

# Family, Religious Attendance, and Trajectories of Psychological Well-Being Among Youth

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Despite numerous studies on adolescent well-being, longitudinal research on the influence of religion on well-being is lacking, and limited studies have looked at how family and religion may work in conjunction with one another to influence adolescent well-being. This study addresses these limitations by using longitudinal data on 5,739 youth to explore whether family structure, changes in family structure, parent–child relationship quality, and religious attendance (overall and with parents) influence trajectories of psychological well-being independently and in conjunction with one another. Results support previous research in showing that parental interaction and attending religious services with parent(s) in late childhood are associated with higher psychological well-being, whereas conflict with parents and residing in a nontraditional family in late childhood are associated with lower well-being among youth. Finally, there is evidence suggesting that attending religious services with parent(s) amplifies the positive influence of parental interaction on psychological well-being, and overall levels of religious attendance over time are less likely to increase well-being among adolescents raised by single parents than for adolescents raised by married parents.

*Keywords:* adolescence, family, parenting, religious attendance, psychological well-being

Childhood and adolescence are key stages in the life course during which youth undergo a number of transitions including increased independence as well as physical and emotional changes. Although many youth are able to handle these transitions, the stress of these changes places youth at an increased risk of experiencing psychological and emotional problems (Ge, Lorenz, Conger, Elder, & Simons, 1994; Meadows, Brown, & Elder, 2006). Indeed, numerous studies suggest that youth often experience lower levels of well-being as they progress through adolescence (Adkins et al., 2009; Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998; Ge et al., 1994; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003).

A large body of research has focused on exploring factors that may help to understand why adolescents may experience divergent levels of psychological well-being. Two important social factors in this discussion are family and religion. For example, residing in a family with few social or economic resources and experiencing family transitions is linked to lower psychological well-being (Avison, 2010; Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Meadows et al., 2006). In contrast, attending religious services is associated with a number of positive outcomes for adolescents including prosocial behavior, higher well-being, academic success, and lower risk of delinquent activity (Petts, 2009a; Regnerus, 2003; Smith & Denton, 2005).

Despite the sizable body of literature on psychological well-being, and the influence of family and religion on adolescent

well-being in particular, the vast majority of research on religion and adolescent well-being uses cross-sectional data, and longitudinal research often focuses on only two or three waves of data (Dew et al., 2008). Moreover, there has been limited research on how childhood family characteristics and religious attendance (and changes over time in these factors) work in conjunction with one another to influence trajectories of psychological well-being from late childhood to young adulthood. Because the institutions of family and religion are closely linked, understanding how these factors interact will help to provide a greater understanding of the relationships between family, religion, and adolescent well-being.

This study attempted to address these gaps in the literature by using 15 years of data from the Child and Young Adult Sample of the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and focusing on four research questions. First, how do childhood family structure, parent–child relationship quality (measured as parental interaction, parental affection, and parent–child conflict), and changes in family structure throughout adolescence influence trajectories of well-being? Second, how do attending religious services with parent(s) in late childhood as well as overall rates of religious attendance throughout adolescence influence trajectories of well-being? Third, does attending religious services with parent(s) in late childhood moderate the relationship between parent–child relationship quality and psychological well-being? Finally, does family structure moderate the relationship between overall rates of religious attendance (i.e., attendance both by oneself and with others) and psychological well-being? Attending religious services with parents may add greater meaning to family relationships. Youth raised in nontraditional families may also be more likely to benefit from the social support provided by religious attendance.

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This article was published Online First May 12, 2014.

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## Conceptual Framework

### Family and Psychological Well-Being

The family structure and parenting practices that youth are exposed to early in life have lasting effects on mental health (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Meadows et al., 2006). Many studies have noted the link between childhood family structure and well-being, suggesting that adolescents who reside with married parents are more likely to have access to emotional and financial support than youth raised in single-parent families and stepfamilies, leading to higher levels of well-being among children raised by married parents (Barrett & Turner, 2005; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Single parents must perform all parenting tasks without the support of another resident parent; balancing the roles of being a financial provider as well as providing emotional and social support for their children can be difficult (Chang & Fine, 2007; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Similarly, stepparents are less likely to be involved in parenting tasks than biological/adoptive parents, which may increase stress for the biological parent because of added parenting responsibilities and may reduce support for youth (Cooper et al., 2009; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). Furthermore, residing in a stepfamily or single-parent family may result in fewer resources for youth relative to residing in a married family, such as educational opportunities, because of financial strains (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Changes in family structure may also influence trajectories of adolescent well-being. Children are largely reliant on parents and others for their well-being until they mature and become more independent (Avison, 2010). Thus, any disruptions in this support due to the dissolution of a parental relationship (as well as any conflict associated with this transition) may be especially problematic for children. Transitioning into a new family environment can also create stress among parents and children (Cooper et al., 2009; Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Elevated stress levels, as well as any disruption in parental support due to changes in family structure, may lead to lower levels of adolescent well-being that may persist into adulthood (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1995; Cherlin et al., 1998; Ge, Natsuaki, & Conger, 2006).

Parent-child relationship quality may also influence trajectories of psychological well-being among youth. In general, authoritative parenting—being warm, supportive, and engaged with children—is associated with fewer psychological problems (Steinberg, 2001). Parents are an important source of social support for their children; expressing affection toward children and being engaged in children's lives help children to feel more secure and reduce the risk of experiencing emotional or behavioral problems (Floyd et al., 2005; Thornton, 2001). In contrast, high levels of conflict within the family may reduce adolescent well-being by lowering the amount of support that youth receive from parents as well as potentially creating a more stressful family environment for youth (Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998). Overall, higher quality relationships between parents and youth may increase the likelihood that youth experience higher well-being throughout adolescence.

