

Anomie, Deviance, and the Religious Factor: Data from 104 NFL Players

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Abstract

The proliferation of deviant and criminal behavior among National Football League (NFL) players has garnered unprecedented attention over the past decade. *Why are* many of these wealthy and famous athletes engaged in deviant and illegal behavior? And more importantly, can this bad behavior be mitigating and deterred via a form of social support? This paper examines the hypothesis that the religious factor (as a form of social support) acts as a deterrent to deviant/illegal behavior and as a key buffer between anomie and deviance (arrests). These relationships are examined in a snowball sample of 104 NFL players. It was found that religiosity reduces personal anomie among players in the study group by enhancing positive group integration and support. Religiosity, also, appears to have a deterrent effect on deviance/illegal behavior as well as a buffering effect between anomie and deviance, as the multiplicative term suggests there is an interaction effect.

Keywords: religion; social support; anomie; deviance; professional athletes

1. Introduction and Background

The fall of 2014 has been consumed by questions and conversation regarding the deviance and illegal behavior of many NFL (National Football League) players. There have been a host of these high profile athletes engaged in deviant and unlawful behaviors ranging from substance abuse to domestic violence to child abuse. Aside from the dialogue surrounding why these athletes are committing these acts, which is certainly important, there are increasing conversations about what might deter these bad behaviors. Might the religious factor be a deterrent for professional football players?

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From Durkheim ([1912] 1965) to Merton (1938, 1957) and beyond, social theorists have argued that religion is a key form of social integration and regulation. For Glock and Stark (1965), "one of the abiding general propositions of sociology is that religion serves the central and crucial function in society of supporting...social integration" (p. 170). From this standpoint, the religious factor should reduce levels of personal anomie among anomic individuals (for this study, professional football players), and as a result lower the probability of deviant and criminal behavior, by providing social integration, regulation, and support. Thus, individuals who are integrated into a religious community should be less likely to engage in deviant and unlawful behavior.

However, research on the impact of religion on deviance has long been controversial among social scientists. Hirschi and Stark's (1969) classic research, "Hellfire and Delinquency," cited that religion had no real deterrent effect on deviant, delinquent behavior. Since then, a number of other researchers (Rhodes and Reiss, 1970; Burkett and White, 1974; Albrecht, Chadwick and Alcorn, 1977; Higgins and Albrecht, 1977; Jenson and Erickson, 1979; Tittle and Welch, 1983; Hadaway, Elifson and Petersen, 1984; Brownfield and Sorenson, 1991; Cochran, Beeghley and Wilbur, 1992; Bainbridge, 1992; Benson, 1992; Benda and Corwyn, 1997; Lee, Rice and Gillespie, 1997; Johnson et al., 2000; Baier and Wright, 2001; Johnson, 2003) have found religious influence to have moderate to significant deterrent effects on deviant and criminal behavior. Thus, the perspective that religion reduces deviance and crime is not "without empirical foundation" or, for that matter, the need for more research (Dilulio Jr., 2009, p. 115).

With the range of findings over the past fifty years in mind, this research reconsiders the relation between the religious factor and deviance using data from 104 NFL (National Football League) players. As a way to get at this relationship between religion and deviance, we first investigate the impact of religion on personal anomie. If professional football players are anomic, in many cases, they are more likely to commit deviant acts (Carter, 2009). So, can religion, while mitigating their personal anomie, also buffer acts of deviance and unlawful behavior?

1.2 Hypotheses

With the growing concern over the deviant and illegal behaviors of many NFL players (Benedict, 1997; Benedict and Yaeger, 1998; Blumstein and Benedict, 1999; Carter, 2009; Eitzen and Sage, 2009) and prior empirical evidence showing the importance of integration and social support in relation to anomie and deviance (Carter, 2009), three core hypotheses emerged.

The first hypothesis is that religiosity reduces personal anomie among players in the study group. The second hypothesis is that religiosity has a deterrent effect on deviance/illegal behavior. The third hypothesis is that religiosity acts as a key buffer between players' personal anomie and their illegal behavior.

