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Shorter communication

Is thought–action fusion related to religiosity? Differences between Christians and Jews

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the relationship between thought–action fusion (TAF) and religiosity in Christians and Jews (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform). There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that religiosity is related to obsessive cognitions in Christian samples, but conceptual and empirical ambiguities complicate the interpretation of that literature and its application to non-Christian groups. As predicted on the basis of previous research, Christians scored higher than Jews on moral TAF. This effect was large and not explained by differences in self-reported religiosity. The Jewish groups did not differ from each other. Furthermore, religiosity was significantly associated with TAF only within the Christian group. These results qualify the presumed association between religiosity and obsessive cognitions. General religiosity is not associated with TAF; it rather depends on what religious group. Moreover, large group differences in a supposed maladaptive construct without evidence of corresponding differences in prevalence rates call into question the assumption that TAF is always a marker of pathology.

Keywords: Thought–action fusion; Obsessive-compulsive disorder; Religiosity; Cognitions; Cross-cultural; Morality

Introduction

The tendency to see thoughts as equivalent to behavior is known as thought–action fusion (TAF), which refers to the propensity to consider a mental event (a) the moral equivalent of a physical action and (b) as making a physical outcome more likely. In at least some cases, clinical populations—especially those with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)—have been characterized as high in TAF (e.g., Shafran, Thordarson, & Rachman, 1996). There is considerable overlap between the construct of TAF and the tendency to judge people as morally responsible for their thoughts, an area that has been studied separately and in which religious group differences are evident in nonclinical populations (Cohen & Rankin, 2004; Cohen & Rozin, 2001). This is especially true of the first aspect of TAF: Thoughts are morally equivalent to action.

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The extant literature is equivocal with respect to the relationship between religiosity and OCD, and limited with respect to that between religiosity and TAF. Although OCD symptom presentation varies by culture and religion (e.g., Okasha, Saad, Khalil, El-Dawla, & Yehia, 1984; Rasmussen & Tsuang, 1986), there is little evidence that prevalence rates for clinically significant OCD differ, except where overall rates for psychiatric illness do (Sica, Novara, Sanavio, Dorz, & Coradeschi, 2002). For example, the Cross National Collaborative Study (Horwath & Weissman, 2000; Weissman et al., 1994) found no differences in lifetime and annual prevalence rates of OCD across seven diverse nations, with the exception of Taiwan where rates of all psychiatric disorders are particularly low. Steketee, Quay, and White (1991) examined obsessive-compulsive symptoms and various measures of religiosity in a Christian sample and found no relationship between OCD and type of religion, but religiosity was associated with symptom severity.

Two other studies reported an association between obsessive-compulsive symptoms and religiosity in nonclinical Christian samples. Sica, Novara, and Sanavio (2002) found that highly or moderately religious Catholics showed more OCD symptoms and cognitions than did those with a low degree of religiosity. Using an undergraduate population, Abramowitz, Deacon, Woods, and Tolin (2004) examined the association between Protestant religiosity and OCD symptoms and cognitions and found that highly religious Protestants reported more pathological symptoms and cognitions than did moderately religious Protestants and atheists. In contrast, there was no difference in religiosity between an OCD group and panic disorder or healthy control groups in a Jewish sample (Hermesh, Masser-Kavitzky, & Gross-Isseroff, 2003).

Importance of thoughts was one of the constructs both Sica, Novara, and Sanavio (2002) and Abramowitz et al. (2004) found related to Christian religiosity, measured using the obsessive beliefs questionnaire (OBQ; Obsessive Compulsive Cognition Working Group, 2001). Using the TAF-scale (Shafran et al., 1996), Rassin and Koster (2003) evaluated the relationship between religiosity and TAF. The TAF-scale yields three subscales: one measures the perceived moral equivalence of thoughts and action, and two measure the perceived likelihood of thoughts leading to a physical outcome, whether for others or oneself. In a nonclinical, predominantly Christian sample, they found that religiosity correlated with TAF, especially on the morality subscale. As they note, however, not all religions may accentuate TAF cognitions.

Given previous research distinguishing Jews and Christians in terms of moral judgments about mental states, there is reason to believe that researchers should not assume a cross-religion commonality in terms of this construct. Religious groups differ in the extent to which they hold others responsible for mental states (Cohen & Rozin, 2001). For example, when presented with hypothetical vignettes, Protestants rated a target person more negatively than did Jews for thinking about committing an immoral action (e.g., thinking about having an extramarital affair), even though the groups did not differ in how they perceived the moral status of the relevant behaviors (e.g., actually having an affair). Furthermore, the group differences were partially mediated by ratings of the moral significance of thoughts and how likely thoughts are to lead to behavior. This discrepancy did not hold true, however, for positive intentions (Cohen, 2003; Cohen & Rankin, 2004; Cohen & Rozin, 2001).

Cohen and colleagues (Cohen, 2003; Cohen & Rankin, 2004; Cohen & Rozin, 2001) suggest that fundamental differences in religious doctrine account for the group differences in judgments about the morality of mentality. Christianity, and especially Protestantism, places great emphasis on thoughts and intentions. Often cited to illustrate this point is Jesus' exhortation: "You have heard that it was said 'you shall not commit adultery': but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matthew 5:27–28; New American Standard Version). Moreover, at the core of Christian doctrine is the notion that one's eternal status hinges upon belief in Jesus as savior, and there are relatively few behavioral prescriptions or restrictions, especially in Protestantism.

In contrast, Judaism tends to emphasize action and behavioral adherence much more than belief. Smart (1999) notes that "Judaism is characterized more by orthopraxy than by orthodoxy" (p. 184), and indeed the Rabbinic literature is predominantly behavioral and legalistic. There are myriad biblical and rabbinic commandments that regulate details of daily routine, and those few that apparently target mental states are typically interpreted as behavioral in classical Jewish texts. That Jews did not differ from Protestants when rating characters who had positive intentions is consistent with Talmudic thought as well, as is evident from a passage in *Kiddushin* 40a: "A good thought is regarded as a good deed…but that the Holy One, blessed be He, does not regard a bad thought…as an actual deed."