"For Tomorrow We Die"? Testing the Accuracy of Stereotypes about Atheists and Agnostics

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Research is increasingly finding that stereotypes about the average intelligence or personality of different groups, when actually tested, have a substantial degree of empirical accuracy. This has been explored with regard to more incendiary stereotypes — such as about races and nationalities — but in no great detail with regard to different religious groups. In this study, we draw upon the Midlife in the United States study (MIDUS) to discern the most important values held by atheists and agnostics. We compare these to stereotypes about atheists and agnostics in terms of personality or interests. We find that the stereotypes are accurate to a strong degree. Item ambiguity and other problems with the instrument may have impacted the results, leading to suggestions on how to overcome these problems in future research.
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In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul famously wrote: ". . . what have I gained, if the dead do not rise? 'Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die'" (I Corinthians, 15:32). By this St. Paul meant that if Christ is not God, or there is no God, then life is pointless and we may as well just follow a philosophy of hedonism. If St. Paul was right, and if atheists are philosophically consistent, then we would expect them to be more hedonistic than religious people. As we shall see, there is a stereotype that atheists, and the non-religious more broadly, are hedonistic.

Stereotypes are a difficult issue to broach in contemporary academic discourse. There is a school of thought that avers that stereotypes are, in many cases, empirically wrong. Miller and Turnbull (1986, p. 233) argue that stereotypes are 'interpersonal beliefs and expectancies that are both widely shared and generally invalid': you stereotype based on your expectation rather than on the reality you have experienced. Bargh and Chartrand (1999, p.467) assert that 'stereotypes are maladaptive forms of categories because their content does not correspond to what is going on in the environment.' They aver that by perceiving the supposed stereotype you thus induce it. Others argue that stereotypes contain only a germ of truth, but are generally misleading: 'A stereotype is any generalization about a group . . . By definition, a generalization about a group is bound to be "unjustified" for some portion of the group members' (Nelson, 2002, p. 5, quoted in Jussim, 2012). Though some stereotypes are correct, many are supposedly created by those who have power in order to suppress and disempower others (e.g. Goldberg, 1992, cf. Levin, 2005). A related argument relies upon the self-fulfilling prophecy: the idea that if you stereotype people in a certain way, then they will come to behave in a manner consistent with the stereotype (see Ganley et al., 2013; Levin, 2005).

However, these viewpoints are manifestly problematic. Jussim (2012) observes that stereotypes are statements about groups. If they are all incorrect then no statements can ever be made about groups, of any size. From the perspective of philosophical pragmatism, this is clearly not a sustainable position. If, however, we advance the more nuanced position of Nelson (2002) that stereotypes have low accuracy then the degree to which they are 'accurate' can at least be empirically tested. Jussim (2012) asserts that some stereotypes 'hit the bullseye', and are accurate, while others only have a modicum of accuracy. As for the explanations for stereotypes other than accuracy, the idea that they are about denigrating outgroups cannot explain neutral stereotypes (e.g. 'The English like drinking tea') let alone flattering stereotypes ('The English are good at making situation comedies'). In addition, they beg the question of why someone should develop a neutral stereotype in the first place if it only becomes accurate via it being developed. Consistent with the inaccuracy of these theories, it has been found that 50% of a sample of racial stereotypes are empirically accurate and 75% are at least partly accurate (Helmreich, 1982). Jussim (2012) has conducted an in-depth analysis of the veracity of theories about the origins and nature of stereotypes. He finds that though there may sometimes be space for the influence of bias and self-fulfilling prophecy, in general empirical accuracy dominates. Stereotypes develop because they are, at least to some extent, empirically

accurate and, therefore, functional. They permit people to negotiate life using evidence-based decisions.

Racial stereotypes are perhaps the most incendiary of stereotypes, especially when it is concluded that they are broadly accurate. But people develop stereotypes about all kinds of groups, including stereotypes about the values of members of different religions or denominations (see Spartvik & Wirren, 2013). That said there appears to be a surprisingly modest amount of systematic academic research on religious stereotypes, and very little on stereotypes regarding the non-religious. Various stereotypes exist about atheists and agnostics, in the eyes of the religious. They are perceived to be more trusting of and competent in science than are the religious, something with which the non-religious concur (Eklund & Scheitle, 2017, p.14); they are angry malcontents, especially in the case of atheists (Meier et al., 2015); they are immoral (Simpson & Ross, 2016), something the non-religious realize they are perceived as being either generally (Cowgill, Rios & Simpson, 2017) or on certain morality measures (Simpson & Rios, 2016); and they are hedonistic (Bowman, 2016).