2. Research Methodology

Data for this study were taken from 104 current and former NFL players from the 2001-2006 time-period³. Data were collected from these players in six states via the use of a survey instrument composed of 60 total variables. Types of variables range from socio-demographic to Likert-type attitudinal concerning a variety of topics thought to be important in assessing anomie, religiosity, and unlawful behavior. While the larger study (Carter, 2009) encompassed a wide range of variables, the focus of this analysis is on religiosity as a possible buffer between anomie and illegal behavior and whether or not the religious factor has a deterrent effect on anomie and deviance/criminal behavior.

The sample is a non-probability snowball sample (Berg, 2007). Random or other probability formats were not available due to the extremely difficult nature of access to this highly guarded social group. Contacts were made through an intricate network of friendships from two initial informants (former NFL players).

The sample is composed of 45 (42.3%) current NFL players and 59 (56.7%) retired players. The mean age of the participants is 30.10 and ranges from 22-39. There were 40 (38.5%) white respondents and 64 (61.5%) black respondents.

The range for years played in the NFL is 1-11, with 4.52 being the average number of years played for players in this study group. See Table 1 for other descriptive statistics.

³ Qualitative data (Carter, 2009) from the 2001-2006 time-period along with new qualitative data (up to present) support the quantitative data and findings in this research note.

Table 1: Summary of Descriptive Statistics for the Study Group (N = 104)

Characteristic	Sample Data	Frequency
Age:	Mean	30.10
	Standard Deviation	4.028
	Range	22-39
Race:	Percent White	40
	Percent Black	64
Player Status:	Percent Current	45
	Percent Former/Retired	59
Years Played:	Mean	4.52
	Standard Deviation	2.014
	Range	1-11
Marital Status:	Percent Married	50
	Percent Not Married	54
Education:	Percent Graduated College	37
	Percent Not Graduated College	67
Income:	Percent Earning \$0-\$500,000	41
	Percent Earning \$500,001 and above	63
Family Structure:	Percent Raised in 2 Parent Home	38
	Percent Raised in Single Parent Home	66
Location:	Percent Raised in Rural Location	39
	Percent Raised in Urban Location	65
Social Class:	Percent Raised Middle Class and Above	42
	Percent Raised Lower Class/Poor	62
Altruism:	Percent Willing to Donate (Time/Money)	81
	Percent Not Willing to Donate	23
Happiness Level:	Percent Happy	58
	Percent Unhappy	46
Arrests:	Percent Arrested	33
	Percent Not Arrested	71

2.1 Measures

The less social integration and support (via religion), it is hypothesized, the greater should be the anomic effects (illegal behavior). In Table 1, illegal behavior was operationalized as a dichotomous variable. It should be noted that illegal behavior referred to those who had been arrested after they entered the NFL. Approximately one-third of the study group reported being involved in illegal behavior with 33 (31.7%) players being arrested after entering the NFL.

The literature on NFL players and crime (Benedict and Yaeger, 1998; Blumstein and Benedict, 1999) suggests that approximately 20% of NFL players have committed illegal acts. Our study group had a rate of illegal behavior higher than other sampled groups.

Anomie is measured by the five item Srole (1956) scale, one item from the Neal and Seeman (1964) powerlessness scale, and four items from the Abrahamson (1980) gratification scale. Conceptually, these items should be closely related with attitudes that accompany what Durkheim ([1897] 1951) conceived as anomie. See Table 2 for the anomie scale.

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Factor Loadings for Responses to the Anomie Scale (N = 104)

Item	Mean	SD	Factor Loading
1. In spite of what people say, the lot of the average man is getting worse.	1.58	.844	.790
2. It's hardly fair to bring children into the world with the way things look for the future.	1.53	.737	.681
3. Nowadays a person has to live pretty much for today and let tomorrow take care of itself.	1.83	.853	.754
4. These days a person doesn't know who he can count on.	1.83	.794	.730
5. There's little use writing to public officials because they aren't really interested in the problems of the average man.	1.74	.547	.618
6. More and more I feel helpless in the face of what's happening in the world today.	1.39	.730	.687
7. There is too much drinking of alcoholic beverages today.	1.54	.880	.802
8. People should never smoke marijuana because it leads to a life of drugs.	1.33	.999	.844
9. Almost everyone finds leisure time more satisfying than work.	1.81	.801	.721
10. Today's sexual morality seems to be, "anything goes."	2.48	.668	.772

Reliability Coefficient (alpha) = .933

Eigenvalue = 7.53; Percent of Variance = 53.77

Religiosity is measured through the development of an index comprised of three items. See Table 3 for the religiosity index. This index focuses on religiosity as a key form of social integration and support, which has been noted to reduce personal feelings of anomie (Kanagy, Willits, and Crider, 1990).

