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Do People Who Believe in God Report More Meaning in Their Lives? The Existential Effects of Belief

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Abstract

I conduct the first large-N study explicitly exploring the association between belief in God and sense of purpose in life. This relationship, while often discussed informally, has received little empirical attention. Here I use the General Social Survey to investigate how form of and confidence in belief in God is related to sense of purpose in life, as measured by a Likert item level of agreement with the statement “In my opinion, life does not serve any purpose.” Using logistic regression analysis, I find that those who indicate that they are confident in God’s existence report a higher sense of purpose compared to nonbelievers, believers in a higher power, and those who believe but occasionally doubt.

Keywords

sense of purpose; God; meaning

Introduction

Religion and spirituality are often seen in terms of their meaning-giving function. Indeed, “many people think of the question of life meaning as a religious question” (Baumeister 1991). Geertz (1973) argues that today meaning making is the fundamental function of religious belief. Some theorists and theologians argue that the sense of purpose provided by religious faith is unobtainable through naturalistic means (Frankl 1969:145; Niebuhr 1943); but this is contended by other theorists (Maslow 1966). Whatever the philosophical case for any particular attitude towards the God/meaning connection, the fact is that for many, if not most people in the United States, God plays a fundamental role in their sense of meaning (Emmons 2003; Park 2005). Here I ask whether the concept of God is successful in fulfilling its meaning-imparting function that is often ascribed to it. In other words, do people who believe in God actually report a higher sense of purpose in their life?

Literature Review

Considering both the association many Americans make between God and their personal sense of purpose and the hypothesized intervening role that existential factors play in religiosity-driven health differentials (Chamerlain and Zika 1988; Schnittker 2001; Seeman, Dubin, and Seeman, 2003), this is a topic that deserves investigation. While some studies have dealt with the theme of general religious influences on sense-of-purpose, none have parsed out the effects belief in God specifically. McFadden suspects that lack of follow-up about which types of religious belief contribute to existential meaning may be attributed to a

“lack of theological knowledge among social scientists” (2000:176). The inherently abstract nature of belief makes treating and operationalizing theological distinctions difficult.

This lacuna is especially salient in regards to the issue of belief in God, since this is a component of belief that is often directly associated with meaning (Park 2005:295). However, some studies have abutted on similar themes by treating the more general relationship between religious belief and meaning in life. Martos, Thege, and Steger (2010) use a sample of Hungarian psychology students to measure literality of belief on various indicators of meaning as represented by several composite indices, some of which incorporated notions of God, and find that a general flexibility of beliefs, openness to new beliefs, and a more symbolic approach to belief contribute to the sense of meaning that their sample derives from their religious beliefs. Pöhlmann, Gruss, and Joraschky (2006) address the hypothesis that attention to religious issues lead to more sophisticated meaning systems when they compared the self-reported meaning levels and frameworks of a sample of 59 theology and science students using a series of comparison-of-means tests, finding that theology students “presented a more differentiated, elaborated, and coherent personal meaning systems than the science students” (Pöhlmann, Gruss, and Joraschky 2006:109). French and Joseph (1999) find that positive attitudes towards Christianity were associated with higher scores on the Purpose in Life Test in a sample of 101 undergraduates. Dezutter, Soenens, and Hutsebaut, (2006) use the same Purpose in Life Test, but incorporate it into a broader measure of psychological wellbeing that they then test on an indicator of symbolic versus orthodox belief, finding that literalist beliefs have negative associations with psychological wellbeing. As one of the most commonly reported sources of existential fulfillment in believers (Park 2005), the connection between belief in God and sense of purpose merits its own unique analysis.

