



Research on Religion and Family: *A Corner Turned, a Step to Take*¹

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As research gives more attention to the specific substance of religion an increased understanding emerges of the ways that religion defines ideals rather than merely contributing instrumentally to the achievement of a certain level of quality in family life. Recent evidence indicates ways that human qualities which religion values and facilitates are, in turn, positive contributions to family stability and parental competence.

Research and the Ignoring of Research

Research on the family has developed a substantial and respectable tradition. Among the earliest emphases of the emergent social sciences was interest in kinship patterns and family structure. At first merely a playing out of curiosity and comparative description, research on the family has developed to the point that it has now turned the corner into the combining of empirical and non-empirical variables in new analytic models. Perhaps the next step will be the development of prescriptive models. If so, research can be useful as one more tool for those who attempt to intervene in constructive, helpful ways toward the development of sound, enduring and satisfying families.

The substantial tradition of research on the family is matched by a similarly substantial tradition of ignoring research on the family. Because the human family in its many structural variations is far older than the tradition of empirical science and because humankind's concern for the family is broadly shared and essentially informal, the gap between research and practice is wide.

In matters of knowledge about family, as at several other points in the spectrum of human understanding, knowledge generated from research falls across one or another intensively developed topics of lore, custom and tradition.

Wherever scientific knowledge intersects with these strong points of common knowledge the tendency to resist or ignore is evident. Consider the health sciences, for example. A scientific discovery will relatively quickly find its way into practice in matters of surgery, orthopedic treatment or brain-wave analysis. These matters do not intersect with common knowledge. But in matters of nutrition, a discovery such as the link between cholesterol and heart disease will make very little impact on society because it falls across matters of common knowledge: "I've always eaten hamburgers, roast beef and other red meat; it hasn't hurt me yet." The tendency to discount research as simply one more form of colloquial advice is persistent; indeed it is a major irony of the scientific age that the commonplace experiences and tasks are least receptive to the benefits of discovery.

Trend Toward Wholeness and Health

With the emergence of family-service professions earlier in this century a new valuing of research arose. The fact that the family services emerged in response to increased tension and dysfunction in the socialization processes accounts for the fact that a premium has been placed on research that can enlighten the skills of diagnosis, remediation and therapy. It is no accident that the

¹ Paper prepared for the Pastors' Task Force, 1985. See also Report of the Survey of Family Development Concerns of Pastors Task Force on the Family NAE (1985) in Document Archives

bulk of research in social science deals with the dark side of things—that is where the demand has been most explicit.

The consequence of this reasonable response has had at least one unfortunate side effect: the tone and emphasis of research is dismal and negative. The field of psychology offers the best example. It has gone through a long and bleak period of preoccupation with the abnormal. But remember, modern psychology and its scientific ways dawned in a day of profound concern about what was “going wrong with the modern human condition”. Now we hear an appeal for research that informs us about the normal, the desirable, the healthy. This same trend is seen in medicine. Many people now are aware that preoccupation with illness can becloud the images of wellness. One way to interpret the trend is to see it as the laypersons’ belated acceptance of the worth of scientific understanding of social relationships. Science is finally being accepted as a valid way of knowing, even in matters of socialization, morality and spiritual development. What this new audience for research evidence wants is sharply different: “We are not here to understand illness but to grasp wellness”, they say. No more eloquent voice for this new audience can be imagined than that of Norman Cousins (1981), whose intellectual grasp and moral sense has added substantially to the credibility of the emphasis on wholeness, health and happiness.

Religious Orientation and Family Solidarity

This concern for wholeness is basic for all of us who hold strong religious convictions and who have seen with our own eyes the family-strengthening nature of “pure religion”.² There is mounting evidence, albeit in bits and pieces, that religious experience and affiliation do make a difference in the direction of stronger families and better parenting. Sweeping together these fragmentary evidences and based on his own investigations of “strong families” Stinnett (1979) feels justified in the inclusion of “religious orientation” as an important facet. This facet, or “pattern” among the six facets proposed³ was deduced from the increasingly common findings about the relationship between religion and family solidarity.

Perhaps more important than the inclusion of “religious orientation” as one of the six ordinal factors is the fact that Ammons and Stinnett (1980) found four “major attributes of a lasting marriage”. Their findings were summarized in terms of the following sets of factors: (1) reciprocity, providing support for each other, (2) determination and commitment, (3) well developed ego strengths evidenced in the capabilities of taking independent actions, and (4) a satisfactory sexual life.

Although religion is not directly mentioned among these four, a well-grounded religious teaching and upbringing, at least in the Judeo-Christian tradition, can significantly enhance these four factors and their underpinnings. The fact that half-lived and poorly grounded religious experience does not lead toward these qualities is, indeed, the major point.

