

Religion and Well Being: Personal and Contextual Effects Among American University Students

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Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Society for the Scientific Study of Religion
October 13-15, 2017, Washington, D.C.

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This research was supported by a generous
grant from the

E.A. Franklin Charitable Trust

(and from viewers like you).

Thank you!

drjkoch.org – Seeking the Moral Community

Abstract

This paper presents descriptive and inferential findings from survey data gathered from nearly 2000 undergraduates at six different American Universities. Three of the schools are large, public, state Universities; three are private and explicitly Christian in their identity and mission. Each Christian school is geographically proximal to one of the public universities. Three separate measures of religion (religiosity, Christian fundamentalist beliefs, and religious context) are examined for the extent to which they impact respondents' reports of self-esteem, depression, suicide ideation, and a history of attempted suicide. Findings show that the contextual effects related to being a student at a Christian school are negligible in favor of the positive effects of personal religious beliefs and practices. In more general terms and independent of context, Religiosity seems to elevate self-esteem; Christian Fundamentalist beliefs seem also to elevate self-esteem while suppressing depression and suicide ideation. Results are interpreted in light of the logic of the "Moral Communities Hypothesis" and previous research on the contextual effects of religion in suppressing deviance.

Demographics of the Six University Samples

Three Christian Three Public

• N	770	1115
• % Aged 18-20	87	82
• % Anglo	69	66
• % Female	68	69

Overall Response Rate: 81.5%

The “Moral Communities Hypothesis.”

I suggest that what counts is not only whether a particular person is religious, but whether this religiousness is, or is not, ratified by the social environment. The idea here is that religion is empowered to produce conformity to the norms only as it is sustained through interaction and is accepted by the majority as a valid basis for action. ... Religious individuals will be less likely than those who are not religious to commit delinquent acts, *but only in communities where the majority of the people are actively religious.*

Stark, Rodney. 1996. “Religion as Context: Hellfire and Delinquency One More Time.” *Sociology of Religion* 57(2): 163-173.

So then.....

- If the contextual effects of religion predominate in suppressing deviance ...
- What (if any) are the contextual and/or personal effects of religion on ...

Well Being?

Variables, Scales, and Results from Surveying Students

- Binary independent variables:

Gender (Sex): Male and Female (F = 1)

Race: Anglo and Non-Anglo (Non-Anglo = 1)

School: Public vs. Christian (Christian = 1)

- Scaled independent variables

Religiosity

A Scale of Eleven Questions:

- Strength of Religious Faith
- Frequency of Prayer
- Saying Grace Before Meals
- Praying for Personal Needs
- Praying for Specific Others
- Praying for Others in General
- Closeness to God
- Beliefs about God
- Personal Beliefs About Jesus
- Belief in Religious Salvation
- Church Attendance

Range = 5 to 52

Cronbach's Alpha Measure of Reliability = .92

Davis, J.A., T.W. Smith, and P.V. Marsden. 2004. *General Social Surveys, 1972-2004: [CUMULATIVE FILE]*[Computer File]. ICPSR 04295-v. 2. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center [producer], 2005. Storrs, CT: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut/Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributors], 2006-04-05.

Fundamentalism

A Scale of Three Questions:

I am sure that the Bible contains no errors or contradictions.

It is very important for true Christians to believe that the Bible is the infallible Word of God.

The Bible is the final and complete guide to morality; it contains God's answers to all important questions about right and wrong.

Response Choices: "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree"

Range = 3 to 15

Cronbach's Alpha Measure of Reliability = .91

Binary dependent variable

How often have you attempted suicide?

- Never
 - Once
 - Twice
 - A few times
 - Several times
-
- Scored for analysis as 0, or 1+

Radloff, L.S. (1977) 'The CES-D scale: A self report depression scale for research in the general population'.
Applied Psychological Measurement 1: 385-401.

Scaled dependent variables

Self Esteem

A Scale of Ten Questions:

- On the whole, I am satisfied with myself
- At times I think I am no good at all
- I feel that I have a number of good qualities
- I am able to do things as well as most other people
- I feel I do not have much to be proud of
- I certainly feel useless at times
- I feel that I'm a person of worth
- I wish I could have more respect for myself
- All in all, I am inclined to think that I am a failure
- I take a positive attitude toward myself

Response Choices: “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”

Range = 10 to 50

Cronbach's Alpha Measure of Reliability = .86

Depression

A Scale of 6 Questions:

To what extent do you currently feel you cannot eat; your appetite is poor?

