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The Importance of Culture-Fit for Remembering Church Sermons

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Abstract: *This experiment tested the degree to which culture-fit influences memory for the content of a sermon. We hypothesized that people who read a sermon emphasizing the infallibility of Christian scriptures will remember it more accurately if they have collectivistic rather than individualistic values. In contrast, we hypothesized that people who read a sermon emphasizing the subjectivity of Christian scriptures will remember it more accurately if they have individualistic rather than collectivistic values. Participants (n = 270) were randomly assigned to read either an orthodox- or quest-oriented sermon regarding Peter 1:20-21. They then completed a true-false memory test as to whether or not statements were in the sermon they read. Later, they completed an online survey of their cultural values and beliefs. Results indicated that highly collectivistic individuals' memories were negatively affected in the Quest Condition, but not in the Orthodox Condition. Implications for the culture-fit of religious information are discussed.*

Keywords: memory, schema, religion, quest, orthodox, culture

Memory is an invaluable part of human life. Indeed, it is utilized every day, from adhering to deadlines to remembering a wedding anniversary. Important knowledge is taken and stored, then recalled for future use. Some environments, however, allow for better memory processing than others, including stimuli that fit one's cultural framework. For example, people with highly independent values are less susceptible to misinformation from others than people with highly interdependent values (Peterson & Paterson, 2012). To date, however, no one has examined how culture-fit memory processes may occur within religious contexts. The purpose of this experiment was to examine how memory is affected by one's own cultural background and the fit of new stimuli, specifically in the context of a church sermon.

Many different factors can effect memory. Some effects are based upon the characteristics of the information being stored, such as the type of stimulus (Craig & Schloerscheidt, 2011; Sato & Yoshikawa, 2013). Other effects involve factors surrounding the information, such as if an environment is real or simulated, if an environment is familiar or not, or if any other sensory distractions are present (Allen, Baddeley, & Hitch, 2017; Rule, Garrett, & Ambady, 2010; Tamplin, Krawietz, Radvansky, & Copeland, 2013). Memory can even be affected by personal circumstances, such as if someone uses nicotine or how much stress a person experiences (Grobe, Perkins, Goettler-Good, & Wilson, 1998; Ramirez, McDonough, & Jin, 2017). Negative emotional states are also detrimental to working memory capacity (Brose, Schmiedek, Löven, & Lindenberger, 2012; Ellis & Ashbrook, 1988; Meinhardt & Pekrun, 2003; Spachholz, Kuhbandner, & Pekrun, 2014; Spies, Hesse, & Hummitzsch, 1996).

Another factor that impacts memory is whether information is aschematic (also called schema-inconsistent) or schema-consistent. Extant literature, however, is contradictory when considering the direction of this effect. Some studies suggest that aschematic information is better recalled because it contrasts against the established schema and is therefore more salient (e.g., Koppel & Berntsen, 2014). In contrast, other research suggests that schema-consistent information is recalled better than aschematic information because the subject matter is more fully integrated into existing memory (Gronau & Shachar, 2015; Silva, Groeger, & Bradshaw, 2004). Another area of research focuses on how schemas influence false memories in social situations, such as eyewitness accounts or observations of others. When observing and reporting information about a social interaction, people tend to report that schema-consistent events occurred when they did not (Nemeth & Belli, 2006; Tuckey & Brewer, 2003; White & Carlston, 1983).

Information can be categorized as schema-consistent or inconsistent based upon how well a particular piece of information fits with someone's understanding of the overall scene. In light of this, culture-fit may be one of the ways in which new information can be schematic or aschematic.

Culture-Fit

Culture-fit is the degree to which an individual fits within the value framework of their own culture. This may also relate to how well new stimuli fit into one's cultural framework. Culture-fit can be applied to many different subdomains culture, including socioeconomic status and nationality (Cohen, 2009).

One of the most common ways to distinguish among cultural values is by examining whether the culture adopts an

individualistic or collectivistic framework (Cohen, 2009; Friedman et al., 2010; Lau, Wang, Fung, & Namikoshi, 2014; Parkes, Bochner, & Schneider, 2001). This particular construct describes an important cultural distinction between how self-focused or group-focused the members of the culture tend to be (Cohen & Hill, 2007; Cukur, De Guzman, & Carlo, 2004; Parkes et al., 2001). Individualism focuses on unique personal achievement and the maintenance of personal control, whereas collectivism focuses on putting group interests above personal needs and desires (Triandis, 2001).

People use cultural understanding, including their collectivistic or individualistic frameworks, as schemas to respond to environmental stimuli (Cohen & Hill, 2007). Consequently, people who experience higher levels of culture-fit may experience more positive outcomes. For instance, organizational research shows that people who fit with their company's values are more satisfied with their jobs, have more commitment to the organization, and earn tenure more often than those who have lower levels of culture-fit within their workplaces (Parkes et al., 2001). Additionally, individuals consider information to be more persuasive when it fits into their cultural values than when it does not (Uskul & Oyserman, 2010; Vaidyanathan, Aggarwal, & Kozłowski, 2013).

