OPTIMISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

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Abstract—Explanatory style from nine religious groups, representing fundamentalist, moderate, and liberal viewpoints, was investigated by questionnaire and by blind content analysis of their sermons and liturgy. Fundamentalist individuals were significantly more optimistic by questionnaire than those from moderate religions, who were in turn more optimistic than liberals. The liturgy and sermons showed the parallel pattern of optimism. Regression analyses suggested that the greater optimism of fundamentalist individuals may be entirely accounted for by the greater hope and daily influence fundamentalism engenders, along with the greater optimism of the religious services they hear.

For nearly a century, religion and its effect on the psychology of its adherents have been the subject of study in the social sciences. Although past studies have examined the behavioral and emotional effects of belonging to a religion, they have not explored variations in the optimistic or pessimistic outlook of individuals stemming from religious differences. Nor have past studies scrutinized how emotional differences vary with the fundamentalist or liberal nature of a religion. We report such an analysis of religious differences in optimism and pessimism.

In a seminal study, Emile Durkheim (1897/1951) found that fundamentalist groups, such as Catholics, which have a tight hierarchical structure and demand unquestioning and unconditional acceptance of the faith, had a much lower suicide rate than liberal groups, such as Unitarians, which have a more questioning environment. (See Pescosolido & Georgianna, 1989, for a modern replication.) In 1925, Malinowski suggested (1948) that there was a positive relationship between participation in religious activities and emotional well-being. McClure and Loden (1982) found that more time spent in religious activity correlated with more overall happiness and satisfaction. Further, Ness and Wintrob (1980) demonstrated that the more frequently people participated in fundamentalist religious activities, the less likely they were to report emotional distress.

We explored the question of whether differences along the dimension of fundamentalism-liberalism influence the optimism and pessimism of religious adherents. In Study 1, we compared the explanatory style of members of nine religions.

STUDY 1

Subjects

Our subjects were 623 adherents of nine major religions. All subjects lived in the United States. We divided these nine religious groups into the three categories of fundamentalists, moderates, and liberals. The fundamentalist category consisted of three religions: Orthodox Judaism, Calvinism, and Islam; we placed these religions into the fundamentalist category because they interpret their religious texts quite literally, as well as imposing a great many day-to-day regulations upon their followers. Empirically, we validated this categorization when we found that these three religions show the most religious involvement and influence (see Results below).

Four religions represented the moderates: Conservative Judaism, Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Methodism. While in Durkheim's work of almost a century ago Catholicism was fundamentalist, Greeley (1977) has argued convincingly that there is a new, more liberal American Catholicism. Modern Catholics tend to spend less time in religious activities than Baptists and accept fewer religious responsibilities than Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians (Glass, 1971). Our religious involvement and influence data below provide empirical validation that Catholicism is "moderate."

The final category, liberals, included two religions: Unitarianism and Reformed Judaism. These religions were called liberal because they encourage individuality, tolerance, and skepticism. Members of both groups are quite free to decide how much they believe of religious dogma. Belief in God, for instance, is not necessary in order to be a practicing Unitarian or Reformed Jew.

Sixty to 80 people from each religion participated. Their ages ranged from 18 to 65. For each person, we collected demographic information about sex, age, education level, income, and race (see Table 1). Subjects were mainly from urban congregations in Philadelphia, New York City, and Washington, D.C. Because there are more Calvinist congregations in the Midwest, Calvinist subjects were tested in Minneapolis.

Procedure

We contacted leaders from each religion and obtained permission for the first author to address members of the congregations during religious services. After these services, while members participated in related activities, we distributed a variety of questionnaires for the members to complete. We told subjects that our research concerned "their outlook towards life and religion." Only those questionnaires that were filled out completely were used in our analysis. Because Orthodox Jews are not permitted to read and write during Friday and Saturday services, they mailed in their completed questionnaires later. The other subjects filled out the questionnaires after the religious services. We did not pay the subjects for their participation. The return rate for completed surveys varied from a low of 30% among the Muslims to a high of 70% among the Reformed Jews.

Questionnaires

We used three questionnaires, which took a total of about 30 min to complete.