While the prior literature is altogether distinct from my own study, there are several advantages that my study has over previous studies addressing religiosity and sense of purpose. The samples previously used were relatively small: 330 and 437 for Martos, Thege, and Steger (2010), 59 for Pöhlmann, Gruss, and Joraschky (2006), 101 for French and Joseph (1999), and 427 for Dezutter, Soenens, and Hutsebaut (2006). In comparison, my smallest model has a sample size of 2,204, which helps produce a relatively large sample of rare subpopulations such as nonbelievers. All of the prior studies cited relied on convenience samples: primarily student populations. In contrast, the General Social Survey (hereafter GSS) randomly draws its subjects from the entire non-institutionalized U.S. population. The Purpose in Life Test, used in three of the four studies cited, incorporates concepts such as enthusiasm, belief in free will, preparation for death, etc. (Crumbaugh and Maholick 1964), which although related to purpose and useful in other research contexts, has the potential to obfuscate when the variable of interest is simply belief that life has purpose. The simple question supplied by the GSS parsimoniously and directly addresses the concept of purpose in its simplest sense. In brief, this study is the first of its kind to measure the relationship between several categories of belief in God and sense of purpose, and it has the sample size to do so effectively.

Theory

The cognitive mechanisms underlying a relationship between belief in God and sense of purpose are difficult to untangle; however, there are several plausible theoretical reasons for why such a relationship would exist. Frankl (1959) argues that a reliable sense of purpose must be grounded outside of the material, and a belief in a spiritual, metaphysical absolute as represented in a God figure may provide this transcendental locus for a grounded sense of purpose. Terror Management Theory posits that religious belief serves the function of obviating the sense existential anxiety arising from the inevitability of biological death by

promising the continuation of being after death (Vail et al. 2010). By believing in the author of a framework that includes an afterlife, believers do not have to deal with the same anxieties naturally accompanying the idea of existential oblivion that nonbelievers do.

Belief in God may also provide believers with a unifying framework that lends itself to confidence in the existence of purpose, whereas alternatives can be naturally more fragmented, leading to the possibility of conflicting goals and aims that can lead to an existential crisis (Emmons 2005:738). An individual's belief that her or his goals and aims of existence are derived from a supreme God can lend weight to the substantive importance of such aims for the individual (Frankl 1955:xv).

Measures of Sense of Purpose and Belief in God

Hood and colleagues correctly note: “there is a kind of scientific vagueness to the idea of ‘meaning’” (2009:15). However, “social scientists have been warming to [existential meaning] and gradually recognizing that despite its vague and boundless nature, that it can be fruitfully and seriously investigated” (Debats 2000). Various instruments have been constructed in an attempt to parse out various dimensions of what is meant by “meaning” (Martos, Thege, and Steger 2010; Reker 2000), and further empirically grounded conceptual exploration of meaning will undoubtedly be forthcoming.

Here I use a simple question asked in the GSS in 1998 and 2008 that uses a five-level Likert item (“strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”) to measure responses to the statement “In my opinion, life does not serve any purpose.” This simple question directly gauges the degree to which the respondent feels they can agree with what is essentially a nihilistic worldview.

This question addresses what is referred to by Steger and colleagues (2009) as the *presence* of meaning dimension, which is simply whether one sees meaning in life or not. The lack of purpose in one's life is closely related to the concept of existential anxiety theorized about by Tillich (1952) among others, and empirically operationalized by Weems and colleagues (2004) using confirmatory factor analysis to categorize various questions. Particularly relevant to the GSS question is their “emptiness and meaninglessness” factor that covers responses to “I often feel anxious because I am worried that life might have no meaning,” “I never think about emptiness,” and “I often think that the things that were once important in life are empty” (Weems et al. 2004:390). Also related to the GSS phrasing is Schnell's Crisis of Meaning Index, which incorporates responses to the questions “I don't see any sense in life,” and “when I think about the meaning of life I find only emptiness” (2009:488).

Just as the concept of purpose is inherently nebulous, so is the concept of God. It is difficult to determine what exactly people mean when they claim to believe in God. As Russell puts it, “‘God’ had a perfectly definite meaning; but ... the word has become paler and paler, until it is difficult to see what people mean when they assert that they believe in God” (1957:31). Durkheim complains about the difficulty of distinguishing between philosophy and theology once God become a symbolic “moral ideal personified” (Pickering 1994). On a more contemporary note, O'Connor and Chamberlain (2000) report that in their textual analyses of responses about God and meaning, many people located their sense of meaning in a non-specific source of supernatural power that the authors label “not God” (85). The lack of terminological clarity here is one of the limitations of this study, and indeed of any study about belief in God.