In contrast, not fitting into the predominant culture can lead to negative outcomes. For example, second-generation Asian American students who are raised in bicultural households experienced higher levels of social anxiety when exposed to a highly individualistic culture in college (Lau et al., 2014). Asian American exchange students can also experience symptoms of depression when they began to perceive cultural distance between themselves and the culture of the United States (Friedman et al., 2010). Similar instances of culture-fit within faith communities, however, are rarely examined. The following section outlines how variations in Christianity and corresponding attitudes may be explained through culture-fit.

Culture-Fit and Christianity

Research concerning religion and culture often notes the overlap between the two constructs (Cohen, 2009; Cohen & Hill, 2007; Cukur et al., 2004). Researchers often suggest that religion is another subdomain of culture, similar to individualism-collectivism and nationality (Cohen, 2009). Many religious orientations clearly have direct links with individualism or collectivism. For instance, people who adhere to Judaism often hold highly collectivistic values, whereas Protestant-Christians hold highly individualistic ones (Cohen, 2015). Cohen and Hill (2007) also discovered similar findings in which American Catholic and Jewish individuals had more collectivistic aspects of religion and spirituality, while American Protestants had more individualistic aspects. Even so, there can be considerable variation within denominations.

One example is whether religious practice emphasizes literalism or open interpretation, which are related to orthodox and quest religious orientations respectively (Allport & Ross, 1967; Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Batson, Naifeh, & Pate, 1978; Reinert & Bloomingdale, 2000; Watson, Morris, & Hood, 1989). People with a highly orthodox orientation emphasize

tradition, and that there is only one correct, literal interpretation of religious texts, and doubt is unacceptable (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Randolph-Seng, Nielsen, Bottoms, & Filipas, 2008). Quest orientation, in contrast, includes viewing religion as a journey to seek truth and consistency within one's self, where doubt and questioning are encouraged (Batson et al., 1978; Messay, Dixon, & Rye, 2012; Reinert & Bloomingdale, 2000; Watson et al., 1989).

Religious orientations can also predict psychological outcomes beyond religious contexts. Recently, Leach and Gore (2017) found that individuals who ascribed to an orthodox orientation were more likely to think primarily about the past, whereas individuals with a quest orientation were more likely to focus on long-term goals and the future. It follows then that orthodox and quest orientations thrive within supportive cultural conditions. For example, people who strictly adhere to Biblical scripture are also more likely than others to value collectivism, right wing authoritarian values, social hierarchies, and ethnocentrism (Terrizzi, Shook, & McDaniel, 2013). Ji (2004) found that intrinsic religiosity was associated with a higher level of principled moral reasoning. In contrast, people who view religion as a personal journey are more inclined than others to also value individualism (Cukur et al., 2004). Furthermore, internalizing religious and cultural values that fit well is associated with better psychological outcomes. Indeed, Gore (2015) found that people with collectivistic values tend to have higher well-being when they also possess highly orthodox Christian beliefs, but have lower well-being when they possess questing beliefs. This suggests that the culture-fit effects may be particularly pronounced among members of collectivistic cultures.

Cognitive biases are also prevalent when exposed to aschematic or challenging information about one's religious values. Yancey (2014) found that Christians engaged in confirmation biases when exposed to statements that challenged their presuppositions. This effect was similar for Atheists when they were exposed to statements that challenged their presuppositions. Thus, people with strong commitments to either religious or non-religious ideologies may be particularly vulnerable to cognitive distortions when exposed to aschematic stimuli.

Pargament and DeRosa (1985) found that individuals with an interest and positive evaluation of a religious message significantly correlated with memory for a highly religious message. These religious messages are primarily transmitted through weekly sermons during church services. The nature of sermons has long been recognized as a social psychological phenomenon (Kline, 1905), and recent analyses of sermons have demonstrated that memory for sermons is largely based upon the degree to which the listeners "open up" to the sermon in the first place (Pleizier, 2010). Cultural values would likely have a strong influence on the listeners' attunement and attention, and how much it motivates them to act in accordance with the interconnected values of their culture and the suggested actions noted in the sermon. The degree to which memory effects are

due to cognitive or motivational factors, however, has not been analyzed quantitatively.

In summary, past research has shown that aschematic stimuli are more difficult to process (Gronau & Shachar, 2015; Silva et al., 2004), but this has not been examined from the perspective of culture, nor has it been examined in the specific context of religious stimuli (e.g., a sermon). Because culture-fit influences emotional and cognitive processing, it is reasonable to conclude that culture-fit effects with religious stimuli may have similar effects. To investigate the unique cognitive effects of aschematic stimuli, it is also important to control for negative emotional reactions to those stimuli as a covariate.

This experiment examines culture-fit as a way that information can be schema-consistent or schema-inconsistent, and assesses the effects thereof. We therefore hypothesized that the association between individualism and memory would be negative when reading a sermon that is based on literalism, and positive when reading a sermon based on open interpretation. We also hypothesized that the association between collectivism and memory would be positive when reading a sermon that is based on literalism (i.e., a sermon emphasizing an orthodox orientation), and negative when reading a sermon based on open interpretation (i.e., a sermon emphasizing a quest orientation). We also expected these effects to remain significant when controlling for negative emotional reactions to the sermon to demonstrate that the effect is not due to heightened emotional arousal.

