

Do religious people self-enhance?

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We ask if and when religious individuals self-enhance more than non-believers. First, religious individuals self-enhance on domains central to their self-concept. Specifically, they exhibit the Better-Than-Average Effect: They rate themselves as superior on attributes painting them as good Christians (e.g. traits like 'loving' or 'forgiving,' Biblical commandments) than on control attributes. Likewise, they exhibit the Overclaiming Effect: They assert superior, but false, knowledge on domains highly relevant to religiosity (e.g. international health charities, humanitarian aid organizations) than on control domains. Second, religious individuals self-enhance strongly in religious (than secular) cultures, which elevate religion to a social value. Finally, Christians may self-enhance in general, perhaps due to their conviction that they have a special relationship with God.

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Introduction

Religiosity, a belief in deity and participation in deity-worshiping practices, satisfies various psychological needs or motives [1], but is self-enhancement one of them? Self-enhancement is the motive to maintain or increase the positivity of self-views [2]. We will introduce two competing theoretical views – one maintaining that Christianity is an optimal antidote to self-enhancement, the other that self-enhancement is untamable by Christianity – and evaluate them based on evidence.

Two views on religiosity and self-enhancement

The view advocating that Christianity is an optimal antidote to self-enhancement is more formally labeled

'Christianity as ego-quieting' ('ego-quieting'), whereas the view advocating that self-enhancement is untamable by Christianity is more formally labeled 'self-centrality principle as universal' ('SCP-universal') [3^{••}].

The ego-quieting view

The idea that Christianity quiets the ego (i.e. attenuates or eliminates self-enhancement) finds roots in the Old Testament. In the Story of Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12), the archangel descends to hell punished for his pride and vanity. Pride is also condemned in the New Testament (1 John 2:16). The Christian bashing of self-enhancement continued over the ages. Pope Gregory (540–604) called pride and vanity (i.e. *superbia*) a deadly sin [4], and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) labelled it the deadliest of all sins [5]. Paralleling their anti-self-enhancement opinions, religious authorities (e.g. Augustine of Hippo [354–430], Martin Luther [1483–1546]) held pro self-effacement opinions. They argued that self-effacement can eradicate, or at least keep at bay, the temptation to self-enhance [6]. This argument has been shared by philosophers [7], sociologists [8], and psychologists [9]. The ego quieting view, then, predicts that Christians do not self-enhance. Specifically, Christians will self-enhance far less than non-believers, and will probably self-enhance even less on the religious domain due to the contextual activation of self-effacement norms.

SCP-universal

Self-enhancement is a fundamental human motive that has evolutionary [10] and hereditary [11] origins, has a dispositional character and hence is considered a more basic psychological structure than religiosity (a cultural adaptation; [12]), confers intrapersonal [13] or intragroup benefits [14], and is manifested across cultures [15]. Given its universal presence among well-functioning persons, self-enhancement must be highly resistant to normative pressures. Specifically, the SCP-universal view predicts that Christians will self-enhance more than non-believers on the religious domain, because it is central to their self-concept. This prediction derives from a long line of theoretical and empirical inquiry asserting that people self-enhance predominantly on central attributes than peripheral attributes, because their self-esteem is tethered more with the former than the latter [16,17].

Self-enhancement in judgment

The better-than-average effect

The majority of people rate themselves higher (i.e. as superior) on central traits compared to their average peer [18], a phenomenon known as the Better-Than-Average Effect (BTAE). Given that it is statistically improbable

for most people to be above average (and only on central attributes!), the BTAE reflects self-enhancement. Do Christians (versus non-believers) manifest a reversal on the BTAE on attributes central to their self-concept, as the ego-quieting view would predict? Or do they manifest the BTAE on such attributes, as the SCP-universal view would predict?