Table 3: Means, Standard Deviations, and Factor Loadings for Responses to the Religiosity Index (N = 104)

Item	Mean	SD	Factor Loading
1. I believe there is a living God/Higher Power.	2.33	1.05	-.840
2. I have a personal relationship with my God/HP	1.90	1.26	-.929
3. I pray to my God/HP.	1.65	1.33	-.907

Reliability Coefficient (alpha) = .919

Eigenvalue = 1.53; Percent of Variance = 11.70

In order to construct composite measures of anomie and religiosity, a considerable number of items presumably relating to each attribute were subjected to factor analysis, correlational analysis, and the computation of Chronbach's alpha. Those items that overlapped each dimension were systematically taken out until items relating to each of the constructs were finally distinct. The anomie scale and religiosity index were each found to have an acceptable degree of reliability. The reliability coefficient for the anomie scale is 0.933, while the reliability coefficient for the religiosity index is 0.919.

Single items were also included in the survey to measure (and control for): (a) age, (b) race, (c), years played in the NFL, (d) marital status, (e) education, (f) income, (g) family structure, (h) location, (i) social class, (j) altruism, and (k) level of happiness. See Table 1 for descriptive statistics.

3. Analyses

Before analyzing whether religiosity acts as a buffer between anomie and illegal behavior and is a deterrent to deviance/arrests among NFL players in the study group, some background information is needed. First, the results of the correlation analysis reveal that anomie is positively correlated to illegal behavior ($r = .503$), religiosity is negatively correlated to anomie ($r = -.562$), and religiosity is negatively correlated to illegal behavior ($r = -.399$). All are significant correlations. See Table 4 for correlation matrix.

Table 4: Correlation Matrix for Arrests, Anomie, and Religiosity for NFL Players (N = 104)

	Arrests	Anomie	Relig.	Age	Race	Yrs. Play	Mar. St.	Edu.	Income	Fam. Str.	Loc.	Soc. Cla	Altru.	Lev. Hap
Arrests	1.00													
Anomie	.503	1.00												
Relig.	-.399	-.562	1.00											
Age	-.449	-.540	.439	1.00										
Race	.284	.407	-.226	-.277	1.00									
Yrs. Played	.019*	.006*	.012*	.179*	.042*	1.00								
Mar. Stat.	-.367	-.515	.398	.375	-.347	.106*	1.00							
Edu.	-.463	-.634	.448	.453	-.445	.008*	.531	1.00						
Income	.170*	.528	-.325	-.476	.131*	-.154*	-.248	-.387	1.00					
Fam. Struc.	.303	.519	-.239	-.201	.385	.027*	-.269	-.479	.287	1.00				
Loc.	.315	.640	-.368	-.274	.449	-.047*	-.407	-.545	.472	.567	1.00			
Soc. Class	.182*	.163*	-.249	-.244	.034*	-.090*	.149*	-.207	.178*	.014*	.132*	1.00		
Altru.	-.284	-.403	.353	.244	.136*	-.058*	.281	.299	-.240	.116*	-.269	.155*	1.00	
Lev. Hap.	-.433	-.639	.383	.384	-.346	.009*	.392	.500	-.401	-.555	-.570	-.260	.318	1.00

* Not Significant at the 0.05 Level

Second, using multiple regression analysis, five variables were shown to be significant in reducing the unexplained variance in the dependent variable (anomie). The five variable model explained 64.9% of the variance in the anomie scale.

