Time For A Change: Continuous and Discontinuous Transformation in Highly Religious Families

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Purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature on research has used life course to understand religion, most of it independent of professional intervention (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). Religion is one instrument through which these changes are facilitated in families. We use life course, as explained in Elder (1994), as the theoretical framework for understanding religiously related transformation, focusing especially on the principles of timing, transitions, and turning points. While some research has used life course to understand religion, most of it does not discuss family-level change (Potts, 2009, 2011). The purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature on transformation at the intersection of religion and family life by focusing on the timing at which these changes occur.

Introduction

While change is a natural occurrence in marital and family relationships, there is an inadequate amount of literature that discusses how this “spontaneous” change occurs within families independent of professional intervention (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). Religion is one instrument through which these changes are facilitated in families. We use life course, as explained in Elder (1994), as the theoretical framework for understanding religiously related transformation, focusing especially on the principles of timing, transitions, and turning points. While some research has used life course to understand religion, most of it does not discuss family-level change (Potts, 2009, 2011). The purpose of this study is to contribute to the literature on transformation at the intersection of religion and family life by focusing on the timing at which these changes occur.

Methods

The American Families of Faith data set was used as the sample for this study. The sample includes interviews with 200 highly religious families (476 individuals). These families represented 22 distinct denominations of the Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) from 17 states in all eight religio-cultural regions of the United States. Half of the families identified as ethnic and racial minorities. The American Families of Faith project typically employs an innovative, team-based approach to coding. Our method of data analysis was a coding process accomplished by teams of students that included both conceptual coding (use of a codebook describing transformation) as well as open coding. It was a three-phase coding process in order to establish inter-rater reliability. A supplemental key word analysis was then performed in NVivo 10.

Following coding, an inductive analysis was performed in which timing of transformation emerged from the data as a significant theme. Only examples of transformation that dealt with both family and religion were included in the analysis.

Results

We identified three themes in the data relating to the time span in which transformation took place: continuous, discontinuous, and a combination of the two. Continuous transformation is characterized by a series of small-scale transitions in which the individual, couple, or family change imperceptibly over time. One clear example of this comes from an Orthodox Jewish husband: “I can attribute it to the fact that in general, faith and Judaism in my particular circumstances [have] made me less combative… We’ve come to realize that marriage is something that we have to work on constantly, every day, with the partner that you’re with… faith helps that because it is not something where you have got a choice. You have to work it out because you’re not going to get divorced.” This father could not pinpoint a specific moment in which his marriage developed, but rather spoke of the slow progression assisted by his faith.

Discontinuous transformation, on the other hand, consists of dramatic moments that make a significant impact on the lives of individuals and families. This mirrors the concept of turning points in life course theory. A Non-denominational Christian wife expressed this concept poignantly: “I ended up in marriage and basically it was a failure. I did not do things well and I did not do things right, and I can remember standing, standing at my kitchen sink one [time] when we’d been married for a couple of years, and I thought, ‘I’m so unhappy, but I can’t leave,’ because divorce was never an option. So I said [to myself], ‘either I’m going to change, or I’m going to be miserable for the rest of my life.’ So I determined at that point that I had to change, and just become more Godly, and not expect so much for myself, not be so selfish and [not] expect everything to revolve around me.” That this woman could trace the initiation of a marital shift back to this exact moment shows compelling nature of turning points.

There were many examples that demonstrated a blend of continuous and discontinuous elements. While many examples showed that transformations could be both dramatic and gradual, others showed that individuals within a marriage or within a family manifested differential pacing. This African American Christian husband illustrated the latter type of combined continuous/discontinuous transformation in this narrative: “I think she changes… she is more of a Christian now [than] she was. Her spiritual growth has grown steadily over the years, over the last 20, 30 years… Mine has been kind of all at once… So, it’s been different. She has a lot more maturity in that way spiritually.”

Discussion

One significant finding from this study is that the families reported more than twice the incidence rate of continuous over discontinuous transformation. This lends itself to a greater understanding the value of gradual change in maintaining and improving familial relationships. It is through daily, constant attention that long-term progression has been shown to occur in these interviews. This, however, does not downplay the role of dramatic changes for successful family outcomes, because in some rare contexts—such as couples on the brink of divorce—“grand gestures” are required for the health of the relationship (Plauche, Marks, & Hawkins, 2016). We also recognize, as we gathered from the analysis, that elements of both themes are difficult to tease apart and often work reciprocally to create change. For example, when discontinuous change occurs, continuity may be required to maintain the change.

These narratives also demonstrate the life course principle of trajectories. Just as the theory states, these trajectories are subject to external systemic influences, such as religion. Religion can be one of the influences on a person’s “time horizon,” which is the perception of the course of their future trajectory. The underlying assumption is that people change because they are seeking some greater good. While perspectives on what exactly constitutes a “greater good” may differ, adjusting trajectories towards improvement seems to be overall fairly universal. Many of our families reported religiously-inspired changes that led them to be a better member of the family in the sense that they became less selfish or more devoted.

References