Go Green Or Go God? Religiosity Reduces Pro-Environmental Behaviors

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Contrary to the belief that religiosity promotes prosocial behavior, we show that religious individuals demonstrate less prosocial behavior in a domain that requires individuals’ behavioral change: pro-environmental behaviors. Consistent with the proposed underlying mechanism, these effects are mediated by sense of control (measured and manipulated) and moderated by types of God images.

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How Goal Distance Influences Regulatory Focus in Goal Pursuit

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This research examines the influence of goal distance on the regulatory focus of goals. Individuals can construe goals as hopes, aspirations and ideals (promotion-focused goals) or as responsibilities, duties and obligations (prevention-focused goals) (Higgins 1997). Previous research identified individual (e.g., Higgins 1997; Aaker and Lee 2001; Cesario, Grant, and Higgins 2004), specific (e.g., Lee and Aaker 2004; Chitturi, Raghunathan, and Mahajan 2008) or situational characteristics (e.g., Mogilner, Aaker, and Pentington 2008) which can influence the regulatory focus of a goal. What remains to be seen is whether the regulatory focus of a goal can change as progress toward the goal is made. Here we demonstrate that goal distance can influence regulatory focus of a goal. We also demonstrate that goal distance is not temporal distance or, more broadly, psychological distance.

In earlier stages of goal pursuit, individuals rely on their initial state as a reference point (Bonezzi, Brendl, and DeAngelis 2011) which makes goal attainment/failure represent a gain/non-gain situation. Goal attainment is a positive deviation from the starting state as a reference point and, hence, it is a gain, while goal failure is a non-deviation from the starting state as a reference point and, hence, it is a non-gain; such representation construes a promotion goal (Higgins 1997, 2002; Shah et al. 1998). In later stages of goal pursuit, individuals rely on their desired end state as a reference point (Bonezzi et al. 2011) which makes goal attainment/failure represent a non-loss/loss situation. If a goal is attained it is a non-deviation from the desired state as a reference point and, hence, a non-loss, while goal failure is a negative deviation from the desired state as a reference point and, hence, a loss; such representation construes a prevention goal (Higgins 1997, 2002; Shah et al. 1998).

The goal distance construct involves two factors: assessment of the gap between the current and the desired state and the appreciation of actions necessary for goal attainment (Townsend and Liu 2012). The actual discrepancy between the current and the desired state is positively correlated with the actual amount of time to goal attainment and, hence, is positively correlated with temporal distance. Assessment of the actions necessary to reduce the “gap” draws attention to the difficulty associated with goal attainment (Townsend and Liu 2012); and, since perception of difficulty has been shown to reduce temporal construal (Vallacher and Wegner 1987; Thomas and Tsai 2012), it reduces temporal distance by constraining time resources. Hence, the two factors in the goal distance construct produce pressures on temporal distance which work in opposing directions.

For temporally unfocused goals, where the point in time of goal attainment or failure is not discretely specified (Madye and Gilovich 1993), goal distance influences both actual time to goal attainment and the amount of effort necessary to reach the goal. Therefore, for temporally unfocused goals, goal distance will likely leave the subjective experience of temporal distancing unaffected. Greater goal distance will increase actual time to goal attainment, thus putting upward pressure on temporal distance, but it will also increase the perception of difficulty associated with greater effort necessary for goal attainment, thus putting downward pressure on temporal distance. For temporally focused goals (Madye and Gilovich 1993), actual time to goal attainment/failure is fixed by some external factor (e.g., date of the driving test, deadline for the assignment, etc.). Hence, for temporally focused goals, goal distance will not influence actual time to goal attainment, but it will emphasize difficulty and make time seem less abundant. The more progress a person makes toward their goal, the more abundant any amount of time to goal attainment/failure will feel. Therefore, for temporally focused goals, goal distance and temporal distance will be negatively correlated.