### Religious Attendance and Psychological Well-Being

Religious attendance may also influence patterns of psychological well-being among youth. Specifically, attending religious services regularly may provide youth with a sense of belonging and access to a social support network (Ellison & Levin, 1998; Smith, 2003b). By attending religious services, youth are also exposed to a set of teachings that may help to provide perspective in life and better help youth to understand and cope with any stresses or difficulties they face in adolescence (Pargament, 1997; Smith, 2003b). Religious attendance also helps youth to acquire cultural and social capital (Smith, 2003b). Having a sense of belonging, coping skills, and cultural and social capital may help to increase well-being among youth. Indeed, a large body of research suggests that religious attendance has a positive influence on a number of adolescent outcomes. For example, religious attendance is linked to fewer depressive and other psychiatric symptoms (Dew et al., 2008; Wong, Rew, & Slaikeu, 2006), declines in delinquent behavior (Petts, 2009a), and higher educational achievement (Regnerus, 2003).

Despite the large body of evidence suggesting that religious attendance is beneficial for youth, there are some mixed results in the literature. For example, a recent review suggests that a handful of studies find no relationship (or a negative relationship) between religious attendance and youth mental health outcomes, and most studies use cross-sectional data (Dew et al., 2008). Other research using longitudinal data suggests that there may be a curvilinear relationship between religious attendance and depressive symptoms for some groups of adolescents (Petts & Jolliff, 2008). Thus, one of the goals of this study was to use longitudinal data to better understand the influence of religious attendance on adolescent well-being. This is especially important to consider because religious attendance often declines in adolescence and young adulthood (Petts, 2009b; Smith & Snell, 2009). Many youth may turn away from religion to exert their independence, and they may also leave behind a social support network. Without this additional support, youth who are not active in a religious community may be more likely to struggle with the stresses that occur throughout adolescence, resulting in lower psychological well-being. In contrast, youth who attend services more frequently, perhaps in an attempt to find meaning in life (or life events) or to cope with hardship (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006; Smith, 2003b), may experience greater social support and higher well-being.

In addition to overall rates of religious attendance, attending religious services with others may also influence adolescent well-being. In particular, adolescents' exposure to religion is likely dependent on whether their parents are religious. Because children often inherit their parents' religious beliefs, youth may be more likely to experience the social and psychological benefits of religion if they are raised in a religious family (Myers, 1996; Smith, 2003b). Moreover, attending religious services with parents may provide particular benefits to youth because of the shared experience of attending with family members. Specifically, youth may be more likely to gain a sense of integration if they attend religious services with their parents (Abbott, Berry, & Meredith, 1990; Edgell, 2006). Indeed, evidence suggests that attending religious services as a family increases social network closure (Smith, 2003a). Attending services with parents may also increase the likelihood that religious teachings are reinforced within the home,

as both parents and youth are being exposed to the same messages (Edgell, 2006; Smith, 2003b). Although youth may be attending religious services involuntarily with parents (or even against their will), there is evidence that most youth are comfortable attending religious services with parents (Smith & Denton, 2005). Thus, the exposure to a religious community and potential reinforcement of religious teachings that may come along with family religious attendance may help to increase adolescent well-being (Smith, 2003b; Wong et al., 2006).

### Family, Religious Attendance, and Psychological Well-Being

Because the institutions of family and religion are closely related (Edgell, 2006), these factors may work in conjunction with one another to influence patterns of psychological well-being. Unfortunately, the link between these two social institutions has been understudied (Mahoney, 2010). Thus, one goal of this study was to explore whether religious attendance and family characteristics may work in conjunction with one another to influence adolescent well-being. This may work in a couple of ways. First, attending religious services with parents may enhance the positive influence of parent-child relationship quality on adolescent well-being. Attending religious services as a family may lead youth and their parents to sanctify their family relationships (i.e., view these relationships as having spiritual significance; Mahoney et al., 2003). As a result, parents who attend religious services with their children may place more importance on interacting with and showing affection to their children (Ellison, Henderson, Glenn, & Harkrider, 2011; Mahoney et al., 2003). Attending services with parents may also help to enhance the bond between parents and children and allow youth to feel closer to their parents, resulting in interactions that are more meaningful and supportive (Mahoney et al., 2003). Overall, attending religious services as a family may lead to sanctification (and additional support that may come with sanctification), increasing the likelihood that high-quality parent-child relationships lead youth to experience a trajectory of higher well-being during adolescence.

Second, family structure may moderate the relationship between overall religious attendance and adolescent well-being. Religious institutions provide resources such as social support and coping mechanisms that may help youth to deal with any stresses or hardships they are experiencing (Smith, 2003b). These resources may be especially beneficial to youth raised in nontraditional families; youth raised in stepfamilies or single-parent families may not receive the same level of social or financial support as youth raised in married families and may also be disadvantaged because of the stigma associated with single parenthood and role ambiguity associated with stepfamilies (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Manning & Lamb, 2003; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). To compensate for these disadvantages, youth may turn to religious institutions for support. Therefore, more frequent rates of religious attendance throughout adolescence may be especially beneficial for youth raised in stepfamilies or single-parent families than for youth raised in married families, and there is some empirical evidence to support this claim (Carothers, Borkowski, Lefever, & Whitman, 2005; Petts, 2009a).

### Gender and Psychological Well-Being

Although not a primary focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge that trajectories of psychological well-being may differ by gender. The physical, emotional, and social changes that occur during this life stage can be stressful, and research suggests that girls are often more exposed to stressful events and are believed to be more vulnerable to the negative effects of stress (Adkins et al., 2009; Hankin et al., 1998; Meadows et al., 2006; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994). Social stress may also increase the likelihood that male youth experience negative outcomes, but these negative outcomes are more likely to appear as externalizing problem behaviors, whereas female youth are more likely to engage in internalizing problem behavior (Zahn-Waxler, Shiftcliff, & Marceau, 2008).

