WORKING PAPER

RELIGIOUS FORMATION AMONG CHILDREN:

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Social identity

The notion of social identity (individual and group) forms the core of our conceptual framework. Within social science, there is currently a good deal of interest in the ways in which individuals develop and negotiate their sense of self and identity over the life course. Classical social science saw identity as being stable and shaped by an individual's position within wider economic and social structures. Social learning theory, for example, viewed a child's attitudes and values as resulting from observing and imitating their parents in day-to-day activities (Bandura, 1977). Theorists of late modernity (for example, Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Lash and Urry, 1993) have questioned the notion of an essential self, emphasising instead the self as a social construct, constantly defined and redefined in a range of social contexts. However, these views have been criticised for placing too much weight on individual agency and neglecting the structural context within which identity is formed (Bendle, 2002). In response, a number of theorists have argued for the need to conceptualise the on-going construction and reconstruction of the self as framed by, and interacting with, existing social structures (Callero, 2003).

Increasing attention has also been paid to the notion of multiple identities, that is, the way in which different dimensions, such as gender, social class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, nationality etc., can become the basis of individual or group identities (Jones and McEwen, 2000). Gender identities, for example, are found to interact with factors such as social class and ethnicity to produce multiple masculinities and femininities (Reay, 2001). Such identities are not static since different aspects of one's identity can be salient at different points in time or in different settings (Jones and McEwen, 2000). Thus, religion may be more or less dominant as an element of one's identity, what Wimberley (1989) terms 'religious identity salience'.

Religious identity

In this study, we seek to explore the formation of religious identity as one possible dimension of parents' and children's identities. In so doing, we adopt a broad definition of 'religious identity', which encompasses a range of religious and secular attitudes, beliefs and practices. This is particularly important given that secular identities are often treated as 'hidden' or 'nothing' (Rudge, 1998).

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There is some emerging research which seeks to examine religion as a basis for group identity and the complex ways in which it interacts with other dimensions of identity, including social class, cultural background, nationality and gender. In Scotland, for example, Catholics and Protestants were found to differ in their social class profile, at least in earlier cohorts (Paterson and Iannelli, 2006). Sanders (2002) describes the central importance of religious institutions for many immigrant groups. These institutions allow for the reproduction of a 'religio-cultural' identity, with religious ties facilitating the maintenance of ethnic boundaries and identity. For some groups, religious identity may carry more weight than ethnic identity (e.g. Pakistani Muslims). Levitt and Jaworsky (2007) find that religious networks serve as an important way for individuals to build social capital, with the children of immigrants increasingly turning to their 'inherited religion' as their primary source of identity (see also Yang and Ebaugh, 2001). These processes interact with gender, with the educational experiences of South Asian women being differentially affected by religio-cultural norms and values (Abbas, 2003). Religious identity has also been used as a basis for political action, for example, through the Christian Democratic parties in many European countries as well as recent debates which conflate ethnicity and religious belief (Islam) with a particular strand of political thought (Meer, 2008).

Even where people do not actively practice (or believe in) a particular religion, religion may be enmeshed with their cultural identity. Thus, those who practice in a very visible way keep the religion alive for those who live it through them 'vicariously' (Davie, 2007).

The formation of religious identity

How then is religious identity formed? International research has indicated a very strong association between parental religious beliefs and practices and those of their children (see Literature Review). However, the processes underlying this relationship have been subject to debate and Boyatzis and Janicki (2003) argue that 'we still know very little about *how* parents influence children's religiosity' (p. 253). Many studies have emphasised the notion of 'religious transmission', indicating the role of parents in shaping the beliefs and values of their children. Such studies have focused on the relative importance of maternal and paternal characteristics, the quality of parent-child relations, and the effect of different dimensions of religiosity (for example, the

frequency of church attendance and the perceived importance of religion) on children's beliefs and practices (see, for example, Nelsen, 1980; Hayes and Pittelkow, 1993; Bao et al., 1999; Min and Kim, 2005; Bader and Desmond, 2006). Parents are seen as the primary influence on their children's beliefs both directly through socialisation but also indirectly through their wider social contacts (Cornwall, 1989; Gautier and Singelmann, 1997; Helve, 1991; Sherkat and Elliott, 1999).