In study 1, participants were asked to imagine that they passed one (large goal distance) or three (small goal distance) out of the four interview stages necessary to get a job. They were then asked to match promotion or prevention phrases to describe their goal. They were also asked to indicate to what extent getting the job represents a gain versus not getting the job represents a loss. Participants in the large goal distance condition reported being more in the gain frame of mind and matched more promotion phrases, while participants in the small goal distance condition reported being more in the loss frame of mind and matched more prevention phrases to describe their goal. In study 2 participants imagined having set a weight loss goal (15 pounds) and having made little (5 pounds) or substantial (10 pounds) goal progress. Participants then read a promotion or prevention framed advertisement for a fitness program. Large goal distance participants reported more favorable attitude and greater purchase intentions after reading a promotion (vs. prevention) focused advertisement; and the reverse was true for small goal distance participants. In study 3, to demonstrate process, all participants were asked to imagine being halfway through goal pursuit (having raised $250 out of $500) for a charity. We manipulated reference points by framing goal progress in terms of “to date” or “to go” to manipulate the beginning or the desired state as a reference point (Koo & Fishbach, 2008). “To date” framing produced greater focus on positive (vs. negative) outcomes and a more gain (vs. loss) frame of mind compared to “to go” framing. In study 4, participants imagined having made little (vs. substantial) progress toward a weight loss goal. Large goal distance participants reported that their goal was more of a maximal goal, while small goal distance participants reported that their goal was more of a minimal goal. Temporal distance and construal level indicators were not affected. In study 5, participants imagined having covered 2 or 8 out of the 10 chapters necessary for an exam (temporally focused goal). Large (vs. small) goal distance participants described their goal as more promotion (vs. prevention) focused. Importantly, large goal distance participants imagined the exam to be closer in time and thought about it more concretely compared to large goal distance participants.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

It is a truism that Americans are deeply religious. Recent surveys show that 77% of Americans consider themselves committed Christians (Newport 2012) and substantially more people believe in angels, the devil, and hell than do those who believe in evolution (Shannon-Missal 2008). Generally, religiosity is hardly negative as religious people exhibit more pro-social behavior than nonreligious individuals (Monsma 2007). For example, they volunteer and donate more (Monsma 2007), cooperate and share more (Ahmed 2009), trust others more (Fehr et al. 2003), and are more trustworthy (Tan and Vogel 2008). However, we believe that in a pro-social domain that requires individuals' will power to change behavior, that is, making differences through human intervention, religiosity will have reversed influences. The current research focuses on one such domain, pro-environmental behaviors.

Freud (1927/1961) argued that at the heart of religion is the strong dependence of people on the omnipotent figure of God. Indeed, most Judeo-Christians believe in a controlling and omnipotent image of God (Laurin, Kay, and Fitzsimons 2012). People who believe and depend on a powerful other, like God, relinquish generalized control to that potent deity (Spilka and Schmid 1983). Given that the only personality variable that is consistently linked to pro-environmental behavior is perceived personal control (Allen and Ferrand 1999), it is possible that Judeo-Christians are less willing to engage in pro-environmental behaviors than nonreligious individuals due to their external locus of control that is derived from their belief in an omnipotent God. In light of these findings, we explore a possibility that religiosity reduces willingness to engage in pro-environmental behaviors via an external locus of control. Through a field study and four laboratory experiments, we tested our predictions.

For the first study, we looked at the relationship between religious affiliation and pro-environmental behaviors using real-world behavioral data from the U.S. population. We collected data to determine each state’s proportion of registered Judeo-Christians and nonreligious people to its overall population, and each state’s level of pro-environmental behaviors. We found a significant negative partial correlation between Judeo-Christians and the environmental index ($r = - .38, p < .01$) and a significant positive partial correlation between the nonreligious and the environmental index ($r = .29, p < .05$), controlling for gender, education, political affiliation, and income levels for each state.

Since Study 1 gives only correlational evidence, Study 2 was designed to replicate this effect in a laboratory setting using a 2 (religious affiliation: Judeo-Christian vs. nonreligious) x 2 (extrinsic religiosity: continuous) between-participants design. First, participants responded to two items that measured their pro-environmental behaviors: “How much are you willing to change your lifestyle to reduce the effects of global warming?” and “How much are you willing to spend extra money to reduce the effects of global warming?”