Where Research Can Go Wrong

My observation in this matter is that religion makes a difference for some people and not for others. I have no trouble hypothesizing why this is so. Further, since I put no confidence in the use of “religiosity” as a variable, the frequent conclusion that “religion makes little difference” seems to have a reasonable explanation: the easily quantified variables associated with religion (religiosity is the collective term) are peripheral to the essential core of spiritual development. The hypothesis follows:

² “Religion that is pure and genuine in the sight of God”, according to the Epistle of James 1:27, shows itself in such things as “visiting orphans and widows in their distress, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world”.

³ The six facets include: Expression of appreciation, Spending time together, Communication, Commitment to the family group, Religious orientation, and Conflict resolution

if religious affiliation and moral-creedal claims are examined in terms of easily observed, reported and quantified variables, the evidence will suggest no predictive relationship to variables which describe family stability and parental competence. If researchers would draw their religiosity indicators from a more biblical definition of religion, it might help substantially.

In plain language, it seems to me that most of what researchers have called “religion” falls far short of the essential issues of spiritual essence and the spiritual relationship of humankind to God. Thus it follows as no surprise that few predictive or causative relationships between religion and family development have been identified.

Of all possible human affairs topics, religion is least likely to be treated in its own terms. And on those rare occasions when it is accepted as a legitimate concern and not dismissed as a quirk of social life or an irrational manifestation, it is usually the focus of all sorts of reader complaints. It seems that no two people see exactly the same meaning in any religious matter.

In some respects, research is like journalism—researchers tend to write what people want to read and to examine variables which are typically examined. (Better to say that they reexamine that which has already been made safe to examine.) Three problems account for the shortage of explicit attention to religious values:

1. Values of all sorts are assumed to be in the non-objective realm--a realm which empiricists avoid if at all possible. (“If you can’t count it, it isn’t real”, they argue.)

2. The anxiety about church-state separation leads to a generalized aversion toward religious topics. The socio-political presuppositions of academicians inevitably color their scholarly interests. Religion and religious experience is a no-man’s land for the research community.

3. Bias, especially the coloration of interpretations of empirical findings, is almost unavoidable when matters of religion enter into the picture. Thus, even if a social context obviously includes a religious dimension, the research tends to deal with religious matters in “neutral” terms and as aloof as possible, usually biasing the significance of the religious factors downward while playing up other matters.

These three assertions border on defamation of the integrity of the research community, admittedly, but they need to be said. Religion and religious experiences is basic in the quality of life. How can I prove this? I claim it as an article of faith and a function of my real experience. The encouraging new willingness to take religious experience as a research-worthy reality is an evidence of the maturing of social science. Now that the corner has been turned, the next step is to find ways to deal with religious experience in its own terms.

Religion is a roots issue, not a matter of technique, procedure and technology. It is not so much a way to produce better families as it is the way to define better families in the sense of providing roots and grounding for ideals.

More to Learn

Many questions are, as yet, unanswered. The most troublesome is how religion affects family life. Evidences are mounting that religion is not—as was assumed in the “flower child” era—merely a very personal and non-institutionalized matter. Even church attendance is related to “marital satisfaction” in some positive manner (Campbell et al, 1976; Glenn and Weaver, 1981; Hansen, 1981; Filsinger and Wilson, 1982; Veroff, et al, 1981; Kunz and Albrecht, 1977; Hunt and King, 1978). Hansen (1981), in particular, concludes that intrinsic matters of religiosity—such as spousal sharing of opinions about the importance of religion—are strongly related to marital happiness.

Secular researchers usually explain their findings in such terms as religion’s adding up to community embeddedness, social integration and shared philosophy of life, all known to relate positively to marital adjustment (Lewis and Spanier, 1979; Veroff et al., 1981). Mormon research has found that among their families the matter of church attendance and participation correlates positively

with time spent with family in non-religious activity (Wilkinson and Tanner, 1980) and with positive family interactions (Johnson, 1973).

A more clear picture of quality in marriage and family is emerging. Surely some of these factors are causative, not merely concomitant. We need a clearer view of causation; which of the correlated variables are indicative of causation? What are the variables and how do they work? Then we need to know which of the predictive or causative variables are resultant from or are significantly strengthened by religious experience. At that point we can ask, What sort of religious experience is most clearly associated with the emergence and nurturance of the family-stability factors?

All three questions must be raised, and in essentially this sequence. When the answers come in it will become clear what exactly is the religion-to-strong-family linkage. Not much before.

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