

RESEARCH STATEMENT

My research spans the areas of religion, health, organizations, and work and family. More specifically, my research program is motivated by my understanding of religion as a social system that shapes and is shaped by its social context. The goal of my research program is to improve our understanding of the role that society plays in transforming religious organizations and the subsequent role(s) that religion plays in the lives of individual participants. I achieve this goal by focusing on religious competition. At the macro level, I focus on competition between minority religious groups and the dominant religion and the subsequent effects of this competition on the health and well-being of individual participants. At the meso level, I focus on competition between congregations and the role of the institutional environment in reconstructing these religious organizations and contributing to their vitality. And at the micro level, I focus on competition between individuals' beliefs systems and the economic realities that challenge their ability to live the lives their religion prescribes.

The Dissertation

My dissertation explores factors that influence the growth and decline of Southern Baptist congregations in one county in the Southeastern United States and the competitive strategies that these organizations employ to remain relevant social institutions in a changing social milieu. To this end, I rely on the theoretical insights of population ecologists, neo-institutionalists, and sociologists of religion interested in congregations and religious markets. As a theory of selection, population ecology helps explain the role that other organizations of the same type play in formation and dissolution of religious organizations. Institutional theory, on the other hand, highlights the adaptive strategies of religious organizations. Both theories provide a new understanding of religious organizations for sociologists of religion interested in congregations and secularization.

A main contribution of my dissertation is my focus on the foundings and disbandings of Southern Baptist congregations from 1784-2012. Since there were no datasets with complete population data for any of the major denominations in the United States, I compiled my own dataset from the minutes of a single Baptist association housed at the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives in Nashville, TN. My results show that congregations are subject to many of the same pressures that affect organizations of all types. More specifically, the age of the congregation and the density of the organizational population are key predictors of organizational failure. Like other types of organizations, new congregations are at the greatest risk of failure; this is especially true when the county is highly saturated with other Southern Baptist congregations.

My dissertation also highlights the institutional pressures that shape the competitive strategies of Southern Baptist congregations. These findings are based on semi-structured interviews with the leaders and members of 5 different Southern Baptist congregations. My findings demonstrate the way that congregations are shaped by normative pressures from the local seminary and mimetic pressures to follow the lead of other successful congregations. Analysis of my qualitative data also highlights the manner in which Southern Baptist congregations attempt to expand their share of the religious market while remaining true to a mission based on cooperation, not competition. Both chapters highlight the ways that congregations resemble other types of organizations and are simultaneously a unique organizational form.

These findings are important because they highlight the applicability of organizational theories to an organizational form with fuzzy boundaries and a “customer” base that is heavily involved in the day-to-day operations of the organization. Using these theories, sociologists of religion can make better sense of the way that society shapes the congregation and the subsequent role(s) that congregations play in the lives of individual participants.

Ongoing Research

Beyond the dissertation, my research examines the contribution of religion to the health and well-being of the religious and their families. Research based on my MA thesis highlights my interest in the role that macro-level religious processes play in the health and well-being of individual participants. Using cross-national data from the World Values Survey, my co-author and I explore the moderating effect of Catholic population share on the relationship between religious participation and mental and physical health among non-Catholics in majority Catholic nations. The results of our analysis suggest that the generally positive benefits of religious participation are reduced for non-Catholics when the Catholic population controls more than 90% of the religious market. This article currently under review at *Sociological Forum*.

I am also the co-author of a paper examining the role that religion plays in the work-family interface. This article – published in *Social Currents* in 2014 – highlights the disparate relationships between religion and work-hour mismatches before and after women become new mothers. The work-family interface is one area where religion plays a major role in the health and well-being of women and men. As a result, I have continued to pursue questions related to this topic. Specifically, I am interested the ways that conservative Protestant women negotiate the tug of war between economic pressures to seek employment outside of the home and pressure from their religion to put family ahead of their career and how the consequences of this tug of war play out in the health and well-being of these women and their families.

Future Plans

The next logical step beyond my dissertation research is exploring how the competitive strategies of congregations impact their members’ daily lives. Analysis of the qualitative data from my dissertation suggests that even the most committed members have things they wish they could change about their religious organization. It is less clear, however, if participants that are not completely satisfied with their congregations fair as well as participants with unwavering commitment to their religious institutions. This presents a clear opportunity to apply for research funding to collect data on religious organizations and the health and well-being of their members.

I also am excited to extend my research to non-Christian populations within the United States and abroad. The research stemming from my MA thesis already highlights my interest in non-Christian traditions and religion on a global scale, but my dissertation research also raises questions about the uniqueness of Southern Baptist congregations. Southern Baptists are unique in their autonomy, but it remains unclear if they are unique in their resemblance of more traditional organizational forms. Extending my dissertation research to non-Christian congregations in the United States presents another clear opportunity to apply for research funding and involve students in my research. Collecting data on any religious population requires sufficient time and resources; having support to collect and analyze this data is a top priority of mine and an excellent way to provide students with hands-on experience in the research process.