Five methodologically sound studies are relevant to this question. In one study [19], undergraduates enrolled at a Christian university compared themselves with their peers on traits that were based on Saint Paul's definition of Christian love (e.g. 'loving', 'kind', 'forgiving'; 1 Corinthians 13), and hence a religiosity-relevant domain. Participants manifested the BTAE effect. In another study [20], undergraduates enrolled at a Christian university compared themselves with their peers on a domain relevant to religiosity (i.e. Biblical commandments) and less relevant to it (i.e. traits). Participants manifested the BTAE on Biblical commandments to a substantially higher extent than on positive traits. In yet another study [21], community members (MTurkers) compared themselves to the average person who shared their religious persuasion on agency/competence and communion/worth. As we mentioned above, the latter domain is more relevant to religiosity. Participants did not exhibit the BTAE on agency/competence, and exhibited a reversal of the BTAE on communion/warmth.

Finally, in two high-powered studies [3], Christian participants (MTurkers) compared themselves with the average Christian MTurker from their country (USA), and so did a control group of MTurkers. The judgmental comparison involved two domains: religious (i.e. commandments of faith such as 'Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain') and less so (i.e. commandments of communion such as 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife'). Only the Christian participants manifested the BTAE on commandments of faith, whereas both participant groups manifested the BTAE on commandments of communion.

Taken together, the literature is consistent with the SCP-universal view at the expense of the ego-quieting view. Religious persons, compared to non-believers, self-enhance on attributes central to their self-concept.

The overclaiming effect

The majority of people claim to possess knowledge (compared to an objective criterion) on domains that are central to their self-concept, a phenomenon known as the overclaiming effect [22,23]. Given that the claim is erroneous (and occurs mostly on central attributes!), the overclaiming effect reflects self-enhancement. Do Christians (versus non-believers) evince overclaiming on attributes that are central to their self-concept, as the SCP-

universal view would predict, or do they evince lower overclaiming on such attributes, as the ego-quieting view would predict?

A set of eight studies addressed this question [3]. Christians and non-believers, across three countries (i.e. Germany, UK, USA), claimed their knowledge on three domains. One, Christianity, was most central to religiosity (sample topics: Christian saints, stories of the New Testament). Another, communion, was moderately central to religiosity (sample topics: international health charities, humanitarian aid organizations). The final one, agency, was least central to religiosity (sample topics: leading universities, international stock market). Overall, Christians overclaimed more than non-believers. However, consistent with the hypothesis, Christians overclaimed the most on Christianity, moderately on communion, and the least on agency. The results were, once again, consistent with the SCP-universal view.

Self-enhancement in cultural context

The two theoretical views can be tested when placing religiosity in cultural context. Cultures vary in the degree to which they value religion. The ego-quieting view predicts that Christians will self-efface most strongly in cultures that value religion, as they will not want unnecessarily to 'toot their own horn.' By contrast, the SCP-universal view predicts that Christians will self-enhance most strongly in cultures that value religion, as this will make them feel good about themselves (i.e. will boost their self-esteem).

Socially desirable responding

A well-established indicator of self-enhancement is socially desirable responding (SDR; [24]). SDR comprises self-deceptive enhancement and impression management, and correlates with indices of self-enhancement [25]. One way to self-enhance successfully is to be a 'good person' in the eyes of society [26]. Persons high on SDR desire strongly to fit the culturally prototypical 'good person' [27]. Being religious means being a good person in religious cultures. Hence, SDR should predict religiosity strongly in religious cultures and weakly, if at all, in secular cultures.

A meta-analysis [28] tested the two views by focusing on intrinsic and global religiosity (with the two being empirically indistinguishable [29,30]). The meta-analysis also focused on culture both at the macro-level (i.e. countries varying on religiosity [31]) and the micro-level (i.e. academic institutions within the US that were Christian or secular). Religiosity was positively associated with SDR in cultures that valued religion more (e.g. United States) than less (e.g. United Kingdom) and in academic institutions that valued religion more (i.e. Christian universities) than less (i.e. secular universities). The SCP-universal view was supported.

Self-esteem

Another common indicator of self-enhancement is self-esteem [32], the extent to which one considers herself/himself a person of worth and is satisfied with who one is [33]. According to the ego-quieting view, religious individuals will manifest lower self-esteem (i.e. self-efface) in cultures that value religion. However, according to the SCP-universal view, religious individuals will evince higher self-esteem (i.e. self-enhance) in cultures that value religion. Religiosity entails high social value in such cultures, and so religious individuals will pride themselves for their religiosity and, thus, feel especially good about themselves.