However, the GSS wording anticipates this concern. Specifically, the six-point question for the variable “God” includes an option for (1) atheist (“I don't believe in God”), (2) agnostic (“I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out”), (3) belief in a higher power but not necessarily a God (“I don't believe in a personal God, but I

do believe in a higher power of some kind” (4) believes but has some doubts (“I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others,” (5) “while I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God,” respectively), and (6) believes in God with surety (“I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it”). Since these options are all mutually exclusive, for the purposes of this study I operate under the working assumption that the more pantheistic notions of God would fit into the “higher power” category, while choices 4, 5, and 6 that deal with “God” would be reserved for the idea of a God figure as conventionally understood. While there may still be some respondents mark a surety of belief when for all relevant purposes their metaphysical beliefs are identical to those of a self-identified atheist or agnostic, with the difference of opinion simply being one of definitions, I believe that the GSS phrasing makes such a possibility a negligible threat to external validity.

I break the 6-item scale that the GSS provides into four categories, each measured as a dummy variable: “No Belief” (option 1 or 2), “Higher Power” (option 3) “Believes-Doubts” (option 4 or 5) with “Sure Belief” (option 6) representing 62% of the total sample. It is not completely apparent how the two “Believes-Doubts” options are related to each other or the other categories, or how relevant the nuanced distinctions between the wordings are; therefore, to conceptually simplify the analysis, I collapse these categories into one group of “Believes-Doubts.” I am forced to merge the “don't believe” and “no way to find out” categories (n= 76 and 118, respectively), into one representing people with no positive belief in God in order to gain sufficient power, although exploring differing existential implications of atheism and agnosticism is a worthy subject for future research. Separate sets of summary statistics for 1998 and 2008 (the two years used) describing where these categories fall on the GSS nihilism scale are found in Tables 1 and 2. Regardless of their beliefs, the majority of the respondents tend to either “strongly disagree” or “disagree” with the statement, suggesting that most of the relevant variation is to be found between these two options.

Methods

While standard OLS regressions are occasionally used for Likert item measures, such an analysis relies on an assumption of normally distributed data. The variable used here is left-skewed. Specifically, 5 (strongly disagree) = 56.31% of respondents, 4=35.22%, 3=5.29%, 2=2.24%, and 1=.94%. Therefore, the assumption of normal distribution is not met. The next obvious choice would be an ordered logistic analysis. However, a Brant test indicates that the proportional odds assumption required for such an analysis is also not met in this case. The effect of going from “strongly disagree” is not close enough to the effect of going from “disagree” to “neither agree nor disagree” and below to merit the assumption of equal effects across the range of the dependent variable. This is probably due to the lack of power that is the natural consequence of some of the smaller subpopulations. As previously noted, the main division in the data happens between those who “strongly disagree” and those who merely “disagree”; therefore, a logistic regression based on this divide should capture most of the relevant variation. The dichotomous variable used has a value of one for “strongly disagree” and zero for everybody else.

The GSS asked the purpose question in the years 1991, 1998, and 2008. However, the 1991 survey does not have a measure for generic religiosity, so once this term is included in the regression the 1991 data is omitted. Therefore, for the sake of sample consistency across models, I exclude the 1991 data and retain the 1998 and 2008 data. The 1998 and 2008 data have 89 and 105 nonbelievers, respectively, yielding a sample of 194 of the relatively rare US non-believing population.

While these two sets of data are ten years apart, interacting the effect of the year 2008 and each of the belief categories yields no significant interaction terms, suggesting that the relationship did not significantly change from 1998 to 2008. I also include an insignificant control for the 1998 sample in my last model to show that the inclusion of year-fixed effects does not substantively change the coefficients.