Method

Participants

The participants in this experiment were 270 undergraduate students who were enrolled in introductory psychology courses. The participants enrolled via an online research management system, and volunteered their time in exchange for course completion credit. The participants' ages ranged from 18 to 55, with the majority of participants being young adults ($M_{age} = 22.26$, $SD = 6.70$), female (79.6%), and European American (99%). Participants spent between 0 to 20 hours per week in religious activities, with the average amount of approximately the length of a formal religious service ($M = 1.51$, $SD = 2.12$). Most participants in the sample identified as Christian (80%), with 3% identifying as religious but not Christian, and 17% identifying as having no religion or atheist.

Materials

Sermons

For the first part of this experiment, participants were randomly assigned to read either a quest-orientation sermon or an orthodox-orientation sermon. Each sermon was approximately 1270 words and focused on 1 Peter 1:20-21 which states, “²⁰Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. ²¹For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Both sermons asserted that the Bible can be understood and use other supporting verses to emphasize their claims.

For the Orthodox Condition, the sermon emphasized that there is only one correct interpretation of scripture, and that the Bible is the inerrant word of God (McArthur, 1990). This sermon included definitive language that leaves little room for argument (e.g., “So, God superintended human authors so that using their own individual personalities, experiences, thought processes and vocabulary, they composed and recorded without error His perfect revelation in the original copies of Scripture.”). The full text of the sermon presented to participants is in Appendix A.

For the Quest Condition, the sermon states that 1 Peter 1:20-21 is often misinterpreted to mean that people should never consider an individual’s interpretation of the Bible (McClister, 2004). It states that this scripture does not address personal interpretation, but rather the claims of Old Testament prophets (e.g., “Interpretation is unavoidable when handling the Bible, and the early Christians themselves were interpreters (whose interpretation was viewed as radical by the Jews) of the Jewish Scriptures.”). The conclusion of this sermon was that the Bible allows room for exploration and doubt in its audience. The full text of the sermon presented to participants is in Appendix B.

Memory

After completing the reading, participants responded via a reaction form. They were asked 10 true/false questions based on the sermon. Participants were asked to indicate if a particular statement was a part of the sermon or not. Five of the statements came from the Orthodox sermon, and five came from the Quest sermon. Correct answers were coded depending on the condition to which participants were assigned. Total Memory scores therefore ranged from 0 - 10, with higher scores indicating a better memory for what they read or did not read from the sermon. We created additional subscores noting the number of hits, misses, false positives, and correct rejections for each condition. Collected scores were Total Memory ($M = 7.87$, $SD = 1.40$), Hits ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.85$), Misses ($M = 1.02$, $SD = 0.85$), False Positives ($M = 1.09$, $SD = 1.10$), and Correct Rejections ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.12$) for each participant. Higher scores on Total Memory, Hits, and Correct Rejections indicated better memory for the sermon’s content, whereas higher scores on Misses and False Positives indicated worse memory for the content.

Emotional Reaction

The participants also completed a survey that measured the degree of which participants experienced negative emotions while reading the sermon. Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they experienced the particular emotion (e.g. “Frustration”) while reading the sermon on a 5-point Likert scale (1=*not at all*, 5=*extremely*). The mean rating across the items was obtained for the Negative Emotions score ($M = 1.44$, $SD = 0.54$, $\alpha = .74$).

Individualism and Collectivism

Participants completed ten items online to assess their values of individualism and collectivism. Two items from the Individual Value scale (Brockner & Chen, 1996), two items from Chen, Brockner, and Chen’s (2002) Individual Agency Belief subscale, and one item from their Individual Self-Representation subscale were used to assess individualism. Five items from Chen et al.’s (2002) Group Value subscale were used to assess

collectivism. Participants responded to the items using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The mean rating across the individualistic items was obtained for the Individualism score ($M = 3.82, SD = 0.46, \alpha = .75$), and the mean rating across the Group Value items was obtained for the Collectivism score ($M = 3.37, SD = 0.46, \alpha = .73$).

Procedure

This experiment was conducted in two parts. In the initial step, participants arrived at the laboratory, provided consent, then were randomly assigned to read one of two sermons. The experimenter told the participant that the transcript was from a sermon that was given by a preacher at a new, local church. Participants were instructed to read it very carefully and to take their time reading it. After reading the sermon, participants handed the transcript back to the experimenter then completed the true/false memory test.

In step two, participants completed an online questionnaire approximately one week later. This survey asked about their cultural values, along with demographic information. At the end of the survey, participants read a debriefing statement that explained both parts of the experiment.

Results

This experiment tested two hypotheses. We first hypothesized that individuals who read a sermon based on literalism would remember sermon content more accurately if they had collectivistic values rather than individualistic values. Secondly, we hypothesized that people who read a sermon based on open interpretation would remember information in the sermon better if they had individualistic values rather than collectivistic values. To determine if these hypotheses were supported, we conducted a series of hierarchical regression analyses.

For the first set of analyses, we entered the centered Individualism scores and dummy-coded condition score (0 = Orthodox, 1 = Quest) as the independent variables in Block 1, their interaction term was added in Block 2, and Negative Emotions was entered into Block 3. Each analyses used a different memory variable as the dependent variable: Total Correct, Total Hits, Total Misses, False Positives, and Correct

Rejections (see Table 1). The results indicated main effects of Condition for Total Memory, Hits and Misses. The results also revealed main effects of Negative Emotions on all five memory scores, namely that negative emotions were detrimental to the memory for the sermon. There were also two significant Individualism X Condition interaction effects on False Positives and Correct Rejections.

