



# Mad Science, “Good” Religion, and Abstract Law

Cultural Schemas of Science, Religion, and Law in  
Talk about Social Controversies

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# Research Question

How do Americans think about the nature of religion, science, and law?

Theoretical Perspectives:

- Modernization
- Lived experience

# Modernization Perspective

- Sociology's foundational narrative
- Processes of rationalization – rise of instrumental rationality
- Older forms of knowledge and authority (e.g. religion) are displaced by rationalized expert systems (e.g. science, law)

# Lived Experience Perspective

- All systems of knowledge and belief have gaps, inconsistencies, limited coherence – highlighted by everyday experiences
- Rationalized systems are not assumed to be superior to older forms of knowledge in all cases

# Methods

- 36 focus groups in three metro areas; 129 pre- and post-interviews (total n=281)
- Group composition varied along religious and class dimensions
- Discussion of one of three vignettes about a controversial social issue

# Vignettes for Discussion

- **Faith-based prison programs**
  - Imagine yourself on an advisory panel for your state: Should the state contract with faith-based prison ministries to prepare prisoners to return to society?
- **Parental refusal of medical treatment for child on religious grounds**
  - Parents refuse cancer treatment for 13-year-old child on religious grounds. Should the judge force treatment?
- **Pre-implantation genetic diagnosis (PGD) of human embryos**
  - Should it be regulated? Allowed for medical screening? Social screening?

# Handout – Schemas of Religion, Science and Law

- **Modernization Schemas (Table 3)**
  - Conflict or Compatibility of Domains
  - Progress and Modern Rationality
- **Lived Experience Schemas (Table 4)**
  - Critical Schemas
  - Realist Schemas

# Modernization Schemas

“The whole approach that it’s this religion that will cure you, this religion that will heal you, this religion that will rehabilitate you. That’s very . . . rigid, that’s just a different planet, that’s not realistic. You need a psychologist in there, you need people who know how to work with addiction . . . that’s a fantasy world, that’s not reality.”

– *Carolyn in Boston*



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# Lived Experience Schemas

“People talk about going up in front of different judges. It depends on which judge you get ... There are some that are really uptight and some that are more laid back. They say, ‘Oh God, watch out, don’t get him or you’re going to be in the slammer for fifty years.’ But there might be another one that’s considered more lenient.”

– *Ruby in Twin Cities*

# Next Steps

- Relative prominence of different types of schemas (modernization vs. lived experience vs. other)
- Patterns of variation based on characteristics of individuals and groups