### Hypotheses

I expected that residing in a married family and higher quality parent-child relationships in late childhood would be associated with a higher trajectory of well-being, whereas residing in a stepfamily or single-parent family in late childhood and experiencing a change in family structure during adolescence would be negatively associated with psychological well-being (Hypothesis 1). I also expected that overall rates of religious attendance throughout adolescence and attending religious services with parent(s) in late childhood would be positively related to psychological well-being (Hypothesis 2). In addition, I expected that attending services with parent(s) in late childhood would amplify the positive influence of parent-child relationship quality on adolescent well-being (Hypothesis 3). Finally, I expected that the positive relationship between overall rates of religious attendance over time and psychological well-being would be stronger among youth raised in stepfamilies and single-parent families than for youth raised in married families (Hypothesis 4).

### Method

#### Sample

Data from the 1992–2006 waves of the Child and Young Adult Sample of the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (C-NLSY79) were used for this study. The C-NLSY79 began in 1986 and focused on obtaining information about all children born to the original female NLSY79 respondents.<sup>1</sup> Beginning in 1988, information has been collected biennially from each child ages 10 years and older of the original NLSY79 mothers. In addition, a young adult survey has been administered biennially to children ages 15 and older since 1994. Information from the child and young adult surveys was used for this study; to date, 13 surveys have been administered to children ages 10–14 since 1988 and nine surveys have been administered to youth ages 15 and older.

To construct the sample for this study, I pooled and recoded data from 1992 (the first year in which children were asked about psychological well-being) through 2006 according to the youth's

<sup>1</sup> The original NLSY79 was a nationally representative study of 12,686 youth between the ages of 14 and 22 years in 1979. These youth were interviewed annually from 1979 to 1994 and biennially from 1996 to 2010.

age (to track youth by age as opposed to survey year). To focus on the period from late childhood to young adulthood, I restricted the sample to youth between the ages of 10 and 25 who were interviewed at least three times (to accurately uncover any curvilinear patterns in the data). This resulted in a sample size of 5,736 youth (2,899 boys and 2,837 girls). Although all youth in this sample had at least three data points, all valid data that met the sample constraints were included; youth contributed up to eight data points, and the mean number of surveys included for youth in this study was four.

Because the sample was restricted to youth who were interviewed at least three times, the youth included in this sample appeared to be more disadvantaged when compared with youth who were excluded for being interviewed two or fewer times. Specifically, youth in this sample were more likely to be Black, more likely to be raised by single parents or stepparents, and had a lower average level of psychological well-being than youth not included in the sample. These differences are likely due to the bias toward youth born to younger mothers, as a greater proportion of youth in this sample was born to mothers who were in their mid-20s or younger when they had a child. Although these restrictions limit the representativeness of the sample, including multiple interviews from each respondent provides a more comprehensive examination of patterns of psychological well-being throughout this stage in the life course.

### Dependent Variable

The measure of psychological well-being consisted of two variations of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression scale (CES-D) that were used to capture the unique ways in which youth experience well-being across developmental periods (Avenevoli & Steinberg, 2001). Unfortunately, youth in the C-NLSY79 survey were asked different items from the CES-D at different ages, preventing a comparison of identical indicators over time. However, given that children and young adults differ in emotional, physical, and psychological maturity, using slightly different indicators of psychological well-being that capture these stages in the life course was appropriate (Switzer et al., 1999).

Each scale was recoded so that higher values indicate higher levels of well-being. From ages 10 to 14, nine questions were used that indicate how often the child feels (a) sad or blue, (b) nervous, tense, or on edge, (c) happy, (d) bored, (e) lonely, (f) tired or worn out, (g) excited about something, (h) too busy to get everything done, and (i) pressured by mom and dad. Responses ranged from 0 = *most of the time* to 2 = *rarely*, and were summed to create an index of psychological well-being ( $\alpha > .63$ ). For youth ages 15 and older, seven questions were used: (a) I did not feel like eating, (b) I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing, (c) I felt depressed, (d) I felt that everything I did was an effort, (e) my sleep was restless, (f) I felt sad, and (g) I could not get "going." Responses ranged from 0 = *most of the time* to 2 = *rarely*, and were summed to create an index of psychological well-being ( $\alpha > .68$ ). Because different measures were used, each index was standardized ( $M = 0.00$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) using the grand mean for each version of the CES-D to accurately assess well-being among youth. Each valid response from youth was included to examine trajectories of psychological well-being.

### Family Characteristics

**Family structure.** Three indicators were used to assess family structure in late childhood: (a) two-parent biological/adoptive family (reference category), (b) stepfamily, and (c) single-parent family.<sup>2</sup> These indicators were taken from the first valid interview (ages 10–14).

**Family structure transition.** A time-varying variable was included to indicate whether youth experienced a change in resident parents during adolescence.<sup>3</sup>

**Parent–child relationship quality.** Three variables measured parent–child relationship quality in late childhood (measured once at the first valid interview).<sup>4</sup> Parental interaction was taken from youth's reports on whether he or she participated in eight activities with his or her parents such as going to movies, dinner, shopping, and outings as well as working on schoolwork and playing games ( $\alpha = .80$ ). Parental affection was taken from mothers' reports on many times the mother (a) praised and (b) showed affection to the child, and the mean was used as the indicator ( $\alpha = .71$ ). Parent–child conflict was taken from youth's reports on how frequently (1 = *hardly ever* to 3 = *often*) he or she argued with parents over rules, watching TV, homework, and dating ( $\alpha = .60$ ), and the mean was used as the indicator.

