a novel means to test and revise traditional assumptions in the study of family and religion. Finally, the third goal of this dissertation is to encourage more interdisciplinary work across the sub-disciplines of family, religion, and social psychology. Although difficult, an interdisciplinary approach helps integrate rich literatures from different fields in ways beneficial to theoretical development. This dissertation shows that an interdisciplinary approach is necessary for understanding the complex micro processes that connect families and religious groups.

### **Outline of the Dissertation**

In Chapter 2, I discuss the data source and statistical methods implemented in this dissertation. Data come from the Portraits of American Life Study (PALS), a nationally representative and longitudinal two-wave panel study conducted in 2006 and 2012. In addition to providing a unique blend of both family and religion survey items, the survey contains a core social network module, where respondents are asked to name up to four close friends along with a variety of questions pertaining to their social characteristics. The combination of family, religion, and social network measures makes this data source ideal for analyzing the social ties connecting families and friends in religious contexts. Chapter 2 details issues relating to sampling methodology, data collection, response rates, weighting, and nonresponse/attrition. Moreover, the chapter presents the analytical samples and methods used in each chapter. Finally, the chapter concludes by presenting the advantages and limitations of the PALS data.

Chapter 3 is the first empirical chapter of the dissertation and examines the ways in which family formation (i.e., getting married and rearing children) impacts close social ties to religious congregations. Although past research suggests that family formation should lead to greater social integration into religious communities (see Stolzenberg et al. 1995; Thornton et al. 1992), this assumption has largely been untested and improperly inferred from other religion measures (e.g., affiliation and attendance). Moreover, the methods used fail to take into account known selection effects into marriage that confound causal inferences (see Schleifer and Chaves 2014). Using longitudinal data from PALS (2006-2012), this study finds that family formation effects on close congregational ties are largely contextual. Fixed effects estimates suggest that marriage actually decreases close social ties to religious congregations while rearing children

within marital unions increases them. Thus, it is children, not marriage per se, that actually integrates married couples into religious communities. Moreover, these contrasting effects tend to be the strongest among young adults, but they weaken with age as well as marital duration. This empirical chapter is forthcoming in *Journal of Marriage and Family* and has received media coverage in the *Huffington Post* (Briggs 2016).

Whereas Chapter 3 examines the ways in which family ties impact religious friendship ties, Chapters 4 and 5 examine the ways in which religious friendship ties impact family ties. Chapter 4, specifically, examines the multidimensional role of religion on improving marital quality, uniquely incorporating the role of religious social networks. Past research suggests that one should measure the religious characteristics of the individual, marital dyad, and one's social network (see Mahoney 2010). However, research has not fully tested the independent and interdependent (i.e., interactions effects) of these three different aspects of religion. Similar to Chapter 3, selection concerns have plagued causal inference in past studies, so the use of fixed effects regression models to rule out potential third variables is needed. Using longitudinal data from the Portraits of American Life Study (PALS, 2006-2012) and fixed effects regression models, this study finds that religious importance, frequency of couple prayer, and number of close friendships within a religious congregation all positively predict marital happiness, though the magnitude of effects are modest in size. Interestingly, the positive effects of religious social ties on marital happiness are the strongest among the less religious.

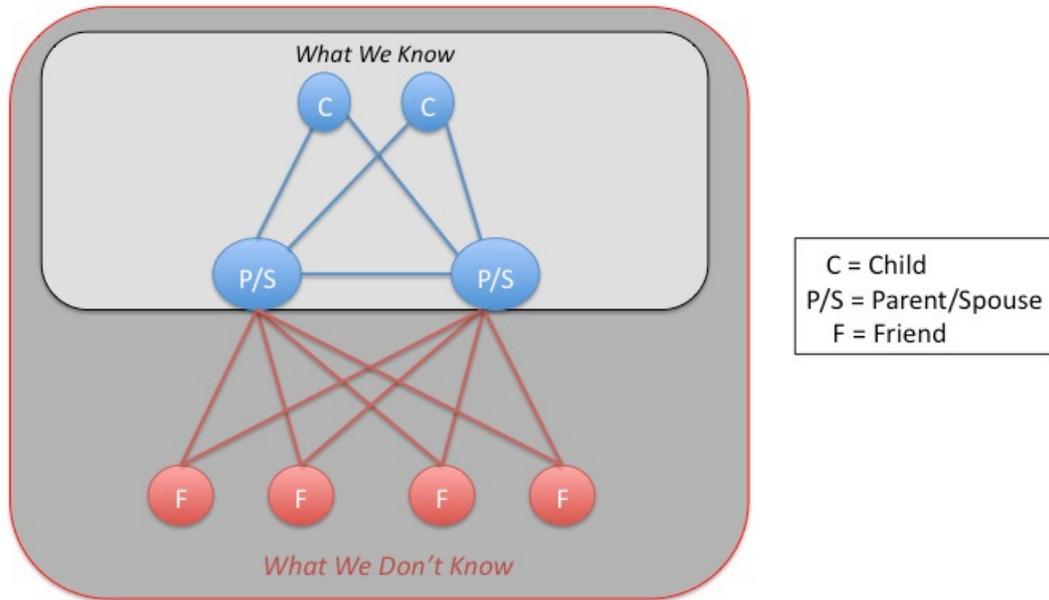
Chapter 5 examines the role of social networks in predicting the prevalence of religious discussions with family members. Religious discussions are a common and important activity among family members for purposes of bonding and religious

socialization. However, less is known with regard to the role that friendship networks have in promoting this type of religious family behavior. Using data from Wave 1 (2006) of the Portraits of American Life Study (N=1075-1201), results suggest that having a high proportion of friends who discuss religion with the respondent positively predicts the likelihood that the respondent discusses religion with his/her children and spouse. Unique to this chapter, network behavior rather than network similarity (e.g., co-membership in a religious congregation) matters more in predicting religious discussions with family members. However, the power of social networks ultimately depends on the level of religious similarity between spouses, as higher levels of discrepancies in religious importance between partners reduces the likelihood of spousal religious discussions and potential network effects.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by discussing important findings across the three empirical chapters. The chapter also provides implications for further theoretical development, noted limitations, and guidance for future studies. While still novel in many ways, this dissertation simply presents an introduction to incorporating social networks into the study of family and religion. It is my hope that this dissertation will serve as a blueprint for future studies to build upon, extending novel insights into the ways in which social ties bind these two important and interdependent institutions.

Figure 1-1. What We Know and Don't Know with Regard to Social Ties in the Study of Family and Religion.

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## **Chapter 2.**

### **Data and Methods**

This dissertation uses data from Wave 1 (2006) and Wave 2 (2012) of The Portraits of American Life Study (PALS), formerly known as the Panel Study of American Religion and Ethnicity (PS-ARE). It is a nationally representative panel study led by principal investigators Michael Emerson and David Sikkink, and conducted by RTI International, the second largest independent nonprofit research organization in the United States (Emerson, Sikkink, and James 2010). The majority of the funding comes from the Lily Endowment, but additional funding came from Rice University and the University of Notre Dame. The data set was downloaded from the Association of Religion Data Archives website ([www.TheARDA.com](http://www.TheARDA.com)). According to the PALS webpage, the purpose of the study is “to understand the impact of religion in everyday life, and ultimately the connections between religious change and other forms of change among diverse individuals and families over the course of their lives.”<sup>1</sup> The unique blend of family, religion, and social network measures, along with being nationally representative and longitudinal, make this data source ideal for the following dissertation.

This chapter is broken down into four sections. Section 1 covers the sampling strategy of the principal investigators for the PALS study. Section 2 details the data

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<sup>1</sup> Visit the main homepage for the study’s description here: <http://thearda.com/pals/>

collections methods, relevant survey measures, response rates/attrition, and weighting. Sections 1 and 2 are summarized based on the official methodology report written and posted online by the PALS principal investigators (Emerson, Sikkink, and James 2012). Section 3 details the analytical strategy for the dissertation, including the choice of analytical samples, quantitative methods utilized in each chapter, and methods used to handle missing data. Section 4 concludes the chapter with noted limitations and advantages of the PALS data.

### **PALS Sampling Strategy**

RTI used a multi-stage complex survey design for the PALS study. Seeking to cover the civilian, non-institutionalized adult population (ages 18+) in the continental United States, RTI established a sampling frame based on residential mailing lists along with supplemental frame-linking procedures to add additional households not included in the mailing lists. RTI estimates that the sampling frame accounted for approximately 98% of occupied housing units across the country. The first wave was conducted in 2006 using a four-stage probability sampling procedure with an intentional oversample of racial/ethnic minorities. At the first stage, RTI selected 60 three-digit zip code tabulation areas across the country with probabilities proportional to a composite size measure that weights high concentrations of minority populations for purposes of oversampling nonwhites. At the second stage, two five-digit zip codes were selected from each of the selected three-digit areas at the first stage, creating 120 zip codes altogether. At the third stage, 90 addresses from each of the 120 zip codes were randomly selected. Finally, the

fourth stage required a screening process for each eligible address, with one adult randomly selected to participate from the household.

The second wave in 2012 had a much simpler re-contact strategy. Investigators attempted to locate and re-interview the 2006 respondents, along with interviewing formerly underage household members from 2006 who are now adult age (18+) in 2012. This additional sample of formerly underage respondents is not included in the longitudinal analyses given how they lacked the Wave 1 responses needed for a longitudinal analysis.

### **PALS Data Collection**

In 2006, interviews were conducted in-person in order to establish a connection with the respondents. Advanced letters were mailed to selected households four to five days prior to the interviewer's arrival. Interviewers conducted an initial screening process using a paper-and-pencil instrument. If the selected household member was eligible to participate and agreed to the survey, he or she was administered a questionnaire via a laptop computer. Respondents were paid an incentive of \$50 to complete the interview. The response rate for the survey was 58%, yielding a sample size of 2,610 respondents.

For the 2012 follow-up survey, the investigators used multiple methods to re-contact the Wave 1 participants, including online (80%), telephone (13%), and in-person interviews (7%). Researchers found that the mode of interview played very little impact

on the results.<sup>2</sup> Respondents were paid \$50 for online surveys, \$30 for phone surveys, and \$50 for in-person surveys. The overall follow-up response rate was 51%, yielding a sample size of 1,314 respondents from Wave 1. Thus, the total response rate for the PALS study across both waves was approximately 30%.

### **Unique and Relevant Measures of PALS**

Of particular interest to the research topic of this dissertation, the PALS study provided an egocentric network module at both survey waves. Respondents were initially asked: “Now think about the persons outside your home that you feel closest to. These may be friends, coworkers, neighbors, relatives, or anyone else who does not live here. Not including people living in your home, about how many people, if any, would you say you feel close to?” If the respondent reported at least one close friend outside the home, the interviewer proceeded: “I want to ask a series of questions about the people you feel closest to - up to four people.” Some of these questions include whether the reported close friend attends the same religious congregation of the respondent, a measure that is used in all three empirical chapters. The interviewer also asked if the respondent discusses religion with this close friend, a survey item used in Chapter 5. Overall, this egocentric network module was vital for understanding the religious social ties that existed outside the family, an underdeveloped area in the study of family and religion.

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<sup>2</sup> See “Collecting the Data” section of the Methodology webpage here: <http://www.thearda.com/pals/researchers/methodology.asp>

The PALS study also asked a variety of important family questions used in the dissertation. In addition to standard marital status, marital quality, and household composition variables, respondents with spouses and children were asked unique survey items relating to how they incorporate religion into their common family interactions. For example, if a respondent reported a spouse, he or she was asked: “In the past year, how often would you say that you and your spouse or partner did the following: pray together, not including before meals and at religious services?” This unique survey item is utilized in Chapter 4 to highlight the potential role of marital-dyadic religious behaviors on marital quality changes. In addition to praying together, respondents with either a spouse or a child were asked whether they “talk or read about religion, God, or spirituality with [spouse/child].” These measures are used to construct the dependent variables in Chapter 5. The aforementioned dyadic religious behaviors, in addition to the egocentric network module, play a crucial role in the dissertation’s focus on family and friendship ties in religious contexts. These measures, along with other relevant sociodemographic variables, are presented as descriptive statistics in Table 2-1.

### **Survey Weights**

The PALS dataset also comes with a longitudinal survey weight variable. The weights adjust for both complex survey design as well as sample selection discrepancies due to non-response, including attrition. The principal investigators strongly suggest

utilizing the survey weights in all analyses because of the survey design,<sup>3</sup> so those recommendations were implemented in the analyses for this dissertation. In order to ensure representativeness and correct for any potential non-response bias (see Braver and Bay 1992), the weights adjust for social discrepancies between the sample and the general population using 2005-2007 American Community Survey data (Wave 1) as well as 2010 Census data (Wave 2). Attrition-related non-response bias also was adjusted for through the survey weights, which incorporated the probability of Wave 2 attrition in their longitudinal weights by predicting Wave 2 attrition in logistic regression models with the 30 most common attrition-related predictors (e.g., gender, race, and education). Cases with a high probability of Wave 2 non-response were given a larger weight and those with a lower probability were given a smaller weight to correct for sample imbalance. In addition, I conducted additional attrition analyses and found that the main variables of interest for each longitudinal study did not significantly predict the likelihood of attrition. Due to the study's complex survey design and potential non-response bias, I weight all analyses for the following dissertation.

### **Analytical Strategy**

The three empirical chapters use a variety of different analytical samples and methods. Chapter 3 investigates the longitudinal effect of family formation on close congregational ties using a full sample of all respondents who completed both waves of

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<sup>3</sup> This is discussed in-depth in the online section entitled: "Controlling for Complex Sampling Design When Using PALS Data." Retrieved 1/5/17 from <http://thearda.com/pals/researchers/syswithpals.asp>

the survey (N=1,314), as well as a subsample of married respondents (N=535). Fixed effects regression models are used in this chapter. For a two-wave fixed effects model, the basic change-score is as follows:

$$(Y_{i2} - Y_{i1}) = a + b(X_{i2} - X_{i1}) + e_i, i = 1, \dots, n \quad (1)$$

This regression model shows a change in Y between Waves 1 and 2 as the dependent variable and a change in X as the independent variable, where *a* is constant term, *b* is the effect of change in X on the change in Y, and *e<sub>i</sub>* is the error term. The causal logic of fixed effects regression models is that each respondent functions as his or her control at an earlier wave (Allison 2005), comparing “like with like” through a within-person approach instead of comparing potentially unlike groups through a between-person approach. Fixed effects models have the unique advantage of controlling for all time-stable heterogeneity, both measured and unmeasured (Firebaugh, Warner, and Massoglia 2013), making them ideal for longitudinal analyses in most cases (Halaby 2004). In this chapter, I also contrast the fixed effects estimates with traditional lagged dependent variable estimates to highlight potential unobserved heterogeneity that may bias family formation effects on religious outcomes. Multiple imputation (MI) was used to handle missing data because it assumes that the missing data is missing at random (MAR), a less strict assumption relative to the missing completely at random assumption (MCAR) used by traditional listwise deletion approaches (Allison 2002). I imputed 25 datasets, with 10 iterations per imputed dataset, based on recommendations from Johnson and Young (2011: 936) for safe and stable estimates. Analyses are performed in Stata 12.

Chapter 4 investigates the multidimensional role of religion on longitudinal changes in marital quality using 535 married respondents who remained married at both

survey waves. Similar to Chapter 3, I use fixed effects regression models to control for time-stable heterogeneity. I also calculate effect sizes to compare the relative magnitude of religious effects. Adhering to Amato and Anthony's (2014) advice on standardizing variables in fixed effects models, standardization was based on taking the overall mean of the variable across waves and the average within-wave standard deviation of the variable. Both independent and dependent variables are standardized, which affects the coefficients but not the significance tests. Multiple imputation (MI) was used to handle missing data (25 imputed datasets), and all analyses are performed using Stata 12.

Chapter 5 differs from prior empirical chapters in both samples utilized and analytical methods implemented. It focuses on the role of friendship network behavior on religious discussions with children as well as spouses. Because the dependent variables are only asked at Wave 1, the study uses a cross-sectional (Wave 1) sample of parents with household children ( $N=1075$ ) as well as married respondents ( $N=1201$ ). Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models are used. The basic (OLS) regression model equation is as follows:

$$Y_i = a + bX_i + e_i, i = 1, \dots, n \quad (1)$$

Here,  $Y$  represents the dependent variable,  $X$  is the independent variable,  $a$  is the constant term,  $b$  is the unit change in  $X$  corresponding to the unit change in  $Y$ , and  $e$  is the error term. Unlike fixed effects regression models, ordinary least squares does not control for unobserved heterogeneity, meaning it is prone to omitted variable bias (Allison 1999). Similar to previous chapters, multiple imputation (MI) was used to handle missing data (25 imputed datasets), and all analyses are performed using Stata 12.

## **Limitations & Advantages of PALS Data**

The data from PALS come with certain disadvantages. First and foremost, there was a fair amount of attrition at Wave 2 (51%), which reduced the sample size significantly (Wave 2: 1,314 returning respondents). Although the longitudinal weights provided by the dataset correct for attrition-related discrepancies between the survey sample and general population, the statistical power for the longitudinal analyses is less than ideal. Because of this, smaller subpopulations of families (single parents, cohabitators, etc.) are not the focus in the longitudinal analyses of Chapters 3 and 4, although, single parents are used in the cross-sectional analysis of Chapter 5. Second, not all survey items were asked at both waves, specifically the dependent variables for Chapter 5 (i.e., religious discussions with children and spouses), which ultimately led to Chapter 5 implementing a Wave 1 cross-sectional analysis. However, the non-recurring use of specific survey items across waves did not have a large impact on Chapters 3 and 4 of this dissertation. Finally, the egocentric network module only asks about the social characteristics of up to four close friends, meaning that one is only able to measure the respondent's "core" social network (see McPherson et al. 2006), but not the influence of peripheral network ties. This is a similar limitation to the egocentric network module General Social Survey, which only asks for the characteristics of up to five close friends. In general, sample size and limitations in certain measures present some disadvantages to the following dissertation.

However, the PALS data also provides a number of benefits to the following dissertation, many of which compensate for the noted limitations. First, the study is nationally representative, meaning the inferences made in the empirical chapters can be

generalized across the United States population. Second, the data are longitudinal, which allow for better temporal ordering of observed variables and better causal inference through the use of advanced longitudinal methods, like fixed effects regression models to control for all time-stable heterogeneity. And third, the survey items asked in the study offer a rare blend of survey measures pertaining to family, religion, and social networks, which is ideal for the research focus of this dissertation. In sum, the PALS data offer numerous advantages in terms generalizability, improved causal inference, and unique survey measures, making the data source well suited for the following dissertation.

Table 2-1. Descriptive Statistics for All Three Empirical Dissertation Chapters

	<i>Mean or %</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Range</i>	Type of Sample, N
<i>Chapter 3: Important Variables</i>				
Married	57.33%	0.49	0-1	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
# of Children in Household	0.76	1.10	0-9	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
Total Congregational Ties	0.44	0.89	0-4	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
% of Social Network (from Cong.)	15.12%	0.28	0-1	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
<i>Chapter 4: Important Variables</i>				
Religious Importance	3.04	1.30	1-5	Married Longitudinal Sample, N=535
Attendance	3.73	2.34	1-8	Married Longitudinal Sample, N=535
Evangelical Protestant	29.79%	0.46	0-1	Married Longitudinal Sample, N=535
Mainline Protestant	13.93%	0.35	0-1	Married Longitudinal Sample, N=535
Black Protestant	2.86%	0.17	0-1	Married Longitudinal Sample, N=535
Catholic	25.50%	0.44	0-1	Married Longitudinal Sample, N=535
Other Religion	16.07%	0.37	0-1	Married Longitudinal Sample, N=535
Spouses Pray Together	2.45	1.72	1-6	Married Longitudinal Sample, N=535
Total Congregational Ties	0.44	0.89	0-4	Married Longitudinal Sample, N=535
Marital Happiness	5.93	1.33	1-7	Married Longitudinal Sample, N=535
<i>Chapter 5: Important Variables</i>				
% of Friends Discuss Religion	49.32%	.39	0-1	Parent Wave 1 Sample, N=1,075
Spousal Religious Discordance	0.61	.77	0-4	Married Wave 1 Sample, N=1,201
Religious Discussions with Spouse	3.02	1.67	1-7	Married Wave 1 Sample, N=1,201
Religious Discussions with Children	3.44	1.74	1-7	Parent Wave 1 Sample, N=1,075

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012, weighted

Table 2-1. (Continued) Descriptive Statistics for All Three Empirical Dissertation Chapters

	<i>Mean or %</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Range</i>	Type of Sample, N
<i>Sociodemographic Variables</i>				
Female	51.78%	0.50	0-1	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
Black	11.71%	0.32	0-1	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
Hispanic	13.50%	0.34	0-1	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
Other Race	5.06%	0.22	0-1	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
Midwest	24.63%	0.43	0-1	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
South	33.57%	0.47	0-1	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
West	24.97%	0.43	0-1	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
Age	47.91	16.32	18-80	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
Income	9.23	4.68	1-19	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
College	29.53%	0.46	0-1	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134
Employed	61.37%	0.48	0-1	Full Longitudinal Sample, N=1,134

*Source:* Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012, weighted

### **Chapter 3.**

## **Family Formation and Close Social Ties Within Religious Congregations**

When individuals age and start to form families of their own, integration into social networks becomes vital for family wellbeing. Becoming a spouse or a parent entails a variety of new roles and responsibilities, and supportive social networks tend to provide guidance and may buffer any potential stress due to newly experienced family transitions (Reid and Taylor 2015). Indeed, for married couples, ties to supportive social networks produce higher rates of satisfaction, commitment, and stability throughout one's marital duration (Bryant and Conger 1999). Likewise, parents embedded in shared social networks tend to experience improvements in parenting practices and parent-child relationships (Widmer et al. 2006). Because social integration provides greater access to social support and improved family outcomes, it may become pivotal for new families to find a supportive community as they navigate the intricacies of family formation.

