Measuring the Role of Faith in Program Outcomes: Key Conceptual and Methodological Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1990s, three developments have contributed to an increased diversity of nongovernmental entities providing social services. First, devolution has shifted policy authority downward from the federal government to state and local actors. Second, this shift has been accompanied by increased diversity in the organizations providing assistance, particularly as priorities have shifted in some policy domains from cash transfers to the provision of social services and programs that promote self-sufficiency. Third, performance management has produced a new emphasis on measurable program outputs and new systems of performance feedback and reward.

Policymakers and researchers have begun to focus on the role of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in this reorganization of social policy. Although FBOs have a long history of providing social services in the United States, supported with both public and private funds (Cnaan, 1999; Gruber & Hungerman, 2005; Tirrito & Cascio, 2003), Charitable Choice provisions first embedded within the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 allow FBOs to compete for government funds on an equal footing with other nongovernmental organizations, and open pathways for FBOs to become more involved in the delivery of publicly funded social services. While existing research on the reorganization of social policy practice has focused on the transition to greater reliance on nongovernmental organizations for the delivery of social services, the implications of increased reliance on FBOs specifically have not been adequately addressed.

Issues related to increased reliance on and public funding of FBOs can be organized into the following four broad areas:

- Legal—Legal issues include whether using public tax money to subsidize charitable activities of religious organizations violates the First Amendment provision separating church and state, and whether religious groups that accept public funds can make religiously based employment decisions (see, for example, Lupu & Tuttle, 2006).
Religious autonomy—The key concern in this area is whether receipt of public funds will have a secularizing effect on religious organizations (see, for example, Bositis, 2006; Gibelman & Gelman, 2003).

Capacity—Concerns exist that FBOs, particularly congregations and those at the grassroots, lack the experience or infrastructure to undertake such activities as managing multiple funding streams or providing accurate financial reports (see, for example, De Vita & Wilson, 2001). A broader concern is whether FBOs have the professional capacity to deliver long-term development aid as compared to short-term emergency assistance (see, for example, Scott, 2003).

Effectiveness—The final area of concern is whether FBOs are as or more effective than secular organizations in terms of serving clients and achieving positive outcomes (see, for example, Cnaan & Boddie, 2002; De Vita & Wilson, 2001; Gibelman & Gelman, 2003; Urban Institute, 2005).

While there are outstanding and important research questions related to each of these areas, the focus of the Institute for Research on Poverty’s working conference on Measuring the Role of Faith in Program Outcomes is limited to the final area: the effectiveness of the services provided by FBOs. The role of FBOs and the “faith factor” in contributing to program effectiveness is an area of substantial recent policy interest and research. Important related issues have been raised by faith-based service providers, policymakers, and researchers from a range of academic disciplines, using a variety of research methods. In particular, two key questions of interest have been identified: 1) Does the provision of services by FBOs improve outcomes for participants compared to secular organizations? and 2) Can any differences in outcomes be attributed to a leveraging of religiosity and spirituality, or what is often termed the “faith factor,” that may be unique to FBOs?

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE “EFFECTIVENESS” OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS?

Research specifically designed to answer the first of these questions—whether provision of services by FBOs (particularly those services that go beyond the provision of basic material needs and encompass, for example, job training and education, alcohol and other drug abuse treatment, or youth mentoring) improves outcomes for participants as compared to secular organizations—has been limited. In general, the studies completed to date have focused on program delivery and characteristics; outcome information has often consisted of descriptive statistics. The result, as summarized by Cnaan and
Boddie (2006), is that “we do not know if faith-based social services are at all effective, and when compared to secular (private, public or nonprofit) social services, if they are performing equally, better, or worse” (p. 9).

Given this, it is not surprising that even less attention has been given to the second question of interest: whether any differences in outcomes can be attributed to the faith factor. Although some associations have been established between the religious character of social service programs and program outcomes, no definitive conclusions can be reached because of difficulties in discerning which program components matter. At issue is not only whether FBOs are effective but why they are effective. The key challenge is in determining whether outcomes achieved by FBOs can be attributed to an organization’s faith components as compared to other organizational or programmatic attributes, such as the content and/or structure of the services provided, the client selection process, client profiles and perceptions, and community relations (Smith, Bartkowski, & Grettenberger, n.d.).

