

God thoughts influence your generosity

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Thoughts related to God cultivate cooperative behavior and generosity, according to University of British Columbia psychology researchers.

In a study to be published in the September issue of *Psychological Science* journal, researchers investigated how thinking about God and notions of a higher power influenced positive social behavior, specifically cooperation with others and generosity to strangers.

UBC PhD graduate Azim Shariff and UBC Assoc. Prof. Ara Norenzayan found that priming people with 'god concepts' – by activating subconscious thoughts through word games – promoted altruism. In addition, the researchers found that this effect was consistent in behavior whether people declared themselves believers or not. The researchers also found that secular notions of civic responsibility promote cooperation and generosity.

"This is a twist on an age old question – does a belief in God influence moral behavior?" says Shariff. "We asked, does the concept of god influence cooperative behavior? Previous attempts to answer this question have been driven by speculation and anecdote."

The research, conducted between September 2005 and July 2006 with 125 participants, is the first of its kind in North America. According to the researchers, there is little replicable empirical data using moral behavior and religion as measures. As Shariff notes, UBC is the first to apply an implicit priming technique to capture and assess subconscious motives or goals, and their associated behavioral outcomes, to this area of concern.

Priming is an experimental procedure used by cognitive and social scientists, mainly in psychology and economics, to obtain indicators of social tendencies by implicitly inducing relevant thoughts. As priming operates largely outside explicit awareness, subjects are unlikely to consciously revise their behaviors or beliefs, the researchers say.

The researchers undertook two related studies. In both studies, groups were randomly assigned to the religious prime or to the control group. Participants in the religious prime group were given a word game and had to unscramble sentences (using spirit, divine, God, sacred and prophet). Those in the control group were given the same task with non-spiritual words. After this task, all participants played an anonymous dictator game, whereby subjects were given 10 one-dollar coins and asked to make a decision of what to keep and what to share with an anonymous recipient.

The researchers were surprised by the magnitude of the positive results for the religious prime in both studies. Sixty-eight per cent of subjects from the religious prime groups allocated \$5 or more to anonymous strangers, compared to 22 per cent from groups where neutral or no concepts were activated.

In the second study the researchers also investigated the strength of the religious prime relative to a secular prime. They used concepts of civic responsibility and social justice to prime subjects (with target words civic, jury, court, police and contract) and obtained almost identical results.

“We did not anticipate such a subtle prime, simply getting participants to unscramble sentences with a few key words, having such a large effect on people’s willingness to give money to strangers,” said Shariff. “These are compelling findings that have substantial impact on the study of social behavior because they draw a causal relationship between religion and acting morally – a topic of some debate. They by no means indicate that religion is *necessary* for moral behavior, but it can make a substantial contribution.”