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## Recollections of Childhood Religious Identity and Behavior as a Function of Adult Religiousness

**R. David Hayward,**  
Duke University Medical Center

**Joanna Maselko,** and  
Duke University Medical Center

**Keith G. Meador**  
Vanderbilt University Medical Center

### Abstract

People have a strong motivation to maintain a self-concept that is coherent and consistent over time. Religion is an central source of social identity for many people, but its importance is prone to dramatic change across the life course. To maintain a consistent perception of self, recollections of one's own past religiousness may shift to better fit with the present. This study examined changes between early and middle adulthood in retrospective perceptions of religious behavior and identity in childhood. Data from a population-based birth cohort sample were matched with data from individuals who participated in at least two of three adult follow-up studies, at intervals of approximately 10 years. Logistic regression was used to analyze the association of final recollections of childhood behavior and identity with previous recollections and current religious characteristics. Consistent with the predictions of temporal self-appraisal theory, participants' perception of their religious identity as children tended to change over time to match their adult religious identity. Recollections of childhood religious behavior were more stable than recollections of religious identity, and change was unrelated to adult behavior. These results have implications for studying religious characteristics using retrospective measures, regarding their accuracy and their independence from contemporary measures.

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The consistency and accuracy of individuals' recollections of their personal pasts is highly variable between domains and types of measurement, especially concerning changes and transitions over time (P. Cohen, Kasen, Bifulco, Andrews, & Gordon, 2005). Religion is one domain in which people tend to undergo patterns of change, both between childhood and adulthood and across the adult lifespan (Levin & Taylor, 1997; Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007), but little is known about how changes in behavior identity may shape one's retrospective recollections of earlier states of religiousness. For many, religion serves as an important element of social identity (Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Ethier, 1995), and religious groups are among the most basic and central sources of social identity (Lickel et al., 2000; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). There is evidence that adherents' ability to derive psychological well-being from religion is related to certain social identity processes, including the strength of their religious social identity (Greenfield & Marks, 2007), and their fit with the prototype of a salient religious group (Hayward & Elliott, 2009, 2011). However, religious identity can also be quite complex, because of the complexity of religion itself (A. B. Cohen, 2009). The nested hierarchical structure of many religious

organizations provides for a variety of potential levels of identification. For example, the same individual might identify as a Christian, a Methodist, and as a member of a particular local congregation. Depending on the level at which one's identity is construed, the religious ingroup and outgroup can thus be constructed quite differently. Moreover, religion includes not only group identification, but also elements of both public and private behavior (such as worship and prayer), as well as the adoption of particular sets of beliefs. The relative importance of these elements varies between religions and cultures (A. B. Cohen, 2002, 2009), contributing to even greater complexity of identities.

Some of the differences between the group categorization, behavior, and belief elements of religion may be reflected in the construal of different levels of social identification. One may identify with a particular religious category without engaging in much worship activity or even adhering to its major tenets. Similarly, one may perform activities – like prayer or meditation – or hold a set of beliefs that one perceives as religious, without identifying with a particular religious organization. Such individuals might be described and see themselves as part of the category “religious person,” and continue to derive positive social identity from their religion through identification with this relatively abstract group. Since religious behavior has generally been found to follow a nonlinear trajectory over the life course, being relatively high through early adolescence, then dropping off precipitously before beginning an increase again in middle adulthood that continues into old age (Levin & Taylor, 1997; Uecker, et al., 2007), these multiple forms may make it easier for individuals to maintain a sense of temporal congruence in their religiousness. That is, one can continue to think of oneself as “religious,” based on category identification or beliefs, even when one is not actively participating in religious activities.

### Self-Consistency in Identity

People are strongly motivated to maintain an image of the self that is both coherent and consistent over time (Beike & Landoll, 2000; Peetz & Wilson, 2008). According to temporal self-appraisal theory (Ross & Wilson, 2000; Wilson & Ross, 2003), people perceive the “present self” as connected in time to a series of recollected “past selves” and imagined “future selves,” which vary in their distinctness depending on their relative closeness. Since important elements of the self often change over time, making past selves inconsistent with the present, the process of maintaining a consistent self-image can entail re-evaluation of one's past so that it is perceived as congruent with the present. For example, in a study that manipulated the situation to make a particular past self seem temporally closer to the present self – making that version of the self more relevant to present self-appraisal – people perceived their earlier level of gender identification as more similar to their present reported gender identification than when the past self was perceived as more temporally distant (Broemer, Grabowski, Gebauer, Ermel, & Diehl, 2008).