### Religious Attendance

Two variables were used to measure religious attendance. First, a dichotomous measure (measured once at the youth's first valid interview) was used to indicate whether the youth attended religious services with his or her parent(s) (1 = *yes*) in late childhood (i.e., 10–14 years old). Second, youth were asked to report their religious attendance (ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 6 = *more than once a week*) in each survey, and responses from late childhood through young adulthood were used to capture adolescents' frequency of overall religious attendance over time.

### Control Variables

Race was included as a control and was coded as White (reference group), Black, and Latino. Mothers' reports of psychological well-being when their child was between the ages of 10 and 14 were also included (measured once in the same year that youth provided their first valid interview), and was indicated by 20 questions taken from the CES-D (responses were recoded so that higher values indicated higher levels of well-being). Finally, adolescents' educational attainment was included as a time-varying variable, and was coded as (a) not completing high school (reference group), (b) graduating high school, and (c) completing at least some college courses.

<sup>2</sup> To be included in the C-NLSY79, all children had to reside with their mother at least part time. The single-parent category includes youth who also reside with their mother's cohabiting partner or other relatives (results were unchanged when excluding these families).

<sup>3</sup> Results were unchanged when separate variables were used for gaining or losing a parent.

<sup>4</sup> Although the hypotheses focus on parent–child relationship quality as one key factor, supplementary analyses suggest that these variables were not strongly correlated with one another and did not load onto a single factor. Thus, they were included as separated variables in the analyses.

### Analytic Strategy

Multilevel models were used as the method of analysis for this study. The C-NLSY79 contains three levels of data: repeated measurements over time (Level 1) are nested within individuals (Level 2), who are also nested within families (Level 3). Thus, multilevel models were used to partition the variance and account for the lack of independence and clustering due to the grouping of data within youth and within families (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). An additional advantage of these models is that they allow for the inclusion of variables that were measured only once or measured at multiple time points, which is useful for examining the influence of family and religious attendance on longitudinal patterns of psychological well-being.

A number of steps were taken to conduct the analyses. Unconditional models were first examined separately for both boys and girls (results not shown), and intraclass correlation coefficients were computed to assess the proportion of variance attributed to each level of data. For girls, 48% of the variance in psychological well-being was attributed to individual change over time (Level 1), 33% of the variance was attributed to Level 2 (between individual), and 19% of the variance was attributed to Level 3 (between families). Similarly for boys, 52% of the variance was attributed to Level 1, 28% was attributed to Level 2, and 20% was attributed to Level 3. These results provide further evidence that a multilevel approach is warranted.

Each of the models took the same basic form and varied by the covariates included in the model (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Singer & Willett, 2003). Each model comprised three equations. The Level 1 (within-person) model is expressed as

$$Y_{ij} = \eta_{0i} + \eta_{1i}AGE_{ij} + \eta_{2i}AGE_{ij}^2 + \varepsilon_{ij},$$

where  $Y_{ij}$  is the predicted level of psychological well-being for person  $i$  at time  $j$ .  $\eta_{0i}$  indicates an individual's initial level of psychological well-being and  $\eta_{1i}$  and  $\eta_{2i}$  indicate the linear and quadratic rate of change in psychological well-being over time. Age was rescaled so that 0 equaled an age of 10 years (to interpret the intercept in a meaningful way). Both linear and quadratic models were estimated, and quadratic models were used because they fit the data better.

Level 2 models included variables that help to explain between-persons differences in both the initial level of psychological well-being and change in well-being over time:

$$\eta_{0i} = \pi_{00} + \pi_{01}PVARIABLE1_i + \pi_{02}PVARIABLE2_i + \dots + \zeta_{0i},$$

$$\eta_{1i} = \pi_{10} + \pi_{11}PVARIABLE1_i + \pi_{12}PVARIABLE2_i + \dots + \zeta_{1i},$$

where  $\pi_{00}$  and  $\pi_{10}$  represent the Level 2 intercepts for the initial level and rate of change in psychological well-being;  $\pi_{01}$ ,  $\pi_{02}$ , and so forth represent the effect of each person-level variable on the initial level of psychological well-being; and  $\pi_{11}$ ,  $\pi_{12}$ , and so forth represent the effect of each person-level variable on the rate of change in well-being. Race and gender were included as time-invariant factors, and overall levels of religious attendance and educational attainment were included as time-varying factors.

Level 3 models included variables that help to explain between-families differences in both the initial level of psychological well-being and change in well-being over time:

$$\pi_{00i} = \gamma_{000} + \gamma_{011}FVARIABLE1_i + \gamma_{022}FVARIABLE2_i + \dots + \zeta_{0i},$$

$$\pi_{10i} = \gamma_{100} + \gamma_{111}FVARIABLE1_i + \gamma_{122}FVARIABLE2_i + \dots + \zeta_{1i},$$

where  $\gamma_{000}$  and  $\gamma_{100}$  represent the Level 3 intercepts for the initial level and rate of change in psychological well-being;  $\gamma_{011}$ ,  $\gamma_{022}$ , and so forth represent the effect of each family-level variable on the initial level of psychological well-being; and  $\gamma_{111}$ ,  $\gamma_{122}$ , and so forth represent the effect of each family-level variable on the rate of change in well-being. Indicators of family structure, parent-child relationship quality, attending religious services with parent(s), and mother's well-being in late childhood (i.e., ages 10–14) were included at this level. Experiencing a family structure transition was also included as a time-varying factor.

