

Death anxiety increases atheists' unconscious belief in God

April 2 2012

New research suggests that when non-religious people think about their own death they become more consciously skeptical about religion, but unconsciously grow more receptive to religious belief.

The research, from the Department of Psychology at the University of Otago in New Zealand, also found that when religious people think about [death](#), their [religious beliefs](#) appear to strengthen at both conscious and unconscious levels. The researchers believe the findings help explain why religion is such a durable feature of human society.

In three studies, which involved 265 university students in total, religious and non-religious participants were randomly assigned to "death priming" and control groups. Priming involved asking participants to write about their own death or, in the control condition, about watching TV.

In the first study, researchers found that death-primed religious participants consciously reported greater belief in religious entities than similar participants who had not been death-primed. Non-religious participants who had been primed showed the opposite effect: they reported greater disbelief than their fellow non-religious participants in the control condition.

Study co-author Associate Professor Jamin Halberstadt says these results fit with the theory that fear of death prompts people to defend their own worldview, regardless of whether it is a religious or non-religious one.

"However, when we studied people's unconscious beliefs in the two later experiments, a different picture emerged. While death-priming made religious participants more certain about the reality of religious entities, non-religious participants showed less confidence in their disbelief," Associate Professor Halberstadt says.

The techniques used to study unconscious beliefs include measuring the speed with which participants can affirm or deny the existence of God and other religious entities. After being primed by thoughts of death, religious participants were faster to press a button to affirm God's existence, but non-religious participants were slower to press a button denying God's existence.

"These findings may help solve part of the puzzle of why religion is such a persistent and pervasive feature of society. Fear of death is a near-universal human experience and religious beliefs are suspected to play an important psychological role in warding off this anxiety. As we now show, these beliefs operate at both a conscious and unconscious level, allowing even avowed atheists to unconsciously take advantage of them."

The paper co-authors also included Jonathan Jong, currently at the University of Oxford, who undertook the experiments as part of his PhD thesis, and Matthias Bluemke, currently at the University of Heidelberg. Associate Professor Halberstadt was Jong's supervisor.

The findings from the three experiments will be published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Provided by University of Otago

Citation: Death anxiety increases atheists' unconscious belief in God (2012, April 2) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

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