Follow-up analyses indicated that the simple slope between Individualism and False Positives was negative in the Orthodox Condition, and non-significant in the Quest Condition (see Figure 1). Conversely, the simple slope of Individualism and Correct Rejections was positive in the Orthodox Condition, and non-significant in the Quest Condition (see Figure 2). Taken together, these results disconfirmed the first hypothesis, because the hypothesized interaction effect was in the opposite direction.

For the second set of analyses, we entered the centered Collectivism scores and dummy-coded condition score (0 = Orthodox, 1 = Quest) as the independent variables in Block 1, their interaction term was added in Block 2, and Negative Emotions was entered into Block 3. The five memory scores (Total Correct, Total Hits, Total Misses, False Positives, and Correct Rejections) were entered as the dependent variables (see Table 2). The results revealed the same main effects of Condition and of Negative Emotions from the first set of analyses. There were also two significant main effects of Collectivism on False Positives and Correct Rejections, suggesting that collectivism is linked with more false positives and less correct rejections in both conditions. There were also three significant Collectivism X Condition interaction effects on Total Memory, Hits, and Misses.

Follow-up analyses indicated that the simple slopes of Collectivism with Total Memory, Hits, and Misses were all non-significant in the Orthodox Condition, but the simple slope of Collectivism with Total Memory and Hits were negative, and the simple slope of Collectivism with Misses was positive, in the Quest condition (see Figures 3-5). Taken together, these results confirmed the second hypothesis: highly collectivistic individuals had more memory errors when reading the sermon regarding open interpretation of the Bible.

Predictor Variables	Total Memory		Hits		Misses		False Positives		Correct Rejections	
	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2
Block 1		.02*		.10**		.09**		.00		.00
Condition	-.14**		-.31**		.30**		-.05		.06	
Individualism	.06		.04		-.04		-.05		.04	
Block 2		.00		.00		.00		.01*		.01*
Condition	-.14**		-.31**		.30**		-.05		.06	
Individualism	.07		.02		-.02		-.03		.02	
Condition X Individualism	-.08		.04		-.05		.13*		-.13*	
Block 3		.06**		.03**		.03**		.03**		.03**
Condition	-.14**		-.31**		.31**		-.04		.06	
Individualism	.08		.01		-.01		-.03		.02	
Condition X Individualism	-.08		.04		-.04		.13*		-.13*	
Negative Emotions	-.25**		-.18**		.18**		.17**		-.18**	

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Individualism and Sermon Condition on Memory. Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