A series of models was used to test the hypotheses. The first model included all variables to test Hypotheses 1 and 2. The remaining models included interaction terms to analyze Hypotheses 3 and 4 (only interaction terms that were significant are shown here). In all models, a lagged measure of psychological well-being was included to better assess whether family and religion are associated with changes in psychological well-being over time (and to account for possible selection effects). Random effect terms were included for age and age-squared to allow individual trajectories to vary over time; tests for additional random effects and slopes either did not improve the fit of the models or resulted in a lack of convergence in the models. Continuous variables were mean-centered, and missing values for variables assessed only once were imputed using regression-based imputation (results using listwise deletion were consistent with those presented here). Also, variables were introduced separately by level, but only the full models are shown here because the results using each approach are consistent with one another. Effect sizes for all variables were estimated using Cohen's  $f^2$ , which reflects the proportion of variance accounted for by a particular variable (Cohen, 1988).

### Results

Mean values for all variables are shown in Table 1. As expected, female youth reported a lower level of psychological well-being. Girls also appeared to receive more affection from parents and to argue less frequently with parents as well as to attend religious services more frequently during adolescence than male youth.

To further test whether trajectories of psychological well-being differed by gender, I examined an initial multilevel model including gender as the only covariate (coefficients not shown). The results of this model are displayed in Figure 1 and support previous research in suggesting that girls experience lower levels of well-being during adolescence than boys. Specifically, girls, relative to boys, experienced a decrease in psychological well-being during adolescence until approximately age 17 when well-being started to increase into young adulthood. In contrast, male adolescents experienced an increase in psychological well-being until age 20 when they started to experience a slight decline in well-being in young adulthood.

Table 2 displays results from multilevel models that include the covariates of interest. The baseline model containing all covariates is shown in Model 1. Overall, results provide some support for

Table 1  
Summary Statistics

Variable	Full sample		Males		Females	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Psychological well-being	0.00	1.00	0.09	0.94	-0.10	1.94*
Stepparent	0.10	—	0.10	—	0.11	—
Single parent	0.42	—	0.42	—	0.43	—
Parental interaction	3.00	1.80	2.98	1.82	3.02	1.78
Parental affection	9.03	9.18	8.73	8.78	9.34	9.57*
Parent-child conflict	1.58	0.55	1.61	0.56	1.54	0.55*
Attends services with parent(s) (ages 10-14)	0.56	—	0.57	—	0.55	—
Religious attendance over time	3.49	1.53	3.41	1.54	3.56	1.51*
Family structure transition (% ever)	0.31	—	0.31	—	0.31	—
Graduated high school (% ever)	0.26	—	0.27	—	0.25	—
Attended some college (% ever)	0.28	—	0.23	—	0.33	—*
Black	0.35	—	0.34	—	0.37	—
Latino	0.22	—	0.23	—	0.22	—
Mother's psychological well-being	48.53	10.12	48.49	10.23	48.56	10.01
<i>n</i>	5,736		2,899		2,837	

Note. For the time-varying variables (e.g., religious attendance and psychological well-being), the overall mean and standard deviation throughout the entire observed period are shown.

\* Significant difference between boys and girls based on *t* tests ( $p < .05$ ).

Hypotheses 1 and 2, suggesting that family structure, parent-child relationship quality, and attending religious services with parent(s) in late childhood may set youth on particular trajectories of well-being. As expected, children raised in single-parent families ( $b = -0.08, p < .01$ ) and stepfamilies ( $b = -0.12, p < .05$ ) are initially around a .10 of a standard deviation lower in psychological well-being than children raised in married biological/adoptive parent families. Similarly, conflict with parents was associated with lower well-being among children ( $b = -0.24, p < .001$ ). In contrast, parental interaction was associated with a higher initial level of psychological well-being ( $b = 0.02, p < .01$ ), but this association decreased over time ( $b = -0.00, p < .05$ ). Also, attending religious services with parent(s) in late childhood was

associated with a higher initial level of psychological well-being ( $b = 0.08, p < .01$ ). Overall, although results provide support for Hypotheses 1 and 2, effect sizes are small, most variables account for less than 1% of the total variation in trajectories of psychological well-being.<sup>5</sup> Thus, although this study highlights some potentially meaningful relationships between family, religion, and adolescent well-being, the effect sizes were fairly modest.

Results in Model 2 of Table 2 provide some support for Hypothesis 3 in showing that the positive influence of parental interaction may be amplified when parent(s) and youth attend religious services together ( $b = 0.04, p < .01$ ). As hypothesized, attending religious services with parent(s) may help to sanctify family relationships and increase the benefits of parent-child relationship quality for youth. In late childhood, youth who interacted with their parent(s) frequently and attended services together had the highest initial levels of well-being. In contrast, attending religious services but having low levels of interaction with parent(s) appears to result in lower initial levels of well-being in late childhood. These results are illustrated in Panel A of Figure 2.

Results in Model 3 of Table 2 include interaction terms that examine Hypothesis 4. In contrast to my hypothesis, Hypothesis 4 does not appear to be supported. Although it was expected that attendance at religious services throughout adolescence would provide a greater benefit to youth raised in a nontraditional family structure, there is some evidence to suggest that the opposite may be true; overall religious attendance throughout adolescence was less likely to increase psychological well-being among youth raised by single parents than youth raised in married families ( $b = -0.02, p < .05$ ). Instead of helping youth to cope with the potential stress and other disadvantages associated with being raised in a single-parent family, they may experience a lack of support in religious communities relative to youth from married families because of the stigma of single parenthood.

