

THE POWER OF PRAYER? INVESTIGATING THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN SOCIOECONOMIC PROGRESS FOR BLACK AMERICANS

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Abstract:

The purpose of this pilot study is to examine the potential relationship between religious engagement and economic outcomes among African Americans. The study addresses several research questions: (1) Do African Americans perceive their religious affiliation as contributing to their socioeconomic progress? (2) Does active involvement in religious activities predict higher annual income for African Americans? (3) Is there a significant correlation between the frequency of religious participation and the likelihood of African American students receiving scholarship or grant funding from religious organizations? This study collected quantitative data on participants' income levels, religious activities, and scholarship information among African Americans in different areas. Based on survey responses from approximately 60% of 156 African American participants, it was revealed that religious communities have a positive impact on their socioeconomic status. These findings have reinforced the strong connection between religion and socioeconomics, noting that active involvement in religious services or activities could lead to higher annual incomes. Individuals who earned a higher income also reported more frequent participation in weekly religious services and activities. Furthermore, a chisquare test of independence showed a significant relationship between the frequency of religious participation and the likelihood of receiving a scholarship or grant funding from religious organizations. These findings provide a framework for additional research in this field to explore further the impact of religious communities on various aspects of African American life.

1. INTRODUCTION

Religion has always captivated our curiosity with its profound spiritual and moral implications and potential to shape our society. Beyond its spiritual and moral implications, religion is believed to influence an individual's well-being profoundly. Previous research reveals that religious involvement can positively influence psychological well-being, social support networks, educational outcomes, and even aspects of financial well-being (Ellison, 1991; Koenig, 2012; Božek et al., 2020; Wuthnow, 2002). Considering the historical significance and persisting obstacles African Americans face, examining the intricate relationship between religion and socioeconomic progress is of importance.

Against this backdrop, this pilot study seeks to contribute to the existing literature by investigating several research questions. First, the study examines whether African Americans perceive their religious affiliation as contributing to their socioeconomic progress. This analysis enlightens the intertwined relationship between religion and social advancement within the African American community. This question is of critical importance as religion often plays a prominent role in the African American community and culture. Understanding the potential link between religion and economic outcomes could provide valuable insights into the factors that contribute to the success of this population.

Secondly, the study explores the potential relationship between active engagement in religious activities and higher annual income among African Americans. This research endeavors to shed light on an intriguing aspect of the African American community and contribute to the existing body of knowledge surrounding the intersection of religion and income. Previous research suggests that religious involvement can positively impact economic outcomes by increasing social networks, providing access to resources, promoting pro-social behaviors, and establishing a sense of community and belonging (Maselko, et al., 2011; Zhang, et al., 2019; Muller & Ellison, 2001). Investigating this relationship within the context of African Americans could provide an understanding of the role that religion plays in the financial lives of this group.

Finally, the study examines the correlation between the frequency of religious participation and the likelihood of African American students receiving scholarship or grant funding from religious organizations. Educational attainment is a key predictor of economic success and financial stability (Wolff et al., 2022). Given the significant role that religion plays in the African American community, religious organizations could potentially play a significant role in supporting educational attainment among this group (Mitchell, 2016). Investigating this relationship could provide valuable insights into

how religious organizations can facilitate access to educational opportunities and promote financial well-being among African Americans.

Overall, this study examines the relationship between religion and socioeconomics among African Americans. By exploring these research questions and utilizing quantitative data, this study enhances understanding the complex relationship between religious engagement and socioeconomic status among African Americans, providing valuable groundwork for future investigations. A comprehensive examination of the complex interplay of religion and socioeconomic development has the potential to contribute significantly to shaping interventions that promote social equity and economic development within the African American community through the targeted incorporation of religiosity.

2. Review of Literature

Moon (2012) examined the relationship between religious engagement and well-being among African Americans, including potential financial well-being. The study's findings indicated that individuals who exhibited higher levels of involvement in religious activities reported a greater sense of overall well-being. Specifically, these individuals perceived their financial well-being to be positively influenced by their religious engagement. The study suggested that religious participation and active involvement in religious activities may play a role in fostering a sense of financial security and stability among African Americans (Moon, 2012 pp.107-130). However, it is important to note that this study focused on perceived well-being, and further research is needed to establish a causal link between religious engagement and actual socioeconomic outcomes in terms of income or wealth accumulation. Nonetheless, the findings from Moon's study provide valuable insights into the potential positive impact of religious involvement on the financial aspects of well-being within the African American community.