Congregations, and the social networks embedded in them, provide one option for families seeking social support. Religious organizations often help connect fellow congregants to one another (Edgell 2005; Ellison and George 1994), providing potential ties to like-minded individuals and access to important family life advice. Congregational social ties have been linked to improvements in health (Krause 2008), life satisfaction (Lim and Putnam 2010), and general social support (Merino 2014). According to Stolzenberg and colleagues (1995: 99), the social support found within congregations is

particularly valuable for “young adults facing the demands of launching a marriage and rearing children.” In a modern context, where younger adults are increasingly using congregations as “social insurance” in times of need (Wuthnow 2007), the social support found in congregations may attract younger families seeking additional help due to the various stressors that accompany childrearing. Moreover, given the “pro-family” message that congregations espouse (Edgell 2005), congregations provide a viable option for families to connect with others and increase their social resources.

Nonetheless, our knowledge regarding family formation and congregational social ties remains limited by measures, methods, and theoretical development. First, most studies on family formation on religious outcomes examine either religious attendance or affiliation (see Chaves 1991; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995; Schleifer and Chaves 2014; Thornton Axinn, and Hill 1992), but not social ties within congregations. Although attendance and affiliation are important outcomes tied to improved wellbeing (Fenelon and Danielsen 2016; Stroope 2012), they do not always operate congruently with religious social ties (e.g., Jewish adherents; see Lenski 1961), nor do they reap the same social benefits as close congregational ties (see Lim and Putnam 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010). If we are interested in social ties and their ability to foster social support, we should actually measure them rather than more distal measures, like attendance and affiliation. Second, concerns persist with regard to selection effects into marriage, given how religious adults already have a predisposition toward traditional family formation (Eggebeen and Dew 2009; Ellison, Burdette, and Glenn 2011). Although most studies find that family formation positively predicts religious outcomes, like attendance (Chaves 1991; Stolzenberg et al.1995; Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992), a

recent study using advanced methods finds that the marriage effect on religious attendance disappears when accounting for selection (Schleifer and Chaves 2014). If this is true with regard to religious attendance, then selection issues may also confound inferences regarding close congregational ties. And third, past studies have failed to address the growing body of family literature suggesting that certain family formation events, like marriage, may actually lead to greater social *isolation*, not integration (see Musick and Bumpass 2012; Sarkisian and Gerstel 2008). Given how spouses have increasingly relied on one another for social support at the expense of friends and voluntary associations since the 1980s (Finkel et al. 2014; McPherson et al. 2006), one wonders whether the desire to establish close congregational ties is relevant to many married couples.

Due to these aforementioned limitations, the goal of this study is to examine whether family formation impacts congregational social ties using longitudinal egocentric network data from the Portraits of American Life Study (PALS, 2006-2012). To limit selection concerns, I utilize fixed effects regression models, a within-person change score approach that controls for all time-stable unobserved heterogeneity. I separately test whether marriage and childrearing integrate or isolate individuals from close friendships within their congregation. Moreover, I examine whether life course effects, like age and marital duration, moderate the impact of family formation on close congregational relationships. In general, as society experiences greater religious and family diversity, like increases in “None” affiliates (Chaves 2011) and complex family structures (Cherlin 2010a; Smock and Greenland 2010), a focus on social ties/relationships may help reveal the complex micro processes connecting these two important and changing institutions.

## **Marriage: Integration or Isolation?**

### **Marriage as Social Integration**

In the family literature, there is a “traditional” framework that views marriage as a beneficial and integrating life event. In general, marriage is portrayed as an institution with mostly positive social outcomes (for a review, see Nock 2005). Durkheim ([1897] 1951) argued that marriage, particularly for men, helps promote social integration into communities and social networks with like-minded individuals. Slater’s (1963) classic study suggested that marriage operates as a solution for the natural inclination of couples to withdraw from communities. Given the extra close tie achieved through a marital union, Fischer and colleagues (1989) suggest that marriage helps to expand and strengthen social networks, and that families still rely on friends for social support in recent times (Fischer 2011), despite contrary views that social ties are weakening (see Putnam 2000). Thus, this traditional paradigm suggests that marriage operates as a beneficial transition into more social ties.

Marriage may also increase social ties in religious contexts through “sanctification” processes, whereby family relationships become imbued with sacred qualities and significance (Mahoney et al. 2003, 2009). Many married couples view their marriage as “blessed by God” and guided by a divine presence (Mahoney et al. 2003), and religious communities help reinforce these perceptions in various ways. For example, wedding ceremonies are performed in a congregation in front of one’s community, and the marital bond is depicted as an eternal commitment to both one’s spouse and to God

(Onedera 2008). In honoring the sanctity of marriage, and because their marital status offers them legitimacy in traditional religious communities (Edgell 2005), newly married individuals may want to increase their ties with likeminded congregants who also view and support their marriage as sacred. Moreover, congregational friendships are themselves viewed as “set apart” (Putnam and Campbell 2010), and they operate as a perceived reflection of God’s influence in marriage, helping newlyweds in times of need and providing counseling during marital conflict (Goodman and Dollahite 2006; Lambert and Dollahite 2006). In this sense, recently married individuals may find congregational social ties valuable for reinforcing their sacred marital commitment and for providing valuable resources needed in adjusting to marital life.

Given these sanctification processes, and the social legitimacy of marriage that enables access to the social world of other married couples, it is not surprising that most studies find a positive relationship between marriage and religious outcomes, like religious affiliation or attendance. As initially suggested by Bahr (1970), and further elaborated by Stolzenberg and colleagues (1995), the traditional family life cycle model assumes that marriage and childrearing promote more religious involvement. Cross-sectional studies suggest that married church members are more religiously active than unmarried ones (Christiano 1986; Ploch and Hastings 1998; Uecker et al. 2007). Longitudinal studies also suggest that getting married at time 1 increases religious attendance and affiliation at time 2 (Stolzenberg et al. 1995; Thornton et al. 1992), potentially because churches organize social programs attracting young married couples (see Stolzenberg et al. 1995: 99). Certainly, numerous scholars have voiced concerns that the marriage effect may be a selection effect (see Schleifer and Chaves 2014; Uecker et

al. 2007), and it is worthy reiterating that these studies do not measure social networks. Nonetheless, one would infer from past studies on other religious outcomes that marriage would positively predict congregational social ties.

### **Marriage as Social Isolation**

However, some scholars in the area of family question whether marriage truly promotes social integration, suggesting its potential to actually isolate spouses from communities. There are a variety of explanations for this phenomenon. First, marriage could function as a “greedy institution” that limits other social attachments by demanding more energy, attention, and commitment than remaining single (Cosser 1974). Indeed, studies suggest that marriage comes with increased obligations and less flexibility to maintain relationships on one’s own terms (Brines and Joyner 1999). Kim and Dew (2016) argue that that the “greediness” of marriage comes less from time demands and more from the unrealistic expectations of spouses as “soulmates,” making marriages more inward- rather than outward- focused. Given how the expectations for spouses have risen over time, but the amount of time and resources spouses actually commit to their marriages have declined (Finkel et al. 2014), there may be some support for this notion that cultural ideals rather than time demands may contribute to “greedy” marriages.

Another closely related explanation for why marriage may lead to social isolation is that spouses are learning to develop a self-sufficient couple identity. Western norms of “conjugal self-sufficiency” promote the notion that spouses should learn to function independently without being overly reliant on others for social support (Bellah et al.

1985; Coontz 2005). Friends may view spouses who spend too much time away from each other as an early “red flag” of a problematic marriage. In one sense, norms of conjugal self-sufficiency are easier to maintain during the early “honeymoon” stages of marriages, when personal well-being and marital quality tend to be relatively high (Musick and Bumpass 2012; VanLaningham et al. 2001). However, as marital quality tends to decline over time and the demands of childrearing emerge, the ability for spouses to fulfill each other’s needs without others may prove dangerous. In any case, spouses are increasingly being used as a main form of social support at the expense of friends, other family members, and voluntary associations (McPherson et al. 2006).

Whether it is because marriages demand absolute attention or because spouses do not need/want social support as they learn to be self-sufficient, recent empirical studies nonetheless show an isolating effect of marriage on social ties. Sarkisian and Gerstel (2008) found that both married men and women tended to be less involved with their extended family compared to single individuals, which held when controlling for a variety of social resources and demographic characteristics. Other studies found implicit support for the hypothesis in the context of divorced fathers who remarry (Noel-Miller 2013) and other types of intergenerational exchanges with parents (Bucx, van Wel and Knijn 2012). The strongest support came from Musick and Bumpass (2012). Using a nationally representative sample and a fixed effects design that controlled for all time-stable factors, they found that respondents who got married between waves tended to reduce time spent with friends and family members. Regardless of gender, previous single status (e.g., never married vs. divorced), or process through which they marry (e.g., cohabitation vs. direct marriage), recent studies suggest that marriage isolates, not

integrates, spouses from social networks (Musick and Bumpass 2012; Sarkisian and Gerstel 2008).

This leads to a very important research question: could marriage also lead to detachments from religion-based social ties? As mentioned, McPherson and colleagues (2006) explicitly note that the rise of the spouse as a prominent form of social support may have come at the expense of other social ties, particularly fewer contacts through voluntary associations. Though not widely known, half of all associational memberships in the United States are church-related (Putnam, 2000). It could be that marriage simply is demanding too much attention that takes away from close friendships in their congregation. It also is possible that congregational friendships filled relational needs between adolescence and marriage, but their salience declines following marriage. Or, it could be that spouses are learning to maintain their “sanctified” marriage on their own, predominantly leaning on each other rather than fellow congregants for important social and spiritual support. Much of the work on the sanctification of marriage highlight how spouses emphasize the importance of God in their marriage and the need for spouses to engage in joint religious practices as a married couple (see Lambert and Dollahite 2006; Mahoney et al. 2003), but admittedly little discussion is given to the importance on maintaining ties to spiritual communities (Mahoney 2010), at least outside of contexts where married couples need help (Goodman and Dollahite 2006). In this sense, social detachment does not derive from changes in religious importance or attendance per se, but a re-imagined spiritual focus on the spouse at the expense of congregational friendships.

Given the limitations of past studies on marriage and integration into religious communities, as well as recent family studies suggesting an isolating effect of marriage, the following study tests competing hypotheses with regard to marital formation and integration into religious communities:

*Hypothesis 1a:* Marriage increases social ties within one's religious congregation.

*Hypothesis 1b:* Marriage decreases social ties within one's religious congregation.

### **Children: Connectors Or Constrainers?**

#### **Children as “Connectors” to Congregational Social Networks**

Just as there is a “traditional” framework on the social benefits of marriage, there also is a “traditional” framework that suggests that children help connect parents to social networks. Given the demands of rearing children, it is plausible that parents may turn toward kin and friends for help and guidance (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003). Moreover, childhood activities that involve social interactions with other children may unite parents with one another and provide contexts for social exchanges (Gallagher and Gerstel 2001). Empirical studies have shown that having children tends to increase the frequency of interaction and the amount of help their parents receive and give to kin (Dwyer et al. 1994; Gallagher and Gerstel 2001). In terms of neighbors and friends, studies show that parents tend to be more involved in the community and friendship networks than singles (Gallagher and Gerstel 2001; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003).

The integrating function of children may also operate in religious contexts through various mechanisms. Qualitative studies using a sanctification perspective argue

that many parents view pregnancy as a “miraculous” life event (Mahoney et al. 2009), which helps parents turn to faith communities for a better understanding of their new sacred role (Jesse, Schoneboom, and Blanchard 2007). Moreover, as children grow up, they also tend to ask parents deep questions about life’s meaning and the existence of God, leading parents to re-evaluate their own beliefs and ties to faith communities (Ammerman 2014). Thus, a sanctification perspective would suggest that children operate as “spiritual connectors” who help parents realize the sanctity of parenting and necessitate further spiritual understanding through greater congregational ties.

However, it also is possible that parents may seek out faith communities for more pragmatic reasons. More recent scholarship in the study of religion suggests that the average religious affiliate tends to emphasize the importance of congregations in times of great need (Ammerman 2014, Wuthnow 2007). One need is moral instruction for children, a common reason parents increase their religious attendance (Ingersoll-Dayton et al. 2002). Another pragmatic function of religious communities is their ability to buffer family stressors (Henderson, Uecker, and Stroope 2016). Unlike marriage, which is initially met with higher psychological and marital benefits (Musick & Bumpass 2012; VanLaningham et al. 2001), childrearing tends to yield great psychological (Evenson and Simon 2005), marital (Crohan 1996), and financial costs (Stanca 2012), particularly if the parents decide to have multiple children (Lavee, Sharlin, and Katz 1996; Pollmann-Schult 2014). If there is ever a time for eliciting social support, it appears to be in times of childrearing. Faith communities respond to this need by providing daily care services, family counseling, and family-oriented events, which help families cope and address the unique challenges of raising children (Edgell 2005). Many congregants are indeed parents

themselves, so their advice and support may be essential for maintaining personal and family wellbeing. In this sense, religion may operate as a form of “social insurance” for parents, called upon to assist in life’s various struggles (Wuthnow 2007). As the lives of adults increasingly face greater economic and social obstacles, parents may turn to congregations to provide some semblance of stability during a fairly challenging life event.

There is empirical evidence in the religion literature that suggests that children lead to integration into religious communities, though with the same aforementioned limitations in measures. Ploch and Hastings (1998) found that having children increased religious attendance and had a stronger effect than marriage. Stolzenberg and colleagues (1995) found that much of the increase in religious participation for both men and women between ages 22 and 32 is attributed to the presence of children. Using a mixed-mode survey design in upstate New York, Edgell (2005) found that fathers often view religious institutions as social support structures that can help them be better parents. Using fixed effects regression methods to control for unobserved heterogeneity, Schleifer and Chaves (2014) found that the only family formation effect that increased religious attendance was the presence of children, not marriage. Thus, it appears plausible that individuals would seek to increase their ties to the religious community in order to foster greater social support as they rear their children.

### **Constraints of Childrearing & The Benefits of Married Parenthood**

However, it is not always easy to develop more social connections when rearing children. During the early years, young children may exhaust the time and energy parents

can dedicate to fostering relationships outside the household (Munch, McPherson, and Smith-Lovin 1997). This can be particularly problematic for employed women and single parents (Fischer 1982; Munch et al. 1997; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003). There may be a benefit for married parents, who can at least share the costs of childrearing and may be more easily accepted in traditional/conservative religious communities relative to single parents (Edgell 2005; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003; Wilcox 2004), although this latter point may be changing (Uecker, Maryl, and Stroope 2016). Nonetheless, it is clear that rearing children, especially more than one child, may consume time and energy otherwise spent on fostering close social ties within religious congregations.

Because children may function as either connectors or constrainers to religious ties, the following competing hypotheses will be tested:

*Hypothesis 2a:* Children increase close social ties within one's religious congregation.

*Hypothesis 2b:* Children decrease close social ties within one's religious congregation.

These hypotheses will be tested in a full sample, with single and married respondents, as well as a "married only" sample. Given how many congregations emphasize a type of familism that values childrearing within a marital union (Wilcox 2004), and intentionally create a variety of programs to attract married parents with children (Edgell 2005), child changes within a time-stable marital context may help highlight how married parenthood may be the key factor integrating families into religious communities. Recent work suggests that married parenthood, more so than married childlessness and single

parenthood, increases the likelihood of re-affiliating with their childhood religion in young adulthood (Uecker, Maryl, and Stroope 2016), so this specific context for family formation may impact congregational social ties.

### **The Moderating Role of Age & Marital Duration**

Up until this point, family formation has been discussed without regard to age and life experience of respondents who experience these transitions. However, past research on family formation and religious outcomes suggest that the life stage at which family formation occurs may impact religious integration (see Stolzenberg et al. 1995). Young adults who form families may be particularly vulnerable to stronger changes in their social ties to religious congregations. First, the social life of young adults is marked by great fluidity, uncertainty, and instability due to the prolonged nature of adult development in today's world as well as economic uncertainty (Cherlin et al. 2013; Wuthnow 2007). Social networks among young adults, as a result, tend to be very contextual and increasingly unstable (Small, Pamphile, and McMahan 2015). Second, the unclear social norms regarding when and how to raise families for young adults may create additional anxieties that necessitate greater changes in their close social network. Marriage and childrearing are no longer explicitly timed or guaranteed (Cherlin 2010a), so when individuals do experience these important life events for the first time, it is possible that their close friends may be at a very different life stage, making young adults either reduce these social ties or find them elsewhere as they seek social support. And third, religion itself is fluid as many young adults “hop” and “shop” for different congregations to fulfill their various needs (Wuthnow 2007), while others (32 percent)

decide to disaffiliate all together (Pew Research 2012). It is not so much that spirituality is not important for young adults, but it is often “tinkered” with and increasingly used for personal therapeutic reasons rather than as a consistent social obligation (Smith and Denton 2005; Wuthnow 2007). Given the great fluidity of young adulthood, we should expect family formation effects to produce the strongest changes at earlier adult stages of the life course.

In contrast, adults that reach middle-age tend to have more life and family experience that produce more social stability. Although young adults may wrestle with a variety of “firsts” (e.g., first marriage, first child, etc.), family transitions for older adults often are not novel. Experienced married and parenting couples are more likely to have crystallized (acquired) knowledge based on their life experience, so the use of social interactions for acquiring new family and life skills becomes less pertinent (Broderick and Blewitt 2010). Although social networks tend to get smaller over the life course, much of the change occurs among “peripheral” ties, with core social ties remaining fairly stable (Morgan, Neal, and Carder 1997). This is because more mature adults tend to value their close social ties and view them as emotionally rewarding (Carstensen et al. 2003). Similar to their social commitments, religious involvement tends to stabilize by midlife after experiencing declines in adolescence and young adulthood (Hayward and Krause 2012). In this sense, older adults may exhibit more consistency in their lives, in contrast to the great fluidity and instability that mark the lives of young adults. For these reasons, the following hypothesis is tested:

*Hypothesis 3:* The effect of family formation on close religious ties will weaken with age and marital duration.

Interaction effects will be tested for these hypotheses. However, it should be noted that it is difficult to disentangle age, period, and cohort effects with only a six-year panel study. It is very possible, and perhaps probable, that life experience (aging effect), generational perceptions of religion (cohort effect) and uncertain social/economic conditions (period effect) all play unique roles in moderating the impact of family formation on congregational ties, so future studies should consider teasing out these effects if possible.

## **Data & Methods**

### **Data**

This chapter uses data from Waves 1 and 2 of The Portraits of American Life Study (PALS). The merged dataset was downloaded from theARDA.com. The merged dataset was downloaded from theARDA.com. All estimates are weighted due to complex survey design, non-response, and strong recommendations from the principal investigators.<sup>4</sup> This data source is described with more detail in Chapter 2.

### **Dependent Variables**

Dependent variables for the following analyses come from the egocentric network module of PALS at both waves. Interviewers began the module by asking: “Not including people living in your home, about how many people, if any, would you say you feel close to?” If the respondent mentioned at least one close friend outside the home, the interviewer would ask: “I want to ask a series of questions about the people you feel

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<sup>4</sup> For more details on how using unweighted PALS estimates may bias results, see <http://www.thearda.com/pals/researchers/syswithpals.asp>

closest to - up to four people.” The interviewer then asked for the first name of each close alter and proceed to ask for a variety of questions pertaining to the characteristics and behaviors of each close alter. The PALS egocentric module resembles the General Social Survey’s egocentric modules in many ways, focusing on the “core” of each respondent’s social network (see McPherson et al. 2006).

