Religion and moral self-image: The contributions of prosocial behavior, socially desirable responding, and personality

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ABSTRACT

Often, the high moral self-image held by religious people is viewed with skepticism. Three studies examined the contributions of socially desirable responding (SDR), personality traits, prosocial behavior, and individual differences in prosocial tendencies to the association between religiosity and moral self-image. In Studies 1 and 2 (N's = 346, 507), personality traits (agreeableness, conscientiousness) and individual differences in empathy/prosociality were the strongest explanatory variables for religiosity's association with moral self-image measures; SDR and prosocial behavior contributed more weakly to this association. In Study 3 (N = 180), the effect of a bogus pipeline manipulation on moral self-image was moderated by religiosity. Among the highly religious, moral self-image remained high even in the bogus pipeline condition. These studies show that the association between religiosity and moral self-image is most strongly explained by personality traits and individual differences in prosociality/empathy, rather than a desirability response bias.

1. Introduction

People generally desire to perceive themselves as moral and strive towards embodying moral traits (e.g., Aquino & Reed II, 2002; Merritt, Effron, & Monin, 2010). Although this motivation is true of many people, it is particularly heightened among the religious: Several studies demonstrate religiosity is positively associated with *self-reports* of moral self-image and moral values (e.g., Furrow, King, & White, 2004; Johnston, Sherman, & Grusec, 2013; Putnam, Campbell, & Garrett, 2010; Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, & Dernelle, 2005; Vitell et al., 2009; Ward & King, under review). The high morality espoused by religious people has been critiqued extensively and viewed with skepticism, as religion does not generally promote moral behavior in controlled experiments or naturalistic settings (e.g., Batson, 1976; Batson et al., 1989; Ji, Pendergraft, & Perry, 2006; McKay & Whitehouse, 2015) and instead only seems related to more circumscribed instances of prosociality (e.g., Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008; Saroglou et al., 2005). Why is religion persistently related to viewing oneself as highly moral, despite equivocal evidence for a more general link between religion and *actual* moral behaviors? Some scholars have posited that the association between religiosity and moral self-image may be an artifact of socially desirable responding (SDR; Shariff, 2015; McKay & Whitehouse, 2015); others have proposed it may be more genuine due to religious people's heightened prosocial behavior and shared overlap with personality traits linked to morality (e.g., Saroglou,

2013; Saroglou et al., 2005).

To date, there have not been critical empirical investigations into the association between religiosity and moral self-image. Much of the extant literature has probed how religion relates to a diverse range of moral values or prosocial personality traits without focusing on explanations for these associations. Here we focus broadly on moral self-image, rather than specific values or traits, seeking to understand *why* religious people perceive themselves as highly moral. The present studies investigated how SDR, prosocial behavior, personality traits, and individual differences in prosocial tendencies account for the relationship between religiosity and moral self-image. Before presenting the studies, we briefly review the mechanisms that may explain why religiosity is associated with viewing oneself as moral.

1.1. Socially desirable responding

Certainly, skepticism of the superior morality espoused by religious people has been longstanding within psychology. Batson and colleagues (Batson, 1976; Batson & Gray, 1981; Batson et al., 1989) posited that religion relates to an egoistic motivation for morality, driven more by reputational concerns rather than altruism. Correspondingly, the most common explanation proffered to explain (and critique) the validity of the association between religiosity and self-reported moral characteristics is SDR (e.g., Galen, 2012; McKay & Whitehouse, 2015; Shariff, 2015). SDR is often conceptualized as involving two facets: impression

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management and self-deception (Paulhus & Reid, 1991). Contemporary research and theory suggest that impression management and self-deception should not be characterized as response biases but instead be viewed as capturing substantive individual differences and motivations.

For instance, impression management has been argued to reflect individual differences in interpersonal self-control (Uziel, 2010), emotional stability, and conscientiousness (Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996). As opposed to reflecting *dishonesty*, impression management is positively associated with moral virtues, including honesty-humility, as well as to lower frequencies of immoral behavior in a low-demand context (de Vries, Zettler, & Hilbig, 2014; Zettler, Hilbig, Moshagen, & de Vries, 2015). Consequently, though traditionally thought of as merely a form of desirability bias, impression management may instead reflect genuine honesty and a moral orientation (e.g., Zettler et al., 2015). Similarly, self-deception, once theorized as representing an unconscious tendency to maintain an unjustifiably good (though honestly held) impression of oneself (Paulhus & Reid, 1991), is now thought to be employed strategically to boost one's interpersonal appeal, status, and resources (e.g., Koban & Ohler, 2016; Paulhus & John, 1998; von Hippel & Trivers, 2011). If self-reports of SDR capture genuine individual differences in valuing morality and in self-control (e.g., Paulhus & Trapnell, 2008; Uziel, 2010; Zettler et al., 2015), then controlling for these variables is unlikely to elucidate the real link between religiosity and moral self-image. As such, alternative operationalizations of response biases may be needed to probe this link effectively.

