

# Parents' Religious Heterogamy and Children's Well-Being

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*This study considers the impact of having parents of dissimilar faiths on children's well-being. Using data from the National Survey of Families and Households, we examine the hypothesis that parents' religious heterogamy has both direct and indirect negative effects on children's well-being. First, we find evidence that religious heterogamy is positively associated with marital conflict and negatively associated with religious participation. Second, our results suggest that children with religiously heterogamous parents are more likely to engage in marijuana use and underage drinking than children with religiously homogamous parents. However, these associations occur only in families where parents' religious heterogamy is a product of greater religious distance (e.g., one parent is not religious or both parents identify with different religions). Religiously heterogamous parents who affiliate with different Protestant groups report similar levels of marital conflict and religious participation as same-faith parents. In addition, the children of these parents report similar levels of delinquency as children of same-faith parents. We find no evidence that religious heterogamy is associated with children's self-esteem, life satisfaction, or grades in school.*

Religion forms the basis for values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors for many people. In the United States, religious culture permeates society and individuals are more likely to belong to religious organizations than any other voluntary association (Putnam 2000). The family is an especially important source of religious influence because religious doctrine affects both family structure and behaviors (Thornton 1985). However, research on the influence of religion within families is limited. Studies on the influence of religion on the family tend to focus only on single-faith families because they have been the norm in the United States. Yet, religiously heterogamous marriages have become more common (Kalmijn 1991; McCutcheon 1988; Williams and Lawler 2001). In addition, most of the research on religion in the family, and on heterogamous marriages in particular, has focused on adults in the household. However, children's first contact with religion is likely to take place through the family, and many children inherit religious beliefs and practices from their parents (Myers 1996). Therefore, more research needs to focus on the effect of family religious practices on children because children are socialized primarily within the family (Wilcox 2002).

Do children from religiously heterogamous families reap similar benefits from the religion of their parents as children from single-faith families? On one hand, religiously heterogamous families may be disadvantaged compared to religiously homogamous families. Religious participation may be lower among members of heterogamous families due to a secularizing effect of these unions (Barron 1972), and differing religious beliefs within a family may result in conflict (Sherkat and Ellison 1999). Therefore, children in these families may not gain benefits associated with religious participation and may be exposed to increased levels of conflict, which may negatively affect their well-being.

On the other hand, the rise in religious heterogamy may not be problematic, but instead signal a cultural change in society that has little or no impact on children's well-being. Kalmijn

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(1991) proposes three reasons for the increase in religious heterogamy. First, cultural differences between denominations have weakened, causing people to place less value on religious beliefs than in the past, creating a more secular society. Second, strong social norms against heterogamy have dissipated, allowing more people to marry outside their faith without being stigmatized. Finally, neighborhoods have become more religiously heterogeneous, giving people more opportunities to meet potential mates from different religious backgrounds. These factors point to changes in American society that may have increased the rate of religious heterogamy in families and also reduced differences in family dynamics that may have once existed between same-faith and interfaith families. Secularization and the intermingling of faiths may have also led to a decreased emphasis on religion within families. Therefore, whether or not children grow up in a religiously heterogamous family may be unrelated to their well-being.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between parents' religious heterogamy and their children's well-being. We use data from two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households to assess whether living in a religiously heterogamous household at Time 1 is linked to lower levels of well-being for children at Time 2. Our sample is restricted to families in which the parents are in their first marriage. Religious heterogamy is defined as any marriage in which each spouse identifies with a different religion or denomination. Within this group, we distinguish between three types of religious heterogamy: (a) inter-Protestant marriages in which each spouse identifies with a different category of Protestant denomination (i.e., conservative, moderate, or liberal); (b) across-religion marriages in which each spouse identifies with a different religion or denomination and both are not Protestant; and (c) faith-none marriages in which one spouse specifies a religious affiliation and the other spouse reports no religious affiliation. Measures of children's well-being include indicators of their self-esteem, life satisfaction, grades in school, marijuana use, and underage drinking.

We also focus on potential mechanisms through which parents' religious heterogamy may influence children's well-being. We analyze whether religious heterogamy may lead to increased marital conflict and lower religious participation, each of which may negatively affect children's well-being. We also consider whether time spent with children moderates these relationships. That is, detrimental effects of parents' marital conflict on children's well-being may be buffered by parents' involvement in the lives of their children. In addition, the positive effects of religious participation may be mitigated if parents spend a lot of time with their children in nonreligious activities.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our conceptual framework draws on theory and evidence of the benefits of religion for families and why these benefits may be compromised by parents' religious heterogamy. We consider both direct and indirect influences of three types of religious heterogamy on children's well-being.

#### The Benefits of Religion

Religion can be beneficial to adults and families, and may also lead to higher levels of children's well-being. First, religious adults report greater feelings of social integration, a personal relationship with a divine being, a good sense of cohesion in life, and a specified pattern of organization in which to live one's life. These outcomes are associated with greater levels of personal well-being for adults (Ellison 1991). Religion also appears to benefit married adults because it is associated with increased marital stability (Call and Heaton 1997), a greater sense of closeness between spouses because of a shared set of beliefs (Swatos 1981), and a coping mechanism that helps people deal with marital conflict (Pearce and Axinn 1998).

These benefits are linked to positive parenting practices. Adults with higher levels of psychological well-being are more likely to engage in supportive parenting (Voydanoff and Donnelly

1998). Marital quality is also related to positive parenting practices (Simons et al. 1990); adults who report better relationships with their partners are more likely to be responsive to their children. Therefore, religion may be especially beneficial for adults with children.

Furthermore, the benefits of religion have a positive influence on family life (Abbott, Berry, and Meredith 1990). Religious participation presents opportunities for family members to engage in activities together and interact with other families. This may help families to strengthen intra-family bonds and develop social support systems, which may improve the well-being of both parents and children.

