# Life Strain, Negative Emotions, and Religious Involvement in Contemporary China

**Kenneth Vaughan**
*University of Connecticut, USA*

## Abstract

The life strain theory has traditionally been utilized to demonstrate how negative life events lead to criminal and other deviant behaviors. We take a unique approach by applying the life strain theory to the scholarly understanding of religious conversion in modernized Chinese society. We argue that when individuals experience life strain, they generate negative emotions. Then, to alleviate their negative emotions, they convert to a religion or increase levels of religious involvement. Applying Lagged Dependent Variable models to the 2012-2014 China Family Panel Study, we examine the life strain theory in a unique context. After controlling for previous waves of religiosity, we find that life strain is associated with higher probabilities of religious affiliation, higher rates of religious attendance, and increased religious salience. Further analysis shows that negative emotions mediate the effects of life strain on religiosity. Our study makes a substantial contribution to multiple bodies of literature by applying a major criminological theory to the study of religion, modernization, and mental health. Our study is also unique in distinguishing the enhancing effects of life strain on religious involvement from the alleviating effects of religiosity on life strain. These findings provide a unique application of a criminological theory to the study of religious conversion and mental health. These results challenge limitations placed on the life strain theory as well the existential security framework. Our results have important implications for the study of religious conversion, mental health, modernization, and criminology.

**Keywords**: Life strain; Emotions; Religion; Social psychology; China