Based on this module, I use two common egocentric network measures to capture religious social networks: *total close congregational ties* and *proportion of congregational ties that compose one’s social network* (i.e., “religious homogeneity”; see Putnam and Campbell 2010). The first dependent variable is the number of close alters the respondent names based on the following survey item: “Which of the people you mentioned are involved in your congregation?” The second dependent variable takes the same survey item, but divides it by the total number of close alters the respondent names at the beginning of the network module. So, for example, if the respondent named four close alters at the beginning of the network module, and names two close alters from their congregation, the respondent would be given a score of .50 (i.e., 50 percent of their close social network goes to their congregation).

The two dependent variables have different relative strengths, which is why both are used in the following study. The total number of close friendship ties within one’s congregation may reflect more opportunity for social support from the religious community, as having a higher number of close ties positively correlates with more social support (Merino 2014). The latter dependent variable reflects “social encapsulation,” as higher religious homogeneity often entails greater social influence through a lack of exposure to alternative views (see Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Indeed, research shows

that religious homogeneity among social ties may lead to greater social support (see Ellison and George 1994). Moreover, these two measures are not synonymous, for an individual may have a relatively small social network (e.g., two close friends), but a high level of religious homogeneity (e.g., both close friends go to his/her congregation). Because of their relative advantages, along with the opportunity to show more robust results, both dependent variables are utilized in the following analyses.

### **Independent Variables**

Focusing on the impact of family formation, the following study has two main variables of interest: *getting married* and *number of children in the household*. The marriage indicator is a change score reflecting whether the respondent went from unmarried to married between waves. Alternatives to a marriage binary variable (e.g., subdividing singles into *never married*, *divorced*, etc.) were tested and the results were generally robust, but due to a significant loss of statistical power, a binary variable was preferable. The measure for number of children in the household derives from the household composition items of the survey. It is important to note that this measure also takes into account child transitions out of the household, although results were fairly similar when using the total number of children in general. However, number of children in the household is the most preferable measure because it reflects the presence of childrearing (unlike total number of children), maximizes meaningful variation (which dummy variables of “first child” or “school-age children” truncate), and highlights additional costs likely to induce religious social support, for larger numbers of residential

children produce greater mental, physical, and marital costs (Lavee et al. 1996; Pollmann-Schult 2014).

To control for spuriousness and to potentially explain relationships of interest, analyses add the following independent variables: age, income, education (*college degree* = 1), employment status (*employed* = 1), self-reported health, work hours, migration (*moved between waves* = 1), and religious affiliation. Religious affiliation divides respondents into the following groups: *Evangelical Protestant*, *Mainline Protestant*, *Catholic*, *“Other”*, and *“None”* (*“None”* = reference group). *Black Protestant* is often another category of religious tradition (Steensland et al. 2001), and the following results remain substantively similar if used, but given recent concerns over the validity and statistical problems incurred by the measure (Woodberry et al. 2012), *Black Protestant* is recoded into *Evangelical* and *Mainline* categories. For the married subsample of the analyses, I add two additional control variables: marital happiness (*completely unhappy* = 1; *completely happy* = 7) and marital duration (in years).<sup>5</sup> The education measure was time-stable for the married sample, so it is inherently controlled for and absent in those models. Lastly, gender, region, and race are inherently controlled for in all fixed effects models because they were time-invariant, but since preliminary lagged dependent models and random effects models do not control for time-stable characteristics, they are included in those models (gender: *female* = 1; region: *Northeast*, *Midwest*, *South*, *West*; race: *white*, *black*, *Hispanic*, *“other”*).

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<sup>5</sup> There was a high correlation between age and marital duration, though not perfect (perhaps due to measurement error in the marital duration variable). Despite this, models ran with both age and marital duration variables together in one model. Moreover, the substantive results remain similar regardless of whether both variables are in the model or only one (age without marital duration and vice versa).

It is important to note that while some of the aforementioned variables may simply operate as control variables (e.g., age, education, etc.), other items may act as mechanisms that explain changes in religious ties as a function of family formation. For example, marriage/parenting may lead to changes in health, residential mobility, or work hours, which have been shown to impact social capital and religious involvement (Boisjoly, Duncan, and Hofferth 1995; Lipka 2013). Moreover, some respondents may also change their religious affiliation if they are in an interfaith marriage, which would impact congregational ties. Examining reduced effects of family formation from a bivariate model to a model with these added variables should give some indication of potential mediation.

In addition to these covariates, I also include three religion variables as potential explanatory variables: religious attendance (*never* = 1; *three times a week or more* = 8), religious importance (*not at all important* = 1; *by far the most important part of your life* = 5), and “switching” congregations (*switched congregations between waves* = 1). These religion variables may help reveal direct and indirect effects that further clarify how family formation impacts ties to the religious community. If, for example, attendance explains away the significant relationship between family formation and ties to the religious community, then a change in religious practice links family formation to religious communities. If, however, the religion variables do not explain away the significant relationship between family formation and ties to the religious community, then this robust relationship may reflect a social rather than a religious change. For a list of all the variables included in the analyses, including their means, measures of dispersion, and within-person change over time, see Table 3-1.

## **Lagged Dependent Approach vs. Fixed Effects Approach**

Lagged dependent variable (LDV) models are a common regression method used to analyze longitudinal survey data (Johnson 1988, 2005). In fact, some of the most cited studies on family formation and religious involvement utilize a LDV design (see Stolzenberg et al. 1995; Thornton et al. 1992). With this approach, researchers predict a Wave 2 dependent variable using Wave 1 independent variables (including the dependent variable at Wave 1). Although they are popular, there are two main problems with an LDV approach as discussed by Johnson (1988, 2005). First, it fails to take into account potential measurement error in the dependent variable at the earlier wave because it is used as an independent variable in the model (Johnson 1988, 2005). Second, and perhaps most importantly, an LDV approach does not take into account unobserved heterogeneity, meaning there may exist an omitted variable that would render the observed relationship spurious. Assuming no measurement error and no important unobserved heterogeneity, then an LDV approach is fine, but this is a strong assumption, and violations will bias inferences (Johnson 1988, 2005).

Fixed effects (FE) regression models offer an alternative approach to modeling longitudinal data that correct for the limitations of LDV models. FE models use a within-person change-score approach that compares “like with like” because each respondent serves as “his or her own control” (see Allison 2005:3). For a two-wave fixed effects model, the basic change-score is as follows:

$$(Y_{i2} - Y_{i1}) = a + b(X_{i2} - X_{i1}) + e_i, i = 1, \dots, n \quad (1)$$

This regression model shows a change in  $Y$  between Waves 1 and 2 as the dependent variable and a change in  $X$  as the independent variable, where  $a$  is constant term,  $b$  is the effect of change in  $X$  on change in  $Y$ , and  $e_i$  is the error term. By measuring how within-person change in predictor variables corresponds to within-person change in the dependent variable, all time-stable factors drop out of the equation and are controlled for in the models, though important time-varying predictors should be included (see Allison 2005). In this way, important factors like family/religious upbringing, personality, gender, race, and all potentially confounding time-stable factors are inherently taken into account in the estimated models, offering a unique advantage over many alternative methods (Johnson 2005). Moreover, FE models, as well as random effects (RE) models, take into account measurement error in the dependent variable at Wave 1, unlike LDV models. However, because random effects models rely on between-person variation that do not control for time-stable heterogeneity, the FE models are typically more appropriate (Halaby 2004).

The advantages of an FE approach also are important in the context of this study given past concerns regarding selection and unobserved heterogeneity potentially biasing family formation estimates on religious outcomes. Some suggest that the relationship between family formation and religious behavior may result from unobserved antecedents (e.g., parental family/religious characteristics, strong individual religious or pro-family attitudes, commitment, etc.) rather than from a direct causal link (Ellison et al. 2011; Thornton et al. 1992; Uecker et al. 2007). Using recent data from the General Social Survey (2006-2010), Schleifer and Chaves (2014) found that family formation (e.g., marriage and childrearing) predicted religious attendance with cross-sectional methods,

but when fixed effects models were used, only having a child of school-age remained significant, suggesting a potential selection effect into marriage. Given how they used recent data, and their results with initially consistent with previous studies using older data before accounting for selection, it appears that improved methods, not recent social changes in family and religion, are mostly challenging past inferences. In order to improve causal inference, better methods, like fixed effects models, need to be used to reduce potential unobserved confounders, like predispositions toward religion and family formation.

### **Analytical Strategy**

My analytical strategy is broken down into four parts. Part 1 uses the full sample (N=1,314) to examine the impact of family formation on ties to the congregation using a lagged dependent variable approach with ordinary least squares regression (N=1,314), a common longitudinal method in the study of family formation and religion (see Stolzenberg et al. 1995; Thornton et al. 1992), but one prone to potential self-selection bias. To correct for this bias, Part 2 tests family formation effects using linear fixed effects regression in the full sample. By comparing the LDV estimates in Part 1 to the FE estimates in Part 2, this study will highlight the potential downfalls of common LDV models and issues of self-selection that future scholars in the area of family and religion should strongly consider. Because Part 2 examines respondents switching marital statuses, and the integrating factors of children may play a significant role among stable married respondents, Part 3 examines the impact of childrearing for those who were

married to the same spouse at Waves 1 & 2 (n=535). There were null results for the effect of childrearing among respondents who were single at both waves, but additional power analyses indicated that there may be insufficient statistical power to truly make null conclusions, so those results are not shown. Lastly, Part 4 tests the moderating effects of age and marital duration for the previous models. The moderating effects of gender, race, and religious tradition were all tested on family formation effects of interest, but they produced null results in all models. All samples retained respondents who either did not report an official congregation or are a religious “None” because a surprising number of respondents within these groups actually reported having congregational friends, highlighting important heterogeneity to consider. Each dependent variable has three models: Model 1 is the bivariate model; Model 2 adds the control variables; and Model 3 adds the religion explanatory variables. All fixed effects models also show the results from the Hausman test (1978), which help to detect heterogeneity bias based on discrepancies between fixed effects and random effects estimates (Halaby 2004). Multiple imputation (MI) was used to handle missing data (25 imputed datasets), but due to the postestimation limitations of MI, the Hausman tests were only run on one imputation set. Lastly, all analyses are performed using Stata 12.

## **Results**

Before testing the fixed effects (FE) models, lagged dependent variable (LDV) models are displayed given that they are commonly used to measure family formation effects on religion, though mostly for measures of affiliation/attendance (see Stolzenberg et al. 1995; Thornton et al. 1992). Displayed in Table 3-2, there was a positive

relationship between marriage at Wave 1 and religious social ties at Wave 2, both as a total number of congregational ties ( $p < .001$ ) or as a proportion of one's close social network ( $p < .01$ ). Moreover, the marriage coefficient did not change drastically when adding any control variables. This suggests there is little evidence of these additional variables serving as potential mechanisms explaining the relationship between marriage and close congregational ties. Number of children in the household was not significantly related to congregational social networks in Table 3-2, nor was it when we only look at married respondents (results not shown). So although an LDV approach offers little evidence of childrearing impacting close congregational ties, it does suggest initial support for the hypothesis that marriage leads to greater social ties within one's religious congregation

However, the substantive results drastically change when a within-person FE approach was implemented. When controlling for time-stable unobserved heterogeneity in Table 3-3, marriage actually *decreased* close congregational ties ( $p < .01$ ). Respondents who transitioned from unmarried to married significantly lost some of their close congregational ties at Wave 2. This appeared true regardless of whether we measure religious social integration as the total number of congregational friends or as a proportion of the respondent's close social network (i.e., religious homogeneity). Moreover, the marriage coefficient remained fairly unchanged from the bivariate model (Model 1) to the full model (Model 3), so there is little evidence that marriage impacts congregational social ties indirectly through other social changes (e.g., migration, self-reported health, etc.) or religious changes. Specifically, personal changes in religious affiliation, attendance, religious importance, and/or switching congregations cannot

explain the loss of congregational ties after marriage. In all six models of Table 3-3, the Hausman tests were significant, suggesting that the fixed effects models were detecting unobserved heterogeneity (Halaby 2004), which may explain why the FE estimates drastically differed from the LDV estimates. In this sense, past concerns regarding unmeasured factors into family formation were indeed warranted. The coefficient for number of children in the household remained insignificant. In sum, the FE estimates, in contrast to the LDV estimates, suggests support for Hypothesis 1b, that marriage reduces close congregational ties.

Although number of children in the household did not predict changes in close congregational ties in Table 3-3, this sample, in measuring changes in marital status, include both single and married respondents. It would be prudent to examine the importance of children in stable marriages across both waves to get at the “conventional” family pattern that tends to be valued by congregations and evident in the social composition of adherents (Chaves 1991; Edgell 2005). Table 3-4 examines the role of children for respondents who stayed married for both waves ( $n = 535$ ). Although the bivariate estimates for both outcomes showed weak support for the role of children on congregational ties, the additional variables added in Model 2 showed a positive effect of children in the household on total congregational ties ( $p < .05$ ) as well as a higher proportion of congregational friendships composing their close social network ( $p < .05$ ). The substantively different results in Model 2 either suggest a suppressor variable was controlled for in the model or the model may be misspecified (e.g., missing interaction effects), with the latter suggestion supported in the next table. The child coefficient remained unchanged in Model 3 when religious importance, attendance, and “switching”

were added. Thus, the married subsample gives support for Hypothesis 2a -- children increase congregational social ties.

Table 3-5 re-examines the final estimates in light of possible life course effects. More specifically, I tested whether of age and/or marital duration moderated the family formation effects previously found in Tables 3-3 and 3-4. Using interaction effects, Model 1 found that the isolating effect of marriage on close congregational ties tended to depend on age ( $p < .10$  or  $p < .05$  depending on the outcome). Similarly Models 2 and 3 found that the childrearing effect among married respondents also depended on age ( $p < .01$ ) as well as marital duration ( $p < .01$ ). To help illustrate how these interaction effects operate, Figure 1 plotted the predicted probabilities based on Table 5 estimates, specifically looking at congregational ties as a proportion of one's close social network and holding other control variables at their mean. To preserve parsimony and ensure stable estimates, age and marital duration groups were collapsed into nominal categories (e.g., below age 25, ages 25-34, ages 35-44, etc.). As Figure 3-1 highlights, the isolating effects of marriage on congregational ties tended to be the strongest among younger age groups and becomes less pronounced once respondents reach middle age (i.e., mid-40s). Likewise, the role of each additional household child on integrating married respondents into religious communities tended to be the strongest for younger age groups and those who are more recently married. Patterns were consistent regardless of the age/marital duration cut-off points used for the nominal variables. In this way, there is support for Hypothesis 3 -- the effect of family formation on close congregational ties weakens with increased age and marital duration.

## Discussion & Conclusion

This study shows that family formation matters to social ties with religious communities. Even when using a within-person fixed effects approach to control for time-stable unobserved heterogeneity, marriage and childrearing both tend to alter one's close congregational ties over time. However, this study also highlights how family formation effects change in direction and strength based on the type of family formation (e.g., marriage vs. childrearing) as well as the life stage at which these events occur. Marriage actually decreases close ties to religious congregations, while childrearing (for married respondents) tends to increase them. In this sense, childrearing, not marriage per se, integrates married respondents into religious communities. Moreover, family formation effects, whether it is the isolating effect of marriage or the integrating effect of children, tend to be the strongest among younger adults. In sum, family formation events certainly matter, but their effects should be understood as highly contextual.

The isolating effect of marriage on congregational social ties is perhaps surprising given past studies highlighting marriage as a positive event on other religious outcomes (e.g., attendance/affiliation; see Stolzenberg et al. 1995; Thornton et al. 1992). However, this finding is sensible for several reasons. First, the causal relationship between marriage and other religious outcomes were increasingly being questioned already and shown to be prone to selection effects (see Schleifer and Chaves 2014; Uecker et al. 2007). In this study, the differences between LDV estimates and the fixed effects estimates, along with the significant Hausman tests, suggest that selection into marriage remains a concern when measuring novel religious outcomes, like congregational ties. Because of this, more advanced statistical methods (e.g., fixed effects) should be used to take into account

possible self-selection. Second, the religious outcomes of this study and previous studies are not the same. Although religious attendance tends to predict congregational social ties (Stroope 2012), the relationship is far from perfect and at times very weak (Lenski 1961; Putnam and Campbell 2010). In the context of this study, the impact of forming families on congregational ties had little to do with changes in religious attendance or affiliation, so marital effects on congregational ties should not be conflated with marital effects on attendance. Lastly, the isolating effect of marriage is not surprising in light of recent family research, showing how marriage generally reduces time with friends and family (Musick and Bumpass 2012; Sarkisian and Gerstel 2008). This study is unique in the sense that it highlights how congregations also may experience the socially isolating effects of marriage.

Another important component of this study is the need to take into account life course stages when observing family formation effects. The lives of young adults have been increasingly marked by fluidity in terms of social relationships, employment, and religious participation. Just as modern young adults “tinker” with congregational commitments and religious beliefs (Wuthnow 2007), they may be tinkering with their congregational social ties as their family life changes. In line with Wuthnow’s (2007) “social insurance” perspective on religion, where religion operates as a safety net in times of need, congregational social ties may be less needed following marriage if one’s spouse helps satisfy one’s personal and social needs. Likewise, if rearing multiple children necessitates the need for social and personal support, then young married adults may turn to their congregational ties for help. Tinkering may be less sustainable or necessary over time, and perhaps less needed as individuals age, stabilize, and gain more life experience.

This is only one possible explanation for why life stage effects matter in the context of this study, but nonetheless it is important to take into consideration the life course when elaborating on the social ties that bind families to religious groups.

This study has important implications for congregations, who often rely on close congregational ties in establishing a loving and supportive religious community (see Edgell 2005; Putnam and Campbell 2010). First, congregational programs and activities that lure married couples with children appear validated given how childrearing within a marital union appears to increase close congregational ties. Moreover, the fact that this effect is actually the *strongest* among younger adults highlights an important context where young adults are actually relying on congregations instead of church hopping/shopping or disaffiliating. However, this study also offers some bleak conclusions for congregations. Given how marriage decreases close congregational ties, particularly among young adults, religious leaders either have to create better congregational programs for young married couples to stay socially connected to their congregation or simply wait until these couples rear children in order to reap the greater benefits of their pro-marriage/pro-family message. However, congregations face a tough reality in light of growing complex family structures replacing more traditional family structures (Cherlin 2010a; Smock and Greenland 2010). Childbearing is no longer required for familial or adult identity, and when it does occur, it is increasingly being delayed over the life course and outside of marital unions (Smock and Greenland 2010). Because of this, relying on traditional families to foster a close religious community appears to be a difficult strategy. Congregations may need to adapt faster to family

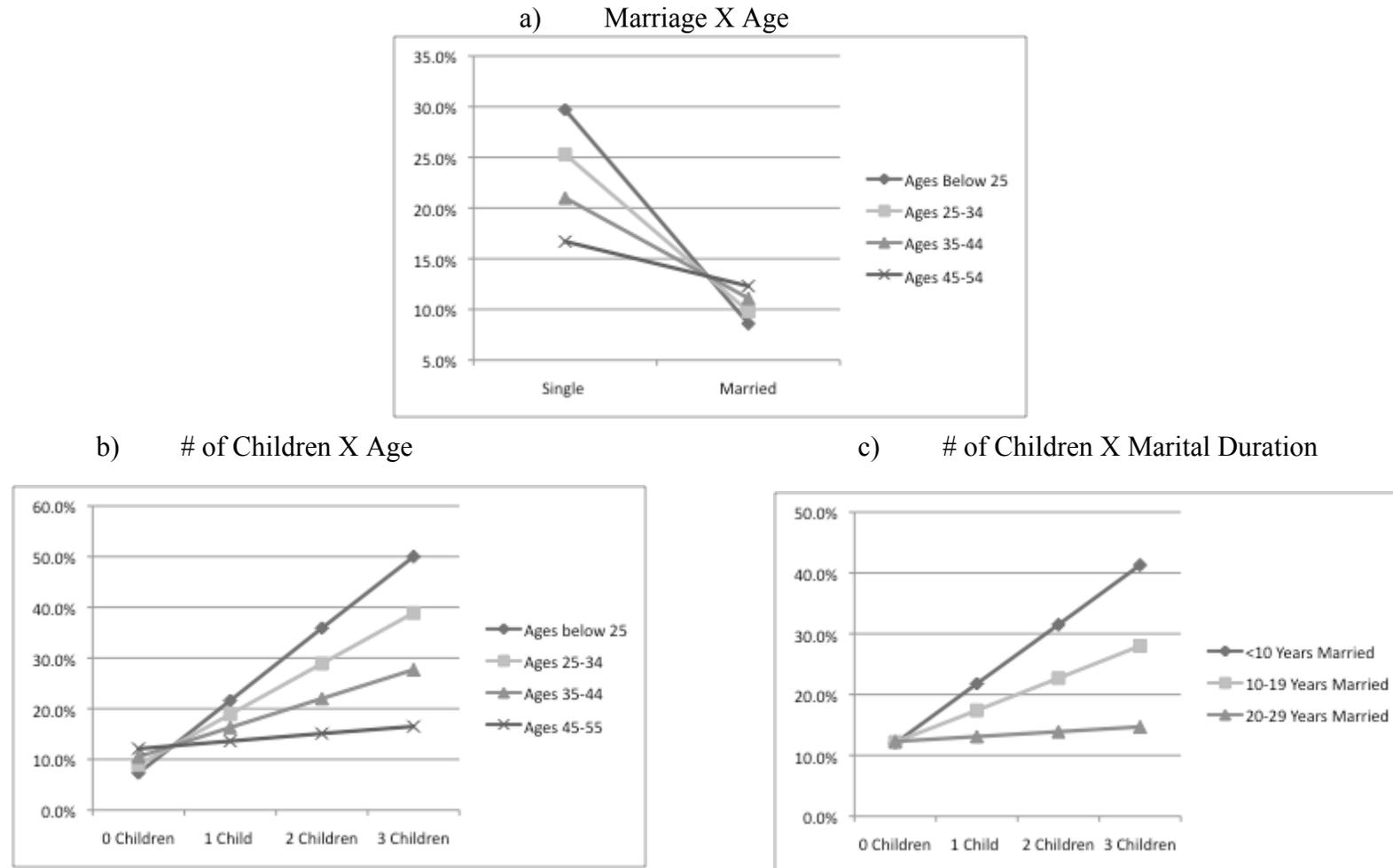
changes and address the specific needs of young adults if they seek to remain socially relevant.