Finally, research consistently shows that religion has positive effects on two dimensions of children's well-being: prosocial outcomes and deviant behaviors. Largely, the relationship between religion and children's well-being is presumed to exist because parents pass on their religious beliefs and practices to their children (Myers 1996). There is consistent evidence that children's religious involvement is positively related to prosocial outcomes such as school attendance and achievement, educational expectations, feelings of self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Muller and Ellison 2001; Regnerus 2003). In addition, religious involvement is negatively associated with measures of deviance such as delinquency behaviors and attempted suicide (Regnerus 2003; Wallace and Williams 1997).

### **Religious Heterogamy and Children's Well-Being**

Although religious beliefs and practices may benefit families, this positive influence may be less apparent in religiously heterogamous families. Religiously heterogamous couples may differ from religiously homogamous couples in regard to well-being, relationship quality and stability, and parenting practices. Therefore, parents' religious heterogamy may negatively influence their children's well-being. For example, while married couples that share religious beliefs are more likely to report having a stable marriage (Heaton 1984) and stronger parent-child relationships (Pearce and Axinn 1998), religious heterogamy appears to lead to marital instability (Bumpass and Sweet 1972; Bahr 1981; Heaton 1984), which is linked to weaker parent-child relationships (Booth and Amato 1994).

The parenting practices of religiously heterogamous parents may also not be as effective as those from religiously homogamous parents in increasing their children's well-being. Religious teachings encourage ideas such as respecting others as well as oneself and developing feelings of self-worth (Smith 2003). A lack of subscription and exposure to these religious teachings may be detrimental to a child's development. Indeed, children from religiously heterogamous families are more likely to be nonreligious than children from same-faith families (Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith 1982; Nelsen 1990).

The effectiveness of parenting practices can also be enhanced by religious institutions that impose social controls on children by making them accountable not only to their family, but also to the church community and a higher being for their actions (Smith 2003). Thus, there is increased motivation for children who are brought up in religious families to conform to religious teachings, to do well in school, and stay out of trouble (Regnerus 2003; Wallace and Williams 1997). To the extent that children from religiously heterogamous families may lack these controls due to weak religious ties, they may be more likely to engage in risky behaviors (Wallace and Williams 1997), resulting in lower levels of well-being.

Overall, this conceptual framework emphasizes that parents' religious heterogamy affects marital dynamics and attempts at encouraging the transmission of religious beliefs to their children. Thus, the influence of religious heterogamy on children's well-being may work especially through parents' marital conflict and religious participation. Indeed, marital conflict is positively associated with religious heterogamy (Bahr 1981; Call and Heaton 1997; Curtis and Ellison 2002; Heaton 1984) and negatively associated with children's well-being (Emery 1982; Grych and Fincham 1990; Vandewater and Lansford 1998). Also, research shows that religious participation,

which is linked to positive outcomes for children (Regnerus 2003), is lower among religiously heterogamous couples (Petersen 1986; Williams and Lawler 2001).

## **Indirect Influences of Religious Heterogamy on Children's Well-Being**

### ***Religious Heterogamy, Marital Conflict, and Children's Well-Being***

Differences in spouses' religious beliefs may lead to increased levels of marital conflict. Because religion is a source of values for many people, religiously heterogamous couples may be more likely to have fundamental disagreements about important issues such as the meaning of life, how to behave properly, and how to raise children. Indeed, religiously heterogamous marriages are less stable than religiously homogamous marriages (Bahr 1981; Bumpass and Sweet 1972; Heaton 1984), and there is a strong negative correlation between marital stability and marital conflict (Chinitz and Brown 2001). In addition, religiously heterogamous couples may not have the same resources for handling conflict as same-faith couples, such as conflict resolution and adjustment techniques (Pearce and Axinn 1998; Wilson and Filsinger 1986).

Having children present in the household may increase marital conflict (Crohan 1996). For example, religiously heterogamous couples may argue more over their children and how they should be raised. Studies of Jewish intermarriage show that religious differences sometimes only become an issue when children are born. Parents often feel a desire to pass on their own religious traditions, even if they do not have strong beliefs themselves (Berman 1968).

Since marital conflict may be more likely to exist among religiously heterogamous couples, it is important to look at the effect that conflict may have on children. A large body of evidence indicates that interparental conflict negatively affects children's well-being (Emery 1982; Grych and Fincham 1990; Vandewater and Lansford 1998). Conflict is especially detrimental when it directly involves children (Grych and Fincham 1990). In religiously heterogamous families, parents may attempt to advocate for their own religious beliefs. This may result in family conflict that has a negative effect on children's well-being.

Nevertheless, the relationship between marital conflict and children's well-being may be moderated by the quality of the parent-child relationships (Grych and Fincham 1990; Vandewater and Lansford 1998). For example, because time spent with children has a positive effect on children's well-being (Wenk et al. 1994), children whose parents argue but still spend time with them may be better off than children whose parents argue and are less involved in their lives. Therefore, parental involvement may provide a buffer against potential negative effects of marital conflict on children's well-being.

### ***Religious Heterogamy, Religious Participation, and Children's Well-Being***

Patterns of religious participation may also differ in religiously heterogamous marriages in ways that negatively affect their children's well-being. Interfaith couples do attend church services less frequently than same-faith couples (Petersen 1986; Williams and Lawler 2001). A lack of religious participation among religiously heterogamous couples may have important implications for children's well-being because religious participation may be more relevant than religious identification for marital and family stability, as well as children's well-being (Call and Heaton 1997; Curtis and Ellison 2002; Heaton 1984; Pearce and Axinn 1998; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995). In order to gain positive benefits from religion, it is important to be integrated into religious services, organizations, and other social activities.

One reason that religious participation is positively associated with children's well-being is that youth who attend church services have greater social capital than those who are not religious, leading to more positive outcomes (Muller and Ellison 2001). Specifically, Muller and Ellison

(2001) argue that religious involvement among adolescents is linked to greater community ties and increased access to community resources. In contrast, children often receive mixed messages about the importance of religion in religiously heterogamous families and are less likely to be integrated into religious communities than children in religiously homogamous families (Petersen 1986; Williams and Lawler 2001). Thus, children in religiously heterogamous families may be less likely to obtain the benefits associated with religious participation and parents' religious teachings than children in religiously homogamous families.