Thus, present identity can be a factor helping to shape recollections about past identity. This kind of retrospective congruence may result from a conscious re-appraisal of the past self. This can be part of the process of constructing a narrative history of the self (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2001; McLean, 2008). However, such congruence may also result from nonconscious cognitive dissonance processes. To the extent that both present and past selves are perceived in a generally positive light, there is a motivation to construe them as highly similar, particularly on dimensions that are either very central to the self-concept, or highly situationally salient (Peetz & Wilson, 2008).

There are also particular circumstances in which people tend to underestimate the congruence between their past and present selves. The idea of change – and particularly of improvement over time – can be an important element of an individual's life narrative

(McFarland & Alvaro, 2000). For example, college students tend to evaluate their current selves more positively, when asked to make comparisons with themselves earlier in the semester, on a variety of measures, even when there is no evidence of actual improvement (Wilson & Ross, 2001). Particularly for highly salient elements of the self, people are motivated to perceive improvement across the life course, and thus are prone to derogate distant past selves in favor of recent past and current selves (Peetz & Wilson, 2008; Wilson & Ross, 2001).

Thus, those people for whom religion is salient should be motivated to perceive consistency across past, present, and future selves, in terms of their religiousness. However, since religious behavior tends to fluctuate considerably between adolescence, early adulthood, and later adulthood, some degree of dissonance is likely to arise. But, since behavior is only once component of religiousness, it should be relatively easy to assimilate or re-frame the religiousness of one's past selves to fit in with that of the present self. This is particularly true to the extent that being religious is perceived as a basic personal quality, rather than a skill that is learned over time. A noteworthy exception to this may be expected in cases where an individual experiences a fairly sudden conversion or other religious change, such as a "born again" experience. People who follow this religious pattern are likely to develop a life narrative, at least regarding the religious elements of their identities, emphasizing change (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998). They may therefore tend to exaggerate or overestimate the differences in religiousness between their present selves and their past selves before their profound change.

The purpose of this study is to examine changes in retrospective perceptions of one's own past religious behavior and identity, and how those changes are related to present religiousness. Based on temporal self-appraisal theory (Peetz & Wilson, 2008), it is hypothesized that individuals ratings of their religiousness as children will systematically change over time during adulthood to be consistent with contemporaneous ratings of their current religiousness as adults, as they strive to maintain a temporally coherent self image. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that this assimilation effect will be stronger for measures of religious identity, which are inherently both more subjective and reflective of personal identity, than for measures of religious behavior. These analyses are based data from a longitudinal birth cohort survey, in which participants rated their current and childhood religiousness at intervals of approximately 10 years.

## Method

Data used in these analyses came from the Providence, Rhode Island, birth-cohort of the National Collaborative Perinatal Project (NCPP) (Niswander & Gordon, 1972) and from three subsequent follow-up studies.

## Participants

Between 1959 and 1965, 4,140 mother-infant pairs were enrolled at the Providence, RI site, and three follow-up studies were later carried out with independent subsamples of the children from this study, when they were adults. The first of these was conducted between 1987 and 1991, and included 660 participants (Klebanoff, Zemel, Buka, & Zierler, 1998); the second was conducted in 1996 with 718 participants (Buka, Satz, Seidman, & Lipsitt, 1998); the third was conducted in 2001 with 1,577 participants (Kahler et al., 2009). Each of the follow-up studies consisted of a combination of in-person structured interviews and mailed in questionnaires. Because sampling was conducted independently for each of the follow-up studies, based on the population of participants in the baseline study, not all participants were included in every adult follow-up wave. However, there was enough overlap between the samples for these follow-up studies to construct a longitudinal dataset

based on those participants who were interviewed multiple times as adults. In total, there were 354 participants from the original NCPP sample as children who had been in at least two adult follow-up studies, and had sufficient data to be included in the present analyses

## Materials

The key measures of interest in this present study include participant demographics and family of origin characteristics (collected in the baseline NCPP study), and four measures of religion (collected in each of the follow-up studies). The religion measures included: (1) current religious behavior (“do you regularly go to a church or other place of worship?”), (2) current religious identity (“do you consider yourself a religious person?”), (3) retrospective childhood religious behavior (“growing up, did you regularly go to a church or other place of worship?”), and (4) retrospective childhood religious identity (“growing up, did you consider yourself a religious person?”). Each of these items had a binary yes/no response format.