Findings once again, favoured the SCP-universal view. One investigation [34**] assessed social self-esteem (how skilled participants regarded themselves in socializing or making new friends [35]) in 11 European countries that varied on religiosity. Religiosity was positively related to self-esteem in more religious countries (Poland, Russia, Spain) than less religious countries (France, Switzerland, The Netherlands). Indeed, in the least secular countries (Germany, Sweden), the association between religiosity and self-esteem was close to zero. Another multi-study investigation [36**] assessed global self-esteem (i.e. 'I see myself as someone who has high self-esteem' [37]) in 65 countries that varied on religiosity (Study 1), assessed informant-reported self-esteem in 36 countries (Study 2), and assessed global self-esteem in 1932 urban areas from 243 federal states and 18 countries. Religious individuals reported higher self-esteem in cultures that ascribed higher social value to religion (i.e. religious cultures) than cultures that ascribed lower social value to religion (i.e. secular cultures) (see also Ref. [38]).

Generalized self-enhancement

Christians self-enhance more than non-believers on the religious domain, as it is central to their self-concept, and self-enhance more than non-believers in religious cultures, as these afford a better fit with the prototypical 'good person' or entail higher social value. Interestingly, Christians do not appear to self-enhance less than non-believers on secular domains or cultures [3**,28**,34**,36**]. As such, the net effect is Christian self-enhancement. And yet we asked whether there is additional evidence for generalized Christian self-enhancement and why such an effect should exist.

The rationale for such an effect lies in Christians believing they have a personal relationship with an almighty God. Indeed, the notion of a personal relationship with God is largely established in theistic religions [39], and is purported to be cultivated through singing, praying, visiting the house of worship [40], and personal faith. Survey respondents report that having a relationship with God is the core feature of their faith [41], and religious persons who take the Bible more literally

(and spend more time reading the Bible and praying) are more likely to report having a close relationship with God [42**]. Also, religious persons (i.e. evangelicals, those high on religious conservatism and awareness) report greater conceptual overlap between the self and God than their counterparts (i.e. atheists, those low on religious conservatism and awareness; [43**]). This self-God overlap, a measure of relationship closeness, is found both on the Inclusion of Other in the Self scale [44] and on an adjective checklist that allows computation of the percentage of traits shared between the self and God. In all, the belief in a personal relationship with an omnipotent, omniscient deity must be a tremendous boost to Christians' self-esteem through such mechanisms as basking in reflected glory [45].

Preliminary evidence is consistent with the possibility that Christians overall self-enhance more than non-believers. Part of it derives from research on narcissism, an indicator of self-enhancement. One form of this trait is grandiose narcissism, which reflects self-aggrandizement or claims of superiority on agentic domains, such as competence, achievement, and uniqueness [46]. Another form is communal narcissism, which reflects self-aggrandizement or claims of superiority on communal domains, such as helpfulness, friendliness, and self-sacrifice [47]. The communal domain—an other-oriented domain—is more central to religiosity, and so, religious individuals will be especially likely to be communal narcissists. Indeed, although the relationship between religiosity and agentic narcissism is likely weak [3**,48,49], studies have consistently found a positive relationship between religiosity and communal narcissism [3**]. Lastly, additional evidence that overall Christians self-enhance more than non-believers derives from research on SDR and self-esteem: Religious persons are particularly high on SDR [50*] and self-esteem [51*].

Conclusions

Our review documented religious self-enhancement in support of the SCP-universal view. Several challenges await. Much empirical evidence is based on studies operationalizing self-enhancement as the BTAE and testing U.S. MTurkers. Follow-up research will do well to use alternative indices of self-enhancement [51*], and test community samples in a wide range of countries. Also, follow-up research will need to focus on other religions besides Christianity (e.g. Judaism, Hinduism, Islam [49]), examine circumstances under which self-enhancement findings are weakened or even reversed, and gauge the relative potency of self-enhancement against other motives or needs that guide religiosity (e.g. meaning, uncertainty reduction, control).

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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