Religious participation also provides an opportunity for families to spend time together, which leads to a more close-knit unit and higher levels of child well-being (Abbott et al. 1990). Children whose parents are very involved in their lives are more likely to report greater self-esteem, life satisfaction, academic achievement, and lower levels of deviance than children whose parents are not involved in their lives (Wenk et al. 1994; Simons, Simons, and Wallace 2004). If religiously heterogamous families are less likely to attend religious services, then family members may not spend as much time with one another. Of course, it is possible that religiously heterogamous parents find other activities in which to spend quality time with their children. Therefore, children from religiously heterogamous families whose parents are involved in their lives may be better off than children whose parents are not involved.

### **Classifying Religious Heterogamy**

The relationship between parents' religious heterogamy and children's well-being may depend on how religious heterogamy is classified. For this study, we focus on the most common definition of religious heterogamy: marriages in which each spouse identifies with a different religion or denomination. Following past research, religious denominations are classified into seven categories: Catholic; Jewish; Conservative Protestant; Moderate Protestant; Liberal Protestant; Other; and None (Roof and McKinney 1987). We then create three categories of religious heterogamy in order to explore how the degree of religious distance between spouses may affect couples and children: (a) across-religion religious heterogamy in which each spouse identifies with a different religion or denomination and both are not Protestant; (b) inter-Protestant religious heterogamy in which each spouse identifies with a different category of Protestant denomination (i.e., conservative, moderate, or liberal); and (c) faith-none marriages in which one spouse specifies a religious affiliation and the other spouse reports no religious affiliation.

While many studies group the heterogamous categories together, research shows that faith-none couples are less likely to pass on religious beliefs to children (Nelsen 1990), and report lower levels of satisfaction (Glenn 1982) than other religiously heterogamous couples. In addition, religiously heterogamous couples with greater religious distance between them may report higher marital conflict and lower religious participation, which may negatively affect children.

### **Background Characteristics**

To focus on the association between parents' religious heterogamy and children's well-being, we also need to account for how background characteristics may affect this relationship. In our analyses, we control for the influence of parents' socioeconomic status, age, and marital instability because these factors may be linked to our primary independent and dependent variables. The age and gender of their children are also relevant for these reasons. Socioeconomic status is associated with marital status (Bumpass and Sweet 1972) and children's well-being (Rossi and Rossi 1990). We also control for parents' age because younger adults tend to be less religious and more likely to enter into a heterogamous marriage (Alston, McIntosh, and Wright 1976; Finney and Lee 1977), which may affect child outcomes (Nelson 1990; Myers 1996). Moreover, religiously heterogamous couples may be more likely to divorce, and parental divorce is associated with increased marital

conflict and lower levels of children's well-being (Amato et al. 1995). Furthermore, the children's age is relevant because it may affect religious participation and parental conflict (Grych and Fincham 1990; Regnerus 2003). Finally, child's gender is important to consider because girls are more religious than boys (Regnerus 2003) and may be better shielded from marital conflict than boys (Grych and Fincham 1990), which may have implications for their well-being.

### HYPOTHESES

Our conceptual framework and previous research leads to five hypotheses. First, we expect that religious heterogamy is associated with higher levels of marital conflict and lower levels of religious participation. Because these relationships may depend on the extent to which parents in religiously heterogamous families are similar in their religious beliefs, we anticipate these findings to occur more consistently when heterogamous couples have greater religious distance between them (e.g., faith-none and across-religion couples).

Second, we expect that religiously heterogamous marriages are associated with lower levels of children's well-being. Children from faith-none families may be especially likely to have lower levels of well-being than children from same-faith families because children are less likely to be religious if one of their parents has no religious affiliation (Nelsen 1990).

Third, we expect that religious heterogamy is indirectly associated with children's well-being through their parents' marital conflict. That is, we expect that parents' marital conflict may partially mediate the relationship between parents' religious heterogamy and children's well-being. This may be most likely to occur in across-religion and faith-none families (as opposed to inter-Protestant families) because the greater religious distance between spouses may lead to increased conflict.

Fourth, we expect that the relationship between religious heterogamy and children's well-being is partially mediated by religious participation. This process may be most common in faith-none families because these couples are less likely to be religious than other religiously heterogamous families.

Finally, time spent with children may moderate the relationships between parents' marital conflict, religious participation, and children's well-being. Children whose parents are involved in their lives may be less likely to be affected by marital conflict than children whose parents are not involved. Also, parents who do not attend religious services may find other opportunities to spend time with their children, thus moderating a negative association between religious participation and children's well-being.

### METHODS

#### Sample

This study uses data from two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households. Wave 1 is a cross-sectional national probability sample of 13,007 adult respondents that was conducted in 1987–1988. It includes an oversampling of minority families, single-parent families, families with stepchildren, cohabiting couples, and recently married persons (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call 1988). In 1992–1994, an attempt was made to reinterview all respondents from the first wave. A total of 10,008 respondents were contacted in the second wave, and a randomly chosen focal child who was between the ages of 10 and 23 was also interviewed (Sweet, Bumpass, and Hansen 1995). Our analyses focus on the 890 first-time married couples at Wave 1 who had a focal child between the ages of 5 and 17 and was also interviewed in Wave 2. This sample includes 71 percent of the eligible families from Wave 1 ( $N = 1,259$ ).

