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Reminders of God Can Increase Risk-Taking

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Religiosity and participation in religious activities have typically been linked with decreased risky behavior. In the current research, we find that reminders of the concept of God can increase risk-taking. Our research provides insight into the divergent effects that distinct components of religion can exert on behavior.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Behavior modification programs—e.g., twelve-step addiction rehabilitation programs—routinely invoke God and religion to help people reduce or eliminate risky behaviors (e.g., Cain, 1991; Ferdinand, 1997; Holt et al., 2009). The wisdom of this strategy has empirical support: Religiosity and participation in religious activities are associated with decreased risk-taking (e.g., Arnett, 1998; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004), and religious references can decrease risky behaviors such as substance abuse (Wallace & Bachman, 1991), speeding (Arnett, 1998), and gambling (Hoffman, 2000). Here, we propose that in some instances references to God can have the opposite effect, and instead increase the tendency to take certain types of risks.

In particular, God is commonly viewed as a source of security, and people often treat God as an attachment figure (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992). Research reveals that feelings of security can reduce people's perceptions of risk, which increases their willingness to engage in risky behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). We predict that the association between God and feelings of security may lead people who are reminded of God to view risky behavior as less dangerous, which should in turn increase their willingness to take risks.

Consistent with this prediction, in Study 1A individuals who were primed (versus not primed) with the concept of God indicated a higher likelihood of risk-taking on the Domain-Specific Risk-Taking Task (DOSPERT; Weber et al., 2002; $t(59) = 2.21, p = .031$). In Study 1B, priming God increased individuals' willingness to take a risk that they had considered taking in the past ($t(200) = 2.72, p = .024$). Importantly, individuals differ in the extent to which they believe God provides security (Kirkpatrick & Shaver, 1992). Consistent with our hypothesis, a replication of Study 1B revealed that this effect was more likely to emerge among individuals who perceived God to be a reliable source of security ($B = 1.33, t(96) = 2.36, p = .020$) than among individuals who did not ($B = -.33, t(96) = -.60, p = .557$).

Study 1C replicated these findings with real behavior. Specifically, participants chose between either completing a task that could

(ostensibly) cause eye damage or an equivalent task that carried no risk. Participants learned that this safer task was two minutes longer and paid 25 cents less. Participants who were reminded (versus not reminded) of the concept of God chose the risky task more often (95.5%_{God}; 84.3%_{Control}; $\chi^2(1, N = 136) = 4.59, p = .032$).

Study 2 aimed to reconcile our findings with the existing literature on religion and risk-taking. Specifically, while previous research suggests that religious references can decrease risk-taking (e.g., Arnett, 1998), many of these previously-studied risky behaviors had immoral connotations. We predicted that God primes decrease these immoral risky behaviors (e.g., Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008) even as they increase non-moral risk-taking. To that end, we conducted a field experiment in which we posted ads to Facebook. We found that ads promoting non-moral risks generated more interest (i.e., more clicks) when they made God salient ($B = .71, z = 2.04, p = .041$), that ads promoting immoral risks generated *less* interest when they made God salient ($B = 1.39, z = 2.31, p = .021$), and that ads promoting neutral behavior generated the same amount of interest regardless of whether they made God salient ($B = .24, z = .83, p = .410$). Hence, this study suggests that reminders of God may decrease *immoral* risk-taking, but increase non-moral risk-taking.

In Study 3 we tested our hypothesis that reminders of God increase risk-taking by leading individuals to perceive risky behaviors as less dangerous. We found that participants who were primed (versus not primed) with the concept of God perceived less danger associated with various risks ($B = -0.44, t(99) = -3.00, p = .004$), and also indicated a higher likelihood of taking the risks ($B = 0.61, t(99) = 2.29, p = .024$). Importantly, perceived danger mediated the effect of condition on risk-taking ($CI_{95\%}: .12, .64$).

Together, these studies suggest that references to God can increase risk-taking. References to God pervade daily life; indeed, the word "God" is one of the most common nouns in the English language (Wiktionary, 2013). This research suggests that these frequent reminders can shape people's risk perceptions and influence their likelihood of engaging in potentially dangerous behaviors.