However, focusing on atheists, it could be argued that there are two fundamentally different kinds of atheist and that the stereotypes about them are slightly different. Qualitative explorations of the values of atheists observe something of a divide between the so-called 'New Atheists,' who strongly espouse Enlightenment values, such as the importance of science and learning; and atheists who vaguely identify with such social movements as postmodernism, with its belief in cultural relativism (Stahl 2014, pp. 34-35). The former group tends to stress the importance of autonomy, as in a world with no divine authority you are an individual who must run your own life and it follows that accomplishment is important because it shows that you are running your life well. New Atheists also implicitly highlight the importance of knowledge, as gaining knowledge is by definition an accomplishment (see Sneddon, 2016). However, many of the latter form of atheist tend towards denying that objective knowledge is even possible. Many atheist philosophers in this school have argued in favor of a hedonistic philosophy, especially when life is regarded as having no eternal importance (see Onfray, 2007) and this hedonism can be seen as the logical extension of a nihilistic worldview (see Scruton, 2000). Certainly, some relativist philosophers have set out a broadly hedonistic philosophy (see Bertens, 2003, p. 206).

Another way of discerning stereotypes about atheists, or the non-religious more broadly, is by exploring stereotypes about those who are 'religious' and inferring that the non-religious will be understood to be the opposite of this. Young people in the USA see the strongly religious as unintelligent and dogmatic (Arweck & Ipgrave 2016, p. 19). There is evidence, in a nuanced form, in support

of these stereotypes (see Dutton, 2014). Religious people are also stereotyped, by society in general, as being family-oriented and having large families, especially in the case of Catholics and Mormons (Brashears & Kinley, 1998, p. 84). Protestants, such as evangelicals, are stereotyped as more family-focused than are those who espouse non-religious ideologies (e.g. Freeman, 1993). Religious people do indeed tend to be highly family-oriented. Numerous studies have found that, when controlling for key influences such as socioeconomic status, the more religious you are the more children you tend to both desire and have (see Ellis et al., 2017; Rowthorn, 2011), and the stronger your social bonds are with your family and the more time you spend with them (King et al., 2013).

This would seem to be potentially consistent with the argument that religiousness itself has been subject to positive Darwinian selection, as evidenced in its heritability, positive correlation with physical and mental health and with fertility, it being a human universal, and the fact of religious experiences being associated with specific brain changes (Vaas, 2009). Following on from this theoretical foundation, Sela, Shackelford and Liddle (2015) have argued that part of the reason why religiousness is adaptive is that it tends to sanctify and divinely mandate what are, in essence, evolutionary imperatives, such as having lots of children and looking after your family. This being so, it would make sense that atheists and agnostics would tend not to regard 'family' as central to the 'good life'. Indeed, believing that life has no meaning, some atheist philosophers have gone so far as to argue against 'natalism' and to proclaim that it is morally wrong to have children, because life is nothing more than an unnecessary 'affliction' (see Benatar & Wasserman, 2015).

This is consistent with the view that religiosity is group-selected for as part of a system of Multi-Level Selection (Wilson & Sober, 1994). Religious groups tend to be higher in ethnocentrism (e.g. Dutton, Madison & Lynn, 2016), with religions turning group-selected behavior into the will of the gods (Sela, Shackelford & Liddle, 2015). This means that religious groups have a higher probability of triumphing in battles of group selection, as shown in computer models (e.g. Hammond & Axelrod, 2006). Clearly, an inclination to persuade the group to stop breeding would epitomize something that would damage the group's genetic interests.

So, in summary, based on both quantitative and qualitative examinations of stereotypes about atheists and agnostics, it appears that they are regarded as hedonistic, interested in science, implicitly disinterested in family, and angry by nature. But, unlike in the case of racial or gender stereotypes, there appears to have been little systematic attempt to test the accuracy of these stereotypes. In this study we will, therefore, attempt to test their accuracy. We conducted this

study with no hypotheses concerning specific religious groups, yet the analyses allow for exploration of possible additional differences between religious groups.

Method

1. Participants

The Midlife in the United States or MIDUS series of studies are designed to examine numerous aspects of midlife development in a nationally representative sample. Data from MIDUS II, 2004-2006 (MIDUS II; Ryff et al., 2017), the second wave of data collection in the longitudinal set of studies, was utilized in the current investigation. The total sample size for the MIDUS-II data was 4,963. The age range was 28-84 years ($M = 55.43$, $SD = 12.45$). The sample was 53.3% female and just over 90% White.