## Dependent Variables

The dependent variables in this study are indicators of children's well-being. They include measures of self-esteem, life satisfaction, grades in school, marijuana use, and underage drinking. These are all drawn from children's responses in Wave 2. Self-esteem is taken from focal children's responses to three items: (a) On the whole, I am satisfied with myself; (b) I am able to do things as well as most other people; and (c) I can do just about anything I set my mind to. Responses range from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree ( $M = 2.29$ ,  $SD = 0.41$ ), and the mean response serves as the measure of self-esteem ( $\alpha = 0.60$ ). Life satisfaction is taken from children's responses to the question: "Taking all things together, on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means really bad and 10 means absolutely perfect, how would you say things are for you these days?" ( $M = 7.50$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ). Self-reported grades in school range from 1 = mostly Fs to 8 = mostly As ( $M = 5.96$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ). Younger focal children (ages 10–17) were asked about grades they currently receive, whereas older focal children (ages 18–23) were asked about the grades they received in high school. Finally, we use two measures of delinquency: marijuana use and underage drinking. One dummy variable reflects reports of smoking marijuana at least once in the past month ( $M = 0.06$ ,  $SD = 0.23$ ). For the second measure, we limited the sample to respondents under 21 and created a dummy variable that indicates whether the respondent had a drink in the past month while being underage ( $N = 694$ ,  $M = 0.26$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ).

## Independent Variables

All independent variables are taken from parents' responses in Wave 1. Marriages are classified into four categories: same-faith marriages ( $M = 0.75$ ,  $SD = 0.44$ ); across-religion marriages in which each spouse identifies with a different religion or denomination and both are not Protestant ( $M = 0.09$ ,  $SD = 0.28$ ); inter-Protestant marriages in which both spouses identify with a different category of Protestant denomination ( $M = 0.08$ ,  $SD = 0.27$ ); and faith-none marriages in which one spouse specified a religious affiliation and the other responded "none" ( $M = 0.08$ ,  $SD = 0.27$ ).

Because religious beliefs can change over time, we also include dummy variables that indicate a change in the religious composition of the relationship: transition into a faith-none marriage ( $M = 0.04$ ,  $SD = 0.17$ ); transition into an across-religion marriage ( $M = 0.03$ ,  $SD = 0.18$ ); transition into an inter-Protestant marriage ( $M = 0.04$ ,  $SD = 0.19$ ); and transition into a same-faith marriage ( $M = 0.09$ ,  $SD = 0.29$ ). These variables specify couples that indicated a different religious affiliation in Wave 2.

## Mediating and Moderating Variables

### *Marital Conflict*

Both husbands and wives were asked questions regarding the frequency of disagreements with their spouse over the following topics: (a) household tasks; (b) money; (c) spending time together; (d) sex; (e) having a(nother) child; (f) in-laws; and (g) the children. Responses range from 1 = never to 6 = almost everyday. Responses were summed ( $\alpha > 0.74$  for both spouses), and the mean score between spouses is used as the indicator ( $M = 13.34$ ,  $SD = 4.82$ ). We also include a difference score indicating a change in conflict between waves ( $M = 0.53$ ,  $SD = 6.51$ ).

### *Religious Participation*

How often respondents attend religious services is recoded into a scale that ranges from 1 = once a year or less to 4 = once a week or more, and the maximum value between husbands and

wives is used as the indicator ( $M = 3.14$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ). A difference score indicates change in participation between waves ( $M = -0.16$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ).

### ***Time Spent with Children***

Husbands and wives were asked how often they spend time with their children in the following activities: (a) leisure activities away from home; (b) at home working on a project or playing together; (c) having private talks; and (d) helping with reading or homework. Responses ranged from 1 = never or rarely to 6 = almost everyday ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ), and the mean score for the couple is used as the indicator ( $\alpha > 0.72$  for both spouses). We also include a difference score that indicates change in time spent with children between waves ( $M = -0.45$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ).

### **Control Variables**

We also control for the influence of factors that could affect both marital and child outcomes. Our control variables include measures of parents' socioeconomic status, age, marital status, as well as child's age and gender. Two measures of SES are used: parents' years of education ( $M = 13.84$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ); and household earnings in dollars ( $M = 45,893$ ,  $SD = 51,072$ ). We also control for parents' average age ( $M = 38.09$ ,  $SD = 2.43$ ), whether they divorced between waves of interviewing ( $M = 0.08$ ,  $SD = 0.27$ ), child's age ( $M = 16.67$ ,  $SD = 3.98$ ), and child's gender (1 = female,  $M = 0.51$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ).

### **Analytic Strategy**

To examine the relationship between religious heterogamy and children's well-being, we test our hypotheses using ordinary least squares (OLS) and logistic regression analyses. Bivariate correlations for all variables are presented in Table 1. We first examine the extent to which parents' religious heterogamy is associated with their marital conflict and religious participation. We then consider our hypothesis that religious heterogamy is negatively associated with children's well-being by regressing parents' religious heterogamy on each of our five dependent variables: children's self-esteem; life satisfaction; grades in school; marijuana use; and underage drinking.

Next, we assess whether religious heterogamy is indirectly associated with children's well-being through higher levels of parents' marital conflict and lower levels of parents' religious participation. We also examine whether parents' time spent with children moderates the associations between marital conflict, religious participation, and children's well-being.

## **RESULTS**

### **Religious Heterogamy, Marital Conflict, and Religious Participation**

The first set of analyses provides evidence of the associations between parents' religious heterogamy, marital conflict, and religious participation (Table 2). First, marital conflict is regressed on religious heterogamy. There is a positive association between faith-none religious heterogamy and marital conflict ( $b = 1.48$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Thus, there is evidence that faith-none religious heterogamy may be more likely to lead to marital conflict than religious homogamy. Also, while across-religion and inter-Protestant heterogamy are not significantly related to marital conflict, the coefficients are in the expected positive direction.