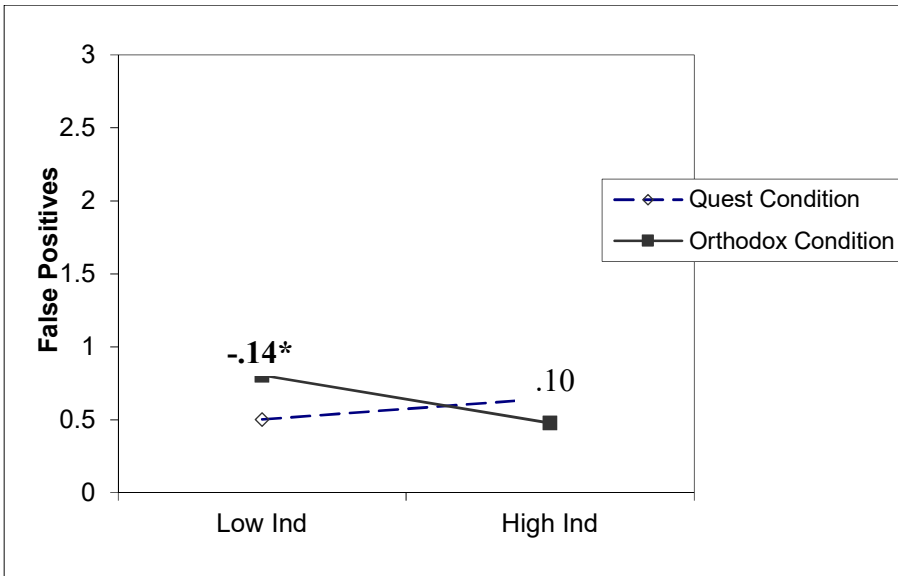


Figure 1. Simple Slopes of Individualism X Condition Predicting False Positives

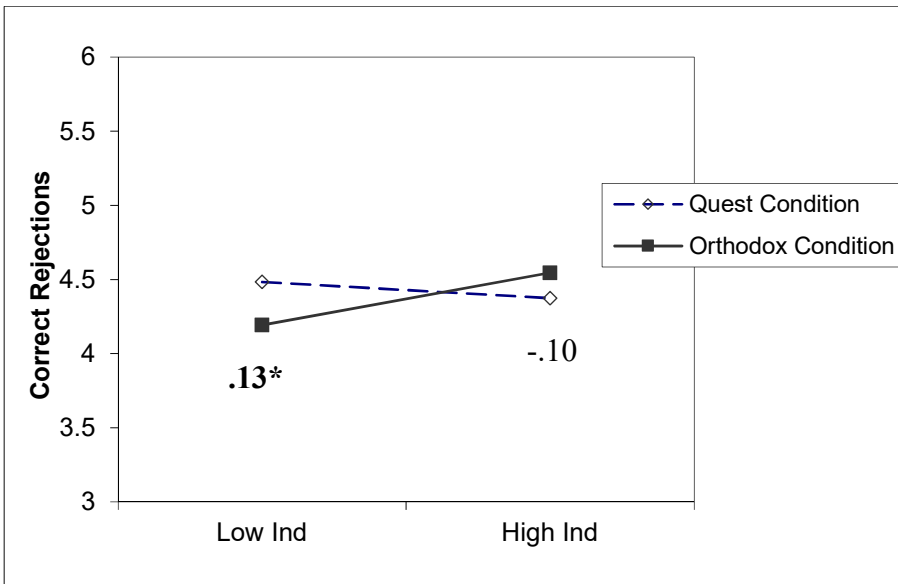


Figure 2. Simple Slopes of Individualism X Condition Predicting Correct Rejections

Predictor Variables	Total Memory		Hits		Misses		False Positives		Correct Rejections	
	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2	β	ΔR^2
Block 1		.06**		.10**		.10**		.04**		.04**
Condition	-.16**		-.31**		.31**		-.03		.04	
Collectivism	-.20		-.07		.08		.19**		-.19**	
Block 2		.02*		.02*		.02*		.00		.00
Condition	-.16**		-.31**		.31**		-.03		.04	
Collectivism	-.09		.03		-.03		.13*		-.13*	
Condition X Collectivism	-.18**		-.16**		.18**		.10		-.10	
Block 3		.06**		.03**		.03**		.03**		.03**
Condition	-.17**		-.31**		.31**		-.02		.04	
Collectivism	-.09		.02		-.02		.14*		-.14*	
Condition X Collectivism	-.16**		-.15**		.16**		.08		-.08	
Negative Emotions	-.24**		-.17**		.17**		.16**		-.17**	

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analyses of Collectivism and Sermon Condition on Memory. Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

