



**EXAMINING THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL REJECTION AND RELIGIOUS COMFORT
ON THE PREFERENCE FOR RELIGIOUS-AFFIRMING INFORMATION**

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INTRODUCTION

Research¹ shows that psychological responses to an existential threat are influenced by individual differences in religious comfort (**RC**) and religious strain (**RS**). In particular, RC in terminally ill patients was *negatively* related to concern over death, which in turn, positively predicted depression symptoms; conversely, RS in terminally ill patients was *positively* related to concern over death, which in turn, positively predicted depression symptoms. In short, these individual differences influenced the extent to which terminally ill patients perceived death as an existential threat.

One way to induce existential threats in the lab is through social rejection manipulations. Case and Williams² contend that ostracism—a form of social rejection—acts as a metaphor for death, and as such, produces an existential threat. Indeed, a number of studies have found that ostracized participants feel a lower sense of meaningful existence than comparison conditions³, and meta-analytic work shows a consistent effect of social rejection on meaningful existence⁴. Furthermore, recent work⁵ shows that socially rejected participants report greater affiliation with religion and greater intentions to engage in religious behavior than comparison conditions.

Together, these studies suggest that RC and RS may influence the degree to which one invests themselves in or seeks support for their religious beliefs in response to social rejection.

¹ Edmondson, D. Park, C. L., Chaudoir, S. R., & Wortmann, J. H. (2008). Death without God: Religious struggle, death concerns, and depression in the terminally ill. *Psychological Science, 19*(8), 754-758.

² Case, T. I., & Williams, K. D. (2004). Ostracism: A metaphor for death. In J. Greenberg, S. L. Koole, & T. Pyszczynski (Eds.), *Handbook of experimental existential psychology* (pp. 336-351). New York: Guilford Press

³ Zadro, L., Williams, K. D., Richardson, R. (2004). How low can you go? Ostracism by a computer is sufficient to lower self-reported levels of belonging, control, self-esteem, and meaningful existence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 40*, 560-567.

⁴ Geber, J., & Wheeler, L. (2009). On being rejected: A meta-analysis of experimental research on rejection. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 4*, 468-488.

⁵ Ayden, N., Fischer, P., & Frey, D. (2010). Turning to God in the face of ostracism: Effects of social exclusion on religiousness. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 36*, 742-753.

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Specifically, we predicted that socially rejected participants high in RC would show greater religious affirmation than social rejected participants low in RC; however, socially rejected participants high in RS would show less religious affirmation than socially rejected participants low in RS.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Participants from LVC ($N = 56$; $M_{age} = 19.88$, $SD_{age} = 1.73$; 48 female) largely identified themselves as Christian ($n = 49$); others identified themselves as Buddhist ($n = 1$), Atheist ($n = 2$), Agnostic ($n = 2$), or other/not-identified ($n = 2$).

MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

After signing consent forms, participants were led to believe that this study was to study thought processes. To begin, participants completed a measure assessing RC and RS⁶ and a 10-item Big Five measure⁷.

Next, under the guise of a cognitive assessment, participants were instructed to build a free-standing tower as high as they could without it falling down. Participants worked with two confederates who either included participants in their effort to construct the tower or ostracized them by not including them in the task. Participants, then, completed manipulation checks by rating the difficulty of the task (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very difficult*), the cooperation of the confederates (1 = *very little cooperation*, 7 = *somewhat cooperative*), their current mood (1 = *unhappy, negative, unpleasant*, 7 = *happy, positive, pleasant*), whether they believed their life had meaning and purpose (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*), whether they believed they were friendly, and a measure of self-esteem⁸.

Finally, participants were given two fake, but scientific-looking abstracts. One of the abstracts affirmed the value of Christian beliefs by saying they produced positive life-outcomes; whereas, the other abstract challenged Christian beliefs by saying they produced racial

⁶ Exline, J. J., Yali, A. M., & Sanderson, W. C. (2000). Guilt, discord, and alienation: The role of religious strain in depression and suicidality. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 56*, 1481-1496.