When religious participation is regressed on religious heterogamy, there is also support for our hypotheses. Faith-none couples ( $b = -1.10$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and across-religion couples ( $b = -0.33$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) attend religious services less frequently than same-faith couples. There is also



TABLE 1  
CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS FOR ALL VARIABLES IN THE ANALYSIS

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)	(15)	(16)	(17)	(18)	(19)	(20)	(21)	(22)	(23)	(24)
(1) Faith-none religious heterogamy <sup>a</sup>	1.00																							
(2) Across-religion religious heterogamy <sup>b</sup>	-0.09	1.00																						
(3) Inter-Protestant religious heterogamy <sup>c</sup>	-0.09	-0.09	1.00																					
(4) Parents' education	0.01	-0.03	0.01	1.00																				
(5) Parents' household earnings	0.09	-0.01	-0.04	0.28	1.00																			
(6) Parents' age	-0.04	-0.10	-0.00	0.16	0.16	1.00																		
(7) Child's age	-0.04	-0.06	0.06	0.00	0.08	0.59	1.00																	
(8) Child is female	-0.01	-0.05	-0.03	0.04	0.00	-0.02	-0.01	1.00																
(9) Parents' marital conflict	0.09	0.04	0.03	-0.09	-0.04	-0.17	-0.09	-0.03	1.00															
(10) Change in marital conflict	-0.04	0.05	-0.00	-0.05	-0.04	-0.06	-0.01	0.02	-0.17	1.00														
(11) Parents' time spent with children	0.00	0.03	-0.03	0.16	0.01	-0.23	-0.32	-0.04	-0.02	0.04	1.00													
(12) Change in time spent with children	-0.06	0.04	0.03	-0.10	-0.05	0.01	0.06	0.06	0.05	-0.02	-0.36	1.00												
(13) Parents' divorce between waves	0.02	0.03	0.02	-0.08	0.04	-0.04	0.01	0.02	0.17	0.21	-0.00	0.09	1.00											
(14) Parents' religious participation	-0.28	-0.07	-0.03	0.04	-0.06	0.16	0.03	0.01	-0.08	-0.07	0.04	-0.00	-0.12	1.00										
(15) Change in religious participation	0.02	0.03	-0.05	0.01	0.01	-0.05	-0.03	-0.01	0.01	0.04	-0.02	0.01	0.00	-0.33	1.00									
(16) Transition to faith-none	-0.06	0.06	0.02	-0.03	-0.02	-0.06	-0.03	-0.01	0.04	0.05	-0.03	-0.03	0.05	-0.19	-0.01	1.00								
(17) Transition to across-religion	0.12	0.06	-0.02	-0.01	-0.03	-0.01	0.08	-0.01	0.06	0.08	-0.05	0.00	0.06	-0.07	-0.06	-0.03	1.00							
(18) Transition to inter-Protestant	0.01	0.00	-0.06	0.04	0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.04	-0.02	0.09	-0.00	0.04	0.01	-0.05	0.08	-0.04	-0.04	1.00						
(19) Transition to same faith	0.33	0.19	0.38	0.00	-0.06	-0.08	-0.05	-0.05	0.04	-0.01	-0.00	0.03	-0.00	-0.11	0.05	-0.07	-0.06	-0.07	1.00					
(20) Self-esteem	0.07	-0.02	-0.03	0.14	0.11	-0.02	-0.06	0.07	-0.04	-0.01	0.12	-0.05	0.01	-0.03	0.02	0.03	0.03	-0.00	0.03	1.00				
(21) Life satisfaction	0.03	-0.03	0.01	0.06	0.05	-0.00	-0.07	0.05	-0.08	-0.03	0.12	0.02	-0.09	-0.00	-0.04	-0.00	-0.03	0.01	-0.03	0.26	1.00			
(22) Grades in school	0.00	-0.04	-0.00	0.23	0.05	0.06	-0.13	0.19	-0.14	-0.06	0.10	0.02	-0.07	0.08	0.03	-0.00	0.01	0.04	-0.01	0.19	0.22	1.00		
(23) Marijuana use	-0.00	0.11	-0.03	0.04	0.06	0.09	0.17	-0.03	0.04	-0.04	-0.09	-0.00	-0.03	-0.07	0.05	0.05	-0.01	0.04	-0.04	-0.01	-0.09	-0.14	1.00	
(24) Underage drinking	0.04	0.05	0.01	0.02	0.16	0.23	0.49	-0.03	-0.06	-0.01	-0.12	-0.09	0.04	-0.14	-0.00	-0.03	0.01	0.09	0.02	-0.03	-0.12	-0.20	0.31	1.00

<sup>a</sup>Faith-none religious heterogamy indicates that one parent specifies a religious denomination and the other reports no religious affiliation.

<sup>b</sup>Across-religion religious heterogamy indicates that each parent identifies with a different religion or denomination and both are not Protestant.

<sup>c</sup>Inter-Protestant religious heterogamy indicates that each parent specifies a different category of Protestant denomination (i.e., conservative, liberal, or moderate). Same-faith is the reference group for all categories.

Note:  $N = 890$  for all coefficients other than those involving underage drinking ( $N = 694$ ).

TABLE 2  
REGRESSION RESULTS FOR THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS’  
RELIGIOUS HETEROGAMY, MARITAL CONFLICT,  
AND RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION

	Marital Conflict 1	Religious Participation 2
Faith-none religious heterogamy <sup>a</sup>	1.48* (0.08)	−1.10*** (−0.26)
Across-religion religious heterogamy <sup>b</sup>	0.51 (0.03)	−0.33* (−0.08)
Inter-Protestant religious heterogamy <sup>c</sup>	0.66 (0.04)	−0.24† (−0.06)
Education	−0.11 (−0.05)	0.01 (0.03)
Household earnings	−0.00 (−0.01)	−0.00* (−0.07)
Age	−0.13*** (−0.17)	0.02*** (0.13)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.05	0.10
Constant	19.60	2.32

<sup>a</sup>Faith-none religious heterogamy indicates that one parent specifies a religious denomination and the other reports no religious affiliation.

<sup>b</sup>Across-religion religious heterogamy indicates that each parent specifies a different religion or denomination and both are not Protestant.

<sup>c</sup>Inter-Protestant religious heterogamy indicates that each parent specifies a different category of Protestant denomination (i.e., conservative, liberal, or moderate). Same-faith is the reference group for all categories.

† $p < 0.10$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Note: Unstandardized coefficients presented (standardized coefficients in parentheses);  $N = 890$ .

some evidence that inter-Protestant couples attend church services less frequently than religiously homogamous couples ( $b = -0.24, p < 0.10$ ).