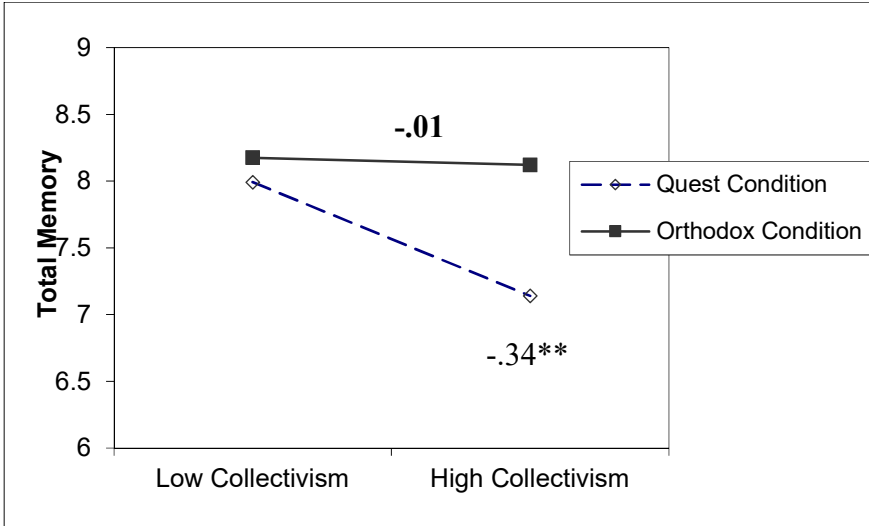


Figure 3. Simple Slopes of Collectivism X Condition Predicting Total Memory

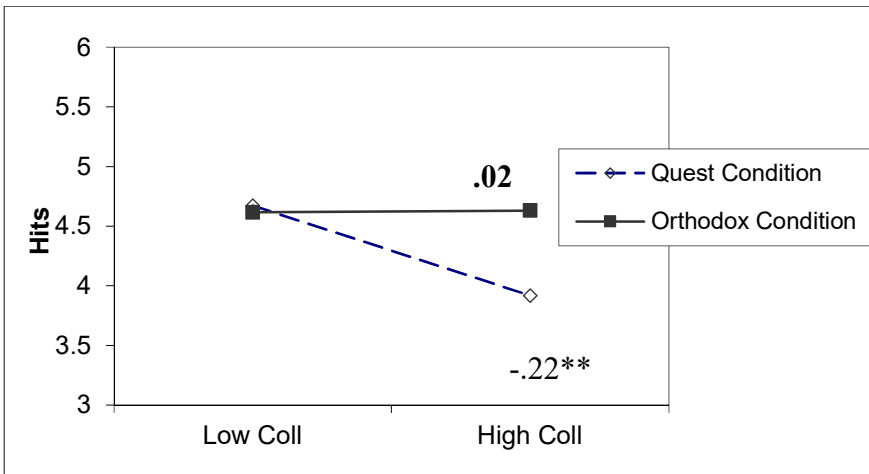


Figure 4. Simple Slopes of Collectivism X Condition Predicting Hits

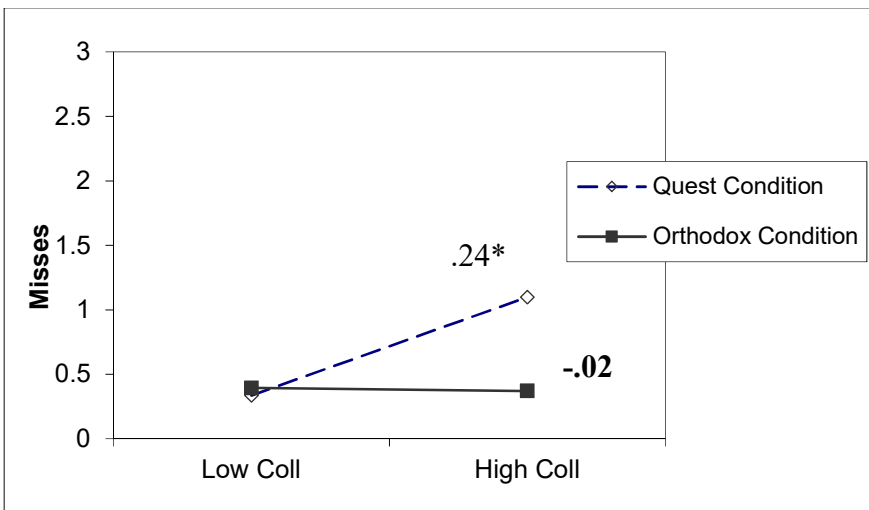


Figure 5. Simple Slopes of Collectivism X Condition Predicting Misses

Discussion

This experiment demonstrates that memory for religious stimuli is affected by the culture-fit of that information. By examining each type of memory outcome, we also gained some insights into how culture-fit memory functions in religious contexts. While reading the orthodox sermon, participants who were highly individualistic were able to accurately note that the information related to open interpretation was not spoken in the sermon. This suggests that people with highly individualistic values are adept at noting when their values are absent in collectivistic settings, which could serve as a protective mechanism from entering social groups with values toward conformity and obedience.

The effects were even more pronounced for the highly collectivistic individuals. More specifically, people with highly collectivistic values had extensive impairment in their memory when they read the quest-oriented sermon. On the memory test, they incorrectly noted that the orthodox statements were present and the quest statements were absent. It appeared as though they were reacting against the sermon by noting what they believed rather than what they read. Although this might suggest they simply ignored the instructions, there was no evidence of the same kind of bias for collectivistic individuals who read the orthodox sermon. This provides further support that Christians with an orthodox orientation also tend to embody collectivistic values (Terrizzi et al., 2013), that the culture-fit effects involving religious values are more pronounced for highly collectivistic individuals than for highly individualistic individuals (Gore, 2015), and that people who are highly committed to their religious ideology are more inclined than others to engage in a reactive confirmation bias when challenged (Yancey, 2014). We expanded on this work by being the first to show that cognitive inaccuracies depend upon the cultural values of the individual and the content of the religious stimuli, and that orthodox individuals exposed to quest stimuli are particularly likely to have poor memory for what they experienced.

We also showed that memory processes involving cultural and religious values are more accurate for schematic than for aschematic information. We found no evidence in our experiment that people are more able to recall aschematic information because it stands out against an already-existing schema (Koppel & Berntsen, 2014). Instead, highly collectivistic people exposed to aschematic stimuli were inclined to falsely report schematic content. This may suggest that the accuracy for schematic versus aschematic stimuli may depend on whether or not those stimuli have important values connected with them. Future research could provide further insight into this interaction effect. Other applications of this work should address some of the limitations.

Limitations and Future Directions

The primary limitation of this experiment was its ecological validity; we asked participants to read a sermon rather than listen to it. This is problematic due to the historic transmission of both religious and cultural values have been almost exclusively orally

communicated (Rubin, 2009). We did not have access to the audio recordings of the sermons we used, and even so, we wanted to have experimental control over other confounds that may be present in audio recordings, such as vocal inflection, regional accent, or quality of the recording. Nevertheless, future applications of this work should consider employing audio recordings of the sermons to provide a more common experience for the participants.

A second limitation of this study was that we only assessed individual-level cultural factors and did not examine societal-level ones. Cultural and religious values exist as shared meaning systems, which usually means that these values exist at a macro level in addition to within the individual. Other research has shown that culture-fit can be based upon societal level factors such as education and median income (Gore, 2015; Whitt, Jiang, & Gore, in press). Future applications of this work should therefore consider societal factors in addition to the individual ones.

We did not find consistent support for the culture-fit effect among highly individualistic individuals. This may be because many religious contexts tend to also include considerable emphasis on collectivism (Cukur et al., 2004). Consequently, the fit of a religious context may automatically be low for individualistic individuals. Future research should examine contexts that are more akin to individualism, such as supreme court decisions that center around the civil rights for marginalized groups, and manipulate the content of a court opinion to reflect either societal or personal benefits to those who are affected by the decision.

Conclusions

Several factors can influence whether stimuli will be encoded and retrieved accurately. One of those factors is the degree to which those stimuli fit into one's established beliefs and values. When exposed to religious content, people will often engage in processing that confirms their already existing beliefs (Yancey, 2014). For people who are strongly committed to their ingroups, exposure to content that challenges the authority of Biblical text seems to enhance the salience of their original beliefs rather than the recognition of the aschematic content. Thus, the degree to which a sermon will be remembered accurately largely depends on the degree to which that sermon fits with the audience's cultural values.

