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Generous heathens? Reputational concerns and atheists' behavior toward Christians in economic games



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ABSTRACT

Ample research demonstrates that people are more prosocial toward ingroup than outgroup members, and that religious believers (e.g., Christians) tend to be more prosocial than non-believers (e.g., atheists), in economic games. However, we identify a condition under which ingroup biases in such games are attenuated, focusing on prosociality among *atheists*. Specifically, we argue that atheists (but not Christians) experience unique reputational concerns due to stereotypes that their group is immoral, which in turn affect their behavior toward outgroup partners. Across three studies, when participants in a Dictator Game believed their religious identity was known to their partner, atheists behaved impartially toward ingroup and outgroup partners, whereas Christians consistently demonstrated an ingroup bias. The effects of religious identity on allocations to the outgroup were partially mediated by concerns about being perceived negatively by others and were eliminated by telling participants that their religious identity would be kept anonymous.

Numerous studies have revealed a positive relationship between religion and prosocial behavior (e.g., Everett, Haque, & Rand, 2016; for a review, see Norenzayan et al., 2016). Theories of religious prosociality (e.g., Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008) emphasize the role of reputational concerns in this relationship: Individuals who are particularly concerned with being seen as moral members of the religious ingroup are more likely to behave prosocially. This is at least partly due to the belief in an omnipresent deity who is constantly monitoring humans' social interactions and who threatens to punish norm violators, cheaters, free-loaders, and selfishness in general (Johnson & Bering, 2006; Norenzayan et al., 2016). Accordingly, reminders of God or of one's religion often increase prosocial behavior (Shariff, Willard, Andersen, & Norenzayan, 2016), purportedly by priming believers with reputational concerns under the premise that God is watching.

Importantly, such prosociality is usually confined to those who are perceived to be fellow religious ingroup members—i.e., those who are relatively capable of tracking the actor's moral reputation across time (Galen, 2012; Norenzayan et al., 2016). Indeed, much research has shown that in economic games, people tend to demonstrate an ingroup bias whereby they allocate more money to ingroup than outgroup members (e.g., Balliet, Wu, & De Dreu, 2014; Kramer & Brewer, 1984). Among religious believers, this ingroup bias is exacerbated when people are induced to think about how members of their religion would want them to behave. The reason, presumably, is that religious believers see ingroup affiliation as especially reflective of prosociality

and, hence, as a means of alleviating reputational concerns (Preston & Ritter, 2013).

Atheists, unlike religious believers, are thought to be relatively free of such reputational concerns, as they can act without fear of supernatural monitoring or punishment. As members of an arguably less cohesive group (Toosi & Ambady, 2011), atheists may also feel less pressure to favor ingroup over outgroup members. However, might atheists experience a different kind of reputational concern that, under some circumstances, motivates prosociality? Given that atheists are widely stereotyped as possessing fewer morally-relevant characteristics (e.g., Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Gervais, 2013), we argue that atheists—but not believers—should be particularly concerned with maintaining a moral reputation in the presence of *outgroup* members who are likely to stereotype them as immoral. Accordingly, we argue that atheists should be concerned with signaling their capacity to be moral – which includes being prosocial (i.e., cooperative and selfless) and trustworthy (see Haidt, 2008) – when interacting with outgroup members.

In this set of studies, we compared atheists' and Christians' behavior toward one another in an economic game in which participants were motivated to establish a reputation as moral, under the premise that they would receive a public “reputation score” prior to playing additional rounds of the game. We loosely based our game design on the Dictator Game, which has been used in much prior research investigating religious prosociality (e.g., Everett et al., 2016; Tan & Vogel,

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2008). However, we modified the game so that participants' concerns for moral reputation were particularly salient. Specifically, participants were led to believe that several rounds of the game would be played, and that their partner would assign a public reputation score for other participants to see.

In contrast to previous research that has focused mainly on the reasons behind religious believers' prosociality (Everett et al., 2016; Shariff, Willard, Muthukrishna, Kramer, & Henrich, 2016), we sought to determine what might motivate prosociality among atheists. We specifically hypothesized that the ingroup bias typically observed in economic games (Balliet et al., 2014; Kramer & Brewer, 1984) would be present among Christians (who should be primarily concerned with whether the *ingroup* perceives them as moral), but not among atheists (who should be concerned with signaling their morality to the *outgroup*). We also hypothesized that atheists' fears of being perceived negatively by outgroup (Christian) partners would mediate these effects. Such results would advance understanding of why and under what circumstances identifying as *atheist* (versus Christian) influences prosocial behavior, as well as when ingroup biases do and do not emerge. They would also shed light on how atheists respond to negative stereotypes about their group.

We chose Christians as the focal outgroup for several reasons. First, Christians represent the religious majority in the U.S., currently constituting approximately 70.6% of the entire U.S. population, whereas non-Christian religious adherents in total represent only around 5.9% (Pew Research Center, 2014a, 2014b). Hence, focusing on Christians as outgroup members offers the greatest scope to generalize findings to the broader social fabric of U.S. society. Moreover, because Christians represent a majority, this allowed us to juxtapose our core hypothesis (i.e., atheists are prosocial toward Christians because they fear being perceived as immoral) against the competing hypothesis that atheists are simply trying to please members of a dominant majority group. Finally, due to their relative emphasis on religious belief over religious practice, Christians are particularly likely to hold anti-atheist prejudice, compared to Jews and Hindus (Hughes, Grossmann, & Cohen, 2015). Thus, atheists in the U.S. might experience particularly strong concerns about their ingroup's moral reputation when interacting with Christians, relative to other groups. In the General Discussion, we elaborate on what we might predict for other religious ingroup-outgroup contexts.