There are several reasons why the answers to these two questions are critical. For example

- If FBOs are found to be more effective than their secular counterparts, and if faith, per se, is central to program effectiveness, then: 1) an important justification may exist for FBO involvement in the provision of social services, perhaps without requiring such a “robust wall of separation between government and religion” (Lupu & Tuttle, 2005, p. 1); and 2) identification of faith as an important input in relation to outcomes may require modification of existing performance measurement and program evaluation strategies.

- If FBOs are found to be more effective than their secular counterparts, but attributes other than faith, per se, are central to program effectiveness, then: 1) an important justification may exist for FBO involvement in the provision of social services, but with a continued separation between government and religion; and 2) identification of the organizational attributes associated with FBO effectiveness as important inputs in relation to outcomes may require modification of existing performance measurement and evaluation strategies.

- If FBOs are not found to be more effective than their secular counterparts, then what has been perceived as an important rationale for their involvement in the provision of social services, particularly publicly funded social services, may be called into question.

There are, however, several conceptual and methodological challenges to answering questions about the effectiveness of FBOs and the extent to which the faith factor contributes to this effectiveness, many of which have been identified, but not necessarily resolved, in the existing literature related to the provision of services by FBOs. This paper outlines some of the key challenges related to identifying the
faith factor in the provision of services, measuring the faith factor, and assessing its effect on outcomes. It is intended to lay the groundwork for a discussion aimed toward the development of a framework for evaluating whether and why FBOs are effective. Evaluating the effectiveness of faith-based services will help support the best future investments in social services, including those provided by FBOs.

WHAT IS THE “FAITH FACTOR”? 

An initial hurdle to be overcome in assessing the relationship between the faith factor and program outcomes is defining the faith factor. This definition is critical because the faith factor is the key independent variable of interest in relation to participant outcomes. The term is, however, employed differently across academic disciplines and within different research traditions. Further, the terms “religion” and “faith” are often used interchangeably to explain the same phenomena, although the term “religion” is becoming increasingly associated with an institutional perspective (Zinnbauer et al., 1997), while “faith” is becoming associated with “the personal, subjective side of religious experience” (Hill & Pargament, 2003, p. 64). Defined in these ways, religiosity and spirituality are different, if related, dimensions. Clarifying the extent to which the faith factor incorporates each dimension is a key challenge in measuring the role of the faith factor in program outcomes.

Further complicating the question in the literature is the level at which the faith factor is to be measured. As noted by DiLulio (2002) and others, it is important to understand the faith factor at three different levels: the individual (referred to by DiLulio as “organic religion”); the organization (“programmatic religion”); and the community (“ecological religion”). In some fields, such as psychology, mental health, and aging, research at the first of these levels—the individual—has been a focus of interest. As a result, articulation of issues associated with measuring the multiple dimensions of religiosity and spirituality in relation to individuals is fairly robust (see, for example, Hill & Pargament, 2003; Idler et al., 2003; Piedmont, 2001; Zinnbauer et al., 1997; and Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). Some of these measures have been more recently adopted in studies designed to ascertain the buffering effects of an individual’s religion on measures of socioeconomic disadvantage (Dehejia,
DeLeire, Luttmer, & Mitchell, 2007) and on behaviors such as the commission of property or violent crimes (Lillard & Price, 2007).

However, defining the role of faith within an organization or a community and developing appropriate measures have received far less attention. The need to develop measures for the faith factor from an organizational perspective is a priority, given that public policy might influence what types of programs are offered, by what organizations, and in what communities, but will likely not have an influence on the “faith” an individual, particularly a participant, brings to a program. It is not at all clear, however, whether it is possible to reach agreement about the best strategies for measuring the faith factor within organizations.

HOW CAN THE ROLE OF THE FAITH FACTOR WITHIN AN ORGANIZATION BE MEASURED?

One way to define the extent to which the faith factor exists within an organization is simply to distinguish between FBOs and secular organizations. In this case, those organizations that are faith-based can be presumed to somehow incorporate the faith factor into their provision of services; the counterfactual is that those organizations that are secular do not. However, this approach is problematic for a variety of reasons (Allard, 2007; Noyes, 2006).