2. Measures

1. Religion. Participants were asked, "What is your religious preference?" In response to the question, participants were given 46 options and allowed to supply their own answer (i.e., respond "other specify"). Five groups were contrasted in the current investigation, representing the most numerous affiliations: Roman Catholic (n = 873), Baptist (n = 366), Methodist (n = 292), a Jewish group (n = 96), and an Atheist/Agnostic group (n = 112). The Jewish group was a combination of five separate responses (Jewish Orthodox = 2, Jewish Conservative = 35, Jewish Reform = 47, Jewish Reconstructionist = 4, and Jewish "Other" = 8). The Atheist/Agnostic group was a combination of two responses (Atheist = 31, Agnostic = 81).

2. Religious identification. MIDUS II included a six-item scale of religious identification (sample item: How closely do you identify with being a member of your religious group?). Participants rated the six items using a four-point scale anchored at "very" and "not at all". The internal consistency for the scale is $\alpha = .90$.

3. Values. Participants were asked what they believe is important for living a good life. They were given 17 options and instructed to choose the five, from among the 17, which were the most important. The options were as follows: (1) autonomy, being self-reliant, (2) a good job, (3) continual learning/growth, (4) enjoyment of life's pleasures, (5) enough money to meet basic needs, (6) extra money/disposable income, (7) faith, (8) giving back to my community, (9) love/care for self, (10) physical fitness and strength, (11) positive attitude, (12) family relations, (13) friend relations, (14) relaxation, peacefulness,

contentment, (15) absence of illness, (16) sense of accomplishment, (17) sense of purpose.

Results

In order to examine differences between the groups on the 17 values, a series of Chi-square analyses were run. Prior to analyses we adjusted probability using a Bonferroni adjustment by dividing .05 by the number of Chi-square tests 17 (.05/17 = .003). The results of these analyses can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. *Values of different denominations in the USA*.

Value	Atheist/ Agnostic	Baptist	Catholic	Jewish	Methodist
Autonomy	40/21.5*	173/179.1	84/89.4	23/18.8	47/58.2
Good job	15/26.7	215/222	138/110.9*	21/23.3	66/72.1
Learning & growth	56/30.4*	235/253.3	118/126.5	29/26.6	81/82.2
Enjoy life's pleasures	43/27.9*	237/232.3	92/116*	35/24.4	69/75.4
Money for basic needs	42/42.4	346/352.8	201/176.2	20/37.1*	114/114.6
Extra money	25/17.3	154/144	53/71.9	27/15.1*	36/46.7
Faith	0/64.9*	547/540.7	350/270*	13/56.8*	198/175.6
Give to the community	9/12.2	103/101.5	55/50.7	12/10.7	29/33
Loving myself	13/13.5	106/112.2	74/56.1	8/11.8	29/36.4
Fitness	42/29.6	256/246.9	114/123.3	24/25.9	70/80.2
Positive attitude	58/59.6	495/496.8	249/248.1	48/52.2	168/161.3
Family relationships	58/77.5*	652/645.6	327/322.4	62/67.8	224/209.7*
Friend relationships	31/32.7	272/272.3	123/136	36/28.6	96/88.4
Relaxation	26/21.5	196/179.1	78/89.4	20/18.8	47/58.2
Absence of illness	47/41.9	368/349.4	140/174.5*	55/36.7*	106/113.5
Sense of accomplishment	27/18.9*	157/157.1	66/78.5	25/16.5*	47/51
Sense of purpose	28/28.6	229/238.6	131//119.2	19/25.1	82/77.5

Note. Actual count/expected count; * $p<.05$ (Bonferroni-corrected)

The results show that Atheist/Agnostics were more likely to endorse autonomy, accomplishment, learning and growth, and pleasure as what it means to have a good life. They were less likely to endorse faith and family relations. Differences also emerged between some of the religious groups. Catholics were more likely to endorse having a good job and faith, while they were less likely to endorse absence of illness and enjoying life's pleasures. Jews were more likely

to endorse the values of having extra money, absence of illness, and a sense of accomplishment, while they were less likely to endorse faith and money for basic needs. Methodists exhibited a slight inclination toward valuing family relations.