This result is further illustrated in Panels B and C of Figure 2. Among children raised in single-parent families, youth with a higher trajectory of overall religious attendance reported lower levels of well-being at age 10 ( $-.13$  for girls and  $-.21$  for boys) than youth with a lower trajectory of overall religious attendance ( $-.09$  for girls and  $-.18$  for boys). By age 25, overall religious attendance had a small positive influence on well-being for youth raised by single parents; women with high attendance had a predicted level of well-being of .08 (vs. .01 for women with low attendance) and men with high attendance had a predicted level of well-being of .01 (vs.  $-.06$  for men with low attendance). In contrast, trajectories of overall religious attendance were positively related to psychological well-being throughout adolescence among youth raised in married families. For example, among youth raised by married parents, adolescents who attended religious services frequently reported higher well-being at age 10 (predicted value of  $-.01$  for girls and  $-.10$  for boys) than adolescents who attended religious services infrequently (predicted value of  $-.06$  for girls and  $-.15$  for boys). The positive influence of overall religious attendance on trajectories of well-being among adolescents raised by married parents increased over time; at age 25,

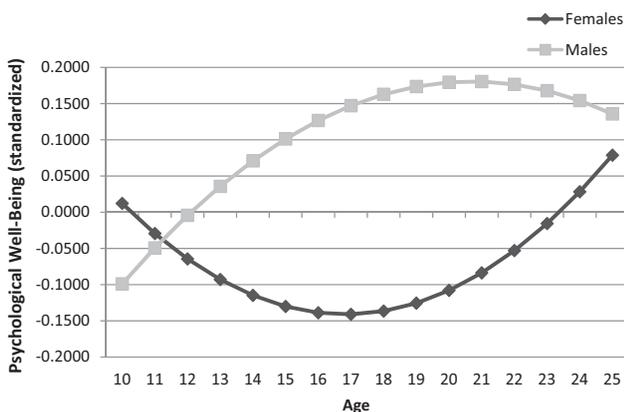


Figure 1. Trajectories of psychological well-being.

<sup>5</sup> This is at least partially due to the complexity of the models, as the multilevel models estimate within-person, between-persons, and between-families variation in trajectories of psychological well-being. Approximately 22% of the total variation was estimated in these models, resulting in small effect sizes for each individual variable.

Table 2  
*Estimates From Multilevel Models Examining the Influence of Family Characteristics and Religious Attendance on Trajectories of Psychological Well-Being*

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>f</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>f</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>f</i> <sup>2</sup>
Initial status	−0.12	0.04**	—	−0.12	0.04**	—	−0.12	0.04**	—
Stepparent	−0.12	0.05*	.00	−0.11	0.05*	.00	−0.11	0.05*	.00
Single parent	−0.08	0.03**	.00	−0.08	0.03**	.00	−0.07	0.03**	.00
Parental interaction	0.02	0.01**	.01	0.00	0.01	.00	0.03	0.01**	.01
Parental affection	0.00	0.00	.00	0.00	0.00	.00	0.00	0.00	.00
Parent–child conflict	−0.24	0.03***	.05	−0.24	0.03***	.05	−0.24	0.03***	.05
Attends services with parent(s) (ages 10–14)	0.08	0.03**	.01	−0.05	0.06	.00	0.08	0.03**	.01
Religious attendance over time	0.00	0.01	.00	0.00	0.01	.00	0.01	0.01	.00
Family structure transition	−0.07	0.04	.00	−0.07	0.04	.00	−0.07	0.04	.00
Graduated high school	0.46	0.13***	.00	0.46	0.13***	.00	0.46	0.13***	.00
Attended some college	0.19	0.10	.00	0.19	0.10	.00	0.19	0.10	.00
Female	0.09	0.04*	.00	0.09	0.04*	.00	0.09	0.04*	.00
Black	0.05	0.04	.00	0.05	0.04	.00	0.05	0.04	.00
Latino	0.03	0.04	.00	0.03	0.04	.00	0.03	0.04	.00
Mother’s psychological well-being	0.01	0.00***	.01	0.01	0.00***	.01	0.01	0.00***	.01
Lagged depressive symptoms	0.04	0.01***	.07	0.04	0.01***	.07	0.04	0.01***	.07
Parental Interaction × Attends Services With Parent(s) (ages 10–14)				0.04	0.02**	.00			
Stepparent × Religious Attendance Over Time							−0.02	0.01	.00
Single Parent × Religious Attendance Over Time							−0.02	0.01*	.00
Linear rate of change	0.06	0.01***	.01	0.06	0.01***	.01	0.06	0.01***	.01
Stepparent	0.00	0.00	.00	0.00	0.00	.00	0.00	0.00	.00
Single parent	−0.00	0.00	.00	−0.00	0.00	.00	−0.00	0.00	.00
Parental interaction	−0.00	0.00*	.00	0.00	0.00	.00	−0.00	0.00*	.00
Parental affection	−0.00	0.00	.00	−0.00	0.00	.00	−0.00	0.00	.00
Parent–child conflict	0.02	0.00***	.02	0.02	0.00***	.02	0.02	0.00***	.02
Attends services with parent(s) (ages 10–14)	−0.00	0.00	.00	0.01	0.00	.00	−0.00	0.00	.00
Religious attendance over time	0.00	0.00	.00	0.00	0.00	.00	0.00	0.00	.00
Family structure transition	0.01	0.01	.00	0.01	0.01	.00	0.01	0.01	.00
Graduated high school	−0.04	0.01**	.00	−0.04	0.01**	.00	−0.04	0.01**	.00
Attended some college	−0.01	0.01	.00	−0.01	0.01	.00	−0.01	0.01	.00
Female	−0.09	0.01***	.02	−0.09	0.01***	.02	−0.09	0.01***	.02
Black	−0.01	0.00*	.00	−0.01	0.00*	.00	−0.01	0.00*	.00
Latino	0.01	0.01	.00	0.01	0.01	.00	0.01	0.01	.00
Mother’s psychological well-being	−0.00	0.00	.00	−0.00	0.00	.00	−0.00	0.00	.00
Parental Interaction × Attends Services With Parent(s) (ages 10–14)				−0.00	0.00*	.00			
Quadratic rate of change	−0.00	0.00***	.01	−0.00	0.00***	.01	−0.00	0.00***	.01
Female	0.01	0.00***	.01	0.01	0.00***	.01	0.01	0.00***	.01
Variance components									
Level 1: Within-person	0.70	0.01***		0.70	0.01***		0.70	0.01***	
Level 2: Between-persons	0.72	0.10***		0.72	0.02***		0.72	0.02***	
Age	0.25	0.08***		0.25	0.01***		0.25	0.01***	
Age <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.00***		0.02	0.00***		0.02	0.00***	
Level 3: Between-families	0.27	0.01***		0.27	0.02***		0.27	0.02***	
Log-likelihood		−27519			−27516			−27515	

