

## Morality Foundation Differences Among Atheists, Agnostics, and Theists

Katrina Okerstrom and David M. Njus  
Luther College

A connection between religiosity and morality is perpetuated by a religion-morality stereotype in the United States (see Galen, 2012). Often religion is treated as a requirement for moral decisions. However, religion is complex. Individuals differ in belief in God, religious affiliation, relationship with God, and religious experiences. For individuals who believe in God, different aspects of religious experiences have been identified as different types of religiosity. Of particular interest is intrinsic religiosity, the degree religion is viewed as an end itself.

Traditionally, moral psychology examined morality constrained to concerns about harm and fairness. Haidt and Graham (2007) expanded the domain of morality with Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) to include five foundations of moral concerns: care, fairness, ingroup, authority, and purity. Consequently, actions that related to harm, cheating, betrayal, disrespect, and desecration may be viewed as immoral. Haidt (2012) proposes that these foundations are all present in a “first draft” of morality for humans and that experience shapes each foundation’s relevance to moral intuitions. Therefore, there are individual differences in the relevance of each of these foundations in making moral decisions.

The present research examines the relationships between religious orientation and the five moral foundations. Specifically, we examined moral foundation differences among atheists, agnostics, and two groups of theists—those high in intrinsic religiosity and those low in intrinsic religiosity.

### Method

#### *Participants and Procedure*

Data were collected online with Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) where participants (N=714) were offered \$0.50 compensation for completion of the survey. All participants were located in the United States and were 21-years-old or older. Seventy-five participants were removed from analysis for not passing the lie scale questions in the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2001).

Participants were asked a series of demographic questions including a question about their religious orientation. Those who self-identified as atheist or agnostic were so labeled; participants who identified as Christian, Jewish, or Muslim were labeled theists.

Participants that identified as theists were split into high and low religiosity (top and bottom thirds on intrinsic religiosity scale). Therefore, participants were classified as atheists (N=117), agnostics (n=130), high theists (n=104), or low theists (n=104). Of the high and low theists there were 194 Christians, 11 Jews, and 3 Muslims. A majority of participants were female (62.4%), white (80.0%), and had at least a four-year college degree (49.2%) or completed some college (41.0%).

Religiosity was measured by the 9-item intrinsic religiosity subscale of the Revised Religious Life Inventory (RLI-R; Hills, Francis, & Robbins, 2004). Intrinsic religiosity is the degree to which an individual views religion as an end in itself (e.g. “I try hard to carry my religion over into all my other dealings in life”). Participants were asked to rate statements on a 9-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree).

The 30-item MFQ assessed moral concerns for each of the five moral foundations. The first part asked participants to rate the relevance of each concern to moral decisions on a 6-point scale between 0 (not at all relevant) to 5 (extremely relevant). For example, “Whether or not someone acted unfairly,” is relevant to the fairness foundation. The second part asked participants to rate their level of agreement to statements about each of the moral foundations on a 6-point scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). For example, “It’s more important to be a team player than to express oneself,” for the ingroup foundation.

## Results

A one-way ANOVA was performed for each of the five foundations with religious orientation as the grouping variable. Figure 1 shows the mean for each religious orientation on the five moral foundations.

The ANOVA for the care foundation was significant ( $F(3,451)=5.03, p=.002, \eta^2=.032$ ). A Tukey HSD *post hoc* test showed highly religious theists scored higher than both atheists and low religious theists; agnostics scored higher on the care foundation than low religious theists. The ANOVA for fairness was not statistically significant ( $F(3,451)=.815, p=.486$ ).

An ANOVA for the ingroup foundation was significant ( $F(3, 451) = 23.6, p<.001, \eta^2=.136$ ). A Tukey HSD *post hoc* test showed that theists (both low and high religiosity) scored higher than atheists and agnostics.

We also found significance on the ANOVAs for authority ( $F(3,451)=50.0, p<.001, \eta^2=.250$ ) and purity ( $F(3,451)=154, p<.001, \eta^2=.507$ ). The Tukey HSD *post hoc* tests showed that all four groups were statistically different from each other in the same pattern: highly religious theists scored higher than low religiosity theists, agnostics, and atheists; low religiosity theists scored higher than agnostics and atheists; and agnostics scored higher than atheists.

## Discussion

Our data provide evidence that there are differences in moral concerns among different religious orientations. Results for the ingroup, authority, and purity foundations had medium to large effect sizes, suggesting that these foundations are of particular interest. With a small effect size for the care foundation and no significant difference in scores for the fairness foundations, the data suggest that these foundations are not major contributors to differences in moral concerns among different religious orientations.