The Influence of Religious Heterogamy on Children’s Well-Being

The remaining models assess whether religious heterogamy predicts children’s well-being (Table 3). First, the indicators of children’s well-being are regressed on heterogamy and background characteristics. These results are presented in the odd-numbered models. Then, our hypothesized mediators, moderators, and other change variables are added to the equations. These results are presented in the even-numbered models.

While religious heterogamy does not seem to be directly related to children’s self-esteem, overall satisfaction, or grades in school (Models 1–6), religious heterogamy is associated with children’s marijuana use and underage drinking (Models 7–10). The results in Models 7 and 9 indicate that parents’ religious heterogamy appears to be more strongly related to delinquency than other indicators of children’s well-being. First, parents’ across-religion heterogamy is positively associated with child’s marijuana use ( $b = 1.09, p < 0.01$ ). The exponentiated coefficient ( $\exp(1.09) = 2.97$ ) suggests that children in across-religion families are approximately three times more likely to smoke marijuana than children from same-faith families. Second, faith-none

TABLE 3  
REGRESSION RESULTS FOR THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS' RELIGIOUS HETEROGAMY  
AND CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

	Indicators of Children's Well-Being									
	Self-Esteem		Life Satisfaction		Grades in School		Marijuana Use <sup>d</sup>		Underage Drinking <sup>d</sup>	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Faith-none religious heterogamy <sup>a</sup>	0.08 (0.05)	0.06 (0.04)	-0.07 (-0.01)	0.13 (0.02)	0.02 (0.00)	0.24 (0.04)	0.21 (0.03)	-0.16 (-0.02)	0.82* (0.09)	-0.04 (-0.00)
Across-religion religious heterogamy <sup>b</sup>	0.00 (0.00)	-0.03 (-0.02)	-0.14 (-0.02)	-0.14 (-0.03)	-0.12 (-0.02)	-0.00 (-0.00)	1.09** (0.15)	1.61** (0.21)	0.73* (0.09)	0.71† (0.08)
Inter-Protestant religious heterogamy <sup>c</sup>	-0.04 (-0.02)	-0.06 (-0.04)	0.07 (0.01)	0.23 (0.04)	0.05 (0.01)	0.20 (0.04)	-0.65 (-0.08)	-0.18 (-0.02)	0.12 (0.01)	-0.30 (-0.03)
Parents' education	0.02*** (0.12)	0.02* (0.09)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (-0.00)	0.12*** (0.20)	0.11*** (0.18)	0.02 (0.03)	0.06 (0.06)	0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.02)
Parents' household earnings	0.00 (0.06)	0.00† (0.07)	0.00 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	-0.00 (-0.02)	-0.00 (-0.01)	0.00 (0.07)	0.00 (0.06)	0.00* (0.13)	0.00† (0.10)
Parents' age	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.03)	0.01 (0.05)	0.04*** (0.17)	0.04*** (0.16)	-0.03 (-0.10)	-0.01 (-0.04)	-0.00 (-0.01)	0.00 (0.00)
Child's age	-0.00 (-0.03)	-0.00 (-0.03)	-0.04* (-0.11)	-0.03† (-0.09)	-0.09*** (-0.24)	-0.08*** (-0.21)	0.23*** (0.46)	0.24*** (0.42)	0.47*** (0.60)	0.50*** (0.59)
Child is female	0.05† (0.06)	0.06† (0.07)	0.14 (0.05)	0.16 (0.05)	0.52*** (0.17)	0.53*** (0.18)	-0.34 (-0.08)	-0.26 (-0.06)	-0.20 (-0.04)	-0.14 (-0.03)
Parents' marital conflict		-0.00 (-0.04)		-0.02† (-0.07)		-0.04*** (-0.12)		0.05 (0.10)		-0.03 (-0.06)
Change in marital conflict		-0.00 (-0.02)		-0.00 (-0.02)		-0.01† (-0.06)		-0.04 (-0.11)		-0.02 (-0.05)
Parents' time spent with children		0.05* (0.11)		0.28*** (0.15)		0.16* (0.09)		-0.25 (-0.09)		-0.32* (-0.10)
Change in time spent with children		-0.00 (-0.00)		0.21* (0.09)		0.19* (0.08)		-0.26 (-0.08)		-0.73*** (-0.19)

(continued)

TABLE 3  
(Continued)

	Indicators of Children's Well-Being									
	Self-Esteem		Life Satisfaction		Grades in School		Marijuana Use <sup>d</sup>		Underage Drinking <sup>d</sup>	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Parents' divorce between waves		0.03 (0.02)		-0.58* (-0.09)		-0.19 (-0.03)		-0.95 (-0.10)		0.65 (0.06)
Parents' religious participation		-0.01 (-0.01)		-0.05 (-0.04)		0.11* (0.08)		-0.21 (-0.11)		-0.45*** (-0.20)
Change in religious participation		0.00 (0.01)		-0.09 (-0.05)		0.11† (0.06)		0.28 (0.12)		-0.16 (-0.06)
Transition to faith-none <sup>c</sup>		0.10 (0.04)		0.07 (0.01)		0.38 (0.05)		0.40 (0.03)		-0.51 (-0.04)
Transition to across-religion heterogamy <sup>c</sup>		0.10 (0.04)		-0.20 (-0.02)		0.42 (0.05)		-0.61 (-0.05)		-0.13 (-0.01)
Transition to inter-Protestant <sup>c</sup>		-0.01 (-0.01)		0.03 (0.00)		0.25 (0.03)		0.77 (0.07)		1.66** (0.13)
Transition to same faith <sup>c</sup>		0.06 (0.05)		-0.20 (-0.04)		-0.03 (-0.01)		-1.29 (-0.17)		0.36 (0.04)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.05	0.01	0.05	0.12	0.16	0.10	0.16	0.25	0.31
Constant	2.01	1.90	7.75	6.89	4.00	3.70	-6.16	-6.64	-9.17	-7.10

