Religion and Youth Substance Use

BARBARA R. LORCH and ROBERT H. HUGHES

ABSTRACT: This research study of 13,878 youths indicates that religion is not by itself a very important predictor of youth substance use. It is, however, more strongly related to alcohol use than drug use. Also, fundamentalist religious groups have the lowest percentages of substance use in general, while the more liberal types of religious groups have the lowest percentages of heavy substance use. Of the six dimensions of religion used in the study to predict youth substance use, importance of religion to the subject was the most important, with church membership second, and the fundamentalism-liberalism scale of religious groups third.

Introduction

Although religion is thought to be a significant factor in the United States today, it has been somewhat disappointing as an independent variable in predicting other behavior. Part of the problem in the use of religion as an independent variable is separating its impact from that of social class, education, sex, age, or other variables to which it is related.1 Other areas of concern have been the question of whether it should be treated as unidimensional or multidimensional and the difficulty of measuring religiosity.2 Some scholars have suggested distinguishing among religious belief, practice, knowledge, experience, and consequences.3 The work that has been done on the scaling of these dimensions has shown religion to be a very illusive and complex variable and points up the fact that just belonging to different religious groups does not necessarily indicate that subjects will differ in other ways. Research has generally shown more differences within religious groups than among them.4

Despite the problems with measuring religion in a meaningful way, research continues to investigate its relation to moral choices and behavior. Results in the broad area of juvenile delinquency in recent years have been mixed, with little evidence that religion is a deterrent to delinquent behavior.5 In the area of adolescent substance use, however, most research has shown a relationship between religion and alcohol and drug usage. Although research studies investigating the relationship between religion and youth substance use have

Barbara R. Lorch, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, and Robert H. Hughes, Ph.D., is Professor of Sociology and Chairperson of the Sociology Department at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs.
resulted in somewhat disparate findings, most research in this area has shown some relationship between the two. Differences in the findings in some cases may be accounted for by the use of different dimensions of religion and religiosity, as well as different measures of substance use.

Some research studies show a relationship between religious affiliation and use of alcohol and drugs by youth. More meaningful relationships than those between religious affiliation and youth substance use have been found between participation in church and church-related activities and youth alcohol or drug use. However, the most consistent and significant findings have been those reporting the inhibiting influence of religious beliefs on youth substance use.

In many studies concerning youth substance use, all Protestants have been classified as one homogeneous population, despite recognized differences among Protestant denominations. In other studies a limited number of specific religious groups has been selected for study without comparing them to all other denominations. Therefore, in this study many different religious groupings are included and compared. Furthermore, the investigators arranged the religious groups on a fundamentalism-liberalism scale as an additional dimension of religiosity.

Since so many studies have found church attendance related to youth alcohol and drug use, this dimension of religiosity was also used by the authors in their study. And last, the importance of religion to the subject was included because of the consistent research findings that religious belief is a deterrent to drinking and drug use.

Previous research studies concerning the relationship between religion and substance use have used a number of different dimensions of religion, thus producing much confusion concerning religion's actual role as a deterrent. The purpose of this research is to determine the relative importance of various dimensions of religion as a deterrent to alcohol and drug usage.

In view of the complexity of religion as a variable, in this research the authors have used six different dimensions of religion as independent variables to investigate their relative influence on youth alcohol and drug use. These are:

1. religious membership,
2. degree of fundamentalism-liberalism of religious group,
3. church attendance,
4. the importance of religion to the subject,
5. a combination of church attendance and importance of religion, and
6. a combination of fundamentalism-liberalism of religious groups and the importance of religion to the subject.

Age and sex were controlled to eliminate whatever effect they may have on the relationship between religion and substance usage. Although a variety of different dimensions of religion have been used over the years in studies of religion and substance use, few have employed several dimensions of religion, and also alcohol and drug use, in the same study in an attempt to assess their relative impact.