1. Negative stereotypes of atheists

In the U.S., the pervasive stereotype of atheists is that they are immoral. For a person to establish a moral reputation, one must be able to demonstrate to others that s/he is a trustworthy and reliable cooperation partner who is capable of suppressing selfishness for the sake of others (Haidt, 2008). Accordingly, atheists are judged as immoral insofar as they fail to signal to others a capacity to be selfless, trustworthy, and cooperative (e.g., Simpson & Rios, *in press*) – in other words, a capacity to be prosocial (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008). For example, people believe that a description of an individual who lies and steals is more representative of atheists (and rapists, with no significant difference between atheist/rapist attributions) than other religious groups (e.g., Christians, Jews, Muslims; Gervais, Shariff, & Norenzayan, 2011). This negative stereotype of atheists is potentially quite potent, as morality is a central dimension on which people form judgments of other individuals and groups (Brambilla, Sacchi, Rusconi, Cherubini, & Yzerbyt, 2012; Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2007; Goodwin, Piazza, & Rozin, 2014; Ybarra, Chan, & Park, 2001). Indeed, people are less willing to vote for an atheist Presidential candidate than for a Black or gay Presidential candidate, suggesting that these stereotypes translate into actual discriminatory behaviors toward atheists (Franks & Scherr, 2014).

Although the existence of negative stereotypes about atheists as immoral is well documented, no research has examined how atheists

behave in response (but for research on atheists' attitudinal and emotional reactions, see Doane & Elliott, 2015; Hammer, Cragun, Hwang, & Smith, 2012). This is a critical question to address because atheists are increasing in prevalence in the U.S. and throughout the world (Pew Research Center, 2014a, 2014b), yet they continue to be frequent targets of pejorative and openly accepted stereotypes. Some research has shown that group members who are aware of the possibility of being negatively stereotyped react by attempting to contradict others' perceptions of their group. For example, Asian Americans for whom the stereotype of their group as “un-American” has been made salient subsequently emphasize their participation in American cultural practices (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). Similarly, men whose masculinity has been called into question subsequently display more physical aggression (Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009) and claim to possess more stereotypically masculine attributes (Cheryan, Cameron, Katagiri, & Monin, 2015). These stereotype-defying behaviors emerge in intergroup interactions as well: When interacting with a different-race partner, African Americans tend to self-promote in order to dispel the stereotype that their group is incompetent, whereas White Americans tend to ingratiate themselves in order to dispel the stereotype that their group is racist (Bergsieker, Shelton, & Richeson, 2010).

The above research on compensatory reactions to negative ingroup stereotypes suggests that in intergroup contexts, atheists might be especially motivated to bolster their moral reputations. Importantly, however, such findings would also (1) introduce a condition under which atheists exhibit prosocial behavior, in contrast to previous research that has largely emphasized the *religion*-prosociality relationship; and (2) shed light on when ingroup biases (e.g., in economic games) might *not* emerge.

2. Religion, prosociality, and ingroup biases

Following previous research on religious identity and prosocial behavior (e.g., Decety et al., 2015; Everett et al., 2016; Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), we examine atheists' behavior in an economic game whereby participants must decide how much money to allocate to an anonymous partner who has no say in the matter. Specifically, participants are told that they are about to play a “trust game” with a partner,¹ are given a hypothetical or real sum of money (e.g., 5 coins), and must indicate how much of the money they would like to give to their partner versus keep for themselves. They are also told that they will be assigned a “reputation score” by their partner, and that this game will repeat multiple times. In economic games similar to this (e.g., Dictator Game, Prisoner's Dilemma, Ultimatum Game; Balliet et al., 2014; Kramer & Brewer, 1984; Yamagishi & Mifune, 2008), individuals tend to demonstrate an ingroup bias whereby they allocate more resources to members of their own group than to the outgroup.

In addition to the ingroup bias often found in economic games, accumulative evidence supports a general association between religiosity and prosocial giving, often regardless of the recipient's group membership (for a review, see Norenzayan et al., 2016). Several studies have shown that people high in religiosity (e.g., Everett et al., 2016) or believers who have been exposed to religious concepts (for a review, see Shariff et al., 2016) tend to allocate more money to their partners than do people low in religiosity or believers who have not been exposed to religious concepts. Critically, though, a recent experiment demonstrated *lower* levels of resource allocation in an economic game among religious believers (e.g., Christians, Muslims) than among atheists (Decety et al., 2015; but see Shariff et al., 2016), which raises the question of when atheists will and will not behave prosocially in such

¹ Technically, the game was not about trust or trustworthiness, per se, but about the signaling of moral reputation. We referred to the game as a “trust game” as this was a practical way to increase the likelihood that participants would be concerned with their moral reputation and expected generosity when playing the game.

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