This study is not without limitations, though future studies with better data should be able to address them. First, the study's use of egocentric network data is less ideal compared to full network data because egocentric network data may not contain all relevant actors in the network. Second, the longitudinal data came from two waves. Because of this, only linear change and short-term effects of family formation can be assessed. Third, this study examines the quantity of social ties to one's religious community, but not the quality of these ties per se. It is possible that marriage may lead to a decrease in ties to one's congregations, but the quality of ties may in fact strengthen under certain conditions. Fourth, the impact of childrearing among "single only" respondents was not examined in-depth due to previously mentioned problems of statistical power. A larger sample size of complex family forms would alleviate these concerns. And fifth, this study focuses on marriage and childrearing, but specific child effects (e.g., age of children, or behavior of children) and partner effects (e.g., religiously different partners, pre-marital cohabitation, etc.) were not explored. Many of these groups (e.g., interfaith marriages, cohabiting partners, partners with different religious importance) yielded fairly small sample sizes, reducing statistical power. However, generally the inclusion or exclusion of these groups yielded similar substantive results. In general, utilizing a larger longitudinal study with multiple waves and relevant measures will further improve this important area of inquiry in future studies.

As this study highlights, scholars need to take into consideration the social ties that bind families to religious groups. The social relationships that families have within

their religious congregation evolve and change over time, potentially because their personal and social needs change depending on their family status and life course stage. The institutions of family and religion are themselves undergoing great social changes, as neither lifelong religious commitment nor the traditional nuclear family are guaranteed occurrences. A focus on social ties suggests that families and their close congregational ties, much like the larger institutions in which they are embedded, remain in constant negotiation with one another in light of these social changes. Whereas this study examines how new family ties impact friendship ties within religious congregations, more research should highlight the opposite direction – how congregational friendships impact both family formation and maintenance. In this way, the role of social networks will further illuminate the micro processes that link these ever-changing institutions.

Figure 3-1. Age and Marital Duration Interaction Effects on % of Social Network from Congregation



Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012

Table 3-1. Descriptive Statistics of Chapter 3

	<i>Mean or %</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Within-Person Change Over Waves</i>	
				Full Sample (N=1,314)	Married Sample (N=535)
Married	57.33%	0.49	0-1	13.2% (N=173)	N/A
# of Children in Household	0.76	1.10	0-9	27.9% (N=366)	33.3% (N=178)
Marital Happiness	5.93	1.33	1-7	N/A	48.6% (N=260)
Marital Duration	23.65	15.72	0-69	N/A	100.0% (N=535)
Female	51.78%	0.50	0-1	N/A, Time Stable	N/A, Time Stable
Black	11.71%	0.32	0-1	N/A, Time Stable	N/A, Time Stable
Hispanic	13.50%	0.34	0-1	N/A, Time Stable	N/A, Time Stable
Other Race	5.06%	0.22	0-1	N/A, Time Stable	N/A, Time Stable
Midwest	24.63%	0.43	0-1	N/A, Time Stable	N/A, Time Stable
South	33.57%	0.47	0-1	N/A, Time Stable	N/A, Time Stable
West	24.97%	0.43	0-1	N/A, Time Stable	N/A, Time Stable
Age	47.91	16.32	18-80	100.0% (N=1,314)	100.0% (N=535)
Income	9.23	4.68	1-19	82.8% (N=946)	79.8% (N=372)
College	29.53%	0.46	0-1	04.5% (N=58)	N/A, Time Stable
Self-reported Health	3.43	1.10	1-5	55.5% (N=565)	49.2% (N=200)
Employed	61.37%	0.48	0-1	22.0% (N=289)	19.3% (N=103)
Work Hours	5.56	4.08	1-16	56.2% (N=737)	51.6% (N=276)
Moved between Waves	16.22%	0.37	0-1	33.4% (N=439)	22.2% (N=119)
Evangelical Protestant	31.64%	0.47	0-1	06.2% (N=81)	05.8% (N=31)
Mainline Protestant	10.85%	0.31	0-1	03.1% (N=41)	03.4% (N=18)
Catholic	25.50%	0.44	0-1	04.3% (N=57)	03.6% (N=19)
Switched Congregations	7.91%	0.27	0-1	16.6% (N=218)	15.7% (N=84)
Religious Importance	3.04	1.30	1-5	52.4% (N=677)	49.3% (N=260)
Attendance	3.73	2.34	1-8	55.0% (N=721)	51.3% (N=274)
Total Congregational Ties	0.44	0.89	0-4	32.9% (N=432)	37.4% (N=200)
% of Social Network (from Cong.)	15.12%	0.28	0-1	36.3% (N=424)	36.5% (N=173)

*Source:* Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012, weighted

Table 3-2. Marriage & Close Congregational Ties, Ordinary Least Squares Regression with Lagged Dependent Variable (N =1,314)

W2 Outcomes:	<i>Total Close Congregational Ties</i>				<i>% of Social Network</i>			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 3	
Married (W1)	.18***(.04)	.20***(.05)	.21***(.05)	.06***(.02)	.05** (.02)	.05** (.02)		
Dependent Variable (W1)	.25***(.02)	.24***(.02)	.16***(.02)	.42***(.03)	.40***(.03)	.29***(.03)		
Female		-.03 (.04)	-.02 (.04)		-.01 (.02)	-.01 (.02)		
Black		.09 (.07)	.05 (.07)		.07** (.03)	.06* (.02)		
Hispanic		.01 (.07)	-.03 (.07)		.05+ (.03)	.03 (.03)		
Other Race		.09 (.10)	-.01 (.10)		.06 (.04)	.02 (.04)		
Midwest		-.12+ (.07)	-.11+ (.06)		-.02 (.02)	-.02 (.02)		
South		.04 (.06)	.01 (.06)		.04+ (.02)	.03 (.02)		
West		-.05 (.07)	-.03 (.06)		.01 (.02)	.02 (.02)		
Age (W1)		.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)		.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)		
Income (W1)		-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)		-.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)		
College (W1)		.06 (.05)	.04 (.05)		.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)		
# of Children in House (W1)		-.02 (.02)	-.03 (.02)		-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)		
Employed (W1)		-.11 (.08)	-.15* (.08)		-.01 (.03)	-.03 (.03)		
Self-reported Health (W1)		-.06** (.02)	-.07***(.02)		-.01+ (.01)	-.02* (.01)		
Work Hours (W1)		.02* (.01)	.03** (.01)		.01+ (.01)	.01** (.01)		
Evangelical Protestant (W1)		.15* (.07)	-.07 (.07)		.10***(.03)	.01 (.03)		
Mainline Protestant (W1)		.29***(.08)	.10 (.08)		.09** (.03)	.02 (.03)		
Catholic (W1)		.28***(.07)	.09 (.07)		.08** (.03)	.01 (.03)		
Other Religion (W1)		.22** (.08)	.05 (.08)		.09** (.03)	.02 (.03)		
Religious Importance (W1)			.04+ (.02)			.01 (.01)		
Attendance (W1)			.08***(.01)			.03***(.01)		

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012

W1 = Wave 1; W2 = Wave 2; Prot. = Protestant; ( ) = standard errors; Reference groups: white, northeast region, no religion

Note: Models exclude change-score-based variables (moved & switched congregations)

+ $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3-3. Marriage & Close Congregational Ties, Linear Fixed Effects Regression (N =1,314)

Outcome:	<i>Total Close Congregational Ties</i>				<i>% of Social Network</i>			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 3	
Unmarried→Married	-0.23** (.08)	-0.26** (.09)	-0.22** (.08)	-0.07** (.03)	-0.08** (.03)	-0.07** (.03)		
Age		-0.02** (.01)	-0.01* (.01)		.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)		
Income		.01+ (.01)	.01 (.01)		.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)		
College		-.01 (.14)	.06 (.13)		-.01 (.04)	.02 (.04)		
# of Children in Household		.04 (.04)	.04 (.04)		.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)		
Unemployed→Employed		-.01 (.09)	-.06 (.09)		-.01 (.03)	-.02 (.03)		
Self-reported Health		.03 (.03)	.02 (.03)		.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)		
Work Hours		-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)		-.01 (.01)	-.01 (.01)		
Moved between Waves		-.11+ (.06)	-.03 (.06)		-.01 (.02)	.01 (.02)		
None→Evangelical Protestant .		.24 (.14)	.10 (.14)		.06 (.04)	-.01 (.04)		
None →Mainline Protestant		.06 (.19)	.03 (.18)		.10+ (.06)	.07 (.05)		
None →Catholic		-.10 (.16)	-.20 (.16)		.05 (.05)	.01 (.05)		
None →Other Religion		.09 (.13)	.02 (.13)		.08+ (.04)	.04 (.04)		
Switched Congregations between Waves			-.40***(.08)			-.06** (.02)		
Religious Importance			-.01 (.03)			.01 (.01)		
Attendance			.10***(.02)			.04***(.01)		
<i>Hausman</i> $\chi^2$	15.40***	54.84***	50.85***	14.39***	28.13**	29.54**		

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012

Estimates represent unstandardized coefficients. ( ) = standard errors

+ $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3-4. Children & Close Congregational Ties, Linear Fixed Effects Regression (Married Respondents, n =535)

Outcome:	<i>Total Close Congregational Ties</i>				<i>% of Social Network</i>							
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
# of Children in Household	.09	(.08)	.20*	(.09)	.20*	(.09)	.03+	(.02)	.04*	(.02)	.04*	(.02)
Age			.06	(.06)	.06	(.06)			.02	(.02)	.02	(.02)
Income			.02	(.02)	.02	(.02)			.01	(.01)	.01	(.01)
Unemployed→Employed			-.01	(.16)	-.03	(.16)			-.05	(.05)	-.05	(.05)
Self-reported Health			-.02	(.06)	-.02	(.06)			-.01	(.02)	-.01	(.02)
Work Hours			-.01	(.02)	-.01	(.02)			-.01	(.01)	.01	(.01)
Moved between Waves			-.19	(.12)	-.16	(.12)			-.02	(.04)	-.01	(.04)
None→Evangelical Protestant			.25	(.26)	.12	(.26)			.07	(.08)	.01	(.08)
None →Mainline Protestant			.07	(.29)	.03	(.29)			.13	(.09)	.09	(.09)
None →Catholic			-.22	(.29)	-.31	(.29)			.03	(.09)	-.03	(.09)
None →Other Religion			-.01	(.24)	-.01	(.24)			.03	(.08)	.01	(.08)
Marital Happiness			.07*	(.03)	.07*	(.03)			.02*	(.01)	.02+	(.01)
Marital Duration			-.08	(.06)	-.08	(.06)			-.02	(.02)	-.02	(.02)
Switched Congregations between Waves					-.14	(.13)					-.02	(.04)
Religious Importance					-.04	(.05)					.01	(.02)
Attendance					.12***	(.03)					.05***	(.01)
<i>Hausman</i> $\chi^2$	0.26		32.41**		34.36**		1.22		16.33		28.05*	

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012

Estimates represent unstandardized coefficients. ( )= standard errors

NOTE: “College” variable in previous models is time-stable among married respondents.

+ $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 3-5. Age & Marital Duration Interactions: Linear Fixed Effects Regressions (Full Sample: N =1,314; Married Sample: n =535)

Outcome: Sample:	<i>Total Close Congregational Ties</i>						<i>% of Social Network</i>					
	(Full Sample)		(Married)		(Married)		(Full Sample)		(Married)		(Married)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Married X Age	.08+	(.01)					.01*	(.01)				
Children X Age			-.01**	(.01)					-.01**	(.01)		
Children X Marital Duration					-.01**	(.01)					-.01**	(.01)
Married	-.58**	(.22)	N/A		N/A		-.20**	(.07)	N/A		N/A	
# of Children in Household	.04	(.04)	.75**	(.22)	.33**	(.10)	.02	(.01)	.25***	(.07)	.10**	(.03)
Age	-.02**	(.01)	.08	(.06)	.08	(.06)	.01	(.01)	.03+	(.02)	.03	(.02)
Income	.01	(.01)	.02	(.02)	.02	(.02)	.01	(.01)	.01	(.01)	.01	(.01)
College	.09	(.14)	N/A		N/A		.03	(.04)	N/A		N/A	
Unemployed→Employed	-.05	(.09)	.03	(.16)	.02	(.16)	-.02	(.03)	-.04	(.05)	-.04	(.05)
Self-reported Health	.02	(.03)	-.02	(.06)	-.02	(.06)	.01	(.01)	-.01	(.02)	-.01	(.02)
Work Hours	-.01	(.01)	-.01	(.02)	-.01	(.02)	-.01	(.01)	.01	(.01)	.01	(.01)
Moved between Waves	-.02	(.06)	-.15	(.12)	-.16	(.12)	.01	(.02)	-.02	(.04)	-.01	(.04)
None→Evangelical Protestant	.10	(.14)	.21	(.26)	.24	(.26)	.01	(.04)	.02	(.08)	.01	(.08)
None →Mainline Protestant	.03	(.18)	.07	(.29)	.05	(.29)	.06	(.05)	.09	(.09)	.09	(.09)
None →Catholic	-.19	(.15)	-.31	(.28)	-.29	(.28)	.01	(.05)	-.04	(.09)	-.03	(.09)
None →Other Religion	.02	(.13)	.09	(.24)	.10	(.24)	.04	(.04)	.03	(.08)	.03	(.08)
Marital Happiness	N/A		.06+	(.03)	.06+	(.03)	N/A		.02	(.01)	.02+	(.01)
Marital Duration	N/A		-.08	(.06)	-.08	(.06)	N/A		-.02	(.02)	-.01	(.02)
Switched Congregations between Waves	-.40***	(.08)	-.15	(.13)	-.15	(.13)	-.06**	(.02)	-.02	(.04)	-.02	(.04)
Religious Importance	.01	(.03)	-.04	(.05)	-.04	(.05)	.01+	(.01)	.01	(.01)	.01	(.01)
Attendance	.10***	(.02)	.11**	(.03)	.11**	(.03)	.04***	(.01)	.05***	(.01)	.05***	(.01)
Hausman $\chi^2$	62.33***		27.55*		28.58*		37.38**		11.26		26.27+	

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012

Estimates represent unstandardized coefficients. ( )= standard errors

+ $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## **Chapter 4.**

### **You, Me, and the Sacred Community: Testing Individual, Marital, and Network Aspects of Religion on Marital Happiness**

Maintaining a healthy and happy marriage is a difficult task. The benefits, costs, and availability of alternatives all play a role in the stability of a marital union (Levinger 1965; Previtti and Amato 2003). Because of declining mortality rates over the last century, spouses must stay together for a longer period of time than ever before (Uhlenberg 1996). Moreover, marriages in the United States encounter contradictory cultural norms of complete commitment and complete individual satisfaction that make satisfying marriages often elusive (Cherlin 2010b). It's perhaps no surprise that divorce rates have risen over the last 50 years (Ruggles and Kennedy 2014), with low marital quality one of the strongest predictors of divorce (Amato and Rogers 1997; Amato and Hohmann-Marriott 2007).

Despite these obstacles, religion may operate as a “safe container” for spouses to maintain their marriages (Lambert and Dollahite 2006). As Mahoney (2010) explains in her popular relational spirituality framework, religion operates through the individual, marital couple, and the religious community to improve marital outcomes. First, belief in a God who operates as a “third partner” helps couples stay committed and view their marriage as a religious institution that lasts (Lambert and Dollahite 2008). Moreover,

couples that pray together indeed often stay together (Ellison, Burdette, and Wilcox 2010), perhaps because the relational religious practice is both an intimate bonding experience and a reminder of shared beliefs. Lastly, social connections to one's religious community may help couples find potential social support through the various trials of marriage (Stolzenberg et al. 1995). As Mahoney's (2010) relational spirituality framework emphasizes, religion's impact on marriage is dependent upon strong relationships -- the individual's relationship with the divine, the relationship between the spouses, and the relationships the spouses have with their religious community.

Scholars of family and religion have strongly embraced the notion that spiritual relationships matter for marital wellbeing. Mahoney's framework has already been cited in more than 200 studies according to *Google Scholar* since its publication in 2010,<sup>6</sup> with mounting evidence highlighting how shared religious practices and beliefs among marital partners help improve marital outcomes (David and Stafford 2015; Ellison, Burdette, and Wilcox 2010; Ellison et al. 2011). However, limitations still remain. In terms of substantive limitations, studies have not fully tested all the independent and interdependent (i.e., moderating) effects of all three components of Mahoney's relational spirituality framework. First, few empirical studies have examined the role of social ties to religious communities (i.e., religious social networks). Religious social networks have been associated with increases in life satisfaction (Lim and Putnam 2010), health (Krause 2008), and social support (Merino 2014), but their role in improving marital outcomes remains absent apart from a handful of qualitative studies (Dollahite and Marks 2009;

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<sup>6</sup> Retrieved October 27, 2016 from [https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cluster=7628391322994076831&hl=en&as\\_sdt=0,39](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?cluster=7628391322994076831&hl=en&as_sdt=0,39)

Goodman and Dollahite 2006). Second, because a lack of social network measures precludes a complete test of Mahoney's relational spirituality framework, we do not know whether individual, marital, or social network aspects of religion have a similar impact on marital outcomes or whether certain religious characteristics matter more than others. Lastly, we do not know the conditions under which religious effects are optimized. For example, do individuals need to be religious in order to reap the marital benefits of religious social ties? This is often assumed by past studies using a relational spirituality framework (Dollahite and Marks 2009; Goodman and Dollahite 2006), but nonetheless this has not been tested. In sum, scholars have largely assumed that individual, marital, and social network characteristics matter without: 1) testing all three aspects of religion; 2) comparing the relative magnitude of effects among all three aspects; 3) and measuring potential conditional effects under which religious factors work best to improve marriages.

In addition to these substantive concerns, there also are important limitations in data and methods that obstruct any proper causal inference. Most studies on religion and family use cross-sectional data as well as methods that do not account for unmeasured variables that may bias findings (Mahoney 2010). This is problematic because family of origin characteristics, personality factors, and social desirability bias may all present "third variables" that render the relationship between religious factors and marital outcomes spurious if unaccounted for in the statistical models. It would be possible to account for these unmeasured factors with a longitudinal design and a fixed effects approach, which would control for time-stable factors like those outlined, but few studies on religion and marriage have done this. Without more sophisticated research designs

that alleviate these concerns, one cannot say with confidence that religion actually improves marital functioning.