Other theorists, however, have criticised the notion of 'religious transmission' as overly deterministic, instead emphasizing the agency of both adults and children. Dillon (2001) has critiqued the notion of adults as passive 'consumers' of religion and indicated the reflexive way in which American Catholics engage with the tenets of the Church:

> There is a reluctance to recognise that doctrinal production occurs in multiple interpretive sites, and as such, the meanings and lived practices of religion may be relatively independent of official church discourses or of the meanings imputed to them by distant observers. (Dillon, 2001, p. 412)

This focus on the relational dynamism of religious belief has some parallels with the work of Bourdieu on religion as a symbolic system. Indeed, a number of commentators have stressed the potential of Bourdieu's approach to the study of religion (Swartz, 1996) while at the same time criticising the simplistic distinction between 'producers' (clergy) and 'consumers' (laity) he proffered (see, for example, Dillon, 2001; Verter, 2003).

Children as agents

More specifically, the 'religious transmission' perspective tends to frame children as entirely passive (Boyatzis and Janicki, 2003) and fails to allow for discontinuity or even contestation between the home and other arenas (such as the school or the local community) over religious values. While little empirical research has investigated religious formation in terms of children's agency, an exploratory study has indicated the potential of such an approach by highlighting the 'bidirectional' nature of parent-child communication in relation to religion (Boyatzis and Janicki, 2003). Thus, children were found to ask questions of their parents regarding religious issues and initiated and terminated such conversations on a frequent basis. Similarly, Zine's (2001) study of Muslim youth in Canada indicates the way in which Muslim students actively negotiate and maintain their religious identities within secular schools.

This notion of children as active agents in their own religious formation has parallels in the emerging research and policy literature on children's rights (see Clark et al., 2003). A number of studies have focused on the 'pupil voice' as a way of determining more effective ways of engaging children in school and enhancing their learning (McIntyre et al., 2005). Rudduck and Flutter (2004) argue for the need to 'take seriously what students can tell us about their experience of being a learner in school' and 'find ways of involving students more closely in decisions that affect their lives at school' (p.2). Furthermore, research with children has indicated important aspects of their well-being which had not always been taken into account previously: 'given a chance to offer their ideas, views and tell of their experience, children can make adults think differently and see the possibilities of change' (Burke, 2007, p.370). A good deal of this work has focused on adolescents, usually those at secondary level. However, a number of studies have extended this approach to incorporate very young children, even those at pre-school level (see Clark, 2007; Cremin and Slatter, 2004; Hewett, 2001), and Tangen (2008) argues for using the same approach to tap into the views of children with special needs.

Summary

In sum, the central element of our conceptual framework is the notion of religious or secular affiliation, belief and practice as an expression of individual and collective or group identity. Within our framework, identity is constructed and reconstructed as part of a dynamic process, with children viewed as active agents in their own religious and moral formation. Children are viewed as potentially holding multiple identities, in terms of religion, gender, social class, ethnicity, nationality, and language, among other factors. Thus, religion may be more or less salient as a basis for identity across different (groups of) children and their families. We also recognise that children's agency is bounded. In particular, we single out three contextual factors as especially impacting on children:

1. The child's position within the family: International research indicates a shift in the nature of parent-child relations away from more authoritarian to more negotiated modes of interaction, with young people now having a greater 'voice' within the family (see Devine et al., 2004). However, the degree of autonomy afforded children is likely to vary by family characteristics (both objective and

subjective, including social class, parenting style, number of other children etc.) as well as the child's own characteristics (gender, temperament etc.).

2. The child's position within the school: Similarly, in spite of a growing emphasis on consultation with children regarding educational issues (see Clark et al., 2003), the school context remains largely hierarchical in nature with an inequality in power between teacher and pupil (Lynch and Lodge, 2002). Thus, children's agency may be constrained by both formal structures (for example, the requirement to attend religious education class) and/or the informal climate of the school (that is, the extent to which particular religious beliefs underpin the attitudes and behaviour of teachers).

3. The continuity or discontinuity between home[1] and school in religious values: Some single-country studies have highlighted the potential tensions between school and home in relation to religious beliefs and values (see, for example, Abbas, 2003; Jacobson, 1998; Vertovec and Rogers, 2004; Zine, 2001). However, to date, comparative research on religion has not explored the relative role of, and potential tensions between, the family and the school in the formation of religious identity among young people. Using a comparative approach will allow us to investigate the extent to which the home-school relationship regarding religious formation varies by institutional context. Significant dimensions of the institutional context include:

   - The role of the State in allowing or enabling different patterns of religious formation;

   - The degree of separation between Church and State, and the relative status of particular religious groups within the broader society;

   - The place accorded religion within the national educational system, and the nature of any religious education provided.

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[1] There may also be some degree of contestation within the home if parents do not share the same religious affiliation or place the same emphasis on religious or secular beliefs and practices.

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