Barrett (2010) conducted a comprehensive study to explore the relationship between religious involvement and educational outcomes, specifically among urban African American adolescents. The findings of this study provided compelling evidence suggesting that religious engagement plays a vital role in promoting positive educational outcomes within this population (Barrett, 2010 pp. 448-479). Through careful data analysis, Barrett found a strong association between religious involvement and various aspects of educational success. The study revealed that adolescents actively engaged in religious practices, such as regular attendance at religious services, participation in religious youth groups, and involvement in religious education, exhibited better educational outcomes than their peers with lower levels of religious engagement. The positive effects of religious involvement on educational outcomes were observed in several key areas.

Firstly, religiously engaged adolescents demonstrated higher levels of academic motivation, showing increased interest and enthusiasm for learning. This heightened motivation translated into more significant effort in their studies, leading to improved academic performance and higher grades. Furthermore, religious involvement provided a supportive social network for urban African American adolescents. Participation in religious activities fostered a sense of belonging and community, offering a supportive environment where students received guidance, mentorship, and positive role models (Barrett, 2010 pp. 448-479). The social connections and relationships formed within religious communities provided additional resources and emotional support, positively influencing educational aspirations and persistence.

Religious institutions also played a significant role in offering educational opportunities and resources to adolescents. Many religious organizations provided after-school programs, tutoring services, and scholarships to support the educational advancement of their members. These resources helped alleviate the challenges urban African American

adolescents face, who often encounter socioeconomic disadvantages and limited access to educational resources. Barrett's study highlights the profound impact of religious involvement on educational outcomes among urban African American adolescents. By fostering academic motivation, providing social support networks, and offering educational resources, religious engagement offers a powerful pathway to enhance educational success within this specific population. These findings underscore the importance of recognizing and leveraging the positive influence of religious institutions and practices in promoting educational equity and empowering urban African American adolescents to reach their full academic potential. Chatters (2008) conducted a significant study exploring the relationship between religious service attendance and the prevalence of mood disorders among older African Americans. The findings of this study provided compelling evidence to suggest an inverse association between religious service attendance and the likelihood of experiencing a lifetime mood disorder within this population (Chatters et al., 2008 pp. 957-965). Through meticulous data analysis, Chatters revealed a strong link between religious involvement, particularly regular attendance at religious services, and improved mental wellbeing among older African Americans. The study discovered that those who frequently attended religious services demonstrated lower odds of having a lifetime mood disorder than individuals with lower religious service attendance.

The inverse association observed in Chatters' study signifies that religious engagement, particularly through active participation in religious services, may be a protective factor against mood disorders among older African Americans. Regular attendance at religious services may provide individuals with various benefits that contribute to improved mental health outcomes. One possible explanation for this association is the social support network provided by religious communities. Religious services often create opportunities for individuals to connect with others, fostering a sense of belonging, community, and emotional support. These social connections can act as a protective buffer against the development of mood disorders by providing avenues for sharing experiences, seeking guidance, and receiving assistance during challenging times (Chatters et al., 2008 pp. 957-965). Moreover, religious services often incorporate elements such as prayer, meditation, and the teachings of faith, which can offer solace, hope, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. The spiritual and religious practices embedded within these services may promote psychological well-being, enhance coping mechanisms, and provide individuals with a sense of peace and tranquility, all of which can contribute to a reduced risk of mood disorders.

It is important to note that Chatters' findings do not establish a causal relationship between religious service attendance and mood disorders but rather suggest an association. Further research is necessary to explore the underlying mechanisms and potential mediating factors contributing to this inverse relationship. Overall, Chatters' study offers valuable insights into the potential benefits of religious service attendance on mental health outcomes among older African Americans. The findings highlight the significance of religious engagement as a protective factor against mood disorders, emphasizing the potential role of religious communities in promoting well-being and fostering resilience within this specific population.

2.1. Summary

A comprehensive review of the literature reveals a significant body of research indicating a relationship between religious engagement and socioeconomic status among African Americans. However, the nature of this relationship is characterized by its complexity and multifaceted nature. While existing research suggests that religious engagement can positively affect various aspects of African Americans' lives, it is important to note that the relationship between religious engagement and socioeconomic status is highly context dependent. The identified papers shed light on the potential benefits of religious engagement for African Americans across different domains. These studies suggest that religious involvement can positively influence psychological well-being, social support networks, educational outcomes, and even aspects of financial well-being. Religious institutions often provide a platform for community engagement, networking opportunities, and access to resources that can contribute to individuals' overall development and potentially enhance socioeconomic outcomes.