This chapter operates as a corrective to the aforementioned limitations of past studies by testing the ways in which individual, marital-dyadic, and network components of religion impact marital wellbeing using nationally representative longitudinal data from the Portraits of American Life Study (2006-2012). Specifically, I test the role of personal religiousness, joint religious activities between spouses, and ties to religious communities on marital happiness for married respondents (N=535). Not only will I test whether these various aspects of religion produce significant effects, but I also will examine their relative effects in magnitude as well as their potential moderating effects (i.e., interaction effects). Moreover, fixed effects regression models will be used to control for all time-stable factors, thus limiting past “third variable” concerns and improving causal inference. As a result, my study will more accurately highlight the multidimensional role of religion on family outcomes using better measures, data, and methods.

### **The Multidimensional Role of Religion**

In order to fully understand Mahoney’s (2010) relational spirituality framework, I will theorize and cover past research on how religion improves marriages through the: 1) individual; 2) marital partners; 3) and religious community/network. I will end this section by: 4) theorizing the ways in which these unique religious effects may interact with one another in ways that produce the strongest positive effects on marital quality.

The first two subsections cover aspects of religion that have been empirically tested (e.g., individual and marital), although important limitations remain, as I will highlight. The last two subsections will mostly be theoretical given the lack of studies testing social network aspects of religion and their interaction effects. I will provide hypotheses by the end of each subsection, most of which are guided by Mahoney's framework (2010) with the exception of the last hypothesis, in which I uniquely argue that the various aspects of religion may be seen as separate religious resources that fill in for one another when a given religious resource is lacking (i.e., a "compensation" effect). For example, the less religious (not the most religious) may benefit the most from ties to religious communities, as religious ties may function as "bridges" to new approaches to understand and improve one's marriage. In this way, this chapter not only tests Mahoney's (2010) theoretical framework, but also builds upon it by introducing a novel way to understand how the aforementioned aspects of religion uniquely interact with one another in unexpected ways.

### **Individual Aspects of Religion**

Marriages are maintained and dissolved based on the beliefs and practices of a given marital partner. For example, infidelity, drug addiction, and a lack of personal commitment to marriage tend to increase marital problems and increase the risk of divorce (Amato and Rogers 1997; Kamp Dush and Taylor 2012; Previti and Amato 2004). Likewise, individual aspects of religion may also impact marital quality. For example, attending religious services may expose an individual to teachings of love,

forgiveness, and commitment to one's spouse, despite various marital obstacles (Marriage Matters book). Likewise, affiliating with certain religious groups may highlight personal exposure to social norms of personal warmth (Wilcox 2004). Lastly, religious importance may reflect a deep internalization of religious teachings, which may be necessary for spouses to rely on when overcoming the conflicts in marriage (Lambert and Dollahite 2006). Moreover, internalizing religious beliefs may also reflect a belief in a God who guides and supports one's marriage (Lambert and Dollahite 2008), an effective means to improve marital quality (Mahoney 2010). In this way, religious affiliation, attendance, and importance may all be relevant factors in maintaining a healthy marriage.

The literature on family and religion tends to focus narrowly on these individual predictors of religion on marital outcomes, which is surprising given that the effects tend to be inconsistent and weak depending on the specific measure (Booth et al 1995; Mahoney 2010). Specifically, the vast majority of studies find affiliation and attendance to correlate weakly with marital satisfaction, with an average Pearson's  $r$  of .05 for religious affiliation and .07 for religious attendance (Mahoney et al. 2001:568). Of the three common individual predictors, religious importance tends to consistently predict higher marital satisfaction (Dudley and Kosinski 1990; Schumm et al. 1982; Schramm et al. 2012), and the effect size tends to be greater, though still modest (Pearson's  $r = .15$ ; see Mahoney et al. 2001: 568). In general, religious beliefs and their importance, rather than behavior or identification, tend to be the most relevant individual factors when measuring marital quality.

Why are these effects often weak and inconsistent? One reason, could be that these common measures only examine religion “from a distance” without truly unveiling how respondents use religion to help improve their marriage (Mahoney et al. 1999). Another explanation is that religion simply is not very relevant to the modern marriage (Booth et al. 1995). Finally, these predictors may produce weak effects because they fail to account for the social dynamics of religion that may play a crucial role in improving marital outcomes. In essence, Mahoney (2010) highlights how spiritual relationships -- either with the divine, with the spouse, or the religious community – are vital for improving family outcomes, but these individual characteristics alone often fail to highlight religion as an important *social* phenomenon for family wellbeing. In order to compare the relative effects of individual aspects of religion to more social aspects, like joint religious practices between spouses and social ties to religious communities, the following hypothesis will be tested:

*Hypothesis 1:* Individual aspects of religion (i.e., affiliation, attendance, and importance) positively predict marital happiness.

### **The Couple that Prays Together: Religion Within the Marital Dyad**

Interaction and activities within the marital dyad are important for the couple’s wellbeing. Marital interaction has been linked with increases in marital happiness (White 1983; Zuo 1992) and decreases in the probability of divorce (Booth et al. 1985; Hill 1988). On a certain level, engaging in joint marital activities reflects Durkheim’s ([1915] 1995) notion of social rituals producing social solidarity, but instead reinforcing the

values of society, it reinforces the values of the couple. Couple activities are important for establishing intimacy and preserving a unique “couple identity” that help spouses see their relationship as special (Felmlee and Sprecher 2000:367). Moreover, marital interactions offer opportunity to engage in open communication, which has been linked with higher marital satisfaction (Vangelisiti 2011). With rising individualistic views of the American marriage (Cherlin 2004), couples engage in less marital interaction now relative to the 1980s (Amato et al. 2007), but joint marital activities offer an opportunity to counter the risk of declining marital happiness and subsequent divorce.

Marital activities in religious contexts (e.g., praying together, attending religious services together, scripture reading, etc.) may also prove beneficial for couples (Lambert and Dollahite 2006). Many spouses view their marriage as a sanctified institution that lasts (Mahoney et al. 2003), and praying together allows couples to put their shared religious beliefs into meaningful action. Couple prayer also allows opportunities for spouses to be open and vulnerable with each other (Lambert and Dollahite 2006), which subsequently produces trust and fosters forgiveness (David and Stafford 2015; Lambert et al. 2012). In contexts of marital conflict, couple prayer often alleviates anger at a partner, as one respondent in a qualitative study notes, “It’s pretty hard to...say prayers together and keep being mad at each other. So, I actually don’t really remember having gone to bed mad at each other after saying prayers” (Lambert and Dollahite 2006:444). Because of this, many couples place a high value on these types of activities for helping maintain their marriage (Marks 2004).

The adage “the couple that prays together stays together” holds true for empirical studies on marital quality. In general, joint religious activities are associated

with higher family functioning (Lambert and Dollahite 2010). Multiple cross-sectional studies have found that activities, like praying together, often are the most robust predictors of relationship satisfaction relative to affiliation and attendance (Ellison et al. 2010; Lichter and Carmalt 2009; Mahoney et al. 1999). Perhaps this is because joint religious activities show the proximal processes through which couples rely on religion to help maintain their marriage, whereas personal measures of religion only measure religion's impact on marriage from "a distance" and leave much room to speculate as to how religion remains relevant in today's marriage (see Mahoney et al. 1999; Mahoney 2010). In order to further examine the efficacy of joint religious activities, like couple prayer, the next step is to examine its robustness with longitudinal data and improve causal inference by controlling for time-stable unobserved heterogeneity through fixed effects models, which has not been done to my knowledge. For this reason, I test the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: Joint couple prayer positively predicts marital happiness.*

### **Religious Social Networks: Contexts for Marital Support**

The social ties that connect people within social networks are powerful. In general, social ties improve life satisfaction and health outcomes (Christakis and Fowler 2009), as well as protect against anomie (Durkheim [1897] 1951). In terms of romantic relationships, many studies focus on the marital dyad and ignore other social ties within one's social network (Felmlee and Sprecher 2000). This is a severe limitation because social networks provide valuable social support to help couples stay together (Felmlee

2001), perhaps because a large proportion of romantic relationships form as a result of common network members (Christakis and Fowler 2009), who subsequently become invested in the relationship's success (Parks and Eggert 1991). Indeed, married couples who are embedded in strong supportive networks tend to have higher rates of satisfaction, commitment, and stability according to a 20-year longitudinal study (Bryant and Conger 1999). Even perceptions of informal social support from one's community help improve marital satisfaction for both men and women (Minnotte et al. 2008). In order to reveal the social processes that help couples maintain marriages, the importance of social networks should always be considered.

Religious social networks may also be important for married couples and their marital happiness. Unlike other social ties, social ties within one's religious community or congregation often are "set apart" and hold more moral weight relative to secular ties (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Indeed, some couples view their social ties to religious communities as an "indirect divine influence" to help guide married couples through tough times (Goodman and Dollahite 2006). In this sense, the advice from friends within the religious community may help promote marital commitment, sanctified perceptions of marriage, and pro-social conflict resolutions (Dollahite and Marks 2009; Goodman and Dollahite 2006; Lambert and Dollahite 2006). Just as religious social networks tend to improve life satisfaction (Lim and Putnam 2010), health (Krause 2008), and social support (Merino 2014), their effect on marital outcomes may also prove to be beneficial.

Despite the potential value of social networks in the study of marriage and religion, empirical studies have largely ignored them. Some studies use attendance as a proxy for embeddedness into a religious community (Stolzenberg et al. 1995), and

although attendance does predict congregational social ties (Stroope 2012), attendance is a fairly crude and indirect measure. As Lenski (1961) notes, some religious groups, like Jews, tend to have a high number of ties to the religious community but low attendance. Likewise, sitting alone in a pew will not reap the same social benefits as establishing relationships within one's congregation (see Lim and Putnam 2010; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Mahoney (2010) notes that the lack of quantitative studies on the power of "spiritual networks" remains a severe limitation in theorizing how religious social processes improve family outcomes. Indeed, Mahoney's (2010) relational spirituality framework on the importance of individual, marital couple, and spiritual community on family outcomes remains largely untested due to the absence of social network measures. As a corrective, I test the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3:* Social ties within religious congregations positively predict marital happiness.

### **Religious Interdependence: Does Congruence or Compensation Matter More?**

Beyond the absence of a complete empirical test of Mahoney's (2010) relational spirituality framework, the ways in which these various religious aspects come together to uniquely impact marital outcomes remain understudied. Specifically, does one need to be religious in order to reap the marital benefits of either joint religious activities or religious social ties (i.e., a "congruence" effect)? Or do social aspects of religion compensate, and perhaps work best, for those who are less religious (i.e., "compensation effect")?

The congruence explanation suggests that individual, marital, and network aspects of religion must align in a consistent pattern in order to improve one's marriage. Congruence between religiosity identity and religious social behavior functions as a form of identity verification and reduces cognitive dissonance (Atkins and Kessel 2008). When religious identity and social behavior operate in opposite directions, this religious inconsistency produces both discomfort and negative outcomes. Studies on marital infidelity, for example, show that religious congruence is an important conditional effect to consider, for individuals who engage in religious social behaviors must also have high personal religiousness in order to reduce the risk of infidelity (Atkins and Kessel 2008; Essselmont and Bierman 2014). Indeed, qualitative studies that use a relational spirituality perspective often highlight the importance of relational religious practices specifically among highly religious couples (Goodman and Dollahite 2006; Lambert and Dollahite 2006, 2008), implicitly supporting a religious congruence argument. In the context of this study, religious individuals may also need to engage in joint couple activities and/or maintain close ties to a religious community in order to reap the best marital outcomes.

However, religion does not always operate in a congruent way (Chaves 2010), and it is not uncommon for the irreligious to become integrated into religious communities for the social benefits, even when they lack a sense of personal religiosity (Lenski 1961). Given the reality of religious incongruence, a "compensation" effect may occur, meaning one religious resource (e.g., ties to the religious community) may compensate for the lack of another religious resource (e.g., religious importance) in improving marital outcomes. Specifically, religious social ties may act as a "bridge" to

novel ideas and social resources for those who are less religious (Granovetter 1973). While a religious person may experience common, predictable advice from others who share the same beliefs, a fairly unreligious person might find ties to religious communities to provide opportunities for novel marital advice, perhaps even essential to overcoming marital conflict and improving marital happiness. For example, messages of forgiveness and unconditional love from religious friends may feel unoriginal for those who are consistently exposed to these ideas from religious scripture, spiritual advice books, or sermons, but for those who are otherwise unreligious, congregational friendships may introduce new approaches to practice these values in ways benefitting his or her marriage. Indeed, that might be the intention of an unreligious person who increases his/her ties to the religious community – to find a new approach to improve one’s marriage. In the health literature, diverse social networks often provide the best health outcomes because they allow unhealthy people to be connected to healthy alters who expose the individual to new information vital for personal change (Fiori and Jager 2012; Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra 2006; Park, Smith, and Dunkle 2014), so connections to religious friends may also operate in this way. Thus, individual, marital, and network aspects of religion may be seen as separate religious resources that fill in for one another when a given religious resource is lacking.

Because either congruence or compensation effects may be at play, I will test the following competing hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 4a:* Individual, marital-dyadic, and network aspects of religion work best to improve marital happiness when they operate congruently.

*Hypothesis 4b*: Individual, spousal, and social network aspects of religion work best to improve marital happiness when they compensate for one another.

## **Data & Methods**

### **Data**

This chapter uses data from Waves 1 and 2 of The Portraits of American Life Study (PALS). The merged dataset was downloaded from theARDA.com. All estimates are weighted due to complex survey design, non-response, and strong recommendations from the principal investigators.<sup>7</sup> This data source is described with more detail in Chapter 2.

The analytical sample is composed of 535 respondents who remained married to the same partner at both waves of the study. While there were some cohabiting couples who stayed together at both waves across a six-year period, the sample was very small (n=22), so they were dropped from the analyses. Future studies should test the relational spirituality framework among cohabiting couples if a sufficient sample is available.

### **Dependent Variable: Marital Happiness**

The dependent variable for the current study is a single item measure of marital happiness. The survey item asked, “All things considered, how would you describe your

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<sup>7</sup> For more details on how using unweighted PALS estimates may bias results, see <http://www.thearda.com/pals/researchers/syswithpals.asp>

marriage/relationship?” Responses range from *completely unhappy* (=1) to *completely happy* (=7). Most married couples gave an average response of “mostly happy,” although nearly half of respondents experienced changes in marital happiness as shown in Table 4-1.

### **Independent Variables**

In measuring individual, marital-dyadic, and social network aspects of religion, I have five main variables of interest: religious affiliation (individual), religious attendance (individual), religious importance (individual), frequency of couple prayer (marital-dyadic), and total close ties to a religious congregation (network). Religious affiliation is based on the common categorization RELTRAD, which categorizes religious affiliation into *Evangelical Protestant*, *Black Protestant*, *Mainline Protestant*, *Catholic*, “*Other*”, and “*None*” (see Steensland et al., 2000), with “*None*” as the reference category.

Religious attendance comes from the following survey item: “How often do you attend worship services, not including weddings or funerals?” Responses range from *never* (=1) to *three times a week or more* (=8). Religious importance comes from the following survey item: “How important is religion or religious faith to you personally?” Responses range from *not at all important* (=1) to *by far the most important part of your life* (=5).

Frequency of couple prayer comes from the following survey item: “In the past year, how often would you say that you and your spouse or partner did the following: pray together, not including before meals and at religious services?” Responses range from *never* (=1) to *everyday* (=6).

Lastly, number of close ties to a religious congregation comes from the egocentric network module of PALS. The interviewer asks whether the respondent has close friends outside of the household, and if the respondent does, he/she is asked a series of questions describing the characteristics of up to four close friends. The PALS egocentric module resembles the General Social Survey's egocentric modules in many ways, focusing on the "core" of each respondent's social network (see McPherson et al. 2006). In describing each close friend, the interviewer asks: "Which of the people you mentioned are involved in your congregation?" All respondents were asked these questions, even those without a congregation or religious affiliation. This was fortunate because a surprising number of non-congregants and religious "nones" reported a close congregational friend. Non-congregants may be church shopping or "tinkering" with religion, as Wuthnow (2007) would say, while the unaffiliated reporting congregational friends may highlight how a minority of "nones" may be traditionally religious, but nonetheless prefer not to adopt a religious label. In any case, non-congregants and religious "nones" are kept in this study for these reasons. These responses were added to together into a single measure ranging from *0 close congregational friends* to *4 close congregational friends*. It's possible that the respondent may have more than four close congregational friends, and limiting questions to only four close friends may truncate variation. However, it is important to note that respondents rarely mentioned four close congregational friends, with most naming between zero and one close congregational friend (see Table 4-1).

The following time-varying control variables also are included in the analyses: age, income, education (*college degree* = 1), employment status (*employed* = 1), number of children in the household, and marital duration. Because gender, race, and region were

time-stable in the dataset, and fixed effects models inherently control for time-stable predictors, these variables do not produce coefficients in the fixed effects models.

However, the means and measures of dispersion for these measures are shown in Table 1 for descriptive purposes. All family and religious upbringing variables are inherently controlled for in the fixed effects models as well.

### **Fixed Effects Regression Models**

FE models use a within-person change-score approach that compares “like with like” because each respondent serves as “his or her own control” (see Allison, 2005:3).

For a two-wave fixed effects model, the basic change-score is as follows:

$$(Y_{i2} - Y_{i1}) = a + b(X_{i2} - X_{i1}) + e_i, i = 1, \dots, n \quad (1)$$

This regression model shows a change in Y between Waves 1 and 2 as the dependent variable and a change in X as the independent variable, where *a* is constant term, *b* is the effect of change in X on change in Y, and *e<sub>i</sub>* is the error term. By measuring how within-person change in predictor variables corresponds to within-person change in the dependent variable, all time-stable factors drop out of the equation and are controlled for in the models, though important time-varying predictors should be included (Firebaugh et al. 2013). In this way, important factors like family/religious upbringing, personality, gender, race, and all potentially confounding time-stable factors are inherently taken into account in the estimated models, offering a unique advantage over many alternative methods (Johnson 2005).

The advantages of fixed effects models also are important in the specific context of this study. Besides implementing a longitudinal design, which many scholars in the area of marriage and religion have been advocating over the commonly used cross-sectional designs (Ellison et al. 2010; Mahoney 2010), a fixed effects approach also helps alleviate unobserved heterogeneity concerns impacting the causal relationship between religion effects and family outcomes. Family of origin characteristics may impact both religious behavior and marital outcomes. For example, adult children of divorce tend to be less religious and have more marital problems (Wolfinger 2000; Zhai et al. 2008). Moreover, the religious upbringing and religious characteristics of the parents may impact both the religious behavior and family outcomes of the adult children (Bengston 2013; Thornton et al. 1992). Personality factors also function as important unobserved heterogeneity that may render results spurious, for the same personality factors that predict religious dispositions (i.e. agreeableness and conscientiousness) also predict and marital happiness (Razeghi et al. 2011; Saroglou 2002). Many studies fail to account for these third variable issues. Moreover, it also is possible that religious couples are overreporting marital satisfaction in the same way that religious individuals tend to overreport religious attendance (Hadaway et al. 1993; Presser and Stinson 1996), possibly due to social desirability concerns some scholars fear among religious respondents (Batson et al. 1978; Trimble 1997). Because the aforementioned issues of family of origin characteristics, personality, and social desirability are mostly time-stable, a fixed effects design inherently controls for these important unobserved factors. Unlike past cross-sectional studies, this study's rigorous design improves causal inference and allows one to truly reassess the importance of religion in the modern marriage.

## **Analytical Strategy**

I analyze the multidimensional role of religion on marital happiness in five separate models, with the first three models measuring individual, marital, and network aspects of religion separately. Model 1 examines the individual religious predictors (i.e., religious affiliation, attendance, and importance) along with the sociodemographic time-varying controls. Likewise, Model 2 examines couple prayer on marital happiness while controlling for sociodemographic characteristics. Similarly, Model 3 examines the effect of close congregational ties on marital happiness with control variables. Model 4 represents the full model with all religious predictors included in the fixed effects equation. Lastly, Model 5 highlights significant interaction effects between the religious predictors to highlight congruence or compensation effects. Although two-way, and even three-way, interaction effects were tested for all religious predictors, Model 5 only shows effects that were significant for the purposes of parsimony. All models present both unstandardized as well as standardized coefficients, with the latter being used to highlight the magnitude of the observed effects. Adhering to Amato and Anthony's (2014) advice on standardizing variables in fixed effects models, standardization was based on taking the overall mean of the variable across waves and the average within-wave standard deviation of the variable. Both independent and dependent variables are standardized, which affects the coefficients but not the significance tests. Multiple imputation (MI) was used to handle missing data (25 imputed datasets), and all analyses are performed using Stata 12.