The five variables included in the model are: (a) location, (b) age, (c) level of happiness, (d) religiosity, and (e) education. Most importantly, this analysis reveals that high levels of religiosity are associated with low levels of anomie. See Table 5 for regression model (anomie).

Table 5: Step-Wise Regression for Anomie with NFL Players Presented in Standardized Regression Coefficient Form (N = 104)

Step	Loc.	Age	Lev. of Hap.	Relig.	Edu.	Adjusted R ²	F Ratio or Entering Variable	Level of Significance
1	.640					.404	70.92	.001
2	.533	-.394				.545	62.63	.001
3	.383	-.320	-.299			.597	51.87	.001
4	.338	-.245	-.265	-.228		.632	45.30	.001
5	.277	-.203	-.235	-.198	-.185	.649	39.09	.001

Variables not entering: Arrests, Race, Years Played, Marital Status, Income, Family Structure, Social Class, Altruism

Third, logistic regression analysis with illegal behavior (arrests) being the dependent variable resulted in the development of an equation in which two variables made significant contributions to the predictive power: (a) anomie, and (b) religiosity. The two variable model explained 43.3% of the variance in the dichotomous variable, illegal behavior.

In essence, respondents appear to have a higher probability of engaging in illegal behavior if they are anomic and less religious. See Table 6 for regression model (criminal activity).

Table 6: Step-Wise Regression for Criminal Activity (Arrests) with NFL Players in Unstandardized Regression Coefficient Form (N = 104)

Step	Anomie	Religiosity	R ²	Wald	Level of Sig.
1	2.44		.363	19.77	.001
2	1.77	-2.37	.433	8.56	.01

Variables not entering: Age, Race, Years Played, Marital Status, Education, Income, Family Structure, Social Class, Altruism, Level of Happiness

Congruent with prior research (Carter, 2009), these analyses reveal important associations among key variables. Anomie, illegal behavior, and religiosity, as a form of social integration and support, all appear to be significantly related. Then, is religiosity a buffer between the personal anomie of players in the study group and their illegal behavior?

An additional logistic regression analysis was performed to test for an interaction effect between anomie and religiosity. The multiplicative term ($B = -.668$) suggests that there is an interaction effect. This further analysis reveals that religiosity is an underlying factor in illegal behavior. The multiplicative term implies that as the level of religiosity goes up, the effect of anomie goes down in relation to illegal behavior. This additional analysis appears to confirm the theoretical propositions, and is consistent with, and supports, the analyses. Indeed, for this study group, religiosity appears to be an important buffer between anomie and illegal behavior. See Table 7 for regression model (criminal activity with interaction term).

Table 7: Logistic Regression for Criminal Activity (Arrests) Including Interaction Term with NFL Players in Unstandardized Regression Coefficient Form (N = 104)

Independent Variable	B	S.E.	Wald
Anomie	2.39*	1.90	1.57
Religiosity	-2.63*	.113	5.43
Interaction Term (Anomie by Religion)	-.668	.742	.811
Age	1.19	1.59	.559
Race	-.605	.786	.592
Years Played	-.056	.170	.106
Marital Status	.015	.725	.000
Education	-2.25*	1.25	3.25
Income	1.77*	.904	3.85
Family Structure	-.527	.981	.288
Location	.557	1.11	.252
Social Class	-.332	.650	.262
Altruism	.452	.671	.453
Level of Happiness	.994	.786	1.60
Chi-Square for Model	51.94*		
R ²	.551		

* $p < .05$ level

4. Conclusion

While this research does not allow us to make generalizations about the impact of religion on the entire population of professional football players, it does show some interesting relationships between 104 players' religiosity, personal anomie, and deviance. For this study group, the religious factor appears to act as a buffer between players' personal anomie and deviance/criminal behavior. Not only does religion act as a mitigating factor, it more importantly appears to reduce the likelihood of deviance and arrests for these 104 NFL players. For these players, we argue that religion furnishes integrative and social support in an anxious and uncertain professional and social environment. Put simply, it appears to be a positive and supportive influence in their lives. With these findings alongside current patterns of bad behavior among NFL players and a spirited public debate about this behavior and what can be done about it, future research is warranted.

5. References

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