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The first was the Attributional Style Questionnaire (ASQ). This questionnaire measures causal explanations for negative and positive events on three dimensions: internality-externality, stability-instability, and globality-specificity (Schulman, Castellon, & Seligman, 1989). This was the scale used to evaluate the optimism-pessimism of each subject. Within the ASQ there are an equal number of negative and positive events; scoring includes a composite measure for the negative events (CN) and a composite measure for the positive events (CP). Each composite score is the sum of the number of negative and positive events; the difference between the two composite scores (CP – CN) is referred to as the CPCN score, which is the full-scale ASQ score, widely used in this literature (Seligman, 1991).

The second questionnaire was the Beck Depression Inventory, which is a widely used measure of the current symptoms of depression (Beck, 1970).

The third questionnaire we designed to measure religiousness. It included three topics: religious influence in daily life, religious involvement, and religious hope. The measure of religious influence in daily life had seven items (e.g., “To what extent do you believe your religious beliefs influence what you eat and drink?”). Each question was placed on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all influential) to 7 (extremely influential). Religious involvement was measured by three items (e.g., “How often do you attend religious services?”; “How often do you pray?”). To answer these, six choices were available, ranging from several times a day to less than once a month. The religious hope measure contained six questions (e.g., “Do you believe there is a heaven?”; “Do you believe your suffering will be rewarded?”). Answers to these questions were on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (disagree) to 7 (agree).

Table 1. Demographics of the sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Percentage female</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Mean age</th>
<th>Percentage of questionnaires returned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fundamentalists</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orthodox Jews</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>Upper-Middle</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calvinists</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2-4</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderates</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholics</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Jews</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>Upper-Middle</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lutherans</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Low-Middle</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodists</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Low-Middle</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberals</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform Jews</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>Upper-Middle</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitarians</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. There were no significant differences among religious groups. “School” refers to mean years of postsecondary education. “Income” is the self-defined mean.

The results showed that members of fundamentalist religions were much more optimistic as measured by the CPCN score than members of liberal religions, with moderates lying in between, $F(2, 593) = 14.82, p < .0001$. As shown in Table 2, fundamentalists were significantly more optimistic than moderates, who were in turn significantly more optimistic than liberals.

The mean composite for positive events, CP, indicated significant differences among the fundamentalists, moderates, and liberals, $F(2, 601) = 20.77, p < .0001$. The mean score for negative events, CN, was significantly different for fundamentalists than for liberals, $F(2, 609) = 3.18, p < .042$.

We found significant differences in religious influence in daily life, religious involvement, and religious hope, confirming our division of the groups along the dimension of fundamentalism. Fundamentalists were significantly more influenced, involved, and hopeful than moderates, who were significantly more so than liberals. The mean full-scale score differed among the three groups for religious influence in daily life, $F(2, 620) = 104.10, p < .00001$; religious involvement, $F(2, 620) = 93.04, p < .00001$; and religious hope, $F(2, 616) = 126.29, p < .00001$.

Within each of the categories of fundamentalists, moderates, and liberals, there were no systematic, significant differences in optimism-pessimism, religious involvement, religious influence in daily life, or religious hope.

Each of these religiousness measures correlated positively with optimism: That is, the CPCN correlated with the measures of religious influence in daily life ($r = .14, p < .001$), religious involvement ($r = .08, p < .06$), and religious hope ($r = .21, p < .0001$). The CP score also correlated with both the measure of religious influence in daily life ($r = .16, p < .002$) and the measure of religious hope ($r = .67, p < .0001$). The CN score was negatively correlated with religious hope ($r = -.1, p < .02$).

Does the optimism difference derive from the differences in religious influence in daily life, involvement, and hope? To test this, we regressed the
Optimism and Fundamentalists