## Data structure

To maximize the power of the analyses the data were collapsed so that each participant had a single “adult time 1” set of observations matched with a single set of “adult time 2” observations. These points were defined such that data from the earliest follow-up study in which the participant had taken part (regardless of whether it was the first or second follow-up study) became the “adult time 1” data, and data from the subsequent follow-up study most temporally distant became the “adult time 2” data. For example, if the participant had been in the second and third follow-up studies only, time 1 and time 2 would represent data from the second and third follow-up studies, respectively. If the participant was in all three follow-up studies, time 1 and time 2 represent data from the first and third studies.

## Results

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Table 2 summarizes within-participant patterns in current and retrospective religious behavior and identity between the initial and final waves. Retrospective ratings of childhood religious behavior were considerably more stable than those of childhood religious identity. While 11.4% of participants changed their recollection of whether they had attended religious services regularly as children, 25.9% changed their estimation of whether or not they were religious people as children.

Logistic regression was used to examine the factors associated with these retrospective measures of childhood religiousness. Results for separate logistic models of both final retrospective ratings of both religious behavior and identity are presented in Table 3. For the behavioral measure of religiosity, one’s previous recollection was related to the subsequent recollection ( $b = 2.77$ ,  $OR = 15.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ), while reported current adult behavior was unrelated ( $b = -0.0004$ ,  $OR = 1.00$ ,  $p = .74$ ). That is, recollections of behavior were fairly stable over time, and the change that occurred was at random in relation to adult religious behavior. However, for the identity measure of childhood religiosity, both one’s previous recall of childhood identity ( $b = 1.90$ ,  $OR = 6.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and one’s current adult identity ( $b = 1.53$ ,  $OR = 4.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were strongly related the final retrospective rating of one’s childhood religious identity. That is, while there was still significant stability between adult recollections of childhood religious identity, changes in these recollections were much more likely than not to be in the same direction as adult religious identity.

## Discussion

Consistent with hypotheses derived from temporal self-appraisal theory (Peez & Wilson, 2008; Ross & Wilson, 2000), results of these analyses indicate that there are differences over time in how adults remember their childhood religiousness, depending on whether that religiousness is framed in behavioral or identity terms. Across a period of about 10 to 20 years in early to middle adulthood, participants' recollections of whether or not they attended religious services regularly in childhood remained relatively stable, and what change did occur was not correlated with their reported frequency of religious service attendance in adulthood. However, there was considerably more change across the course of the study in participants' ratings of whether or not they were "religious people" in childhood. More importantly, this change was strongly related to present identification as a "religious person" or not in adulthood. That is, religious people were more likely to come to see their childhood selves as religious, while non-religious people were more likely to begin to recall their childhood selves as having been non-religious as well.

This pattern of results is consistent with predictions based on self-appraisal theory. Since we are motivated to see ourselves as basically stable on important dimensions across the life course, and to reduce perceived dissonance between past and present selves, it is likely that when people re-evaluate their religiousness they tend to harmonize past identities with present ones. Since religious behavior is more objective, as well as more verifiable by others, than internal states such as seeing oneself as a "religious person," it is less prone to change in recollection. If dissonance arises, it is more likely for behavior to be reconstrued. For example, someone who has become less religious can attribute childhood behavior to family pressure, while someone who has become more religious can attribute the previously dissonant behavior to a lack of opportunity. These findings are also consistent with previous findings regarding retrospective measurement of change, that recollections of behavior are both more stable and more consistent with contemporaneous measures than recollections of other elements of one's personal past, including identity (P. Cohen, et al., 2005).

These findings have some practical implications for the use of retrospective measures of religiousness. Measures of religious identity appear to be particularly problematic. Not only were these responses quite prone to change over time, in this study, but there was considerable bias in the direction of this change, towards assimilation with adult religious identity. This raises serious methodological concerns for attempting to retrospectively establish relationships between early religious identity and outcomes in adulthood, since these measures may be both inaccurate and non-independent of other important constructs related to adult religiousness. If retrospective measures of religion must be employed in research, behavioral measures would seem to have the advantage of being relatively stable and independent of adult religiosity. While this stability does not necessarily imply greater accuracy, it is plausible that these reports of behavior provide a more objective measure of religiousness in childhood. Childhood religiousness has been of interest to researchers both in relation to the trajectory of adult religiousness (Granqvist & Hagekull, 1999; Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1990; Koenig, McGue, Krueger, & Bouchard, 2005). Childhood religiousness itself, as well stability of religiousness between childhood and adulthood, have also been found in some studies to be associated with lower subsequent risk of depression and other forms of psychiatric illness (Maselko & Buka, 2008; Miller, Weissman, Gur, & Greenwald, 2002). The results of this study reinforce the methodological hazards of relying on retrospective data regarding early religiousness when doing research in these areas.