Note. *N* = 5,736 (21,166 person years).  
 \* *p* < .05. \*\* *p* < .01. \*\*\* *p* < .001.

women with high attendance had a predicted level of well-being of .20 (vs. .05 for women with low attendance) and men with high attendance had a predicted level of well-being of .27 (vs. .12 for men with low attendance).

### Discussion

The goal of this study was to further examine the relationships between family characteristics, religious attendance, and adolescent well-being by using longitudinal data and incorporating a variety of measures including family structure, changes in family structure, parent–child relationship quality, adolescents’ overall religious attendance from late childhood through young adulthood, and attending

religious services with parent(s) in late childhood. Overall, results revealed a number of modest relationships between family, religious attendance, and psychological well-being among youth.

Consistent with previous research, family structure and parent–child relationship quality in late childhood were associated with psychological well-being. Youth raised by married parents may receive greater social and financial support and may be exposed to fewer disadvantages in society compared with youth raised in step-families or single-parent families (Barrett & Turner, 2005; Manning & Lamb, 2003; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). As a result, youth raised in married families appear to follow a trajectory of higher well-being throughout adolescence than youth raised in nontraditional

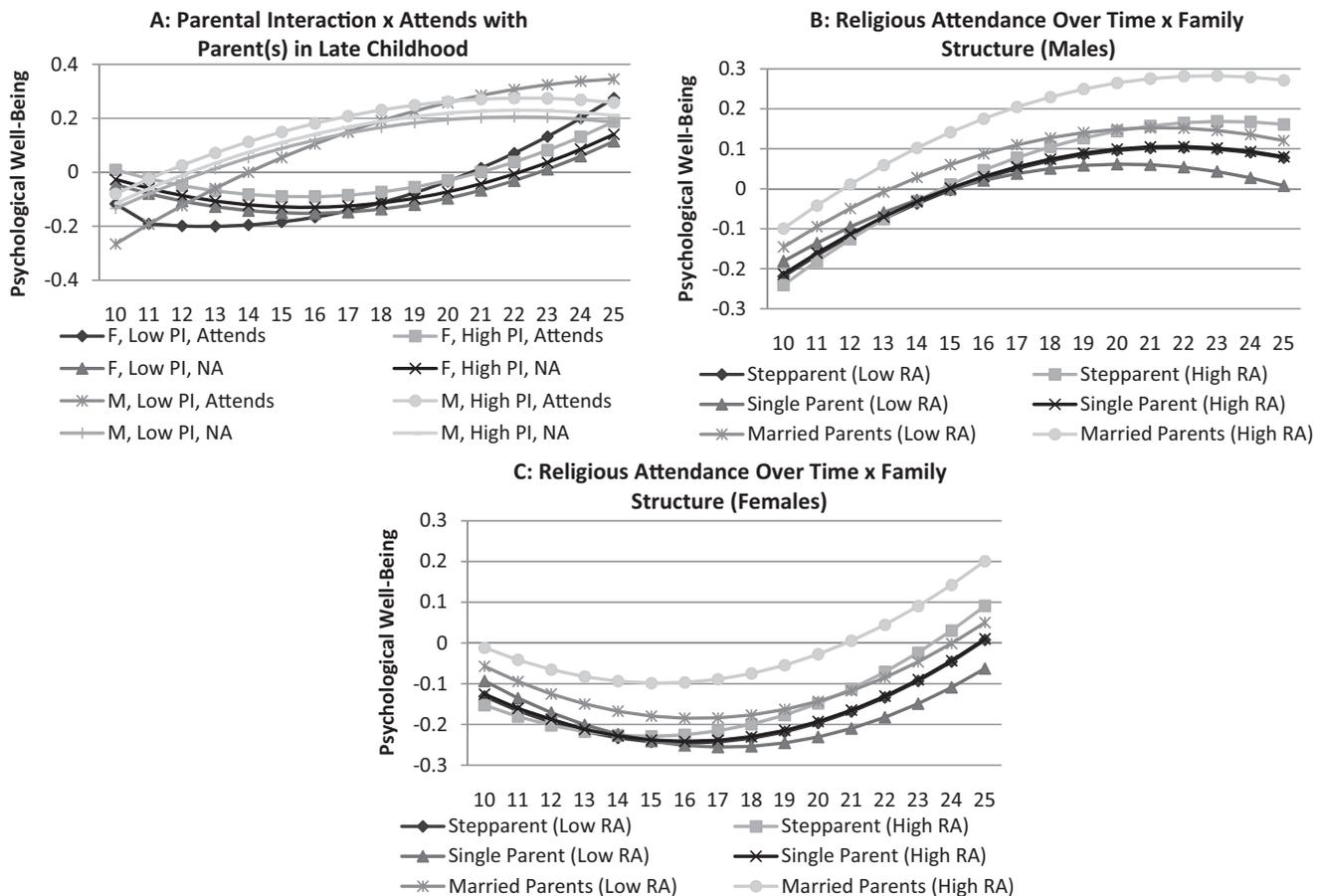


Figure 2. Predicted values of psychological well-being based on multilevel model estimates of interaction terms. RA = religious attendance.

families. Somewhat surprisingly, changes in family structure were not associated with adolescent well-being. There was some evidence that family structure transitions led to declines in well-being among female (but not male) youth in supplementary models (results not shown), but initial family structure appears to be more influential than any changes in family structure. Moreover, as expected, parent-child relationship quality was associated with higher well-being; interacting with parents and having low levels of conflict with parents in late childhood increased the likelihood that youth experienced a higher trajectory of well-being throughout adolescence. Parents who are engaged in their children's lives may provide youth with a greater sense of social support, whereas family conflict may create stresses in adolescents' lives that reduce their sense of well-being (Thomson et al., 1994; Thornton, 2001).