Discussion

Based on popular stereotypes, we predicted that atheists would be relatively hedonistic and interested in science, and less interested in family, in addition to being, by definition, less interested in faith. All of these stereotypes are borne out, whether they tend to relate more to 'New Atheists' or to followers of atheistic ideologies such as postmodernism. We could not examine the stereotype of atheists as being 'angry' because the survey had no suitable questions to test this. In addition, it is noteworthy that both atheists and Jews, though not the other samples, prize 'a sense of accomplishment.' 'Achievement motivation' has consistently been shown to be predicted by intelligence (Jensen, 1998, p. 300). Atheists are, on average, more intelligent than the religious and have historically been stereotyped as such (see Dutton, 2014, Ch. 6), which helps to explain this finding. It could be argued that we are employing a US survey while some of our stereotypes about the non-religious are derived from UK sources. However, although being non-religious is more common in the UK than in the USA (see Dutton, 2014), we have no reason to believe that the stereotypes differ significantly in nature between the two countries.

As we have discussed, there is a sound case for arguing that religiousness was selected for under pre-industrial conditions and that it was particularly significant in terms of group selection. It has been shown elsewhere that atheists, and others who do not collectively worship a moral god, display a higher level of mutational load than those who do collectively worship a moral god. This can be seen in the association between atheism and poor mental health, poor physical health, autism, and physical asymmetry (Dutton, Madison & Dunkel, 2018). These results imply that atheism behaves like a 'spiteful mutation' (Woodley of Menie et al., 2017) which, due to pleiotropy with both mental and physical expressions, would have been selected out in the pre-industrial era, due to the high child mortality rates (Dutton, Madison & Dunkel, 2018). This being so, we would expect atheists to display behavior which would be damaging, or at least not positive, in terms of their genetic interests. Consistent with this expectation, this study has proven that atheists are individualistic (they value 'autonomy'), a trait that can be damaging in terms of group selection. In addition, they have little regard for the family, meaning that they are less adapted than others in terms of kin selection and, by implication, group selection, as the ethnic group can be conceived of as an extended genetic family (Salter, 2007).

While no a priori predictions were made concerning the various religious groups, several significant and potentially interesting differences emerged. We interpret the pattern of responses of Catholics as reflecting belief in the importance of the afterlife. Thus while Catholics endorsed having a good job and, although not significant, money for basic needs, Catholics also put less emphasis on enjoying life's pleasures and absence of illness. As seen in previous work (Dunkel, 2019; Dunkel & Dutton, 2016), Jews put little emphasis on faith. Additionally, valuing extra money (but not money for basic needs) and accomplishment aligns with Jewish social and financial success (Lynn, 2011). It is less clear how the endorsement of the absence of illness manifests. Baptists and Methodists did not exhibit a clear pattern of endorsements. The only significant difference was that Methodists were more inclined to value family relations.

In terms of limitations, it may be that our results are partly confounded by sub-cultural differences in how the words in the statements are interpreted. Most obviously, we might ask what constitutes a 'good job.' Is it simply a job that pays well? Is it a profession with high occupational status? Is it work which you enjoy and which gives you satisfaction? A superior instrument would clarify this, so allowing us a more nuanced and clearer understanding of the differences between the values of religious groups. The concept of 'basic needs' (in their financial sense) is also potentially rather subjective as is, therefore, what constitutes a sufficient amount of money on top of which more money is 'extra money.' Even something such as 'absence of illness' involves a subjective element, which becomes particularly germane when we are essentially comparing different religious subcultures.

Secondly, it may be argued that there is a subtle difference between a general stereotype and stereotypes about 'values'. In general, when people engage in stereotypes about particular groups, their focus is on 'what they are like' rather than 'what they think is important in life', though there is obviously a strong degree to which these two categories cross over and an extent to which one can be inferred from the other. So although we appear to have confirmed stereotypes about the non-religious, a degree of caution is necessary.

Thus it is advisable that future research address these limitations. It may be important to simply use different methods; for example, by employing a Likert-type measure of values, instead of a forced-choice measure. Forced choice measures may tap into the prioritization among values held, while a Likert-type scale may provide more information about the array of held values. Furthermore, an individual may strongly value one principle over all others, or may give relatively equal weight to several. Additionally, it may be fruitful to understand how

the values of various religious groups manifest, for example, in decision making and politics. One may expect that values are strongly associated with moral foundations which seem to be a basis for political orientation (Graham, Haidt & Nosek, 2009). The findings presented in the study are consistent with a view of religion as being socially-based or group-focused, forming what Graham and Haidt (2010) refer to as self-reinforcing 'moral communities'. Continued exploration of group differences in values and morals between these 'moral communities' may, therefore, more deeply elucidate reasons for religious conflict, among other socially salient areas.

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