First, there is no single or even commonly understood definition of an FBO for the purposes of discussing FBOs’ participation in the social service delivery system. Neither the United States Constitution nor relevant Supreme Court precedents contain a comprehensive definition of “religion” or “religious organization.” In addition, despite the fact that the federal government has initiated much of the recent discussion about the provision of social services by FBOs, it has not established a federally accepted definition of the term (White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, 2006). Researchers have stepped into this void, with some stating that FBOs are, by definition, connected with an organized faith community (Scott, 2003). Others believe that the term “faith-related” is preferable to “faith-based” because of the variations among providers in the ways in which their faith is expressed, and
also because of the “complex ties between the agencies and their societies” (Smith & Sosin, 2001, p. 653).

Second, the dichotomizing of organizations as either secular or faith-based may not be appropriate. The challenge of clearly defining FBOs is evident in the variety of typologies that have been developed to describe FBOs. The typologies are usually rooted in concepts such as size and geography or the level of institutional faith. For example

- Cnaan (1999) based his typology on the concepts of size and geography. Its six categories are: 1) local congregations, 2) interfaith agencies and ecumenical coalitions, 3) city- or region-wide sectarian agencies, 4) national projects and organizations under religious auspices, 5) paradenominational advocacy and relief organizations, and 6) religiously affiliated international organizations.

- The Working Group on Human Needs and Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (Working Group on Human Needs, 2002) developed its typology based on key characteristics related to, for example, an organization’s mission statement; founding; controlling board; selection of senior management and other staff; affiliation with an external, religious agency; and source of financial support. This typology also has six categories: 1) faith-saturated, 2) faith-centered, 3) faith-related, 4) faith background, 5) faith-secular partnership, and 6) secular.

- Monsma (2004) also used six categories in his classification of welfare-to-work programs: 1) government run programs; 2) for-profit programs; 3) secular programs that are large and professionalized; 4) small, secular nonprofit programs that are grassroots or community-based in nature; 5) faith-segmented programs that implicitly and clearly separate religious elements from the services being provided; and 6) faith-integrated programs that explicitly interweave religious elements into the services being provided.

However, the current range of typologies may not get us closer to agreement about how to measure the faith factor in relationship to the provision of social services for at least four reasons. First, there is no one typology that is commonly used or accepted by government agencies, researchers, or service providers. Researchers studying FBOs typically employ their own typology, which may draw from typologies developed by other researchers but do not mirror them exactly (Allard, 2007).

Second, it is not at all clear which of these typologies has “construct validity,” meaning that the measures that are used to classify faith programs into these categories actually measure the theoretical construct of the faith factor. For example, many criteria for categorizing a given organization are based on seven traits initially identified by Jeavons (1998) and summarized by Ebaugh, Pipes, Chafetz, and Daniels (2003): 1) self-identification and a display of this identity; 2) clients as well as staff tend to be religiously
committed as individuals; 3) material resources are provided by religious people or organizations; 4) organizational goals, products, and services are religious in nature and performed on the basis of religious values; 5) there is a reliance on religious values, beliefs, and experiences in information processing and decision-making; 6) power derives from religious sources and often is a requirement of leadership; and 7) interaction with other religious organizations and groups with religious goals.

However, whether these traits actually reflect the extent to which faith is incorporated into the provision of services is not clear. As noted by Netting, O’Conner, and Yancy (2006), these “visible” elements of faith may not reflect how faith is actually manifested in the delivery of programs and services.

Third, the typologies all overlook the extent to which the faith factor may have an influence on secular organizations. This is particularly true if, for example, the behavior of staff members is influenced by their individual faith. As noted by Ebaugh, Pipes, Chafetz, and Daniels (2003), a key reason cited for why FBOs might produce differential outcomes relates to the motivation of their staff: “Their religious character motivates a supportive and caring attitude on the part of staff and volunteers that is transmitted through relationally based programs aimed at transforming lives” (p. 412). However, this motivation may exist within individuals who are part of a faith community but are working in secular organizations. If this is the case, is it appropriate to believe that faith plays no role in the delivery of services by such secular organizations?

Fourth, questions can be raised as to whether the typologies focus on the right unit of analysis. That is, rather than focusing on the religious characteristics of the organizations providing the services, should the typologies focus instead on specific programs within an organization? This line of thinking, which distinguishes between programs within an organization and the organization itself, has been advocated by Unruh and Sider (2001), who note the wide variation in the religious content of different programs within a single organization. Thus, it is possible for an organization to appear to be faith-saturated but, in relation to a particular program, the faith factor may play no role.
HOW CAN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE FAITH FACTOR AND OUTCOMES BE MEASURED?