Religiosity is moderately correlated with impression management and more weakly correlated with self-deception (r's = .31 and .12, respectively, in a meta-analysis; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010). Correspondingly, religious people report being better than other people on both moral and non-moral traits (e.g., Gebauer, Sedikides, & Schrade, 2017; Ludeke & Carey, 2015; Rowatt, Ottenbreit, Nesselroade, & Cunningham, 2002). Although religiosity is related to self-enhancing tendencies, previous literature has demonstrated that the link between religiosity and prosocial values is not fully explained by SDR. Controlling for SDR, intrinsic religiosity predicts self-reported altruism and empathy (Saroglou et al., 2005), volunteerism (Hansen, Vandenberg, & Patterson, 1995), and adherence to biblical commands (Rowatt et al., 2002). Still, the extant research on this topic is limited. First, these studies have not measured moral self-image or moral identity, so it is unclear how SDR accounts for religiosity's role in promoting views of oneself as moral. Additionally, past studies used a limited set of questionnaires pertaining to morality, personality, and SDR. It may be possible that another factor, or combination of factors, explains the association between religiosity and moral self-image, but previous studies may have failed to identify this because they used a limited set of measures. Also, these studies sometimes failed to report the religious affiliation of their participants (e.g., Hansen et al., 1995; Saroglou et al., 2005) or utilized religiously homogenous participants (e.g., Rowatt et al., 2002), potentially leading to a restricted range on the relationships observed and limiting the generalizability of these results. Finally, SDR may affect not only self-reports of moral self-image but also reports of personality characteristics and prosocial behaviors. As such, it is critical to measure these variables together to tease out how much their relationships are accounted for by shared variance with SDR.

Even if SDR helps to account for the association between religiosity and moral self-image, there may be other factors involved as well. Having a propensity towards personality traits associated with prosocial tendencies and engagement in prosocial behavior may lead religious people to perceive themselves as highly moral, possibilities to which we now turn.

1.2. Religiosity and personality

Personality traits and individual differences in prosociality may explain the link between religiosity and moral self-image (e.g., Saroglou, 2013; Saroglou et al., 2005). Agreeableness, honesty-

humility, and conscientiousness are linked to both prosocial behavior and religiosity (e.g., Graziano, Habashi, Sheese, & Tobin, 2007; Habashi, Graziano, & Hoover, 2016; Hilbig, Glöckner, & Zettler, 2014; Saroglou, 2009). Prosocial personality encompasses not only these broad traits but also more specific other-oriented values and tendencies. Religiosity is associated with empathy, a prosocial trait, as well as with prosocial values including benevolence and compassion (e.g., Saroglou, 2013; Saroglou, Delpierre, & Dernelle, 2004). These associations emerge in diverse religious groups (Christians, Buddhists, Jews, and Muslims) and hold when controlling for self-reports thought to tap SDR (e.g. Saroglou et al., 2004; Saroglou et al., 2005). Thus, there is evidence that religious people genuinely hold prosocial values, which may cause them to perceive themselves as being highly moral.

1.3. Religiosity and prosocial behavior

Consider as well that the individual differences noted above (i.e., empathy and agreeableness) predict engaging in prosocial behavior (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). As such, religious individuals may view themselves as highly moral because they can recall themselves engaging in prosocial behavior (Bem, 1967). Across a wide array of religious groups and continents (Pelham & Crabtree, 2008), religiosity is correlated with self-reported prosocial behavior, including volunteerism and charitable donations (e.g., Monsma, 2007; Putnam et al., 2010; Saroglou, 2013). Some controlled and naturalistic experiments have also shown a positive association between religiosity and prosocial behavior (e.g., Anderson & Mellor, 2009; Everett, Haque, & Rand, 2016; Saroglou et al., 2005), though results are inconsistent (e.g., Galen, 2012; Kramer & Shariff, 2018). It is important to note that religious prosociality is typically extended to ingroup members (e.g., Saroglou et al., 2005), rather than broadly, suggesting it is contextualized. Still, religious people's high valuation of their morality may arise from their tendency to behave prosocially. In sum, broad and specific individual differences and behavioral reports may account for a substantial portion of the shared variance between religiosity and moral self-image. If supported, this contention would suggest that the link between religiosity and moral self-image is neither wholly veridical nor completely artifactual. Rather, it is at least partially a product of dispositional tendencies that both facilitate actual behavior and color self-perceptions.

1.4. Overview and predictions

Two correlational studies and an experiment tested key potential contributors to the relationship between religiosity and moral self-image. Studies 2 and 3 tested the contributions of self-reported personality traits (e.g., agreeableness, conscientiousness), individual differences in prosocial tendencies, prosocial behavior, and measures of SDR to the association between religiosity and moral self-image. We predicted that the association between religiosity and moral self-image would be explained by individual differences in prosocial tendencies, personality traits (i.e., agreeableness, honesty-humility, and conscientiousness), and SDR. In order to address the inherent ambiguity in self-reports of SDR, Study 3 employed a bogus pipeline manipulation, providing a strong test of the role of impression management in this relationship. We predicted that the bogus pipeline would attenuate the association between religiosity and moral self-image.

2. Study 1

2.1. Overview and predictions

Study 1 included several possible explanatory variables for the link between religiosity and moral self-image. We measured moral self-image using an established measure of moral identity (Aquino & Reed II, 2002), along with a set of items developed to tap various aspects of