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Ideal Family Size as an Intervening Variable Between Religion and Attitudes Towards Abortion*

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Previous research has shown a fairly consistent relationship between religion and/or religiosity and attitudes towards abortion. Data from a 1972 national sample is presented showing the importance of ideal family size as an intervening variable in this relationship and argues for its inclusion in subsequent research in this area.

The research on the relationship between religious affiliation and attitudes towards abortion has consistently taken a position of a direct causal relationship between religion and these attitudes. Finner and Gamache (1969) in their study demonstrate that multidimensional measures of religious commitment are directly related to attitudes towards induced abortion. This relationship is supported by the introduction of the following control variables: sex, age, marital status, education, income, religious self identification, political self identification, and religious affiliation, none of which significantly affected the relationship of religious commitment and abortion attitudes. Subsequent research has further contributed to these findings by investigating different populations, using other control variables or modification of the measurement of the religious variable. Research by Richardson and Fox (1972) was conducted on a sample of state legislators using voting record on abortion legislation as the dependent variable. Religious affiliation was found to have a direct relationship to their dependent variable after the introduction of the control variables of age, party affiliation, and constituency.

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A comparative perspective was added to this research by Balakrishnan et al., (1972). Using a sample of married women in Toronto, they found that religious affiliation, particularly Catholic vs. non-Catholic, as well as frequency of church attendance were the most powerful predictors of attitudes towards abortion. The control variables of age, income, education, and size of birthplace were not as important as religion in explaining the variation in abortion attitudes.

Two of the most recent studies were conducted on a college student population (Clayton and Tolone, 1973) and on a sample of professional social workers and nurses (Hertel et al., 1974). Clayton and Tolone (1973:28) used the following control variables: sex, class rank (freshman and other), birth order, size of community, parental income, religious identification, and frequency of church attendance while Hertel et al. (1974:27-28) used sex, race, age, profession, and occupational prestige. As with the earlier research, these control variables did not significantly modify the relationship of religion and/or religiosity with attitudes towards abortion. Given the various populations researched, as well as the numerous control variables introduced, the religion and/or religiosity relationship to abortion attitudes appears well established.

However there is another body of research findings dealing with religion which leads one to a possible variable which is consistently absent from the above research. As early as 1960, it was found that Catholic married women wanted and expected to have a larger number of children than non-Catholic married women (Whelpton et al., 1966:90). Subsequent research (Westoff et al., 1963, Ryder and Westoff, 1971) further supported these findings. The most recent study by Brackbill and Howell (1974), while based on junior high, high school, and college students, does show the continued importance of a religious differential in family size preference.

Religion appears then to be systematically related to desired family size. If one conceptualizes abortion as simply one more device to control family size, it would seem important to introduce family size as a control variable in any analysis of the relationship of religion and attitudes towards abortion. This is what we intend to do in this research note, as an attempt to see if religion continues to have a direct influence on attitudes towards abortion when preferred family size is held constant.

METHODS

The data for this research note were taken from the National Data Program for the Social Sciences. The data collection was under the supervision of National Opinion Research Center. The survey was conducted in March of 1972 on a cross-sectional national sample of non-institutionalized adults 18 years of age or older. The N was 1,613.¹

Three variables are of concern in this research note: religion, preferred family size, and attitudes towards abortion. In regard to religion respondents were categorized into

1. Further information on the data as well as the exact wording of all the questions used can be found in Davis (1972).

Catholics and Protestants,² and respondents with other religious affiliations were excluded because of the small size of this population represented in any national sample. Preferred family size was operationalized by responses to a question about the ideal number of children for a family.³ Those respondents who indicated 2 or less children as ideal were categorized as preferring small families, while those who indicated 3 or more were designated as preferring large families.

Attitudes toward abortion were tapped by six questions, with each indicating a condition of pregnancy, and the respondents were asked whether or not it should be possible for a pregnant woman in each of these conditions to obtain a legal abortion.⁴ Only responses of yes or no are included in our analysis. Chi square was used to measure the statistical significance of any observed differences.