Even given a definition of the independent variable of interest—the faith factor—and an adequate measure of its role in the delivery of services, challenges remain in identifying the relationship between the faith factor and outcomes. To a great extent, these challenges are common to most efforts to evaluate social services; the central issue of identifying the causal effect of the faith factor, and ruling out other plausible explanations for the outcomes, is hardly unique to this area. There are, however, particular dimensions of faith-based services that raise specialized challenges for evaluation efforts.

First, is it possible to disentangle the role of the faith factor from other characteristics of an FBO that may have an influence on outcomes? On the one hand, there is a belief that faith-based social service programs may be “more successful precisely because of an explicit religious or faith element” (Monsma, 2004, p. 45), and that faith-based programs “facilitate a form of divine intervention or discovery that may result in social or spiritual transformation based on deeply held religious beliefs and values” (Harden, 2006, p. 485). On the other hand, the factors that actually have an effect on outcomes might be associated with FBOs but be largely unrelated to faith per se, such as accessibility, trust, and individualized service (Sherman, 2003), or their more holistic approach (Sherman, 2003; Smith, Bartkowski, & Grettenberger, n.d.).

A second challenge relates to the difficulty of measuring the strength and intensity of the treatment, where the treatment is “faith.” Not only does the faith factor differ across organizations, as partially reflected in the typologies previously discussed, but the extent to which the faith factor is incorporated into a specific program may also vary from day to day, given the often personal nature of the services provided. This is not a question of whether or not an individual is subject to a particular policy (such as time limits under welfare reform) or a particular dosage of a drug (as in the case of drug trials). As noted by von Furstenberg (2006), “social organizations do not mechanically produce services and their clients do not respond passively and predictively” (p. 53). Rather, incentives, motivations, and mechanisms can be fluid and geared toward specific outcomes for individual clients.
A third challenge, common to most evaluation efforts, relates to identifying mediating and moderating variables in relation to outcomes. In other words, are there other factors that contribute to or impede positive outcomes within FBOs as compared to secular outcomes? Do outcomes differ by, for example, type of client, type of services provided, location of service delivery? Do outcomes involve some kind of convergence of individual, organizational, and societal faith factors? Perhaps the faith factor only has an effect under certain circumstances, with certain clients. This information would be important to know in developing appropriate policy responses.

Fourth, the issue of selection bias, which, as noted by Larzelere, Kuhn, and Johnson (2004), “is often the most important threat to making valid causal inferences in intervention research” (p. 289), needs to be addressed. Again, while this is a common concern, it is particularly central in research on the role of faith because many concepts of faith emphasize dimensions that are essentially unobservable (for example, an individual’s belief in personal accountability to God). Given potential unobserved differences, how do we know that outcomes are not due to pre-existing characteristics of the groups being compared? As noted by Sherman (2003), some clients of FBOs are already people of faith. According to these individuals, FBOs have helped them to apply their faith or provided them with a connection to a supportive faith community, leading to successful outcomes. However, questions can be raised as to whether, absent a pre-existing individual faith factor, such outcomes would have been possible. Conversely, the question can be raised as to whether it is possible that someone who does not share a faith tradition with a particular provider will have worse outcomes if services are provided by that provider.

Finally, consideration needs to be given as to the appropriate definition of “success” when it comes to comparing outcomes of services provided by FBOs to those of their secular counterparts. The need to consider this question is reflected in Lockhart’s (2005) summary of the social capital literature regarding service provision by secular and faith-based service providers. This literature notes that secular providers most often view their work as “contractual,” while FBOs more often view their work as “covenantal.” As a result, secular agencies focus on the establishment and accomplishment of individual goals, emphasizing such outcomes as skills development, while FBOs focus on mutual responsibilities in
a community, emphasizing both personal and social needs. In addition, Lockhart draws upon the congregational research completed by Cnaan (2002) to note that contact with clients “does not end when the problem disappears” (p. 291). Within this context, viewpoints about outcomes may differ.

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH ASSESSING THE ROLE OF THE FAITH FACTOR IN THE DELIVERY OF SERVICES

This paper has outlined some of the key areas in which it is critical for practitioners, policymakers, and evaluators to build a common understanding if we are to develop better information about the faith factor’s role in the provision of social services. The issues as outlined are related to defining the faith factor, measuring the role of the faith factor within an organization’s provision of services, and analyzing the relationship between the faith factor and outcomes. Although consensus has not been reached on how to address each of these issues, the broad parameters for a discussion about them have been developed.