## Results

In Model 1 of Table 4-2, the first hypothesis is tested – individual aspects of religion positively predict marital happiness. Support for this hypothesis largely depends on the specific individual religious predictor examined. For example, religious tradition tends to be a weak and inconsistent predictor of marital happiness. While transitions from a religious “none” to Catholic affiliation positively predicts marital happiness ( $p < .01$ ), transitions into Evangelical Protestant, Black Protestant, and Mainline Protestant affiliation do not produce significant effects. Likewise, religious attendance does not positively predict marital happiness either. The null findings for most of the religious tradition predictors may be due to lack of within-person variation, producing high standard errors that make significant results hard to obtain. However, more than half the sample experienced changes in religious attendance, so statistical power should be sufficient for the religious attendance predictor to detect significant effects if they were present.

In contrast to both religious tradition and attendance, religious importance positively predicts marital happiness in Model 1 ( $p < .01$ ), although the magnitude of the effect ( $\beta = .15$ ) remains fairly modest according to conventional standards used in meta-analyses (see Amato 2001). Studies with more sophisticated methods, like fixed effects designs, tend to produce weaker effect sizes (Amato and Keith 1991), so this is fairly common. In general, support for Hypothesis 1 is mixed, but as previous research has suggested (Mahoney et al. 2001), the effect of religious importance on marital happiness appears stronger than the effects of religious affiliation and religious attendance.

While certain personal aspects of religion matter with regard to changes in marital happiness, what about joint religious practices between spouses (Hypothesis 2)? As Model 2 of Table 4-2 suggests, an increase in couple prayer tends to significantly predict an increase in marital happiness ( $p < .05$ ). In this sense, how spouses perform religion within their marriage appears to matter, as suggested by more recent research on the importance of religious dyadic activities (Ellison et al. 2011; Lichter and Carmalt 2009; Mahoney et al. 1999). The magnitude of the effect size ( $\beta = .10$ ) appears fairly modest, similar to religious importance. Nonetheless, Model 2 shows support for Hypothesis 2 – couple prayer positively predicts marital happiness.

Few studies have examined the role of religious social ties within marriages, although past studies on the positive outcomes related to religious social networks lead one to believe that close congregational social ties should positively predict marital happiness (Hypothesis 3). Model 3 of Table 4-2 tests this hypothesis and finds marginal support ( $p < .10$ ). Respondents who increased their close congregational ties between waves also experienced an increase in marital happiness while controlling for all time-stable heterogeneity as well as time-varying social and marital characteristics. Similar to all the significant religious effects thus far, an estimated effect size of .09 is fairly modest. In this way, congregational social ties matter to improving marital outcomes, but the magnitude should not be overstated.

Model 4 adds all the individual, marital, and network aspects of religion into one full model, and the results remain substantively similar. Religious importance remains the most relevant personal predictor of religion on marital happiness, while couple prayer and congregational social ties also appear to matter. Post-estimation tests for equality of

coefficients show no significant difference in any of the observed significant religious effects, so there is little support for the notion that individual or social aspects of religion matter more in improving marital happiness. All appear to be relevant factors. Moreover, there is little evidence of any religious effect mediating, or explaining away, another religious effect. In fact, the coefficients for couple prayer and number of close congregational ties actually become slightly *more* significant (couple prayer:  $p < .01$ ; close congregational social ties:  $p < .05$ ). This may suggest either the presence of a suppressor effect or the need for an improved model with better specification (e.g., additional interaction effects), with the latter explanation examined in the next table.

The observed religious predictors may be dependent upon one another as evidenced by significant interaction effects. Two-way and three-way interaction effects were tested among all observed religious predictors, but for the sake of parsimony, Table 4-3 only shows significant interaction effects. As evidenced in Model 5 of this table, the effect of close congregational ties on marital happiness depends on one's personal level of religious importance ( $p < .05$ ). Given that the interaction coefficient is negative, the substantive interpretation is that the relationship between number close friends from the congregation and marital happiness gets weaker as personal religious importance increases. In other words, ties to the religious community have a stronger effect on marital happiness for those with low religious importance than those with high religious importance.

To illustrate this effect, Figure 4-1 plots the predicted probabilities from Table 4-3. While increases in congregational social ties do little to improve marital happiness for those who report "high" (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean) religious

importance, those with “low” (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean) religious importance experience higher marital happiness as social ties to one’s religious congregation increases. In contrast to a congruence effect, where individual and network measures of religion need to align in the same direction to produce a significant effect on marital happiness (see Hypothesis 4a), a person with a lack of religious importance appears to benefit the most from ties to a religious community, supporting notions of a compensation effect (see Hypothesis 4b).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study found general support for the notion that individual, marital, and network aspects of religion improve marital happiness. Specifically, increases in religious importance, frequency of couple prayer, and number of close congregational friends all positively predict marital happiness over time. The effects tend to be similar in magnitude, but in all cases the effect are considered modest in size. As expected from past research, religious affiliation and attendance often produced null or inconsistent effects, while religious importance produced significant and consistent effects, suggesting that religious importance matters the most of the more personal aspects of religion. Couple prayer also seemed to improve marital happiness, which past research also has found in cross-sectional studies. However, the relationship was robust even when controlling for time-stable heterogeneity through fixed effects models, a unique advantage of the current study. In this way, we can be more confident that the relationship between couple prayer and marital happiness is unlikely to be spurious.

Lastly, number of congregational friendships positively predicted marital happiness, a novel empirical finding. In general, this study finds general support for Mahoney's (2010) relational spirituality framework -- that individual, marital, and network aspects of religion operate to transform family relationships in beneficial ways.

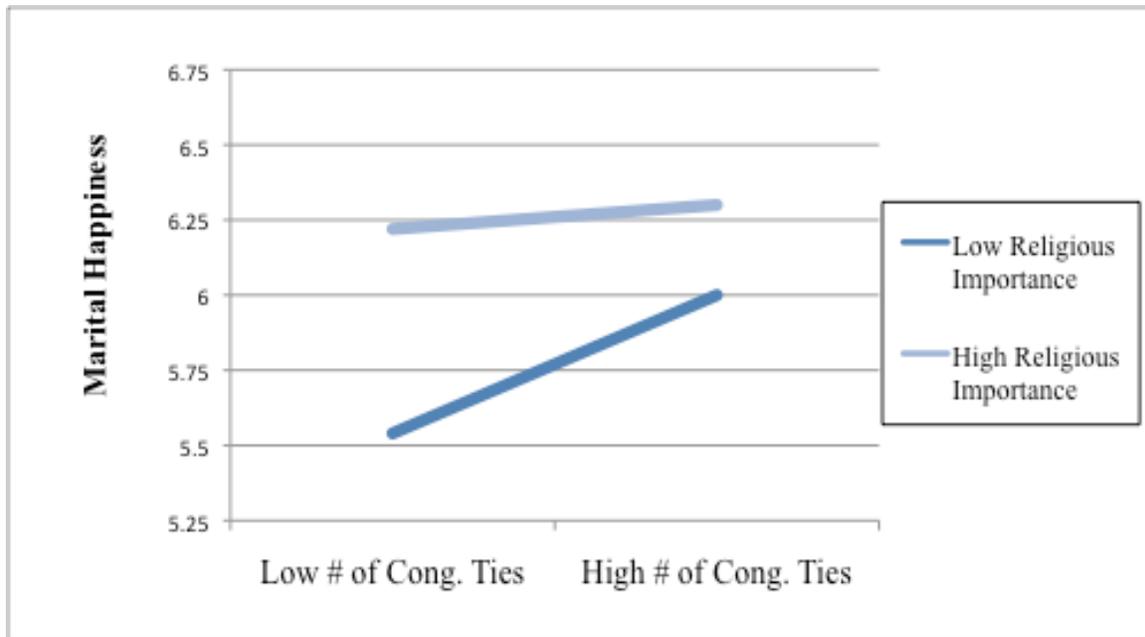
Close social ties to the religious community matter to marriages, but interestingly they seem to matter more for the less religious. This seems contrary to past studies describing the importance of religious communities among the very religious (Dollahite and Marks 2009; Goodman and Dollahite 2006; Mahoney 2010). However, religious communities may matter more for the unreligious because they function as “bridges” to new information that might help their marriage, whereas the very religious may already be familiar with similar ideas as their congregational friends from sermons, spiritual help-books, and scripture. In this sense, one religious resource (e.g., congregational social ties) may compensate for another religious resource (e.g., personal religious importance) to improve marital outcomes. Another interpretation is that there is a ceiling effect for those with high religious importance, who report a relatively high level of marital happiness regardless of close community ties. In any case, future studies should examine why and how close social ties to religious congregations work so effectively among the less religious to improve marital happiness.

This study is not without limitations. First, more refined measures may be needed. While this study measures the quantity of religious social ties, the quality of these ties and evidence of explicit social support may be a better means to evaluate the important role of religious social networks. In terms of measures highlighting the role of religion among marital partners, it would have been preferable to also include a measure of shared

religious beliefs in this study. Many studies have noted the important value of viewing one's marriage as sacred to improving one's marriage (Ellison et al. 2011; Mahoney et al. 1999; Lichter and Carmalt 2009), but it would have been ideal to measure the independent and interdependent role of sanctification in a longitudinal study that controls for time-stable heterogeneity. Also, the single-item measure for marital happiness is less preferable compared to an index that considers a wide range of factors influencing marital quality, like positive marital interactions, number of marital problems, and marital doubts. For these reasons, this study's dependent variable is limited and should be rectified in future studies. Lastly, partner effects (e.g., religious characteristics of the partner) were not tested due to a lack of measures across waves as well as a lack of statistical power needed in fixed effects models. All these aforementioned limitations may be rectified in future studies with better measures and a larger sample size.

Religion has a multidimensional role in helping to transform marriages for the better. This study highlights the robust importance of individual, marital, and social network aspects of religion on marital happiness. However, other marital outcomes should be examined, like marital activity or divorce, in order to provide further robustness to Mahoney's (2010) relational spirituality framework. Moreover, future studies should also compare the marital benefits of religious communities to more secular ones (e.g., workplace friends, friends in the community, etc.) in order to assess their unique effects. Finally, other congregational community characteristics (closeness, size, programs, etc.) on marital outcomes should be examined using a relational spirituality framework. This will be necessary in order to further highlight the unique relevance of religion in today's marriages.

Figure 4-1. The Moderating Role of Religious Importance on Congregational Ties & Marital Happiness



Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012

N = 535 married respondents (1,068 observations)

NOTE: Estimates based on predicted probabilities using “mimrgns” .ado in Stata

Low = -1 standard deviation from the mean; High = +1 standard deviation from the mean

Table 4-1. Descriptive Statistics of Chapter 4 (N=535)

	<i>M</i> or %	<i>S.D.</i> / <i>Range</i>		<i>Within-Person Change</i>
Female <sup>a</sup>	43.85%	0.50	0-1	N/A, Time Stable
Black <sup>a</sup>	6.39%	0.24	0-1	N/A, Time Stable
Hispanic <sup>a</sup>	12.07%	0.33	0-1	N/A, Time Stable
Other Race <sup>a</sup>	6.96%	0.25	0-1	N/A, Time Stable
Midwest	18.18%	0.39	0-1	N/A, Time Stable
South	34.96%	0.48	0-1	N/A, Time Stable
West	32.7%	0.47	0-1	N/A, Time Stable
Age	51.83	14.37	19-80	100.0% (N=535)
Income	10.82	4.32	1-19	79.8% (N=372)
College	33.97%	0.47	0-1	01.1% (N=6)
Employed	59.92%	0.49	0-1	19.3% (N=103)
Marital Duration	23.65	15.72	<1-69	100.0% (N=535)
# of Children	1.71	1.15	0-9	33.3% (N=178)
Evangelical Protestant	29.79%	0.46	0-1	05.6% (N=30)
Black Protestant	2.86%	0.17	0-1	01.0% (N=5)
Mainline Protestant	13.93%	0.35	0-1	03.4% (N=18)
Catholic	26.03%	0.44	0-1	03.6% (N=19)
Other Religion	15.33%	0.36	0-1	05.0% (N=27)
Attendance	3.95	2.39	1-8	51.3% (N=274)
Religious Importance	3.15	1.28	1-5	49.3% (N=260)
Spouses Pray Together	2.45	1.72	1-6	46.7% (N=250)
# of Close Ties to Congregation	0.48	0.95	0-4	37.4% (N=200)
Marital Happiness	5.98	1.30	1-7	48.6% (N=260)

*Source:* Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012

Descriptive statistics based on pooled observations.

*M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; Prot. = Protestant

<sup>a</sup> = Time-stable variables inherently controlled for in fixed effects models

Table 4-2. Individual, Marital, and Network Effects of Religion on Marital Happiness, Fixed Effects Regression Models.

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	<i>b</i>	(SE)	$\beta$									
<i>Religion: Individual</i>												
None→Evangelical Prot.	.37	(.48)	.06							.39	(.47)	.06
None →Black Prot.	.33	(.35)	.02							.24	(.38)	.02
None →Mainline Prot	.18	(.44)	.02							.21	(.45)	.03
None →Catholic	.77**	(.29)	.10							.96**	(.34)	.12
None →Other Religion	.82+	(.50)	.12							.91+	(.49)	.14
Attendance	-.03	(.05)	-.03							-.06	(.05)	-.06
Religious Importance	.23**	(.07)	.15							.22**	(.07)	.15
<i>Religion: Marital</i>												
Spouses Pray Together				.11*	(.05)	.10				.12**	(.05)	.11
<i>Religion: Friendship Networks</i>												
# of Close Ties to Congregation							.11+	(.06)	.09	.12*	(.06)	.09
<i>Controls</i>												
Age	.02	(.04)	.08	-.04	(.04)	-.05	-.01	(.05)	-.04	-.01	(.05)	-.02
Income	.01	(.02)	.03	.02	(.02)	.03	.01	(.02)	.02	.02	(.02)	.03
College	-.37*	(.18)	-.02	-.50*	(.21)	-.02	-.35+	(.21)	-.02	-.64**	(.19)	-.04
Unemployed→Employed	-.15	(.16)	-.05	-.19	(.17)	-.06	-.18	(.17)	-.06	-.14	(.16)	-.04
Marital Duration	-.01	(.04)	-.01	.04	(.04)	.04	.03	(.04)	.01	.02	(.04)	.10
# of Children	-.32**	(.12)	-.13	-.32*	(.08)	-.13	-.36**	(.13)	-.14	-.32**	(.11)	-.13

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012

*N* = 535 married respondents (1,068 observations)

*b* = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error;  $\beta$  = fully standardized coefficient

+*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Table 4-3. Interaction Effects of Religion Variables on Marital Happiness, Fixed Effects Regression Models.

	<b>Model 5</b>		
	<i>b</i>	(SE)	$\beta$
<i>Main Effects</i>			
None→Evangelical Prot.	.31	(.49)	.05
None →Black Prot.	.34	(.37)	.03
None →Mainline Prot	.17	(.44)	.02
None →Catholic	.90*	(.35)	.11
None →Other Religion	.87+	(.50)	.13
Attendance	-.06	(.05)	-.06
Religious Importance	.26**	(.08)	.14
Spouses Pray Together	.12**	(.05)	.11
# of Close Ties to Congregation	.53*	(.22)	.15
<i>Interaction Effects (Significant Only)</i>			
Religious Importance X			
# of Close Ties to Congregation	-.11*	(.05)	-.04
<i>Controls</i>			
Age	.01	(.05)	.02
Income	.01	(.02)	.03
College	-.45+	(.23)	-.03
Unemployed→Employed	-.13	(.16)	-.04
Marital Duration	.01	(.04)	.05
# of Children	-.32**	(.11)	-.13

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006-2012

*N* = 535 married respondents (1,068 observations)

*b* = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error;  $\beta$  = fully standardized coefficient

+*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

## **Chapter 5.**

### **Social Network Effects on Religious Discussions with Family Members: The Moderating Role of Spousal Religious Discordance**

In order to understand the importance of religion within families, one needs to examine the ways in which religion becomes infused in everyday family life (Ammerman 2014; Mahoney 2010). Religious discussions provide one way to examine this. According to Pew Research Center, approximately one-third of families discuss religion with one another at least once a week, and more than half will discuss religion over the course of the year (Cooperman 2016). The most common topics of religious conversations include common life struggles and the meaning behind them, religious ideas/theology, different religious groups, and congregational activities (Dollahite and Thatcher 2008). Not only is it a common everyday religious practice, but it is also an important one. When parents discuss religion with their children, they are actively socializing them to learn specific religious beliefs and ideas (King, Furrow, and Roth 2002; Smith and Denton 2005), allowing for religion to be passed down across generations (Bengston 2013). It also can be a bonding experience for both children and spouses who actively engage in religious discussions, providing an opportunity to be vulnerable, intimate, and open about ideas pertaining to the sacred. Indeed, when family members discuss religion in meaningful and respectful ways (e.g., collaborative family

devotionals, no “preaching” to one another; see Dollahite and Thatcher 2008), it often positively predicts marital satisfaction and general family wellbeing (Ellison, Burdette, and Wilcox 2010; Lambert and Dollahite 2010). However, religious discussions may also introduce conflict into family relationships, especially when family members have differing religious views (Mahoney 2005). In this way, talking about religion provides a powerful means to either unite or divide families.

Despite the prevalence and importance of this religious activity, researchers know surprisingly little about the factors associated with family religious discussions. Personal religious importance appears to play a role, as very religious people tend to discuss religion more often than the non-religious (Cooperman 2016; Dollahite and Marks 2009). However, less is known with regard to the social factors that encourage family religious discussions, specifically the potentially powerful role of social networks. Social networks and the behaviors exhibited within them often are influential in changes in personal behavior (Christakis and Fowler 2009). Given how friends within social networks often impact the likelihood of a religious conversion (Ebaugh and Vaughn, 1984; Kox et al., 1991; Stark and Bainbridge 1980), as well as changes in religious service attendance (Cheadel and Schwadel 2012), social circles that discuss religion may also predict the likelihood of religious discussions with family members. However, the “contagious” effects of social networks may also face obstacles when family members are religiously dissimilar. In any case, scholars in the area of religion and family have failed to examine the power (and limits) of social networks with regard to everyday religious activities among family members.

This chapter seeks to rectify this limitation. Using Wave 1 of the Portraits of American Life Study (2006), I examine whether religious discussions among close friends predicts one's likelihood of discussing religion with one's children as well as one's spouse. Moreover, I test whether the level of dissimilarity in religious importance between spouses -- which I refer to as "spousal religious discordance" -- moderates this relationship. By incorporating research from social psychology/social networks studies into the study of religion and family, this chapter encourages religion scholars to go beyond individual characteristics of religion and acknowledge how social networks play a vital role in the religious activities of families.

### **The Importance of Social Networks on Religious Behaviors**

Social psychologists have long noted the impact of social groups on one's behavior. Albert Bandura (1986) noted how people often learn social norms by imitating others in their social group. Solomon Asch's (1955) famous conformity studies showed how common it is to conform to the behavior of others, even one does not privately agree with their behavior. Social network theorists suggest that social networks have a far-reaching impact in shaping the life of the individual (Felmlee and Faris 2013). Indeed, studies have shown how the behaviors and beliefs of peers tend to predict the individual happiness (Christakis and Fowler 2009), suicide propensity (Zimmerman et al. 2016), divorce propensity (McDermott et al. 2013), and fertility decisions (Bernardi and Klarner 2014). In this sense, social ties are power conduits for "social contagion" effects (Christakis and Fowler 2013), whereby peers pass their traits onto others in their network.

While some may suggest the unobserved heterogeneity may obscure “peer” or “contagion” effects in observational studies (Shalizi and Thomas 2011), experimental studies and sophisticated research designs highlight the robustness of social influence (Brechwald and Prinstein 2011; Christakis and Fowler 2013; VanderWeele 2013).

The power of social networks also applies in religious contexts. Lofland and Stark’s (1965) theory of religious conversion emphasizes that social networks are instrumental in recruiting and converting new members for religious groups, a theory that has found strong empirical support in the context of radical religious groups (Stark and Bainbridge 1980). Religious communities also have an extensive impact on the likelihood of adhering to religiously-based sexual strictures that often are difficult to maintain (Cort, Ramirez, and Chama 2016). Lastly, social networks tend to reinforce traditional religious commitments and beliefs (Stroope 2012). Even when controlling for selection effects, the religious attendance rates and levels of religious importance among friends tends to predict those same characteristics of the individual over time (Cheadle and Schwadel 2012).