<sup>a</sup>Faith-none religious heterogamy indicates that one parent specifies a religious denomination and the other reports no religious affiliation.  
<sup>b</sup>Across-religion religious heterogamy indicates that each parent identifies with a different religion or denomination and both are not Protestant.  
<sup>c</sup>Inter-Protestant religious heterogamy indicates that each parent specifies a different category of Protestant denomination (i.e., conservative, liberal, or moderate). Same-faith is the reference group for all categories.  
<sup>d</sup>Reference group is "no transition."  
<sup>d</sup>Logistic regression model.  
†  $p < 0.10$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .  
Note: Unstandardized coefficients presented (standardized coefficients in parentheses);  $N = 890$  for Models 1–8;  $N = 694$  for Models 9–10.

heterogamy ( $b = 0.82, p < 0.05$ ) and across-religion heterogamy ( $b = 0.73, p < 0.05$ ) are both positively related to underage drinking. Children from both faith-none families ( $\exp(0.82) = 2.27$ ) and across-religion families ( $\exp(0.73) = 2.05$ ) are over twice as likely to drink underage as children from same-faith families. These results are consistent with our expectation that parents' religious heterogamy may negatively affect children's well-being.

We also analyze whether parents' religious heterogamy is indirectly associated with children's well-being through the mechanisms of marital conflict and religious participation, and also whether time spent with children moderates these relationships. Results are presented in the even-numbered models of Table 3. We focus on the findings from Models 8 and 10 because although the indicators of our hypothesized mechanisms are usually associated with children's well-being in the expected directions, there is a lack of evidence of mediating or moderating effects in the other models.

Overall, relationships between parents' religious heterogamy and children's delinquent behaviors provide some support for our hypotheses. Religious heterogamy is positively related to both of our measures of children's delinquency, and higher rates of underage drinking are a function of lower levels of religious participation reported by parents in interfaith marriages (compared to the reports of parents from same-faith marriages). In Model 8, the coefficient ( $b = 1.61, p < 0.01$ ) for across-religion heterogamy increases and becomes a stronger predictor of children's marijuana use ( $\beta = 0.21$ ). However, this change cannot be attributed to the addition of marital conflict or religious participation into the model, as expected. Supplementary analyses, in which we entered each new variable to our base model (i.e., Model 7) individually, indicate that the increase in the coefficient for across-religion heterogamy is a function of controlling for changes in religious heterogamy. Indeed, 27 percent of across-religion couples at Time 1 transitioned into same-faith status before Time 2. It is possible that these transitions may have provided more social control for their children. Regardless, after taking into account changes in religious heterogamy, the results indicate that children who remained in across-religion families are five times as likely to use marijuana ( $\exp(0.71) = 5.00$ ) than children from same-faith families.

When potential mediating factors are introduced into the model predicting children's underage drinking (Model 10), the relationships between heterogamy and underage drinking lose statistical significance. Supplementary analyses in which we entered each new variable to our base model (i.e., Model 9) individually indicate that religious participation explains this change. Because religious heterogamy is negatively associated with religious participation (e.g., Table 2), and religious participation is negatively associated with underage drinking ( $b = -0.45, p < 0.001$ ), parents' religious participation mediates the association between parents' religious heterogamy and children's underage drinking (although the change in the across-religion heterogamy coefficient is modest). There is also evidence that changes in religious heterogamy among parents may be linked to underage drinking; parents' transitions to inter-Protestant religious heterogamy ( $b = 1.66, p < 0.01$ ) are associated with their children's underage drinking (the majority of these transitions were from same-faith couples at Time 1). Although the reasons for these transitions are unknown, this finding provides further evidence that religious heterogamy may have negative implications for children. As in other models, parents' time spent with children is related to children's well-being in the expected direction; however, it does not have a moderating effect on the relationships between marital conflict, religious participation, and children's well-being.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to explore the relationship between parents' religious heterogamy and children's well-being. Our findings suggest some support for our hypotheses. First, consistent with previous research, we find that religiously heterogamous couples have higher levels of marital conflict and attend religious services less frequently than same-faith couples. Yet, in contrast to our hypotheses, only faith-none couples experience significantly higher conflict than religiously

homogamous couples. Because conflict is more likely to occur when spouses strongly believe in different religions (Chinitz and Brown 2001; Curtis and Ellison 2002), conflict in faith-none couples may result from one partner being very religious, while the other partner is strongly opposed to organized religion.

We find evidence that all types of religiously heterogamous couples (i.e., faith-none, across-religion, and inter-Protestant) attend church services less frequently than same-faith couples. One explanation is that spouses in an interfaith marriage may not attend religious services as frequently as same-faith couples because they cannot agree upon a suitable church to attend, and perhaps prefer not to attend religious services alone. Alternatively, spouses in interfaith unions may be less religious than spouses in same-faith marriages, on average. While our data do not allow for a full exploration of this issue, a lack of religious participation may have important implications for children's well-being, regardless of the reason (Regnerus 2003; Smith 2003; Wallace and Williams 1997).

Second, our results provide some support for our hypothesis that parents' religious heterogamy is associated with lower levels of children's well-being, in that religious heterogamy predicts the likelihood that children use illegal substances. It may be that children from religiously heterogamous families participate in deviant activities due to a lack of social controls or cohesion within the family. Pearce and Haynie (2004) find that adolescents who have dissimilar levels of religiosity from their mothers have higher rates of delinquency. In religiously heterogamous families, competing religious interests may compromise the effectiveness of religious social controls and family cohesion. These factors should be investigated as mechanisms through which religious heterogamy may affect children's well-being in future research.