This is not to imply, however, that these are the only issues that remain to be addressed in relation to better understanding the role of the faith factor in the provision of social services and its implications for public policy. A review of the literature suggests that such efforts to evaluate the faith factor may potentially require the conceptualization and measurement of important variables and relationships that are only beginning to be defined and understood. The following reflects some, but not all, of these areas for consideration:

- The role of the “moral logic” of different religions—Often, the evaluation of a program or policy is driven by an interest in replication. Yet, as noted by Cnaan and Boddie (2006), “the more an intervention is religion-specific, the less likely it is that other faith traditions will adopt it” (p 16). What does it mean to assess the effectiveness of the faith factor across different religious traditions? How can differences across religious traditions be incorporated into evaluations of the faith factor?

- The role of “community”—There are different mechanisms through which the faith factor and community may interrelate. The faith factor may, for example, be the basis for which a connection to a faith community fosters the development of “organic religion” (Dillulio, 2002, p. 1). In this case, the concept of community may play an important role in the delivery of services, in so much as inclusion in a faith community leads to transformation, and transformation leads to desired programmatic outcomes. Connection to a community may also, however, be an important outcome in and of itself, particularly if it sustains a potentially permanent connection
between the client and the “program,” independent of whether or not transformation within an individual has occurred. Given this, how can the concept of community and its role in relation to the faith factor be conceptualized?

- The time frame for measuring outcomes—As previously noted, it has been asserted that FBOs may differ from secular organizations in their time horizon for interacting with and supporting an individual. In particular, one theme that has emerged in the research about staff associated with FBOs is that “if staff perceive that a higher being calls them to perform the mission of service, then the commitment to perform in a consistent and long-term manner seems equally imperative” (Netting, O’Connor, & Yancey, 2006, p. 273). This translates into an interest in long-term results and long-term change because “there’s no one who is hopeless.” Is it possible to reconcile this longer view with what has traditionally been a shorter horizon for evaluating a program’s effectiveness?

- The definition of service provision—The provision of social services is often measured in terms of specific functions, such as the provision of job training services, education, or substance abuse treatment. There may, however, be other ways to define service provision that may allow for the role of the faith factor to be more clearly ascertained. For example, although certainly an important component of service delivery, relationships between clients and service providers are not usually viewed as a “service” in and of themselves. However, these relationships may be of fundamental importance in defining what constitutes a service by FBOs because outcomes may be linked to “the empowering effect of personal relationships with loving, caring, religiously motivated staff” (Unruh and Sider, 2001). Given this, what should the definition of service provision be? And, if these relationships are important, how can their efficacy be measured?

There are also significant practical issues related to the evaluation of the faith factor, including but not limited to the need to collect information from and about a disparate set of organizations serving a wide variety of clients in a decentralized operating environment. Clearly, even if all other issues associated with an evaluation of the faith factor were to be addressed, consideration would need to be given to the feasibility of actually conducting an efficient and effective study designed to assess whether and why the faith factor contributes to outcomes.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This paper outlines some of the key conceptual and methodological challenges inherent in evaluating whether and why there are differences in effectiveness between faith-based providers and other social service providers. Gilman (2007), has noted that there is “scant empirical evidence that a spiritual approach is superior to a secular one in delivering welfare services, suggesting that constitutional risks are simply not worth taking” (p. 399). Addressing the conceptual and methodological challenges discussed
above will be an important step in developing the information necessary to inform policymakers about the implications of increased reliance on FBOs, including the role of the faith factor in contributing to outcomes. It is currently impossible to know whether the current lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of faith-based services reflects limited program outcomes, or limitations of evaluation design.

It is our hope that the Institute for Research on Poverty’s working conference on *Measuring the Role of Faith in Program Outcomes* will serve as a step toward addressing the gap of knowledge that currently exists in relation to whether and why the faith factor makes a difference in terms of outcomes. We will not conclude the conference with a definitive answer to the question of why the delivery of services by FBOs might lead to different outcomes for individuals than if those same services were delivered by non-faith-based organizations. However, if we leave the conference with a better shared understanding and an articulation of the elements of FBO service delivery that require evaluation, important progress will have been made.
References