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Appendices

Orthodox Sermon Condition

The Word of God comes to us tonight from 2 Peter chapter 1. We're looking at verses 20 to 21 under the subject, "The Sure Word." In this, Peter says:

2 Peter 1:20-21

²⁰ Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. ²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

The Bible makes some startling claims for itself that set it apart from every other book in the world. Scripture says, for example, "The law of the Lord is perfect." It says, "Thy Word is very pure." It says, "Thy law is truth." It says, "All Thy commandments are truth." "The sum of Thy Word is truth." "Every one of Thy righteous ordinances endures forever." "All Thy commandments are righteous." "The law is holy, just and good." "Scripture cannot be broken." "Every word of God is pure and flawless." "Not one jot or tittle shall pass from the law until all is fulfilled." Scripture is even called the word of truthfulness.

Over and over again the Scripture reminds us that it is a sure word. That is precisely the message of our text. Let's go back to it, 2 Peter chapter 1 and verses 16 through 21, and let me read you these verses so you have them in your mind as we consider them. Beginning in verse 16, "For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power of our Lord Jesus Christ but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the majestic glory, 'This is My beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.' And we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain." And so we have the prophetic word, more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this, first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

Peter might be expecting someone to say, "Well, Peter, I'm glad you had your experience, but your experience can't be the standard for truth. Lots of people have lots of experiences, real and unreal. So, Peter, as good as your firsthand experience is, as wonderful as it must have been to have walked and talked with Jesus, seen Him on the cross, seen Him after His resurrection, as great as it was to have seen His Second Coming glory glimpsed on the mount of transfiguration, there must be a more sure word than your experience. As true as it was, as valid as it was, there must be more than that."

Peter is concerned with the source of Scripture. Prophets didn't invent it. They didn't invent the Word. Not at all. The same God who spoke at the transfiguration about the deity and humanity of Christ, the same God who spoke of the perfection of His Son is the same God who authored Scripture. You do well, he says, to give heed to this holy Scripture like a night light in the midst of worldly darkness because what is in it is not the result of human inventions like the myths of false teachers. The NIV, I think, has an excellent translation, it says, "No prophecy of Scripture ever came about by a prophet's own ideas." He couldn't be talking about interpretation or verse 21 would make no sense. Verse 21 says, "For no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." That explains what he means in verse 20. Quite the contrary to Scripture being of human origin, it is of divine origin...for NO prophecy, NO word of Scripture, NO word from God, not any was ever absolutely never...notice how emphatic this is...no prophecy was ever at any time made by an act of human will. The Bible is not the product of men.

So, back to 2 Peter, what is Peter saying? No prophecy ever came by some act of human will. Just the opposite...just the opposite, alla, quite the contrary, that's the word for "but," but on the other hand, men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

The Holy Spirit then is the divine author, the producer of the prophetic word, not human thought, not human will, this is not a book written by men. This is a book recorded by men, but authored by God the Holy Spirit. The only one who knows the mind of God is the Spirit of God, so the only one who could move the writers along is the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit inspired the writers, moved them along and they wrote the Word of God. They were living men. They weren't lifeless pens. They were not passive, they were active. But the Holy Spirit through them wrote God's flawless, inerrant Word. And that's why we have a more sure word. That's why it is a lamp in a dark place.

You say, "How did they do it?" I don't know. I don't know the supernatural phenomena. I don't know what they felt. I don't know what they experienced. I don't know what kind of phenomena was going on. All I know is that the Spirit of God wrote it and as a result we have a more sure word.

So, Peter says...Look, I'm not a false prophet, I'm not like the false prophets. First of all, I was an eyewitness of the majesty of Jesus Christ so I know whereof I speak. But even more sure than that, I write as one moved along by the Holy Spirit like every other biblical

writer and so here is a more sure word of revelation, more sure even than the experience of an Apostle. So Peter says take heed to the Word, it's a more sure word.

He reiterates this same concern in chapter 3 as he says in verses 1 and 2, "This is now, beloved, the second letter I'm writing to you in which I'm stirring up your sincere mind by way of remembrance." Then he says this, verse 2, "That you should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your Apostles." You've got to look to the Word, that's the sure word.

So, God superintended human authors so that using their own individual personalities, experiences, thought processes and vocabulary, they composed and recorded without error His perfect revelation in the original copies of Scripture. And so we have a light, a night light in a dark place. And it's going to be our night light until the Morning Star arises. And immediately following the Morning Star, the day dawns in the day of glory in the Kingdom of Christ and He becomes not just the Morning Star but the blazing sun who becomes the lamp of the eternal dwelling place of God's people. But until that blazing light dissipates all darkness, we have to have the night light and it's a more sure word. If you're going to stand against error, you should know your Scripture.

Quest Sermon Condition

Have you ever had a discussion about some Biblical passage or topic in which the person with whom you were speaking abruptly ended the conversation with the words "That's just your interpretation"? Or maybe they said "Well, that's just your opinion" or "You've got your opinion on that, and I've got mine." If you have talked to others about the Bible much at all, odds are good you have had such things said to you, perhaps often. The pluralistic religious landscape in our country is quite full of this concept.