⁷ Gosling, S. D., Rentfrow, P. J., & Swann, W. B. Jr. (2003). A very brief measure of the Big Five personality domains. *Journal of Research in Personality, 27*, 504-528.

⁸ McFarland, D. B., & Ross, M. (1982). Impact of causal attributions on affective reactions to success and failure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 43*, 927-946.

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intolerance. For each of the abstracts, participants rated the extent to which they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*, 10 = *strongly agree*) that the article sounded interesting, that they wanted to read the article, that they thought it was important for people to know about, and their general impression of the article (1 = *very unfavorably*, 10 = *very favorably*).

RESULTS

Analyses were conducted to assess whether the social rejection manipulation was effective. As seen in Table 1, participants did not differ in how difficult they thought the tower-building task was, but included participants perceived greater cooperation from the confederates and reported a more positive mood and higher self-esteem than socially-rejected participants. Unexpectedly, there was no difference in meaning and purpose across conditions.

Table 1. Manipulation Check Descriptive and Inferential Statistics

	Included		Rejected		t-value	p-value
	M	SD	M	SD		
Task Difficulty	3.29	1.45	2.80	1.71	1.15	.256
Cooperative	6.32	.087	2.16	1.60	7.20	>.001
Mood	5.58	1.37	3.71	1.32	5.19	>.001
Meaning/Purpose	6.37	0.81	6.52	0.84	0.68	.501
Self-Esteem	8.86	1.23	7.53	1.79	3.28	.002

Religion-affirmation was determined by subtracting participants' ratings of the religion-challenging article from their ratings of the religion-affirming article, such that higher numbers indicated a greater preference for religion-affirming information. A 2 Religious Comfort (high vs. low) × 2 Religious Strain (high vs. low) × 2 Task (included vs. rejected) ANOVA was performed on this measure. The analysis revealed no effect of the rejection manipulation, showing that rejected participants' ($M = 0.88, SD = 2.62$) preference for religious-affirmation was not different from accepted participants ($M = 0.74, SD = 2.95$), $F(1, 48) = 1.07, p = .307$. There was no main effect of RS, showing that participants high in RS ($M = 0.25, SD = 3.01$) showed a relatively equal preference for religious-affirmation as participants low in RS ($M = 1.28, SD =$

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2.52), $F < 1$, *ns*. There was, however, a main effect of RC, showing that participants high in RC ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 2.49$) had a greater preference for religious-affirmation than participants low in RC ($M = -0.63$, $SD = 2.31$), $F(1, 48) = 15.99$, $p < .001$. There were no interactions, $F_s < 1$, *ns* (see Table 2).

Table 2. Mean (SD) Religious-Affirmation Ratings Across Conditions

	Included		Rejected	
	Religious Strain (RS)			
	High	Low	High	Low
Religious Comfort				
High	2.75 (2.46)	2.97 (3.14)	1.64 (3.06)	1.90 (1.55)
Low	-0.50 (2.64)	-0.39 (1.95)	-1.55 (2.94)	-0.25 (1.52)

DISCUSSION

The results showed that the social rejection manipulation was effective, but did not influence religious-affirmation. This finding is difficult to reconcile with previous work, showing the effect of social rejection on *reports* of greater affiliation and *intent* to engage in religious practices⁵. One possibility is that they may suggest limitations to these effects, such that *people's feelings about* and *intentions towards* religion does not manifest itself in various religious practices or study. Another explanation of these data in the context of the larger literature may be that people's desire for and intentions towards religion are not motivated by religious-affirmation. Of course, the possibility also remains that the manipulation was not effective. While it influenced mood and self-esteem, it did not produce changes in meaningful existence, and as such, it did not produce an existential threat that would motivate religious responses. The only significant effect found was that RC predicted religious-affirmation. These findings are consistent with our previous work, showing that individual differences influence religious-affirmation⁹.

⁹ Kitchens, M. B., Mitchell, M. E., Collins, A. E., Horna, M. A., Rine, T. M., & Tran, A. N. (2011). Individual differences in a preference for positively- and negatively- oriented Christian information. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 30(1), 16-27.