Theists high and low in religiosity scored higher than both atheists and agnostics in ingroup, authority, and purity. Additionally, agnostics scored higher than atheists in these moral foundations. This suggests that belief in God is related to moral concerns involving ingroup, authority and purity.

However, high and low theists differed from each other on two moral foundations. High religiosity theists scored higher on authority and purity than low religiosity theists. This suggests that there are differences in moral concerns even among those who believe in God.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in the present research was the difference between low religiosity theists and non-theists (atheists and agnostics). Our data suggests that there are differences in moral concerns between low religiosity theists when compared to atheists and agnostics. Some past research on the effects of being religious has compared highly religious individuals to low religious individuals, which then generalizes low religious individuals to atheists (Galen, 2012). In light of our data, this assumption may be inappropriate. It appears that believing in God and being low in religiosity is different from absence of belief.

## References

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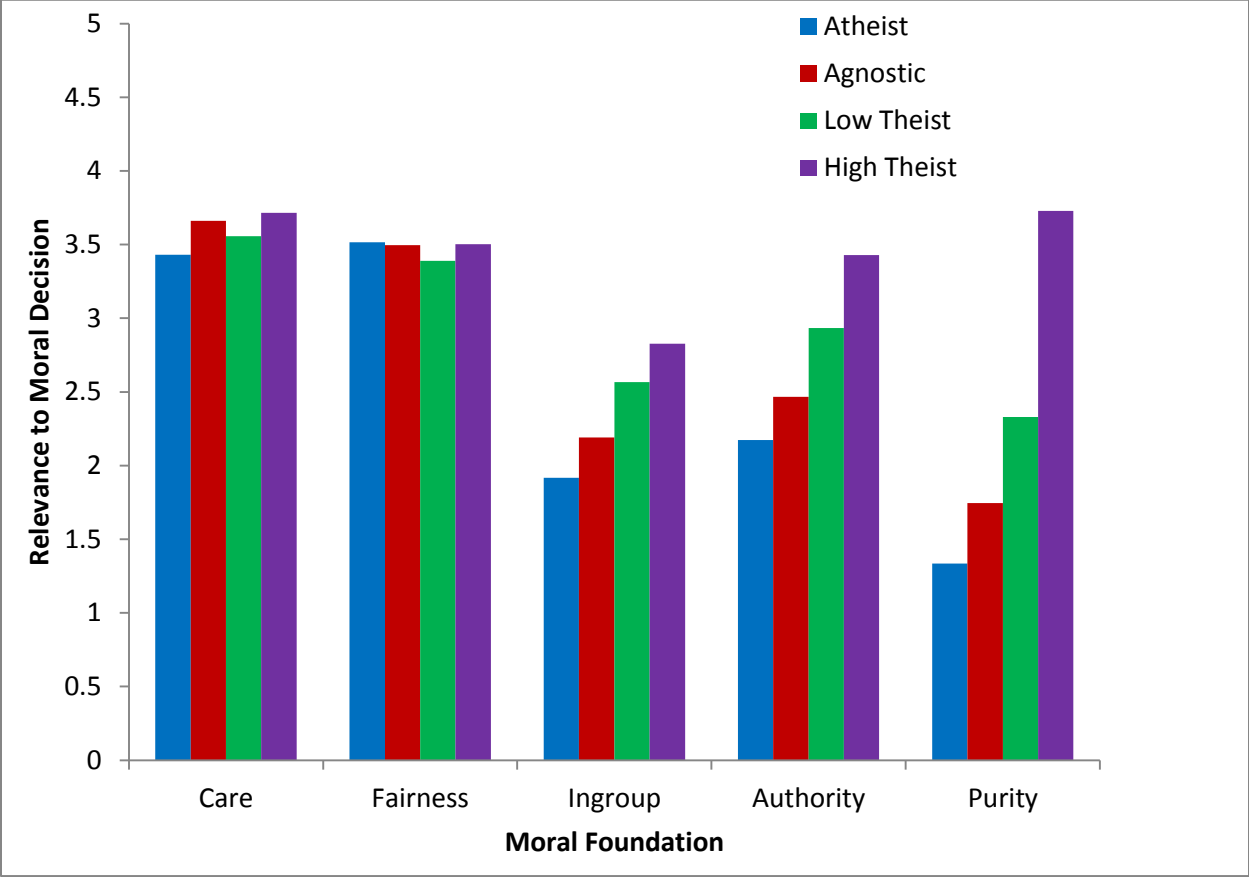


Figure 1. Mean relevance of concern by moral foundation for atheists, agnostics, low religious theists, and high religious theists on a 6-point scale between 0 (not at all relevant) to 5 (extremely relevant).