For Model 1, I simply use my belief-based categorical variables of interest as predictors of whether they “strongly disagree” with the nihilistic statement (Table 3). In Model 2 and all subsequent models I include a very general set of controls that are related to mental health, metaphysical worldviews, and a wide range of other characteristics: specifically age (in units of ten years), race (other race and black, with white as the omitted reference), region-fixed effects (based on the nine region scheme that the GSS uses), sex, and SES. To control for SES I include inflation-adjusted family income (in units of 10,000, standardized to year 2000 values), and years of education.

Belief factors risk proxying for a more generalized sense of religiosity; therefore, in Models 3 and 4 I include a control for self-identified level of religiosity (an answer to the question of “to what extent do you consider yourself a religious person.”) While the GSS survey has 1=very religious and 5=not religious, I have inverted this measure to make it more intuitive. Finally, testing an indicator of sense of purpose alone may risk conflating a true sense of purpose with generic happiness. Because the two are correlated, not controlling for general happiness risks subtly turning the models into predictors of general happiness rather than sense of purpose about life. In Models 3 and 4 I include a control for self-reported happiness based on the GSS’s tripartite categorization. Once again I have inverted the measure to make it more intuitive: “not too happy”=1, etc. In Model 4, I include the control for the year 1998, with 2008 as the base year.

Discussion

Is belief in God related to a higher sense of purpose? The answer appears to be a qualified yes. The association appears to be reserved for those who indicate that they “know God exists.” Of the three other categories, those who indicate a belief in more abstract notions of divinity (“higher power”) and the non-believers have the next highest level of sense of purpose about life, with those who report some degree of uncertainty having the lowest coefficient. However, the statistical distinctions between these latter three categories are statistically insignificant in all models; belief in a “higher power” or an occasionally doubting belief does not appear to contribute to a higher sense of purpose any more than non-belief; however, once again the lack of non-believers in the survey hazards the possibility of a Type II error, or a false negative. The relationship between a sure belief in God and sense of purpose appears to be substantively significant, with odds ratios of being in the “strongly disagree” category ranging from about .48-.67 across the models. Both measures of SES—family income and education—are positively associated with sense of purpose while controlling for one another. Being male and belonging to the “other race” category are both negatively associated with sense of purpose. Religiosity and happiness are both positively and highly significant, and their inclusion changes the magnitude of the belief coefficients, although this effect is not large. While not the main emphasis of this paper, it is worth noting that the findings for sex challenge the findings of the prior literature that find a positive relationship with marital status and an insignificant or positive relationship with being male (see Schnell 2009 for a review of the demographic correlates of sense of purpose).

It appears that a belief that exhibits less skepticism or abstractness tends to be associated with a higher chance of “strongly disagreeing” with the nihilistic statement. These results

accord with the Emmons' (2005) theory that predicts that people with the relatively unified metaphysical framework provided by strong religious beliefs will have a firmer sense of purpose than more fragmented alternatives. The fact that the believers in a higher power and those who believe but doubt are also significantly different from the sure believers support Vail and colleagues' finding that more flexible belief systems “embrace uncertainty and ambiguity,” a tendency which, while avoiding some the potential religious strictures of fundamentalist religious belief, also potentially allows for existential uncertainty (2010:89).

While these associations appear robust and consistent with various theoretical perspectives, without panel or experimental data I am prevented from drawing causal conclusions; it could be that people with a higher sense of purpose are naturally drawn more towards belief, or that there is a deeper cognitive mechanism that causes both. Very few people in the GSS sample were willing to mark that they believed in complete nihilism (.8%), which confirms the fact that as humans we have a strong, fundamental urge to seek for or construct purpose in our lives in some form or another (Frankl 1969). For many personal sense of purpose is completely autonomous of any notion of God, suggesting that they find this psychologically vital sense of purpose elsewhere. Consequently, the effectiveness of God as a source of purpose implies a comparison with secular alternatives. While there is a promising, burgeoning literature on non-believer studies (Zuckerman 2011), the available data do not allow me to go into detail about what these alternatives are, and therefore I am prevented from speculating further.