However, it is crucial to recognize that the relationship between religious engagement and socioeconomic status is not universally consistent or straightforward. The context in which religious engagement occurs plays a significant role in shaping its impact on socioeconomic status among African Americans. Factors such as geographical location, socioeconomic background, and cultural norms may interact with religious engagement in complex ways, influencing the outcomes observed. Additionally, diverging findings within the literature suggest that the relationship between religious engagement and socioeconomic status is not uniform across all individuals or communities. While some studies indicate positive associations, others highlight variations and potential mediating factors contributing to differing outcomes. These variations may arise from differences in study methodologies, sample characteristics, or specific aspects of religious engagement examined.

To understand the intricate dynamics of the relationship between religious engagement and socioeconomic status among African Americans comprehensively, it is essential to consider the interplay of various contextual factors. A multitude of individual, cultural, and structural factors beyond religious engagement alone influence socioeconomic status. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis must account for the broader social, economic, and historical contexts in which religious engagement and socioeconomic status intersect. In summary, while the literature suggests a relationship between religious engagement and socioeconomic status among African Americans, it is important to recognize this relationship's complex and multifaceted nature. The identified papers indicate that religious engagement can positively affect various aspects of African Americans' lives. However, this relationship's nuanced and context-dependent nature emphasizes the need for further research to elucidate the underlying mechanisms and understand the specific conditions under which religious engagement influences socioeconomic outcomes within the African American community.

3. Methodology

The methodology employed in this study involved collecting data from a randomized sample of 156 participants, while limited in size, provided a preliminary basis for understanding the relationship between the variables of interest. Data collected from the survey questionnaire were analyzed using statistical techniques and IBM SPSS software to identify patterns and trends in the responses given. These results were discussed in detail, drawing upon an extensive literature review and theory to provide further insight and explanation.

To investigate the perceived contribution of religious communities to the socioeconomic status of African Americans, the primary survey question was, “Do you believe your religious community has contributed to your current socioeconomic status?” Respondents were asked to respond “Yes” or “No.” Table 1 analyzed the survey data using descriptive statistical analysis, including frequency distributions, to explore the relationship between religious affiliation and perceptions of community support. In analyzing the data, frequencies and percentages were calculated for each response category, with the results in Table 2. Specifically, frequencies and percentages were calculated for the survey question that asked participants how often they engage in religious activities or attend religious services. The frequencies and percentages were calculated separately for each income bracket, which allowed for an analysis of the relationship between household income and religious participation.

To investigate the relationship between Q7 and Q8, which pertained to the frequency of religious activities/attendance and the receipt of scholarships/grants from a religious organization, a chi-square test of independence was used to determine whether there was a significant association between these variables. The test was chosen because it is an appropriate statistical measure for assessing the degree of association between categorical variables. Participants were asked to respond to the questions (Q7) “How often do you participate in religious activities or attend religious services?” and (Q8) “Have you ever received a scholarship or grant to fund your education from a religious organization?” Q7 was measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “Every day” to “Never,” while Q8 was measured as a dichotomous variable with two response options: “Yes” or “No.”

4. Results

Table 1 provides the frequency distribution results to the question: “Do you believe your religious affiliation has contributed to your current socioeconomic status?” The most frequently observed category was Yes (n = 93, 59.62%), indicating that approximately 60% of the sample population attribute their success to the support of their faith-based community.

The hypothesis, “African Americans with religious affiliation believe their faith has contributed to their socioeconomic progress,” was supported. This finding provides preliminary insight into the connection between religious engagement and socioeconomic status among African Americans.

The hypothesis that a positive relationship exists between active involvement in religious activities and higher annual income is partially supported by the finding that individuals who earned a higher income reported more frequent participation in weekly religious services or activities. However, the most common response from individuals earning between \$15,000 to \$29,999 was “every week,” which is a surprising finding. This suggests that income level may not be the only factor at play when it comes to religious involvement. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for participating in religious activities split by annual household income. Frequencies and percentages are presented in Table 2. The most frequently observed category of “participating in religious services or activities” within the Under \$15,000 category of Annual Income was Never (n = 12, 46.15%). The most frequently observed category of Participating in religious services or activities within the Between \$15,000 and \$29,999 category of Annual Income was Every week (n = 8, 32.00%). The most frequently observed category of Participating in religious services or activities within the Between \$30,000 and \$49,999 category of Annual Income was Every week (n = 12, 30.00%). The most frequently observed category of Participating in religious services or activities within the Between \$50,000 and \$74,999 category of Annual Income was Never (n = 9, 30.00%). The most frequently observed categories of Participating in religious services or activities within the Between \$75,000 and \$99,999 category of Annual Income were Every month and Never (n = 5, 29.41%). The most frequently observed category of Participating in religious services or activities within the Between \$100,000 and \$150,000 category of Annual Income was Less than once a month (n = 5, 45.45%). The most frequently observed category of Participating in religious services or activities within the Over \$150,000 category of Annual Income was Every week (n = 4, 57.14%).