Limitations of this study include the use of binary measures of religious behavior and identity, lack of precision in the framing of the items, and the unavailability of contemporaneous measures of actual religiosity during childhood. First, participants were

limited to choosing between regular and irregular worship attendance, and between religious and non-religious identity. More nuanced measures would provide a better picture of people's childhood recollections, and might be less prone to error. However, since the use of more sensitive measures would also tend to make associations statistically easier to detect, it is anticipated that the present pattern of results would likely be even stronger if such measures were available. Next, the measures did not provide a frame to define "childhood," so it is possible that participants did not use the same reference age when recalling their childhood religiousness at different waves of the study. For example, at age 19 one might be more likely to construe "childhood" to refer to pre-adolescence, while the same person at age 40 might be more likely to include their teenage years. Since religiosity is likely to undergo change throughout the span that could be considered "childhood," an unknown amount of variability between retrospective measures may be due to changing points of reference. It is also unfortunate that measures collected while participants were children did not include self or parent rated religiousness, so there is no contemporaneous standard against which to judge the accuracy of later recollections. Finally, the sample for this study was geographically limited to the northeastern US and was predominantly composed of Christians. Cultural norms regarding religion may play a role in shaping recollections in ways that may limit the generalizability of these findings to other populations.

Nevertheless, this study provides evidence of the ways in which people's recollections of their past religiousness change over the course of adulthood, at least in part to harmonize their present and past selves. Who you think you were as a child appears to be at least in part a function of who you think you are now. In contrast, recollections of childhood religious behavior seem to remain relatively stable, and do not appear to depend on current adult religious behavior. Future research should examine the issues of perceived closeness of present and past selves, and personal narratives of change as they relate to religion. In particular, taking into account personal histories that include significant conversion or born-again experiences may help to explain why some individuals put more distance between their present and past religious identities over time. Understanding these relationships makes clear the important role that self and social identity processes have in shaping the way that individuals experience and come to understand their religious history throughout the life course.

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**Table 1**

## Descriptive statistics

	Initial Wave		Final Wave	
	M	(SD)	M	(SD)
Age	29.84	(5.42)	37.95	(2.22)
	N	(%)	N	(%)
<i>Sex</i>				
Male	190	(53.67)		
Female	164	(46.33)		
<i>Race</i>				
Black	77	(22.06)		
White	271	(77.65)		
Other	1	(0.29)		
<i>Current Attendance</i>				
Regular	142	(40.23)	183	(51.84)
Not Regular	211	(59.77)	170	(48.16)
<i>Retrospective Childhood Attendance</i>				
Regular	312	(88.39)	310	(87.82)
Not Regular	41	(11.61)	43	(12.18)
<i>Current Religious Identity</i>				
Religious Person	200	(56.50)	226	(63.84)
Not a Religious Person	154	(43.50)	128	(36.16)
<i>Retrospective Childhood Religious Identity</i>				
Religious Person	201	(56.78)	217	(61.30)
Not a Religious Person	153	(43.22)	137	(38.70)

**Table 2**

Change in retrospective measures of religiousness between initial and final waves

	Current		Retrospective Childhood	
	N	(%)	N	(%)
<i>Regular Attendance</i>				
Stable "yes"	106	(30.03)	291	(82.44)
Stable "no"	147	(41.64)	22	(6.23)
Decreased	36	(10.20)	21	(5.96)
Increased	64	(18.13)	19	(5.38)
<i>Religious Identity</i>				
Stable "religious"	178	(50.28)	163	(46.05)
Stable "not religious"	106	(29.94)	99	(27.97)
Decreased	22	(6.21)	38	(10.73)
Increased	48	(13.56)	54	(15.25)

**Table 3**

Logistic regression results for retrospective childhood religious behavior and identity, measured at final wave

	<i>b</i>	(SE)	OR
<i>Retrospective Childhood Religious Behavior at Final Wave</i>			
Intercept	-0.24	(0.47)	
Time elapsed between initial and final wave	0.01	(0.04)	1.01
Initial wave retrospective childhood behavior	2.77***	(0.39)	15.92
Final wave current behavior	-0.004	(0.37)	1.00
<i>Retrospective Childhood Religious Identity at Final Wave</i>			
Intercept	-1.24***	(0.34)	
Time elapsed between initial and final wave	-0.03	(0.03)	0.97
Initial wave retrospective childhood identity	1.90***	(0.26)	6.70
Final wave current identity	1.53***	(0.27)	4.61

\*\*\*  
 $p < .001,$

\*\*  
 $p < .01,$

\*  
 $p < .05$