Have you ever used 2 Peter 1:20 as a reply to that? Peter said:

2 Peter 1:20-21

²⁰ Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. ²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Some people think this statement by Peter is the perfect retort to "that's just your interpretation." On the surface it appears that Peter is saying that there is no such thing as "your interpretation" or "my interpretation" of the Bible, there's just what the Bible says and that's that. No one, the passage says, is allowed the comfort of a private, personal interpretation of the Bible. The Bible is not to be read in such a way that it is made to conform to our opinions and assumptions; instead, we must conform to what it says. But is that really what 2 Peter 1:20 is saying? Let's take a closer look at this whole business.

Let's begin with the more general matter of different interpretations. To some people, "interpretation" is actually a bad word because it has unnecessarily become associated with subjectivism and the pluralistic mentality which asserts that the Bible is basically unintelligible, that opinions (interpretations) are all we can hope to have when it comes to the Bible and religious matters, and that since the Bible is unintelligible in the first place, all opinions (interpretations) about what the Bible means are equally valid. Some interpretations of the Bible may have such an attitude behind them, but the fact is that we cannot escape the business of interpreting the Bible. Even those who claim that all they do is let the Bible speak for themselves engage in an interpretive process (although they are probably unaware of it themselves).

Is the Bible basically unintelligible? Not at all. The Bible is eminently understandable. It makes this very claim for itself (Eph 3:4). But the question everyone who picks up a Bible eventually faces (whether they address it explicitly or not) is: what does this mean? The moment we begin to inquire about the meaning of any part of the Bible, or even of the Bible as a whole, we have asked the first question in the process of interpretation. And when we begin to say "I think the Bible means this" or "I think this passage is saying that," we have produced an interpretation, like it or not.

Engaging in the process of interpretation is not an evil thing. I will reassert that everyone who picks up a Bible and wonders to any degree what the text means is already involved in an interpretive process. Anyone who has any opinion about what the Bible teaches has arrived at an interpretation of the Bible. The real question is: is this the right interpretation? Is my interpretation correct? Is the interpretation at which I have arrived the one that makes the very best sense of what is written? Does the interpretation I have produced fit the Biblical data without distorting it in any way (that is, without twisting words, without leaving data out, without reading foreign ideas into it, etc.)?

Consider, if you will, that the interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures was one of the key issues upon which Christianity was founded. The early Christians, who had learned from Jesus himself, believed and taught that the Hebrew Scriptures spoke of the demise of the Levitical sacrificial system centered in the tabernacle and temple, that those Scriptures predicted the coming of Jesus of Nazareth into the world, that they predicted his death, burial and resurrection, and that they spoke of the resurrected Jesus as the king over God's

kingdom. Many of the Jews disagreed with that vehemently. That is, one of the greatest differences between Judaism and Christianity was their interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Christianity is itself an interpretation of those Scriptures, and it claims to be the right interpretation.

Interpretation is unavoidable when handling the Bible, and the early Christians themselves were interpreters (whose interpretation was viewed as radical by the Jews) of the Jewish Scriptures. Peter was not, therefore, condemning interpretation wholesale in 2 Peter 1:20. Read Peter's letters and what you will see there is an interpretation of the life of Christ. Because Peter was an apostle guided by the Holy Spirit, we can be assured that his interpretation of the story of Jesus was correct. But it was an interpretation nonetheless.

So what does 2 Peter 1:20 mean (note that this is itself an interpretive question!)? Consider the context. Peter is there talking about the prophets of Old Testament times. This is clear from verse 19, in which Peter says "we have the prophetic word made more sure." What Peter means is that Jesus was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and Peter himself was an eyewitness to this very fact. It was not that Peter had heard that Jesus fulfilled prophecies, but that Peter knew it from his own experience with Jesus.

How were the prophets of old able to predict with such astonishing clarity and accuracy the things about Jesus? Peter tells us plainly in verse 21: "no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." The Spirit of God revealed these things to them. They were not making guesses about the Messiah. In fact, they were not even making educated guesses. What they predicted was not a matter of them arriving at some interpretation of events they saw in their own day. This is what Peter means when he says "no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation."

For example, the prophet Isaiah predicted the Babylonian captivity of Judah at a time when Babylon was not a military or political threat to anyone, nor was there any indication they would be some time later. In Isaiah's time the Assyrians were waging wars of conquest over all of the Ancient Near East. If Isaiah had been guessing, or interpreting, what would happen to Judah based on the things that were going on around him, he would have predicted that the Assyrians would take the kingdom of Judah into captivity. But he did not. He accurately predicted that the Babylonians would do that, and that is exactly how it unfolded in history. This is because Isaiah was not interpreting the events of his day, looking for patterns in current events, as he spoke about the future of Judah. What he said about Judah he said from the Holy Spirit of God.

2 Peter 1:20, then, is about the prophets and how they made their predictions. It is not about the more general issue of interpreting the Bible. 2 Peter 1:20 is not about whether anyone must or can interpret the Bible. So the next time someone says "that's just your interpretation," instead of quoting 2 Peter 1:20 to them, invite them to investigate which interpretation (understanding, or reading) of the Bible is the right one.