Table 1: Frequency Distribution

		Do you believe your religious community has contributed to your current socio-economic status?			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<u>Yes</u>	<u>93</u>	59.6	59.6	59.6
	<u>No</u>	<u>63</u>	40.4	40.4	100.0
	Total	156	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Frequency Table

How often do you participate in religious activities or attend religious services?	What is your approximate annual household income?						
	Under \$15,000	Between \$15,000 and \$29,999	Between \$30,000 and \$49,999	Between \$50,000 and \$74,999	Between \$75,000 and \$99,999	Between \$100,000 and \$150,000	Over \$150,000
Every day	2 (7.69%)	5 (24.00%)	5 (12.50%)	4 (13.33%)	4 (23.53%)	0 (0.00%)	1 (14.29%)
Every week	5 (23.08%)	8 (32.00%)	12 (30.00%)	3 (26.67%)	2 (11.76%)	3 (27.27%)	4 (57.14%)
Every month	2 (7.69%)	5 (20.00%)	11 (27.50%)	1 (3.33%)	5 (29.41%)	2 (18.18%)	1 (14.29%)
Less than once a month	4 (15.38%)	3 (12.00%)	3 (7.50%)	3 (26.67%)	1 (5.88%)	5 (45.45%)	1 (14.29%)
Never	12 (46.15%)	3 (12.00%)	9 (22.50%)	9 (30.00%)	5 (29.41%)	1 (9.09%)	0 (0.00%)
Total	26 (100.00%)	25 (100.00%)	40 (100.00%)	30 (100.00%)	17 (100.00%)	11 (100.00%)	7 (100.00%)

The hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between the frequency of religious participation and the likelihood of receiving scholarship or grant funding from religious organizations for African American students is supported. The findings of a chi-square test of independence revealed a significant relationship between the frequency of religious participation and the likelihood of receiving a scholarship or grant funding from religious organizations. The chi-square test examined whether Q7 (“How often do you participate in religious activities or attend religious services?”) and Q8 (“Have you ever received a scholarship or grant to fund your education from a religious organization?”) were independent. There were five levels in Q7: Every day, Every week, Every month, Less than once a month, and Never. There were two levels in Q8: Yes and No. Table 3 presents the results of the Chi-square test. The assumption of adequate cell size was assessed, which requires all cells to have expected values greater than zero and 80% of cells to have expected values of at least five (McHugh 2013, 143–49). All cells had expected values greater than zero, indicating that the first condition was met.

100.00% of the cells had expected frequencies of at least five, indicating the second condition was met.

The Chi-square test results were significant based on an alpha value of .05, $\chi^2(4) = 25.13$, $p < .001$, suggesting that Q7 and Q8 are related. Table 4 presents the crosstabulation of the Chi-square test. The significant results showed a clear relationship between Q7 and Q8, with an alpha value of .001 and a Chi-square value of 25.13. The following level combinations had observed values that were greater than their expected values: Q7 (Every day): Q8 (Yes), Q7 (Every month): Q8 (Yes), Q7 (Every week): Q8 (No), Q7 (Less than once a month): Q8 (No), and Q7 (Never): Q8 (No). The following level combinations had observed values that were less than their expected values: Q7 (Every week): Q8 (Yes), Q7 (Less than once a month): Q8 (Yes), Q7 (Never): Q8 (Yes), Q7 (Every day): Q8 (No), and Q7 (Every month): Q8 (No). This finding suggests that religious participation frequency and funding for education are linked, providing valuable insights for further discussion and explorations.

Table 3: Chi-square Test of Independence

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	25.135 ^a	4	<.001
Likelihood Ratio	24.593	4	<.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	8.203	1	.004
N of Valid Cases	156		

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 5.64.

Table 4: Chi-square Test Crosstabulation

How often do you participate in religious activities or attend religious services? * Have you ever received a scholarship or grant to fund your education from a religious organization?

Have you ever received a scholarship or grant to fund your education from a religious organization?