Third, we find sparse evidence for the hypothesized mediating and moderating effects on the relationship between parents' religious heterogamy and children's well-being. There is no support for our hypothesis that religious heterogamy may indirectly affect children through greater conflict among parents. While faith-none couples do report higher conflict, this does not appear to mediate the relationship between religious heterogamy and children's well-being, as expected. Yet, there is some evidence that parents' religious heterogamy may negatively affect children because of lower levels of religious participation. This finding is consistent with the expectation that children in interfaith families may engage in deviant behaviors more frequently because they lack the social controls that religion provides (Bainbridge 1989). Finally, while parental time spent with children is positively associated with indicators of children's well-being, it does not moderate the relationships between marital conflict, religious participation, and children's well-being.

The lack of support for our hypotheses regarding the influence of religious heterogamy on other dimensions of children's well-being besides delinquency may be due to possible benefits of living in a religiously heterogamous family. Religiously heterogamous families appear to have a greater level of tolerance and respect for others (Ho 1984). Children in interfaith families may be more likely to be exposed to different cultures, which may help them to develop their own identity. They may also learn to accept differences in others, which may better prepare them for when they are exposed to more diversity in adulthood. Therefore, while parents' religious heterogamy may negatively influence children in some ways, it may also provide a number of benefits. Overall, the positive aspects of living in a religiously heterogamous family may offset potentially negative aspects of increased parental marital conflict and lower levels of religious participation, resulting in children from religiously heterogamous families having similar levels of well-being as children from religiously homogamous families.

There are some limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. First, because all parents in this study were already married when the survey was conducted, we do not know much about factors that occurred prior to the marriage that may affect both parents and children, including why these couples married and whether they discussed how to handle their religious differences before marriage. It is feasible that some religiously heterogamous couples discussed religious differences prior to marriage and decided to raise their children in a particular religion. If they did, they may have been less likely to exhibit differences in marital conflict and religious

participation than religiously homogamous families, and their different religious beliefs may have been less likely to have adverse effects on their children's well-being. Another possibility is that religion may not be as important for people in religiously heterogamous marriages, so marrying someone of a different faith may be relatively inconsequential. For example, religious participation may not decline after marriage because it may have already been low prior to marriage.

In an attempt to explore some of these issues, we ran supplementary analyses that examined the extent to which couples that entered into religiously heterogamous marriages are selectively different than religiously homogamous couples. It is possible that individuals who entered into heterogamous unions had limited options in the marriage market that may have led to them marrying someone of a different religious background, and these factors may also help explain higher marital conflict, low religious participation, and having children who are more likely to engage in delinquent activities. We analyzed whether controlling for the effects of a history of unemployment, lack of organizational involvement, high residential mobility, prior cohabitation, and spending little time with friends might change our results. While some of these factors were related to parents' and children's outcomes, they did not affect the relationships between parents' religious heterogamy and the indicators of children's well-being. While we cannot definitively conclude that selection effects are not accounting for the results in our study, these supplementary analyses provided further support for our findings and the interpretation of these findings. However, future research should continue to explore ways in which religiously heterogamous parents may be fundamentally different from religiously homogamous parents, and what effect this may have on children.

Another limitation involves our measures of religion. One benefit of using a data set such as the NSFH is that it allows for large enough samples to conduct statistical tests. However, the tradeoff is that the measures included in the data are not as precise as they could be. The primary way our study is affected is that we do not have good indicators of religiosity. We might expect that not only differences in religious affiliation, but also the extent of differences in religious beliefs between spouses and the relative strength of these beliefs have implications for children's well-being. Unfortunately, the only indicators of religiosity (other than religious participation) in our data are questions about biblical literalism and inerrancy. In supplementary analyses, we included these measures in our models as a proxy for religiosity, but did not present these results because of their lack of applicability to all respondents (the inclusion of this measure did not affect our overall findings). Better indicators of religiosity, such as questions that approximate the value that respondents place on religion and how important it is to them, may more adequately capture the strength of religious beliefs. Also, we are not able to measure children's religiosity. This is a shortcoming because children may vary in their receptiveness to their parents' religious teachings and may also learn religious traditions from sources other than their parents, especially when they become older.

In addition, we were unable to consider sufficiently whether certain denominational combinations within heterogamous marriages had different implications for children. We would expect that greater religious distance between the denominations of each spouse would be more likely to negatively affect children's well-being. However, small sample sizes prevented a full exploration of whether certain combinations with greater religious distance (e.g., Catholic-Jewish) result in greater conflict and lower children's well-being than marriages with less religious distance (e.g., moderate Protestant-liberal Protestant). Nevertheless, our findings do suggest that inter-Protestant religious heterogamy is less likely to be negatively associated with children's well-being than other types of religious heterogamy. We also ran models using absolute differences in biblical literalism and inerrancy between spouses as a proxy for religious distance (combined with indicators of whether spouses were Christian or non-Christian), but these measures did not affect the relationships between religious heterogamy and children's well-being.

Finally, our study is limited because focal children in Wave 2 of the NSFH were divided into two age groups, 10–17 and 18–23, and each group was asked a different set of questions. It

is possible that our indicators of well-being (e.g., self-esteem) may have different meanings for adolescents and young adults. However, we decided to increase our sample size by combining the age groups because the results were consistent with those in which the age groups were disaggregated.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on religion and family life by presenting a framework that considers how parents' religious beliefs may influence their children's well-being. To better understand the role of religion in the family, it is important to consider the implications of having more than one faith present in a household.

Using a nationally representative data set, this study is able to corroborate past research on religious heterogamy and extend the literature by furthering a discussion about how these relationships may influence the lives of children. One strength of this study is that two waves of data are used. Whereas most studies on religious heterogamy use cross-sectional data, this study is better able to construct a more plausible causal pathway between parents and children by using data collected at two points in time. Another strength of this study is that the well-being measures are taken from focal children's responses, but our other measures are derived from parents' responses. This allows us to avoid same-source bias. Finally, our multiple indicators of children's well-being allow us to investigate the relationship between parents' religious heterogamy and children's well-being in a comprehensive manner. Overall, the results indicate that there are differences between religiously heterogamous families and same-faith families. Furthermore, these differences appear to influence at least one dimension of children's well-being: their delinquent behaviors.

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