Next, participants responded to the 12-item extrinsic religiosity subscale from the religious orientation scale (Allport and Ross 1967) to measure the strength of their religious beliefs. Study 2 found more evidence that Judeo-Christians tended to be less willing to engage in pro-environmental behaviors than nonreligious people ($t(123) = 1.8, p < .1$). We also found that a weak commitment to one’s religion, or extrinsic religiosity, mitigated the effect ($\beta = 1.03, t = 2.548, p < .02$).

Study 3 tested the underlying mechanism that explains why Judeo-Christians engage in relatively few pro-environmental behaviors using a 2 (religious affiliation: Judeo-Christian vs. nonreligious) x 2 (prime: control vs. God) between-subjects design. Participants first completed a priming procedure where they formed grammatically correct sentences using four words from sets of five. In the God condition, five of the ten sets contained a word semantically related to the concept of God and in the control condition, the words were neutral. Participants then completed the external locus of control measure. We showed that Judeo-Christians had more of an external locus of control than the nonreligious ($F(1, 91) = 8.8, p < .005$) and that this difference was due to their religiosity as Judeo-Christians in the God condition had more of an external locus of control than those in the control condition ($p = .01$). As expected, there was no difference in the locus of control for the nonreligious between conditions ($p > .8$).

The objective of Study 4 was to further test the underlying mechanism of the observed effect. If in fact Judeo-Christians’ external locus of control is tied to their belief in an omnipotent image of God, then any attempts to manipulate their personal perceived control will not be successful because they believe that God has all of the power. This study used a 2 (religious affiliation: Judeo-Christian vs. nonreligious) x 2 (prime: high control vs. low control) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to either the high or low control condition. In the high (vs. low) control condition, they wrote about 3 examples of times when they felt they had complete (vs. no) control over a situation. The dependent measure was the likelihood of purchasing various environmentally-friendly products. We found a significant interaction effect between religious affiliation and priming condition ($F(1, 71) = 3.810, p < .06$). Planned comparisons revealed that the nonreligious in the high control condition were significantly more likely to buy green products than those in the low control condition ($F(1, 71) = 3.754, p < .06$). However, there was no significant difference between likelihood of green consumption for Judeo-Christians in the high and low control conditions ($p > .3$). Judeo-Christians’ religiosity acts as a buffer to any attempts to change their sense of control. If we use a primary (vs. secondary) approach to increase control, or attempt to change the cause of the perceived lack of control (vs. the result) (Rothbaum et al. 1982), we expect to effectively change Judeo-Christians’ low levels of green consumption. In other words, by manipulating the cause of the external locus of control (the omnipotent image of God) rather than manipulating the effect (the external locus of control), we expect to see an increase in their green behavior. This was the rationale for Study 5.

Study 5 utilized a primary approach to manipulating locus of control such that we manipulated the cause of Judeo-Christians’ perceived lack of control using a 2 (religious affiliation: Judeo-Christian vs. nonreligious) x 2 (priming condition: controlling God vs. facilitating God) between-subjects design. Participants either were primed with the image of God as a controlling or facilitating figure. They then indicated their willingness to buy various green products as in Study 4. We found a significant interaction between religious affiliation and image of God ($F(1, 81) = 9.9, p < .01$). Planned comparisons indicated that Judeo-Christians who were primed with a facilitating God image were significantly more likely to purchase the green...
forms of the products than were Judeo-Christians in the controlling
God condition \(F(1, 81) = 4.1, p < .05\).

In summary, our research provides the demonstration of a nega-
tive influence of religiosity on prosocial behavior in the domain of
pro-environmental behaviors, while simultaneously providing the
underlying conceptual basis for why we observe this effect. Thus,
this research suggest that the external locus of control that is tied to
the belief in a controlling image of God should affect consumers in
other domains when they experience uncertainty.

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