		Yes		No	Total
How often do you participate in religious activities or attend religious services?	Every day	Count	11	11	22
		Expected Count	5.6	16.4	22.0
Every week	Count	8	35	43	
	Expected Count	11.0	32.0	43.0	
Every month	Count	14	13	27	
	Expected Count	6.9	20.1	27.0	
Less than once a month	Count	2	23	25	
	Expected Count	6.4	18.6	25.0	

	Never	Count	5	34	39
		Expected Count	10.0	29.0	39.0
Total		Count	40	116	156
		Expected Count	40.0	116.0	156.0

5. Discussion

Table 1 presents intriguing results regarding whether one’s religious community has played a role in their socioeconomic status. Notably, the most common answer was in the affirmative, with 60% of the sample population responding with “Yes.” This suggests that individuals who actively participate in religious activities may perceive their spiritual communities as contributing to their success. Of particular interest is the breakdown of responses according to household income, which may reveal further insights into how religious affiliation and socioeconomic status intersect.

It is interesting to see how income plays a role in religious participation, as revealed in Table 2. For those earning under \$15,000, it is not surprising to see that “never” is the most common response. However, it is fascinating to note that for those earning between \$15,000 to \$29,999, the most common reply was “every week.” This suggests that people in lower income categories might seek refuge in religion more than we assume. On the other hand, for people earning \$50,000 to \$75,000, “never” seems to be the prevalent response, perhaps indicating a shift towards secularism or a detachment from traditional religious practices. Nonetheless, the data shows that religion still holds an important place in many African Americans’ lives. These findings underscore the importance of religious organizations as providers of social support and resources, highlighting the potential value of such communities beyond merely spiritual guidance.

The finding that engaging in religious activities was positively associated with the likelihood of receiving a scholarship from a religious organization further underscores the importance of active involvement in faith communities for African Americans seeking to improve their socioeconomic status. These results align with previous studies that have found that religion plays a crucial role in the lives of African Americans, providing them with social support and cultural resources that promote resilience and success. Additionally, this study provides insights into the influence of religious involvement on academic pursuits. It recognizes the potential motivational benefits of religious experiences on academic achievements. Moreover, further research is needed to highlight the importance of considering religiosity as a potential predictor of scholarship receipt. Religious organizations can use such information better to understand the needs and interests of their constituents and develop targeted scholarship programs that cater to different levels of religiosity.

However, it should be noted that the study has two limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, the pilot sample size was relatively small, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the survey was designed to capture only quantitative data on education outcomes and income levels. As such, it did not account for important contextual and socioeconomic factors that may influence the relationship between denominational affiliations and education outcomes.

While these findings may be limited due to the pilot study’s sample size, they raise important questions about the intersection of faith and societal structures. How much of an impact do these beliefs have on our economic circumstances? Furthermore, how might economic outcomes shape our religious beliefs and practices? Therefore, further research with a larger sample of African Americans is warranted to elucidate the associations between religious affiliations, education outcomes, and income.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this pilot study examined the potential relationship between religious engagement and socioeconomic status among African Americans. The research questions presented significantly contribute to the research landscape by addressing the potential relationship between religious engagement and socioeconomic status among African Americans. This pilot study offers several key contributions:

1. **Examining Perceptions:** The first research question explores African Americans’ perceptions regarding the role of their religious affiliation in contributing to their socioeconomic progress. This aspect adds an important qualitative dimension to the research landscape by delving into individual beliefs and subjective experiences related to the intersection of religion and socioeconomic outcomes.
2. **Predictive Value of Religious Involvement:** The second research question investigates whether active involvement in religious activities predicts higher annual income for African Americans. By exploring the potential predictive power of religious engagement on income levels, this question provides insights into the potential benefits of religious involvement and its impact on socioeconomic status.
3. **Scholarships and Grants:** The third research question focuses on the correlation between the frequency of religious participation and the likelihood of African American students receiving scholarship or grant funding from religious organizations. This question examines the potential role of religious organizations in providing financial resources and support for educational pursuits within the African American community, highlighting an often-overlooked avenue for socioeconomic advancement.

Moreover, the pilot study’s quantitative data collection on income levels, religious activities, and scholarship information among African Americans in different areas contributes to the empirical understanding of the relationship between religious engagement and socioeconomic status. Using descriptive and inferential statistics to analyze the relationships among these variables provides initial insights into potential associations, serving as a foundation for future, more comprehensive research. Overall, this pilot study helps fill existing research gaps by examining the perceived contributions of religious affiliation, the predictive value of religious involvement on income levels, and the role of religious organizations in providing educational support. By exploring these research questions and utilizing quantitative data, this

study enhances understanding the complex relationship between religious engagement and socioeconomic status among African Americans, providing valuable groundwork for future investigations in this field.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. This pilot study project required human subjects review as human subjects are involved. Additionally, surveys or other data collection efforts for the program or institutional improvement underwent review. The research follows ethical guidelines for the protection of human subjects. To that end, the researcher employing human subjects completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI). These training and other guidelines include information on developing appropriate introductory letters and utilizing other informed consent language.

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