Conclusion

I have presented a unique analysis of a fundamental question that until now has remained unaddressed: do those who believe in God have a greater sense of purpose about life? While I have ventured some hypotheses, ultimately the why behind this is relationship is unknown. Also, the fact that most of the variation lies between the “strongly disagree” and “disagree” options raises the question of what the real-world difference between these two options is, and whether the difference is substantively meaningful. Without more detailed data, it is difficult to say. Given the complicated nature of the concepts involved, future qualitative and quantitative studies should carefully dissect the underlying mechanisms connecting various forms of belief in God with self-reported purpose in life to give a more thorough explanation of this relationship.

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Table 1

1998 Frequencies

	No Belief	Believes-Doubts	Higher Power	Believes-Sure	Total
Strongly agree	0 (0)	2 (.175)	3 (.262)	4 (.349)	9 (.785)
Agree	6 (.524)	4 (.349)	7 (.611)	12 (1.047)	29 (2.531)
Neither agree nor disagree	17 (1.483)	14 (1.222)	19 (1.658)	24 (2.094)	74 (6.457)
Disagree	22 (1.920)	35 (3.054)	98 (8.551)	252 (21.990)	407 (35.510)
Strongly disagree	44 (3.839)	53 (4.625)	94 (8.202)	436 (38.050)	627 (54.710)
Total	89 (7.766)	108 (9.424)	221 (19.280)	728 (63.530)	1146 (100)

Note: Frequencies; cell percentages in parentheses. $N=1146$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 2

2008 Frequencies

	No Belief	Believes-Doubts	Higher Power	Believes-Sure	Total
Strongly agree	2 (.149)	0 (0)	0 (0)	10 (.746)	12 (.895)
Agree	1 (.075)	2 (.149)	5 (.373)	18 (1.342)	26 (1.939)
Neither agree nor disagree	9 (.671)	13 (.969)	19 (1.417)	24 (1.790)	65 (4.847)
Disagree	39 (2.908)	59 (4.400)	119 (8.874)	269 (2.060)	486 (36.240)
Strongly disagree	54 (4.027)	66 (4.922)	133 (9.918)	499 (37.210)	752 (56.080)
Total	105 (7.830)	140 (1.440)	276 (2.580)	820 (61.150)	1341 (10.000)

Note: Frequencies; cell percentages in parentheses. $N=1,341$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Life Purpose (Odds Ratios)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
No belief	.669 ^{**} (-2.630)	.477 ^{***} (-4.320)	.670 [*] (-2.060)	.670 [*] (-2.060)
Believes-doubts	.551 ^{***} (-5.730)	.507 ^{***} (-5.920)	.594 ^{***} (-4.270)	.593 ^{***} (-4.280)
Higher power	.605 ^{***} (-3.660)	.531 ^{***} (-4.130)	.671 [*] (-2.380)	.670 [*] (-2.390)
Age (/10)		.993 (-.240)	.961 (-1.400)	.958 (-1.480)
Male		.697 ^{***} (-3.950)	.701 ^{***} (-3.810)	.701 ^{***} (-3.810)
Black		.898 (-.800)	.858 (-1.090)	.854 (-1.120)
Other race		.634 ^{**} (-2.700)	.649 [*] (-2.480)	.645 [*] (-2.510)
Family income		1.051 ^{***} (3.930)	1.045 ^{***} (3.400)	1.045 ^{***} (3.350)
Years education		1.139 ^{***} (7.520)	1.128 ^{***} (6.850)	1.128 ^{***} (6.850)
Religious person			1.276 ^{***} (4.090)	1.278 ^{***} (4.100)
Happy			1.266 ^{**} (3.240)	1.271 ^{**} (3.290)
Year 1998				.934 (-.740)
Region-fixed effects?	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Constant	1.525 ^{***} (8.120)	.298 ^{***} (-4.450)	.036 ^{***} (-5.920)	.037 ^{***} (-5.870)
<i>N</i>	2487	2221	2204	2204
<i>BIC</i>	3407.400	2942.300	2949.800	2956.900
χ^2	42.030	181.000	225.900	226.500
Log likelihood	-1688.000	-1432.600	-1397.900	-1397.600

Note: Exponentiated coefficients; *t* statistics in parentheses.

+*p* < .10

*
p < .05

**
p < .01

p < .001.