### Table 2. Mean group differences in optimism and religiousness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>CPCN</th>
<th>RIF</th>
<th>RIV</th>
<th>RH</th>
<th>CP</th>
<th>CN</th>
<th>Caved CPCN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fundamentalists</td>
<td>3.16a</td>
<td>5.53a</td>
<td>3.86a</td>
<td>5.52a</td>
<td>15.59a</td>
<td>12.43a</td>
<td>2.09a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.84)</td>
<td>(1.02)</td>
<td>(1.27)</td>
<td>(1.02)</td>
<td>(2.05)</td>
<td>(2.62)</td>
<td>(1.10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderates</td>
<td>1.95b</td>
<td>4.17b</td>
<td>3.56b</td>
<td>5.10b</td>
<td>14.34b</td>
<td>12.42b</td>
<td>0.48ab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3.17)</td>
<td>(1.14)</td>
<td>(1.20)</td>
<td>(1.42)</td>
<td>(2.72)</td>
<td>(2.29)</td>
<td>(1.27)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberals</td>
<td>1.01c</td>
<td>3.74c</td>
<td>2.38c</td>
<td>3.47c</td>
<td>13.97c</td>
<td>12.96c</td>
<td>-0.07c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3.27)</td>
<td>(1.12)</td>
<td>(0.90)</td>
<td>(1.14)</td>
<td>(2.66)</td>
<td>(2.75)</td>
<td>(1.6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses. CPCN = Composite positive minus composite negative ASQ score for individuals; higher score means more optimism (possible range: +18 to -18). RIF = religious influence in daily life; higher score means more influence (possible range: 1–7). RIV = religious involvement; higher score means more involvement (possible range: 1–6). RH = religious hope; higher score means more hope (possible range: 1–7). CP = composite ASQ score for positive events; higher score means more optimism (possible range: 3–21). CN = composite ASQ score for negative events; lower score means more optimism (possible range: 3–21). Caved CPCN = content analysis of liturgy and sermon, composite positive minus composite negative; higher score means more optimism (possible range: +18 to -18).

Within each column, means that share a common superscript do not differ significantly. The alpha used was $p = .05$.

Data for individual religions can be obtained from the authors.

CPCN score against fundamentalism, religious influence in daily life, involvement, and hope. Religious influence in daily life ($t = -1.88, p < .06, \beta = .13$) and religious hope ($t = 2.23, p < .02, \beta = .31$) both played a significant role. Religious involvement ($t = .84, p < .4, \beta = .28$) was not significant. We also found that even after partialing out religious involvement, religious influence in daily life, and religious hope, fundamentalism still significantly predicted the CPCN score ($t = 2.33, p < .04, \beta = .56$). This means that part, but not all, of the effect of fundamentalism on optimism stems from how much hope the religion engenders and the daily influence that the religion has.

We analyzed age, income, education, and sex for the different groups and found no significant differences. To answer the question whether the optimism or religiousness differences might be accounted for by income, sex, and education, we regressed CPCN on these variables and found that none of them significantly predicted any optimism or religiousness variables. No analysis was undertaken with regard to race, because aside from the Muslims, all subjects were Caucasian.

Scores obtained from the Beck Depression Inventory did not differ among the three groups.

### STUDY 2

Our second study examined another possible mechanism causing optimism differences among fundamentalists, moderates, and liberals: the religious materials that members read and hear. We tape-recorded sermons and blindly content-analyzed these and other liturgical materials. The fundamentalist religious sermons express much more optimism than do liberal services, with moderate services lying in between (CPCN of Caved material: $F(2, 93) = 25.81, p < .00001$). The CPCN of adherents correlated with the CPCN of the Caved material, $r = .80, p < .0001$.

Do the individual optimism differences stem from the optimism differences of religious services? To test this, we regressed the CPCN of the adherents against religious influence in daily life ($t = 2.27, p < .02, \beta = .28$), religious involvement ($t = 2.06, p < .05, \beta = .2$), religious hope ($t = 3.39, p < .001, \beta = .37$), Caved CPCN ($t = 2.16, p < .04, \beta = .83$), and fundamentalism ($t = .37, p < .71, \beta = .45$). After adding in the Caved CPCN to the regression equation, fundamentalism dropped out as a predictor of individual CPCN. These results suggest that the optimism differences of the individual members of the various religions stem partially from the religious material to which they are exposed. When religious involvement, influence, and hope are added in, the greater optimism of fundamentalism seems entirely explained.

### DISCUSSION

Three major findings emerged from these two studies: (1) The optimism of

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greater optimism in fundamentalists. It has been a fashion for modern social science to argue that authoritarian upbringing and doctrine damage mental health (e.g., Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). In contrast, we find that the more authoritarian religious produce more hope and optimism, and we suggest that the question of mental health, authoritarianism, and religious belief be reopened.

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