

Predicting Moral and Religious Behavior in Young Adults

“In a series of studies Gibbons & Gerrard proposed a “prototype-willingness model to explain risky-decision making by adolescents. According to their model adolescents are more willing to engage in risk behavior to the extent they hold favorable images of the prototype exemplar of such behavior. For example, a teen is more likely to smoke if smoking is associated with image of “James Dean” or “Marlon Brando” than if the image is a more disagreeable one. Moreover, the influence of prototype-willingness depends upon certain individual difference characteristics, such as the tendency to engage in social comparison. In one study, for example, they showed that individuals that looked at a prototype of an exerciser or non-exerciser who also held a higher level of social comparison were more likely to increase their exercise behavior from time one to time two.

The purpose of this study is to extend the prototype willingness model in a direction novel to this literature. Although extant research has demonstrated the utility of this model to account for risk behavior, the present study attempts to use the model to account for pro-social and religious behavior.” We expect that young adults with a more positive prototype of a moral or religious exemplar will be more likely to engage in pro-social or religious behaviors in general and that those who give positive prototypes of these exemplars at time one will be more likely to have increased the time spent engaging in the corresponding behaviors at time two. We expect the opposite effect will occur for those who present more negative prototypes at time one. We also expect young adults that indicate a high level of social comparison at time one to be more likely to conform to their idea of a moral or religious prototype at time two.

A prototype is an individual’s image of the typical person who belongs to a specific group or who engages in a particular behavior (Ouellette et. al., 2005). Previous research has

shown that the prototype that an individual has of a person in a particular group will influence whether or not a person engages in risky behaviors, including smoking, drinking, and unsafe sexual practices; the favorability that one has of said image will also be an influential factor in whether or not individuals engage in a particular behavior (Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995; Gibbons, Gerrard, & Boney-McCoy, 1995). Levels of social comparison in an individual may also affect whether or not an individual changes his or her behavior from time one to time two in accordance with the favorability of his prototype (Ouellete et. al., 2005; Gibbons & Gerrard, 1995). For example, an individual who provides a positive prototype of a smoker and also indicates a high level of social comparison will be more likely to begin or increase rates of smoking from time one to time two (Gibbons & Gerrard, 2005). However, thus far, this prototype-willingness model has only been examined in cases where young adults engage in risk or health behaviors; it has yet to be looked at if moral and religious behaviors would yield similar results.

Previous research has also shown that young adults do have prototypes of both moral and religious exemplars, which are as accessible as risk and health behavior prototypes (Lapsley & Laskey, 2001; Walker, 1999). In both studies, participants were able to compile lists of traits, either in accordance with the Big Five personality dimensions or on their own, which they felt encompassed either a good moral character or a good religious character. Examples from each include honest, fair, ethical, principled, and committed. However, not everyone rated moral and religious exemplars in a positive light, some choosing words such as rigid, narrow-minded, and stubborn to describe these prototypes. Because there does also seem to be this distinction between a positive and negative prototype of a moral or religious person, it seems as if the results

found in studies based on health and risk behaviors may also apply to this study, which will be based on moral and religious behaviors.

Because we wish to replicate Gibbons and Gerrard's (1995), we are going to employ a similar methodology in our study. In a survey format, participants will be asked to think about their idea of a moral prototype and a religious prototype and describe their image of that prototype in terms of a number of adjectives. The adjectives will be taken from lists generated in Lapsley and Laskey's (2001) and Walker's (1999) studies describing a prototypical moral character and moral and religious exemplars. Rating of each prototype will be followed by a question which asks each participant to rate how similar they feel that they are to each prototype. Participants will also be asked to describe themselves using the same list of adjectives in order to generate a self-prototype. Following these instructions, participants will be given the 12-item Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation scale in order to evaluate levels of social comparison in each individual

Prior to their prototype descriptions, participants will be asked how often they engage in particular pro-social and religious behaviors – sharing, volunteering, prayer, and liturgy. In addition to how often they currently perform each behavior, participants will also be asked how often they intend to engage in each behavior in the following three months. By using this methodology, we will be able to assess each individual's prototype of a moral and religious exemplar, their self-prototype, levels of social comparison in each individual, the rates at which they currently engage in pro-social and religious behaviors, and the rates at which they intend to engage in these behaviors in the future; all this information is what is sufficient to provide support for or against our hypotheses. This process will then be repeated three months after the

original survey is circulated so that we may study these individuals and their behaviors longitudinally.

In order to allot ourselves enough time to be able to study our individuals longitudinally, the original survey will be circulated in April, as soon as approval is granted. It is important, though, that data analysis be completed over the summer so that the second wave of surveys can be circulated three months later, in July. Therefore, the first several weeks of July will be dedicated to data analysis of the first wave of surveys. It is expected several hours will be spent four to five days a week on this data analysis. This should be completed by the final week of July, in which we will issue the second wave of surveys to our original participants. As soon as participants begin completion of this survey, we will begin data analysis of this round of data, which should begin by early August. Data analysis will then continue until all surveys have been completed and data has been recorded.

I will be meeting with the director and members of the Adolescent Psychology lab as we begin the study in April and as data analysis begins in July. It is expected that we will meet two to three times a week in order to conduct and monitor the study. Meetings may become even more important as we begin data analysis of the second wave of surveys, as it will not only be important to answer these general research questions for this wave of data but also begin comparing it to first wave data in order to see if we have gotten the expected results. There is evident correlation between the director's research and the present study in that both are interested in a young adult's view of a typical moral character.

The initial goal of this research is that it will be used for a senior thesis. Regardless of what we do with our results in the future, I will definitely use this for this reason. However, because this project will provide information that may contribute to research on moral and

religious prototypes and their interaction in the prototype willingness model, I would ideally like to do even more with this project and the data that we collect. I hope to be able to attend at least one conference in my senior year where I can present the results of this study, and ultimately, I think that this project may eventually be able to be published in a journal where our results can be shared with the entire psychological community.

References

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