Results from this study also suggest that youth who attend religious services with their parent(s) in late childhood are more likely to experience a trajectory of higher psychological well-being throughout adolescence. Although most research has focused on adolescents' overall rates of religious attendance, results from this study suggest that attending services with parent(s) at a young age may be beneficial to youth. Attending religious services with married, step-, or single parent(s) during late childhood may help to increase network closure as well as provide a feeling of integration and social support for youth

(Edgell, 2006; Smith, 2003a). Even though attending services with parents may not reflect youth's own religious beliefs (as they may not have a choice in attending), it may help to increase adolescents' feelings of connectedness to both their parents and the larger religious community, allowing youth to feel a greater sense of social support, help them to better cope with the stresses of adolescence, and improve their psychological well-being (Smith, 2003b; Wong et al., 2006).

Results from this study also suggest that attending religious services with parent(s) in late childhood may moderate the relationship between parent-child relationship quality and well-being regardless of family structure. Specifically, results suggest that attending religious services with parent(s) in late childhood (i.e., ages 10-14) amplifies the positive influence of parental interaction on adolescent well-being. Although parental interaction and religious attendance with parent(s) in late childhood each contribute to higher levels of well-being individually, attending religious services with parent(s) may also help to provide an additional level of importance to parent-child interaction that enhances the influence of the parent-child relationship. Specifically, attending religious services together may help to sanctify these family relationships; by viewing these relationships as sacred, both parents and children may invest more in the relationship and may receive more benefits from the relationship (Mahoney et al., 2003). This additional

meaning may provide a sense of comfort to youth, contributing to higher well-being.

Surprisingly, results from this study did not provide support for the hypothesis that adolescents' overall rates of religious attendance from late childhood through young adulthood may be more beneficial to youth raised in a nontraditional family structure. In contrast, overall religious attendance over time appears to be less beneficial to youth raised by single parents than youth raised by married parents. Single parents often feel stigmatized by religious communities, as many religious denominations promote the married two-parent family as ideal and view nonmarital sex as sinful (Edgell, 2006; Sullivan, 2011). Thus, adolescents raised by single parents may experience stress (or less support) from attending religious services than adolescents raised by married parents, perhaps due to a lack of acceptance within these communities or experiencing feelings of sacred loss by being exposed to messages about the importance of two-parent families (Sullivan, 2011; Warner, Mahoney, & Krumrei, 2009).

Despite the strengths of this study, there are also a few limitations. One limitation is the lack of information in early childhood and later in adulthood. Early childhood experiences may set youth on particular trajectories of psychological well-being, but data were collected only from youth starting at age 10. Moreover, this study did not focus on how the influence of entering into family relationships in adulthood (marriage, parenthood, etc.) may alter trajectories of psychological well-being.<sup>6</sup> Although this study included 15 years of data, incorporating more data from early childhood and further into adulthood may help to provide a more complete context for understanding the trajectories that youth experience. Moreover, given the age restrictions in the sample, there was a bias toward youth with young mothers in this study. Thus, future research should explore whether the relationships between family, religion, and psychological well-being are consistent among more socially and financially advantaged youth.

An additional limitation of this study is a lack of information on the processes occurring within religious institutions. Specifically, qualitative data would be useful in better understanding exactly why families are attending religious services together and how youth view this religious attendance. Future research could also explore how these processes may work differently across various religious denominations.

Finally, a number of indicators used in this study were available only for youth between the ages of 10 and 14 years. It would be helpful to have additional longitudinal measures such as attending religious services with parent(s), but unfortunately these questions were not asked in the young adult survey. Thus, this study was unable to determine whether attending religious services with parents is more or less beneficial to adolescents than attending religious services independently throughout adolescence. Future research should consider the relative benefits to youth (in terms of well-being as well as other outcomes) of religious attendance by oneself and with others.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to our understanding of how the social institutions of family and religion influence youth's lives. The use of national longitudinal data allowed for an examination of trajectories of psychological well-being throughout an important stage in the life course, and improved on previous studies that focus on cross-sectional data. Furthermore, this study took a unique approach in examining how religion and family may work

together to influence adolescent well-being, which is a topic that has been understudied in the literature (Mahoney, 2010).

Given the large body of research on adolescent well-being, this study makes a unique contribution by focusing on how the social institutions of family and religion work separately and in conjunction with one another to influence trajectories of psychological well-being among youth beginning in late childhood. Overall, this study suggests that residing in a married family, parent-child relationship quality, and attending religious services with married, step-, or single parent(s) in late childhood all increase the likelihood that youth will follow a trajectory of higher psychological well-being during adolescence, and attending religious services with parent(s) may amplify the positive influence of parental interaction on well-being. Results from this study also suggest that adolescents' overall rates of religious attendance over time are less likely to increase well-being for youth raised in single-parent families than for youth raised in married families.

<sup>6</sup> Variables to indicate family transitions in adulthood were included in supplemental models, but only a small percentage of this sample had experienced these life events and none of these variables were significantly related to psychological well-being.

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Received April 3, 2013

Accepted April 14, 2014 ■