Research Report

OPTIMISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

Sheena Sethi and Martin E.P. Seligman
University of Pennsylvania

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.

Address correspondence to Sheena Sethi, Department of Psychology, Stanford University, Jordan Hall, Building 420, Stanford, CA 94305.

Table 1. *Demographics of the sample*

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

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

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 three dimensions of internality, stability, and globality. 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 your religious beliefs influence whom you associate with?"; "To what extent do 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).

Results

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

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

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

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 material for each religion. We hypothesized that the optimism of the individual adherents would reflect the optimism of the religious material.

Method

We consulted several leaders from each of the nine religions to obtain information regarding the central, distinguishing religious prayers and hymnals most used day-to-day by their congregations. We then selected the four most typical hymns and prayers for each religion. We also tape-recorded three sermons from each of the congregations whose members had filled out the questionnaires.

Next, these materials were analyzed through the CAVE (Content Analysis of Verbatim Explanations) technique. This method allows for the analysis of explanatory style in any kind of written texts. Every statement which began with an expression such as "because," "since," or "as a result of" was extracted from the document. These extractions from the various documents were randomly shuffled and were given to trained raters who were blind to the source of the material. The religious material was rated on the three dimensions of internality, stability, and globality. Reliability with this technique is very high, and optimism-pessimism values were scored in a manner parallel to that used for the ASQ (see Schulman et al., 1989, for reliability and validity evidence; for scoring, coding, blindness, and extraction details, see Peterson, Luborsky, & Seligman, 1983).

Results

The greater optimism found with greater fundamentalism in individual adherents was paralleled by more optimism in the religious materials they read and hear. The fundamentalist religious services 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

individual members of a religion varies with fundamentalism, with fundamentalists significantly more optimistic than moderates, who are more optimistic than liberals. (2) Religious hope, religious influence in daily life, and religious involvement are significantly higher for fundamentalists than for moderates and higher for moderates than for liberals. (3) The optimism of religious materials members read and hear is significantly greater for fundamentalists than moderates, and greater for moderates than liberals.

What causes the differences in optimism among fundamentalists, moderates, and liberals? The degree of religious hope, religious influence in daily life, and religious involvement may play some causal role, as indicated by the regression analyses. Optimism in the liturgy also may play a causal role. A causal model that takes into account all four factors—religious influence in daily life, religious involvement, religious hope, and religious liturgy—seems to account exhaustively for the effect of fundamentalism on optimism.

In conclusion, people who subscribe to more fundamentalist religious beliefs are on average more optimistic than people who hold more moderate beliefs. Moderates are in turn more optimistic than liberals. We believe that the more optimistic explanatory style present in fundamentalist religious services as well as greater religious hope, involvement, and influence all combine to cause 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 religions produce more hope and optimism, and we suggest that the question of mental health, authoritarianism, and religious belief be reopened.

Acknowledgments—Preparation of this article was supported in part by the Newcombe Fellowship Fund of the University of Pennsylvania to Sheena Sethi and by Public Health Service Grant MH 19604 to M. Seligman.

We thank the following clergy for their advice and support: Rabbi Fuchs, Pastor Bailey, Rabbi Halpern, Rabbi Maslin, Rabbi Caplan, Rabbi Parsofsky, Rabbi Kaizn, Rabbi Maharam, Reverend Geurkink, Reverend McGinty, Reverend Carletti, Reverend Hurto, Father Macafee, Reverend Boehm, Reverend Meyer, Reverend Mellson, Reverend Smith, Pastor Fikse, Imam Khoug, Imam Asi, Imam Noman, and Imam Malik.

We gratefully acknowledge the following people for their help in data collection: Sherri Mitchell, Jed Fishback, David Seligman, Dan Richter, Christopher Wasson, Steven Bomley, Diane Gooding, Cathy Rank, Rumella Husain, Linda Drummer, and Andrew Rozmiarek. We would like to acknowledge the significant contribution of Mary Anne Layden to the authorship of the ASQ. We give special thanks to all the members of the congregations who made this study possible.

REFERENCES

Adorno, T.W., Frenkel-Brunswik, E., Levinson, D.J., & Sanford, R.N. (1950). *The authoritarian personality*. New York: Harper & Row.

Beck, A.T. (1970). *Depression, causes, and treatment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Durkheim, E. (1951). *Suicide: A study in sociology*. New York: Free Press. (Original work published 1897)

Glass, K.D. (1971). Denominational differences in religious belief, practice, anxiety, and dogmatism. *Religious Education, 66*, 204–206.

Greeley, A.M. (1977). How conservative are American Catholics? *Political Science Quarterly, 92*, 199–218.

Malinowski, B. (1948). *Magic, science, and religion*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.

McClure, R.F., & Loden, M. (1982). Religious activity, denomination membership and life satisfaction. *Psychology, A Quarterly Journal of Human Behavior, 19*, 12–18.

Ness, R.C., & Wintrob, R.M. (1980). The emotional impact of fundamentalist religious participation. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 50*(2), 202–215.

Pescosolido, B.A., & Georgianna, S. (1989). Durkheim, suicide, and religion: Toward a network theory of suicide. *American Sociological Review, 54*, 33–48.

Peterson, C., Luborsky, L., & Seligman, M.E.P. (1983). Attributions and depressive mood shifts: A case study using the Symptom-Context Method. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 92*, 96–103.

Schulman, P., Castellon, C., & Seligman, M. (1989). Assessing explanatory style: The content analysis of verbatim explanations and the Attributional Style Questionnaire. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 27*, 505–512.

Seligman, M.E.P. (1991). *Learned optimism*. New York: Knopf.

(RECEIVED 6/1/92; REVISION ACCEPTED 9/24/92)