TABLE 1
PERCENT AGREEING TO A LEGAL ABORTION
BY RELIGION AND IDEAL FAMILY SIZE

| | Situation of Pregnancy | | | | | |
|-----------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| | Woman's Health Endangered by Pregnancy | Became Pregnant As Result of Rape | Strong Chance Of Birth Defect In Baby | Family has Low Income and Can't Afford More Children | Woman Not Married And Does Not Want To Marry The Man | Woman Married Does Not Want Anymore Children |
| | Small Families | | | | | |
| Protestants (N) | 91 (442) | 87 (441) | 89 (438) | 60 (436) | 57 (430) | 52 (441) |
| Catholics (N) | 93 (138) | 85 (133) | 83 (134) | 49 (136) | 44 (134) | 40 (133) |
| | Large Families | | | | | |
| Protestants (N) | 78 (539) | 71 (526) | 70 (527) | 37 (522) | 30 (523) | 26 (532) |
| Catholics (N) | 78 (254) | 68 (253) | 65 (250) | 31 (251) | 27 (253) | 24 (260) |
| | X ² =35.4 df=3 p < .001 | X ² =52.7 df=3 p < .001 | X ² =84.2 df=3 p < .001 | X ² =70.8 df=3 p < .001 | X ² =90.8 df=3 p < .001 | X ² =88.1 df=3 p < .001 |

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the data on the relationship of religious affiliation and attitudes towards abortion when preferred family size is held constant. In general the data support our position that preferred family size is an important intervening variable in the relation between religion and abortion attitudes. First, comparing members of the

2. We recognize that this operationalization of the variable of religion is most elementary and much more refined measures exist, but we feel that such operationalizations await a more lengthy and systematic analysis than can be accomplished in a paper such as this.

3. This research is based on secondary analysis, and while a question tapping preferred family size which explicitly refers to the respondents family would be more useful, such a question was not available to us. For a discussion of the conceptual problems involved with this variable see Ryder and Westoff (1969).

4. For a more detailed analysis of abortion attitudes see Ryder and Westoff (1971: 267: 293) as well as Blake (1971).

same religious groups who differ on family size preference, the data indicate that preferred family size appears to have an independent relationship to abortion attitudes. This is supported by noting that under each of the pregnancy situations Catholics and Protestants who prefer small families are consistently more liberal than corresponding religious group members who prefer large families. The range of difference on abortion attitudes for the two Catholic groups is 15 to 18 percent, while the differences for the two Protestant groups is 8 to 27 percent.

However, it also appears that preferred family size has a slight interactive effect with religion upon abortion attitudes. Comparing the differences between Protestants and Catholics with the same family size preference, the data in general indicate that under the specification of small family size the difference between the religious groups is more substantial than between the religious groups who prefer large families. In four of the six situations of pregnancy the differences between Catholics and Protestants who prefer small families is greater than 5 percent, while only in one situation of pregnancy is the difference between Catholics and Protestants who prefer large families greater than 5 percent.

In summary, the data in Table 1 indicate that preferred family size has a relationship to abortion attitudes relatively independent of religious affiliation. However, it also appears that this variable has an important specifying effect on the relationship of religion and abortion attitudes, in that the greatest differences between religious groups with respect to attitudes towards abortion in general occur only with the specification of small family size.

DISCUSSION

Much of the previous research (noted above) on the relationship between religion and/or religiosity as it influences attitudes towards abortion attempts to argue for a direct causal relationship between a "religious factor" and attitudes towards abortion. This specific theoretical orientation is consistent with the one called by White (1968) the theory of "psychological consonance." According to White, this theoretical approach is based on two postulates. The first of these postulates is that the theology of the religion with which one is affiliated is the primary source of religious influence,⁵ and, second, that persons who believe their theology seek a consonance between that theology and their attitudes and behaviors in other spheres of social life.

White then continues to critique this approach of direct theological influence. He argues that a more appropriate approach is to conceptualize religious groups as spheres of interaction and that this interaction generates group specific norms. These group specific norms may or may not be logically linked to theology but they are to White the primary source of the "religious factor." White therefore seems to be calling for greater care as to possible intervening factors in the religion, attitude and behavior process.

The data in this research note lends support to the appropriateness of White's caution to the specific area of research dealing with the relationship of religion and

5. Recent work by Clayton and Gladden (1974), among others, attempting to show the overriding importance of an ideological factor in multidimensional of religiosity is consistent with this postulate.

attitudes towards abortion. Our findings suggest that the influence of religion is more indirect, and that preferred family size is an important specifying variable to be considered in further research in the area. Such subsequent research on abortion attitudes should be concerned then with two questions: 1) the influence of religion on family size preference, and 2) other normative factors of religious groups as they influence this preference, e.g. ethnicity.

The above conclusions are offered in a preliminary way given the somewhat small but consistent differences found in this data. We recognize that other factors such as denominational differences among Protestants and the extent of religious involvement are not included in this research. Furthermore, alternative explanations exist for these findings. It is possible that preferred family size is an indirect measure of religious commitment, religious orthodoxy or some other dimension of the religious factor. Questions such as these, however, await research designed specifically to address the relationship of religion and/or religiosity to abortion attitudes rather than secondary analysis as is reported here. Nonetheless we do feel that this research raises questions with the position that because abortion is a "moral" issue theology must be the most important factor.

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