However, much of the research on social networks, both in secular and religious contexts, emphasizes the transmission of individual characteristics across social ties, but not the contagious nature of network interaction per se. As Mahoney (1999, 2010) would suggest, the peer effects of religion are still being measured “at a distance” without highlighting how religion is infused in everyday life and social interactions. This is a particular limitation, for Durkheim (1965[1915]) and Collins (2004) note how the contagious nature of religion is mainly exhibited in group interactions that are viewed as “set apart” and filled with symbolic meaning. In these religious social interactions, sacred

symbols and normative behavior are created and perpetuated. It is through social interactions that religion is given its true power. Because of this, measuring the religious similarity of peers is not adequate to reflect the true contagious nature of religious behavior that theorists have highlighted as notable. In fact, the current study argues that simply measuring social ties to fellow religious congregants is not sufficient (or even helpful) for understanding the religious exchanges between family members. Instead, one should examine how religious interactions between peers is further perpetuated in family interactions as to get at the true “contagious” nature of religious behavior across social ties.

This study specifically focuses on how religious discussions among friends in one’s social network predict similar behaviors with children and spouses. Is there a specific reason why social networks would reinforce this type of behavior? First, network members may provide useful advice on how to provide religious socialization for children. Many parents want to teach their children moral values and specific religious beliefs (Taris and Semin 1997), but this is not an easy task. Theological concepts may be tough to explain to young children, and adolescents tend to be less receptive to top-down religious “preaching” from parents (Dollahite and Thatcher 2008), so close friends may suggest how to best approach these family issues. Indeed, research shows that parents strongly embedded in religious communities tend to be more successful at teaching religion to their children (Van de Pol and Van Tubergen 2014). Second, peers may pass down “social norms” on how to reinforce faith in the household. For example, a respondent may initiate in-home family devotionals or praying with a spouse after learning that this is what his/her close friends are doing with their families. Third,

religious discussions with friends may lead to religious discussions with family members in order to induce behavior consistency across groups. Spiritual conversations often are understood as intimate interactions (Ammerman 2014; McCurry, Schrod, and Ledbetter 2012), and given how individuals expect their family members to provide the greatest amount of social intimacy (Oliphant and Kuczynski 2011), an individual may feel cognitive dissonance if they engage in this level of relational depth with friends but not family members. Finally, religious discussions with friends may spillover into religious discussions with family members in unintentional ways, as family members recall what they did that day and what they discussed with their friends (Blum-Kulka 1994). Whether intentional or incidental, social ties should be a powerful impact on religious family interactions. For these reasons, I test the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Religious discussions with friends positively predict religious discussions with children and spouses.

### **The Moderating Role of Spousal Religious Discordance**

It is unwise to overstate the contagious nature of social ties without giving proper attention to the bridges and boundaries that exist between family members. It is easier to spread social behaviors across social ties when that social behavior encounters few interpersonal obstacles. In the context of this study, spousal similarity may operate as the “gatekeeper” for religious contagion effects. When spouses hold similar religious views, a religious discussion should be easier to maintain and produce little conflict (Curtis and Ellison 2002). Religious discussions among similar partners may be beneficial, for they

may help reinforce individual worldviews and provide a level of relational depth in the relationship (Alcock, Carment, & Sadave 1988). It also is easier to provide religious socialization to children when both partners are in agreement with their religious views (Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith 1982; Walsh 2010), as spouses with similar religiousness tend to be more successful at passing down their religion to their children compared to religiously dissimilar spouses (Bengston 2013; Myers 1996). In this sense, the ability of social networks to promote religious discussions with family behaviors may be welcome in contexts where family members hold similar religious views.

In contrast, religious differences between partners may function as a boundary that buffers any religious contagion. This is because bringing up religion with a partner who holds dissimilar views may produce psychological discomfort and relationship instability (Heider 1958). In essence, religion may function as a “sensitive subject” among religiously dissimilar partners. Although religious heterogamy has been on the rise in the United States (Kalmijn 1998), it would be incorrect to infer that religious differences between partners are irrelevant. Although differences in religious affiliation do not produce consistent findings (see Call and Heaton 1997; Williams and Lawler 2003), partners who differ in general religiousness tend to have lower marital satisfaction (Schramm et al. 2012; Gurrentz 2016), higher marital disagreements (Curtis and Ellison 2002), and a higher propensity for divorce (Vaaler, Ellison and Powers 2009). This implies that differences in the relative importance of religion may increase conflictual interactions between spouses (Mahoney 2005). Because religion becomes an uncomfortable and problematic subject matter in a divided household, it would be unwise to have religious discussions with a religiously different spouse. In terms of discussions

with children, spousal religious differences make it difficult to provide religious socialization to children (Myers 1996), as “mixed” or inconsistent religious teachings to children often limit the intergenerational transmission of religion (see Bader and Desmond 2006). Because one parent’s religious teachings may contradict or offend the other parent, religious discussions may be avoided. Although discussing religion may be a fine activity among friends outside the household, religious discussions may be held to a minimum in a religiously mixed household if one wishes to provide a harmonious family environment.

Collectively, this study argues that the promises and limits of social networks are largely dependent on religious differences present among family members. When religious differences between spouses are relatively few (i.e., “low spousal religious discordance”), network effects are stronger. When religious differences between spouses are relatively high (i.e., “high spousal religious discordance”), network effects become weaker. Ultimately, contagion effects depend on the interpersonal boundaries that exist between family members, with religious spousal similarity operating as a “bridge” for network effects while greater religious discordance between spouses functioning as a “blockade” for network effects. Because of this, I test the following moderating hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2:* Spousal religious discordance weakens the effects of social networks on religious discussions with children and spouses.

## **Data & Methods**

## Data

This chapter uses data from Wave 1 (2006) of The Portraits of American Life Study (PALS). The dataset was downloaded from theARDA.com. All estimates are weighted due to complex survey design, non-response, and strong recommendations from the principal investigators.<sup>8</sup> This data source is described with more detail in Chapter 2. Although a second wave was conducted in 2012, the dependent variables used in the analyses (i.e., talking about religion with children/spouse) were only asked at Wave 1, which is why the analyses are cross-sectional and not longitudinal.

In order to examine network effects in various family contexts, there are two main analytical samples used in this study: parents with household children ( $N = 1075$ ) and married respondents ( $N = 1201$ ). Among the parents with household children, subsamples of married parents ( $N = 716$ ) and single parents ( $N = 359$ ) also are presented in the analyses. As a small proportion of the full sample, cohabiting parents were dropped from the analyses. In any case, results tended to be robust regardless of whether cohabiting parents were included in the parenting sample.

### **Dependent Variables: Talking About Religion with Children and Spouse**

There are two separate dependent variables examined in this study: (1) the prevalence of religious discussions with children; and (2) the prevalence of religious discussions with a spouse. The former dependent variable derives from the following

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<sup>8</sup> For more details on how using unweighted PALS estimates may bias results, see <http://www.thearda.com/pals/researchers/syswithpals.asp>

survey item: “How often do you talk or read about religion, God, or spirituality with your child or children?” The latter dependent variable derives from the following survey item: “In the past year, how often would you say you and your spouse/partner talk or read about religion, God, or spirituality together?” Responses range from *never* (=1) to *more than once a day* (=7). On average, most respondents in the sample said they discussed religion/spirituality with a household family member once or twice a month (=3; see Table 5-1).

### **Independent Variables**

The main independent variable of interest is the proportion of close friends who discuss religion with the respondent. This measure derives from the egocentric network module of the survey. The interviewer asks whether the respondent has close friends outside of the household, and if the respondent does, he/she is asked a series of questions describing the characteristics of up to four close friends. In describing each close friend, the interviewer asks: “With which have you discussed religious or spiritual matters in the past twelve months?” On average, respondents have religious discussions with approximately 49 percent of their close friends (see Table 5-1).

To control for spuriousness, I control for the following sociodemographic variables: age, gender (*female* = 1), race (*Black, Hispanic, Other Race*), education (*High School Degree; Bachelor’s Degree, Graduate Degree, Other Degree*), employment status (*employed* =1), income, region (*Midwest, South, West*), age of children (*Under Age 5, School-age (5-17)*), single status (parent sample only), marital duration (in years), marital

happiness. To control for general sociability, a potential “third variable” that would render the relationship between network religious discussions and family religious discussions spurious, I control for three additional variables: frequency of socializing with co-workers outside of work, frequency of socializing with friends online, and frequency of having friends over to one’s home. Responses range from *never* (=0) and *more than once a week* (=7).

Because the relationship between religious network behavior and family religious behavior may be an artifact of general religiousness, I also control for various religious factors, including: religious importance (*not at all important* =1; *by far the most important part of my life*=5), religious attendance (*never* =1; *three times a week or more* =8), proportion of close friends from one’s religious congregation, religious tradition (*Evangelical Protestant, Black Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, and “Other”*), and spousal religious discordance. Spousal religious discordance is measured as the absolute difference between the values of self-reported religious importance and spousal religious importance (according to the respondent). Values range from 0, indicating same level of religious importance, to 4, indicating that the spouses have completely different levels of religious importance. Because this measure is constructed from and correlated with the religious importance variable, it is present in the final table when general religious importance is removed. Spousal religious discordance also is tested as a moderating factor and is interacted with network religious discussions in the final table.

### **Analytical Strategy**

The following study is divided into three main parts, all of which use ordinary least squares regression. Part 1 tests the effect of network discussions of religion on religious discussions with household children among all parents ( $N=1075$ ), as well as married ( $n = 716$ ) and single parents ( $n = 359$ ) separately. Part 2 tests the same network measure on religious discussions with a spouse among all married respondents ( $N = 1201$ ). Part 3 examines the independent and interdependent (i.e. interaction) effects of spousal religious discordance on religious discussions with household children as well as with a spouse. Because this section examines differences between spouses, single parents are not included in these analyses. Multiple imputation (MI) was used to handle missing data (25 imputed datasets), and all analyses are performed using Stata 12.

## Results

Table 5-2 examines the various predictors of religious discussions with family members. I begin by focusing on the independent variables associated with religious discussions with children. First, general religiousness, in terms of religious importance or religious attendance, positively predicts religious discussions with household children among all parents (both:  $p < .001$ ) as well as the subsamples of married parents (both:  $p < .001$ ) and single parents (religious importance:  $p < .01$ ; religious attendance:  $p < .001$ ). Religious tradition does not appear to be a significant predictor, nor does having a higher proportion of close friends from one's religious congregation. Age tends to be negatively associated with religious discussions with children ( $p < .05$ ), while women tend to be more likely than men to engage in religious conversations with their children (all parents:

$p < .01$ ; married parents:  $p < .05$ ; single parents:  $p < .10$ ). Among married parents, marital duration and having school-age children is positively associated with religious discussions with children (both:  $p < .01$ ).

Hypothesis 1 suggests that discussing religion among friends will positively predict discussing religion with family members, and this hypothesis finds initial support when examining network effects on religious discussions with household children. Whether the sample examines all parents ( $p < .001$ ), or parents divided by marital status (married parents:  $p < .001$ ; single parents:  $p < .01$ ), social networks that discuss religion increase the prevalence of religious discussions with children. This relationship is robust even when controlling for general religious characteristics and general sociability. Coupled with the previous finding that friends from one's congregation does not predict religious discussions with children, it appears that network interaction rather than network similarity (in terms of co-congregational membership) is more relevant in understanding factors associated with religious behaviors with children.

Table 5-2 also presents the various predictors of religious discussions with a spouse among all married respondents in the last column. Consistent with previous findings, general religiousness positively predicts religious discussions with a spouse (both:  $p < .001$ ), but in contrast to religious discussions with children, religious tradition matters in predicting spousal religious discussions, as Mainline Protestants and Catholics actually are *less likely* than religious "nones" to discuss religion with a spouse (Mainline Protestant:  $p < .01$ ; Catholic:  $p < .001$ ). I will return to this finding in Table 3. Unlike religious discussions with children, women are actually less likely than men to discuss religion with a spouse ( $p < .001$ ). Also, marital happiness appears positively related to

discussing religion with a spouse ( $p < .001$ ), perhaps reflecting a high comfort level among partners that allows for more intimate spiritual conversations.

Similar to religious discussions with children, Hypothesis 1 finds further robust support when examining the role of social networks on religious discussions with one's spouse. Having a higher proportion of close friends who discuss religion with the respondent positively predicts the prevalence of discussing religion with a spouse ( $p < .001$ ). This effect holds when controlling for a variety of religious and social characteristics. Thus, regardless of religiosity, general sociability, family structure, type of family member engaging in the religious discussion, social networks who discuss religion seem to be a relevant factor in family discussions of religion.

Table 5-3 examines the independent and interdependent (interaction) effects of spousal religious discordance (i.e., spousal differences in religious importance) on family discussions of religion. The first evident finding is that spousal religious discordance is not a relevant factor in discussing religion with children. It does not significantly predict this outcome in Model 1, nor does it moderate the relationship between network discussions of religion on similar behavior with family members in Model 2. In this way, spousal differences in religiosity do not appear to hinder network effects on religious discussions with children, thus giving little support for Hypothesis 2.

However, when testing the role of spousal religious discordance on religious discussions with *wives*, not children, religious differences do appear to matter. Model 1 shows that larger discrepancies in religious importance among spouses reduces the likelihood of spouses discussing religion ( $p < .01$ ), suggesting that religion may indeed be

a “sensitive subject” to bring up directly with a dissimilar spouse. Moreover, the negative effects of Mainline Protestant and Catholic affiliation in Table 5-2 are greatly reduced when spousal religious discordance is specified in the model, suggesting that spousal religious differences may explain why Mainline Protestants and Catholics are less likely to discuss religion with their spouse.

Model 2 of Table 5-3 tests whether spousal religious discordance weakens the relationship between network effects on religious discussions with a spouse. Supporting Hypothesis 2, spousal differences in religious importance significantly moderate the role of friends on religious discussions with a spouse ( $p < .05$ ). To illustrate this relationship, Figure 5-1 plots the predicted probabilities of this interaction effect using the “mimrgns” command in Stata. Couples that have no reported differences in religious importance report the greatest positive effects of network discussions of religion on similar behavior with a spouse. This slope starts to level out when spouses report a moderate amount of spousal religious discordance (i.e., spouses are two values off in religious importance), and finally turns slightly negative when spouses report completely opposite values in religious importance (e.g., one spouse reports that religion is “the most important part of his or her life” while the other believes religion is “not at all important”). The plotted intercepts show that even when the respondent has a relatively high proportion of friends who discuss religion (+1 standard deviation above the mean), a respondent with a very dissimilar spouse is much less likely to discuss religion with his or her spouse, highlighting how spousal religious discordance represents a particular barrier for network effects on religious discussions with spouses.

## Discussion & Conclusion

Social networks are an important factor to consider when predicting religious family activities. The results indicate that being embedded in friendship networks that discuss religion increases the prevalence of discussing religion with a family member. This appears true regardless of marital status, family role, general religiousness, and sociability. Having similar religious ties, in terms of friends from one's religious congregation, appears less relevant to family religious discussions though. In this sense, social interaction with networks members, rather than simply network similarity, is the key driving force behind the power of social networks to impact everyday religious activities with family members. Thus, religious discussions may be subject to "social contagion" effects, where religious social behavior spreads across social ties, from friendship networks to family networks. Because of this, religion scholars should be increasingly cognizant of the important role of social networks on the religious life of families.

However, social similarities and differences between spouses should also be considered. This study found mixed support for the notion that spousal religious discordance moderates network effects on religious discussions with family members. In the context of parent-child interactions, religious similarity between spouses does not appear relevant. There are some potential explanations for this. First, it is possible that despite religious differences, the spouses have an explicit arrangement with regard to the religious socialization of the child. The less religious partner may defer to the more religious partner in terms of religious socialization as a compromise and a means to reduce potential religious conflict within the household. Because of this spousal religious

discordance does not predict parent-child religious discussions nor does it moderate potential network effects. Another explanation is that spouses, despite their differences in religious importance, still discuss religion with their children in contexts where the other spouse is not present. Religion may cause conflict and function as a sensitive conversation subject ONLY if the religiously different partner is present. Otherwise, religious discussions with children are carried out in ways no different from religiously similar households. In either case, future studies should examine how parents discuss religion with their children in contexts of spousal religious differences.

Although spousal religious discordance is less relevant for parent-child religious discussions, it is particularly important when spouses discuss religion with each other. When spouses share the same level of religious importance, network effects tend to be the greatest, highlighting spousal similarity as a “bridge” for network contagion effects. However, spouses who greatly differ in religious importance tend to discuss religion less with one another, even if the respondent discusses religion with a high proportion of his or her peers. Given how religious discussions between dissimilar spouses may produce discomfort and conflict between partners, it appears that the sensitive subject of religion is avoided, ultimately functioning as a blockade for any network effects. In this way, the power of social networks are subject to the barriers that exist between religiously dissimilar spouses, making family context a particularly important factor when considering religious network effects.

This study has several limitations. First, the data are cross-sectional due to the absence of relevant dependent variables at Wave 2. This limits causal inference in terms of potential reverse causality and selection effects. It is possible that family discussions of

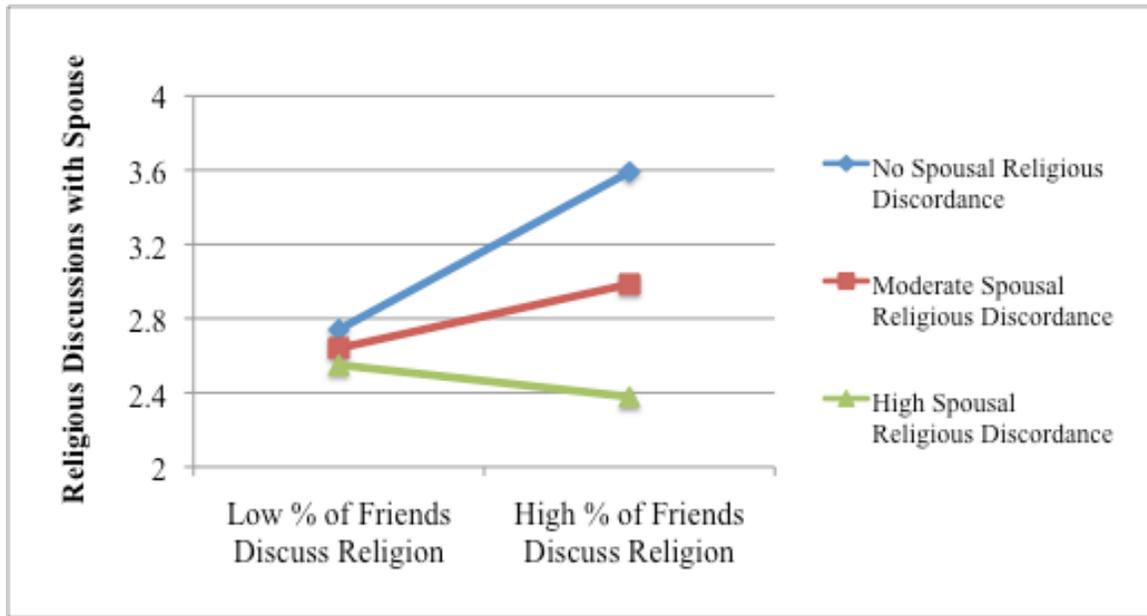
religion actually predict religious discussions with friends. Given the iterative process of communicating ideas across close social ties, religious discussions among friends and family may be better specified as bi-directional. Selection bias may also be a problem, although past studies on religious peer effects that account for selection bias still suggest that peer socialization tends to be a stronger factor (Cheadle and Schwadel 2012).

Second, the network measure for religious discussions fails to indicate who initiates the religious discussion, which would be preferable in measuring network influence. Third, the measures for religious discussions with family members also include the possibility that family members simply may read about religion together without discussing it with each other, although silent in-home devotionals do not seem common (see Dollahite and Thatcher 2008). And fourth, spousal religious discordance was limited to spousal differences in religious importance, but not other religious differences between spouses (e.g., attendance or affiliation dissimilarity). Beyond the reported religious importance of one's spouse, there were no other survey items at Wave 1 that measured other religious characteristics of the respondent's spouse. Longitudinal data with better measures would rectify these aforementioned limitations.

This study proposes that religion scholars who study family need to consider the role of social networks in religious family life. For far too long, studies have focused primarily on individual religious characteristics without considering the broader social context in which these families perform religion. Families and their religious behavior do not exist “on an island,” but are subject to the social influence of close peers. In order to provide a more holistic depiction of religion in everyday family activities, one should examine the religious behaviors enacted among friends and their relationship to family

behaviors. While this study examines the behavior of religious discussions, social networks may be relevant in other important contexts of religion and family including: prevalence of family prayer, the likelihood of religious intermarriage, and non-service related congregational involvement (e.g., church-sponsored family events). This will provide greater understandings on the far-reaching impact of social ties and their ability to impact religion in various family contexts.

