Religion, Death, and Prosocial Behavior: A Priming Study
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Background
- Mortality salience, or awareness of the certainty of one’s own death, has been shown to increase helping behavior (Jonas et al., 2002).
- Salaience of religious concepts has also been shown to increase willingness to help (Pichon et al., 2007).
- However, previous research has not examined the effects of priming mortality in a religious context. Almost all major religions place considerable importance on some kind of afterlife. Many, in fact, connect one’s behavior on earth to outcomes in the afterlife.

The purpose of the current research was to determine the effect on helping of priming religious concepts of death and the afterlife.

We hypothesized that priming religious beliefs concerning death would lead to greater rates of helping than priming mortality, and that this effect would be moderated by participants’ religiosity.

Method

Participants:
- 265 Purdue undergraduates participated for course credit.

Materials:
- Big Five Inventory (John, 1991)
- Religious Commitment Inventory (Wellington, 2003)

Design:
- Participants completed one of three priming conditions: religious concepts of mortality, mortality, or neutral.
- Participants read and responded to three quotes pertaining to their priming condition. Examples include:
  - Religious Prime: “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.” Revelation 20:12-13
  - Mortality Prime: “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” Benjamin Franklin
  - Neutral Prime: “Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower” Steve Jobs

Procedure:
- Participants were told that the experiment would measure the performance impact of messages from famous quotes.
- Participants completed the initial surveys, then completed the priming activity.
- In the priming activity, participants were instructed to read over the quotes carefully and write a short 3-5 sentence response to the quotes.
- Participants then completed an anagram task to go along with our deception.
- The number of surveys volunteered for was our measure of helping behavior.

Results

• We performed a quartile split separating the participants into high religiosity and low religiosity groups based on their scores on the Religious Commitment Inventory.
• We found a main effect for religiosity (p = .05). Highly religious participants volunteered for more surveys than low religiosity participants regardless of condition.
• The interaction between priming condition and religiosity, however, was not significant.

• We then collapsed the mortality and religious primes.
• We found a marginally significant main effect for Agreeableness (p=.055).
• We also found a significant interaction between Agreeableness and priming (p=.05) when conditions were collapsed.

Conclusion

• Regarding our hypothesis, we found no evidence of significant interaction between participant religiosity and priming.
• The main effect for religiosity showed that, regardless of condition, highly religious participants displayed more helping behavior than participants of low religiosity.
• Agreeableness interacted with priming in an unexpected way. Low agreeable participants showed more helping with priming, which can be explained as “reminder effects” (Graziano et al., 2007). That is, priming reminds low agreeable participants of that they should indeed help others. However, it is not clear why the same reminder undermined helping behavior for high agreeable participants.

References


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