Figure 5-1. The Moderating Role of Spousal Religious Discordance



Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006

N = 1185 married respondents

NOTE: Estimates based on predicted probabilities using “mimrgns” .ado in Stata  
Low/High % of Friends Discuss Religion = -1/+1 standard deviation from the mean

Moderate Spousal Religious Discordance = 2 values off in religious importance

High Spousal Religious Discordance = 4 values off in religious importance

Table 5-1. Descriptive Statistics of Chapter 5 (N=1075 - 1201)

Sample	<i>Parents with Household Children, N=1075</i>			<i>Married Respondents, N=1201</i>		
	Mean or %	Standard Deviation	Range	Mean or %	Standard Deviation	Range
Age	42.52	11.86	18-80	48.07	14.31	19-80
Female	56.96%	.50	0-1	49.02%	.50	0-1
Black	11.51%	.32	0-1	6.99%	.26	0-1
Hispanic	14.89%	.36	0-1	11.07%	.31	0-1
Other Race	7.90%	.27	0-1	7.72%	.27	0-1
Education: High School	38.09%	.49	0-1	36.54%	.48	0-1
Education: Bachelor's Degree	15.63%	.36	0-1	17.79%	.38	0-1
Education: Graduate Degree	10.26%	.30	0-1	13.49%	.34	0-1
Education: Other	24.28%	.43	0-1	21.78%	.41	0-1
Employed	72.97%	.44	0-1	64.08%	.48	0-1
Income	10.04	4.45	1-19	10.75	4.19	1-19
Region: Midwest	24.04%	.43	0-1	23.09%	.42	0-1
Region: South	32.22%	.47	0-1	34.51%	.48	0-1
Region: West	25.45%	.44	0-1	24.25%	.43	0-1
Children: Under Age 5	0.39	.63	0-3	0.24	.52	0-3
Children: School-age (5-17)	1.17	1.09	0-5	0.69	.99	0-5
Single	22.34%	.42	0-1	N/A	N/A	N/A
Marital Duration (If Married)	14.79	10.37	0-55	20.05	15.46	0-65
Marital Happiness (If Married)	5.83	1.35	1-7	5.84	1.37	1-7
Socializes with Co-workers	2.37	2.17	0-7	2.21	2.15	0-7
Socializes Online with Friends	2.58	2.64	0-7	2.72	2.68	0-7
Has Friends Over to Home	4.22	1.97	0-7	4.12	1.93	0-7
Religious Importance	3.04	1.20	1-5	3.07	1.21	1-5
Religious Attendance	3.67	2.18	1-8	3.77	2.27	1-8
% of Friends from Congregation	14.30%	.27	0-1	14.80	.27	0-1

*Source:* Portraits of American Life Study, 2006, weighted

Table 5-1 (Continued). Descriptive Statistics of Chapter 5 (N=1075 - 1201)

	Parents with Household Children (N=1075)			Married Respondents (N=1201)		
	<i>Mean or %</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Range</i>	<i>Mean or %</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>	<i>Range</i>
Evangelical Protestant	25.72%	.44	0-1	28.34%	.45	0-1
Black Protestant	6.68%	.25	0-1	4.01%	.20	0-1
Mainline Protestant	13.20%	.34	0-1	15.90%	.37	0-1
Catholic	28.44%	.45	0-1	26.97%	.44	0-1
Other Religion	11.94%	.32	0-1	12.52%	.33	0-1
Spousal Religious Discordance	0.59	.77	0-4	0.61	.77	0-4
% of Friends Discuss Religion	49.32%	.39	0-1	48.48%	.40	0-1
Religious Discussions with Children	3.44	1.74	1-7	3.03	1.66	1-7
Religious Discussions with Spouse	3.01	1.67	1-7	3.02	1.67	1-7

*Source:* Portraits of American Life Study, 2006, weighted

Table 5-2. Network Behavior on Religious Discussions with Family Members, Ordinary Least Squares Regression

<b>Outcome: Religious Discussions with...</b>	<b>Children</b>		<b>Children</b>		<b>Children</b>		<b>Spouse</b>	
<i>Sample Type:</i>	<i>All Parents</i>		<i>Married Parents</i>		<i>Single Parents</i>		<i>All Marrieds</i>	
<i>Sample Size:</i>	<i>(N=1075)</i>		<i>(N=716)</i>		<i>(N=359)</i>		<i>(N=1201)</i>	
	<i>b</i>	<i>(SE)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>(SE)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>(SE)</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>(SE)</i>
<i>Variable of Interest</i>								
% of Friends Discuss Religion	.74***	(.14)	.78***	(.17)	.89**	(.27)	.75***	(.13)
<i>Religion Control Variables</i>								
Religious Importance	.45***	(.06)	.50***	(.07)	.30**	(.10)	.38***	(.05)
Religious Attendance	.19***	(.03)	.18***	(.04)	.24***	(.06)	.20***	(.03)
% of Friends from Congregation	.09	(.22)	.01	(.25)	-.10	(.49)	.34+	(.20)
Evangelical Protestant	.25	(.20)	.24	(.21)	.23	(.39)	.05	(.17)
Black Protestant	.32	(.25)	.18	(.31)	.50	(.41)	-.49+	(.29)
Mainline Protestant	.09	(.19)	.04	(.20)	.54	(.41)	-.42*	(.17)
Catholic	-.07	(.19)	-.01	(.21)	-.46	(.37)	-.62***	(.16)
Other Religion	.11	(.21)	.21	(.23)	-.34	(.39)	-.11	(.20)
<i>Sociability Control Variables</i>								
Socializes with Co-workers	.01	(.03)	.01	(.03)	.04	(.05)	.01	(.02)
Socializes Online with Friends	.02	(.02)	-.01	(.03)	.10+	(.05)	-.01	(.02)
Has Friends Over to Home	.01	(.03)	.04	(.03)	-.09+	(.05)	.06*	(.03)
<i>Sociodemographic Control Variables</i>								
Age	-.01*	(.01)	-.03**	(.01)	-.02*	(.01)	-.01	(.01)
Female	.34**	(.11)	.25*	(.12)	.51+	(.30)	-.49***	(.10)
Black	-.29	(.18)	-.11	(.21)	-.53	(.33)	.22	(.20)
Hispanic	.15	(.17)	.22	(.20)	-.09	(.33)	.34*	(.16)
Other Race	-.27	(.22)	-.32	(.23)	-.32	(.51)	.10	(.20)
Education: High School	-.19	(.20)	-.02	(.24)	-.83*	(.34)	-.05	(.18)

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006

*b* = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error;

+*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Table 5-2. (Continued) Network Behavior on Religious Discussions with Family Members, Ordinary Least Squares Regression

<b>Outcome: Religious Discussions with...</b> <i>Sample Type:</i> <i>Sample Size:</i>	<b>Children</b> <i>All Parents</i> <i>(N=1075)</i>		<b>Children</b> <i>Married Parents</i> <i>(N=716)</i>		<b>Children</b> <i>Single Parents</i> <i>(N=359)</i>		<b>Spouse</b> <i>All Marrieds</i> <i>(N=1201)</i>	
	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)
<i>Sociodemographic Control Variables</i>								
Education: Bachelor's Degree	-.01	(.24)	.28	(.28)	-1.28**	(.49)	.25	(.21)
Education: Graduate Degree	-.12	(.27)	.09	(.31)	-.45	(.48)	-.05	(.23)
Education: Other	-.12	(.22)	.02	(.25)	-.57+	(.35)	.09	(.20)
Employed	.03	(.13)	-.01	(.14)	.20	(.26)	.01	(.13)
Income	-.01	(.02)	-.01	(.02)	-.02	(.03)	-.03+	(.01)
Region: Midwest	-.22	(.16)	-.37*	(.18)	.47	(.31)	.14	(.15)
Region: South	.01	(.14)	-.04	(.16)	.31	(.27)	.16	(.13)
Region: West	-.15	(.15)	-.28	(.17)	.59*	(.28)	.06	(.14)
Children: Under Age 5	.13	(.10)	.15	(.11)	.21	(.26)	-.01	(.10)
Children: School-age (5-17)	.17**	(.05)	.17**	(.06)	.14	(.11)	-.06	(.05)
Single	.13	(.14)	N/A		N/A		N/A	
<i>Married-Only Control Variables</i>								
Marital Duration	N/A		.02**	(.01)	N/A		.01	(.01)
Marital Happiness	N/A		.02	(.04)	N/A		.12***	(.03)

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006

*b* = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; NA= not applicable

+*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Table 5-3. The Moderating Role of Spousal Religious Differences, Ordinary Least Squares Regression

<b>Outcome: Religious Discussions with...</b> <i>Sample Type (Sample Size)</i>	<b>Children</b> <i>Married Parents (N=710)</i>		<b>Spouse</b> <i>All Marrieds (N=1185)</i>					
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2				
Models:	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)				
<i>Main Effects</i>								
Spousal Religious Discordance	.10	(.07)	.12	(.10)	-.18** (.06)	-.02 (.09)		
% of Friends Discuss Religion	.94***	(.18)	.97***	(.20)	.88***	(.14)	1.08***	(.17)
<i>Interaction Effects</i>								
Spousal Religious Discordance X % of Friends Discuss Religion			-.04	(.19)			-.33*	(.15)
<i>Religion Control Variables</i>								
Religious Attendance	.31***	(.04)	.31***	(.04)	.29***	(.03)	.29***	(.03)
% of Friends from Congregation	.23	(.25)	.23	(.25)	.43*	(.21)	.44*	(.21)
Evangelical Protestant	.71**	(.21)	.71**	(.21)	.43*	(.18)	.40*	(.18)
Black Protestant	.45	(.34)	.44	(.34)	-.24	(.28)	-.27	(.28)
Mainline Protestant	.36+	(.21)	.36+	(.21)	-.15	(.17)	-.15	(.17)
Catholic	.27	(.21)	.27	(.22)	-.37*	(.17)	-.38*	(.17)
Other Religion	.46+	(.25)	.46+	(.25)	.16	(.21)	.16	(.21)
<i>Sociability Control Variables</i>								
Socializes with Co-workers	.01	(.03)	.01	(.03)	.01	(.02)	.01	(.02)
Socializes Online with Friends	-.01	(.03)	-.01	(.03)	.01	(.02)	.01	(.02)
Has Friends Over to Home	.02	(.04)	.02	(.04)	.05+	(.03)	.05+	(.03)
<i>Sociodemographic Control Variables</i>								
Age	-.03**	(.01)	-.03**	(.01)	-.01	(.01)	-.01	(.01)

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006

*b* = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error;

+*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Table 5-3. (Continued) The Moderating Role of Spousal Religious Differences, Ordinary Least Squares Regression

<b>Outcome: Religious Discussions with...</b> <i>Sample Type (Sample Size)</i>	<b>Children</b> <i>Married Parents (N=710)</i>		<b>Spouse</b> <i>All Marrieds (N=1185)</i>			
	Model 1		Model 2			
Models:	<i>b</i>	(SE)	<i>b</i>	(SE)		
<i>Sociodemographic Control Variables</i>						
Female	.34**	(.13)	.34**	(.13)	-.45***(.10)	-.43***(.10)
Black	.04	(.22)	.04	(.22)	.36+ (.20)	.36+ (.20)
Hispanic	.28	(.21)	.27	(.21)	.39* (.17)	.37* (.17)
Other Race	-.30	(.27)	-.30	(.27)	.10 (.21)	.12 (.21)
Education: High School	.10	(.25)	.10	(.26)	-.08 (.19)	-.11 (.19)
Education: Bachelor's Degree	.45	(.30)	.45	(.30)	.19 (.22)	.15 (.22)
Education: Graduate Degree	.20	(.33)	.20	(.33)	-.22 (.24)	-.25 (.24)
Education: Other	.11	(.27)	.11	(.27)	.03 (.20)	.01 (.20)
Employed	-.03	(.15)	-.03	(.15)	-.03 (.13)	-.03 (.13)
Income	-.02	(.02)	-.02	(.02)	-.03+ (.02)	-.03+ (.02)
Region: Midwest	-.21	(.19)	-.21	(.20)	.20 (.15)	.22 (.15)
Region: South	.07	(.17)	.07	(.18)	.21 (.14)	.23+ (.14)
Region: West	-.08	(.18)	-.08	(.18)	.15 (.15)	.16 (.15)
Children: Under Age 5	.10	(.12)	.10	(.11)	-.05 (.10)	-.05 (.10)
Children: School-age (5-17)	.18**	(.06)	.18**	(.06)	-.07 (.05)	-.07 (.05)
<i>Married-Only Control Variables</i>						
Marital Duration	.02*	(.01)	.02*	(.01)	.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)
Marital Happiness	.05	(.05)	.05	(.05)	.14***(.03)	.14***(.03)

Source: Portraits of American Life Study, 2006

*b* = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; NA= not applicable

+*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

## **Chapter 6.**

### **Conclusion**

As this dissertation highlights, social ties, whether in the context of family or religious friendships, have a powerful impact on people's lives. Whether it's a marital tie, a parent-child tie, or a congregational friendship tie, these relationships help shape the social world of everyday individuals. Moreover, these two powerful contexts of close relationships are reciprocally related, as family relationships impact religious friendship ties and vice versa. In this way, the interdependence of families and religious institutions that have been noted to exist on the macro level (see Edgell 2005) also exist on the micro level through social ties, suggesting that a social networks approach to family and religion is a valuable means to highlight *sociological miniaturism* (i.e., seeing large scale social phenomena in small-scale everyday contexts; see Stolte et al. 2001).

The first general finding of this dissertation is that family ties impact religious friendship ties. This is evident in Chapter 3, which highlighted how family formation events (i.e., marriage and childrearing) appear to significantly alter one's close congregational friendships. Specifically, getting married tends to decrease congregational friendships while rearing children tends to increase them. To a certain degree, Chapter 5 also reinforces the notion that family ties impact religious friendship ties in the sense that spousal differences in religious importance act as either bridges or blockages for religious network effects. In other words, family boundaries and contexts seem to trump the power

of social networks in perpetuating everyday religious behaviors, like discussing religion with family members. Together, these findings suggest that religious communities and religious behaviors depend largely on what is occurring within the family. Family relationships may facilitate or hinder ties to religious friendships and their potential efficacy on everyday religious behaviors. In this sense, the common phrase “family comes first” appears supported in certain areas of this dissertation. Because of this, religion scholars should not ignore the power of family relationships, as religious communities (Chapter 3) and the prevalence of religious behaviors (Chapter 5) largely depend on them.

With that said, the dissertation also finds that religious friendship ties impact family ties. This is evident in Chapter 4, as the number of close congregational ties positively predicted marital quality, even when controlling for time-stable heterogeneity through fixed effects regression models. Moreover, network effects produced effects similar in magnitude to that of personal religious importance and joint spousal prayer. In this way, religious friendships indeed help improve family relationships, as past scholars have suggested (see Mahoney et al. 2010). Chapter 5 also suggests that friends play powerful roles in family interactions, as close social networks that discuss religion correspond to an increased prevalence of family discussions on religion. In light of these findings, scholars should always consider the important role of religious friendship ties on maintaining and transforming family relationships.

Finally, this dissertation reveals how the social ties connecting families and religious groups operate in “complex” and “surprising” ways. While specific dissertation findings certainly reinforce past notions in the area of family and religion (e.g., family

formation impacts religious social integration, religious communities help improve marriages, etc.), the focus on social ties provided a variety of interesting (and perhaps unexpected) findings. For example, Chapter 3 found that marriage actually *decreases* the number of close congregational friendship ties, which largely contradicts traditional inferences based on more distal measures of religious affiliation and attendance (Stolzenberg et al. 1995; Thornton et al. 1992). However, this finding is consistent with family studies on the “greediness” of marriage on other social relationships (see Musick and Bumpass 2012; Sarkisian and Gerstel 2008), so it serves as a reminder that religious social ties operate differently from other religion measures and may yield different, nuanced results. Likewise, Chapter 4 found that congregational friendships actually help improve marital quality the most among the less religious, a finding contrary to the assumptions of past studies (Dollahite and Marks 2009; Goodman and Dollahite 2006; Mahoney 2010). Instead of personal religiousness and religious social ties operating congruently to improve family life, I suggest that religious social ties may actually “compensate” for a lack of religiousness in improving marital quality, potentially exposing the less religious to new approaches to benefit their marriage. In sum, a social networks perspective reveals the nuanced ways in which social ties operate, which in this case leads to new understandings of the complex ways in which family relationships and religious friendships are interconnected.

While this dissertation certainly provides advantages in measures, data quality, and methods over past studies on family and religion, it is not without limitations. First, the chapters using longitudinal data (e.g., Chapter 3 & 4) lack statistical power to examine similar phenomenon among smaller subgroups and contexts (e.g., single parents,

cohabitators, interreligious marriages, etc.). This is because the longitudinal sample itself is small (total respondents=1,314; married subsample =535), and fixed effects regression models, although great for causal inference, are less statistically efficient relative to common between-group estimators, like OLS regression or random effects models (see Firebaugh et al. 2013). Second, the longitudinal chapters only examine short-term, not long-term, effects due to the availability of only two survey waves. Third, the egocentric network module of PALS only examines the “core” of one’s social network (up to four close friends), ignoring the potential importance of more peripheral and weaker ties. And fourth, the lack of recurring important measures across waves, like religious discussions of family members, ultimately inhibited a longitudinal analysis in Chapter 5, leading to cross-sectional study with greater limitations in causal inference. Future studies should rectify these limitations using a larger longitudinal sample with multiple waves and better survey measures.

The findings of this dissertation suggest that a social networks perspective is a viable means to examine the importance and interdependence of families and religious groups. While a promising start, there is certainly more work that needs to be done. The role of extended family relationships (e.g., grandparents) and complex family relationships (e.g., cohabiting couples, single parents, etc.) may be a future context to explore the interdependency of family relationships and religious friendships. Likewise, the importance of “spiritual” friendships (e.g., friends that pray together), rather than traditional congregational friendships, may be an important area of future study given more recent trends toward less institutionalized expressions of religion (Ammerman 2014; Wuthnow 2007). Moreover, in implementing a social networks approach to family

and religion, it would be appropriate for future studies to utilize more unique social network methods. For example, it may be beneficial to use exponential random graph modeling (i.e., ERGMs) to examine the role of religious friendship homophily on the likelihood of entering a religiously homogamous marriage. Or, one can test the “centrality” (i.e., social popularity) of individuals with certain family statuses (e.g., a married parent) within a religious congregation in order to examine whether religious communities truly offer social legitimacy and prestige to families, as past scholars have suggested (see Chaves 1991; Edgell 2005; Stolzenberg et al. 1995). In sum, there are numerous possibilities for highlighting the powerful role of social ties in the area of family and religion. Hopefully, this dissertation will serve as a blueprint for future studies to uncover the numerous and complex ways in which families and religious groups remain connected through close social relationships.

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### EDUCATION

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*Dissertation*: "Family, Faith, and Friends: Incorporating Social Networks into the Study of Family and Religion"  
*Committee*: Roger Finke (Chair), Diane Felmlee, David Eggebeen, and David Johnson
- 2014 M.A., Sociology, The Pennsylvania State University
- 2011 B.A., Florida State University, Sociology and Religion (Double Major)

### PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL ARTICLES

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- Gurrentz, Benjamin T. Forthcoming. "Family Formation and Close Social Ties Within Religious Congregations." *Journal of Marriage and Family*.
- Bader, Christopher, Andrea Molle, and Benjamin T. Gurrentz. Forthcoming. "For the Wrath of God: Fatalism and Images of God in Violent Regions of the World." *Sociology of Religion*.
- Gurrentz, Benjamin T., and Roger Finke. Forthcoming. "When Contact Counts: Testing Intergroup Contact on Business and Intermarriage Resistance in the Caucasus Region." *Social Science Research*.
- Gurrentz, Benjamin T. Forthcoming. "Religious Dynamics and Marital Dissolution: A Latent Class Approach." *Marriage & Family Review*.
- Gurrentz, Benjamin T. 2016. "Fear of Love Online: Religious Salience and the Early Adoption of Online Dating (2000-2005)." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 12(2):1-22.
- Gurrentz, Benjamin T. 2014. "God is 'Color-blind': The Problem of Race in a Diverse Christian Fraternity." *Critical Research on Religion* 2(3): 246-264.
- Gurrentz, Benjamin T. 2014. "'A Brotherhood of Believers': Religious Identity and Boundary-work in a Christian Fraternity." *Sociology of Religion* 75 (1): 113-135.

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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#### Sole Instructor:

- 2016 Introductory Sociology, Summer, Pennsylvania State University
- 2015 Intermediate Social Statistics, Summer, Pennsylvania State University
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