To what extent do you currently feel you cannot shake off the blues even with the help of family or friends?

To what extent do you currently feel everything is an effort?

To what extent is your sleep currently restless?

To what extent do you currently feel sad?

To what extent do you currently feel you cannot “get going?”

Response choices:

- Rarely or none of the time (< 1 day a week)
- Some or a little of the time (1-2 days a week)
- Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days a week)
- Most all the time (5-7 days a week)

Range = 0 to 18

Chronbach' s Alpha Measure of Reliability = .88

Radloff, L.S. (1977) 'The CES-D scale: A self report depression scale for research in the general population'. Applied Psychological Measurement 1: 385-401.

Suicide Ideation

A Scale of 2 Questions:

To what extent do you currently think about hurting yourself?

To what extent do you currently think about taking your own life?

Response choices:

- Rarely or none of the time (< 1 day a week)
- Some or a little of the time (1-2 days a week)
- Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days a week)
- Most all the time (5-7 days a week)

Range = 0 to 6

Chronbach's Alpha Measure of Reliability = .80

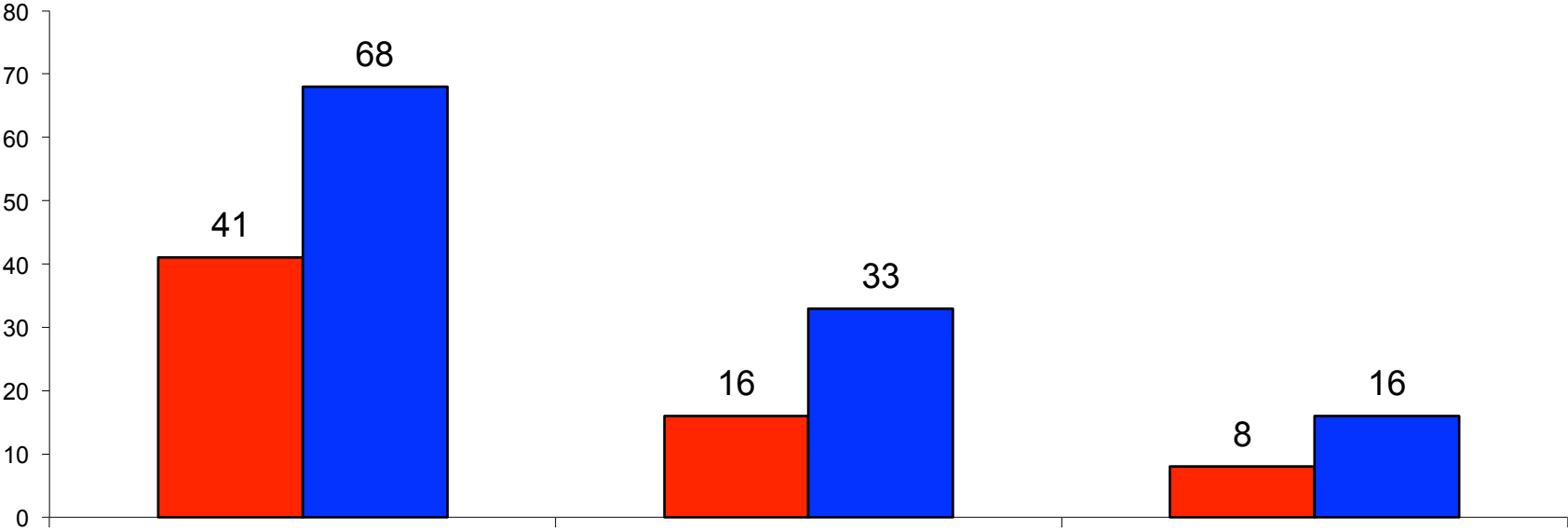
Radloff, L.S. (1977) 'The CES-D scale: A self report depression scale for research in the general population'.
Applied Psychological Measurement 1: 385-401.

A brief digression ...

- The following slide shows descriptive statistics for the contextual effects of religion on “deviance.”
- These effects hold significant in a regression where personal religious beliefs and practices are in the model.

Figure 1

Sexual Behavior by School Type



Had Premarital Sex

2+ Sex Partners Previous Year

6+ Sex partners Lifetime

Comparative Percentages

■ Christian Schools

■ State Schools

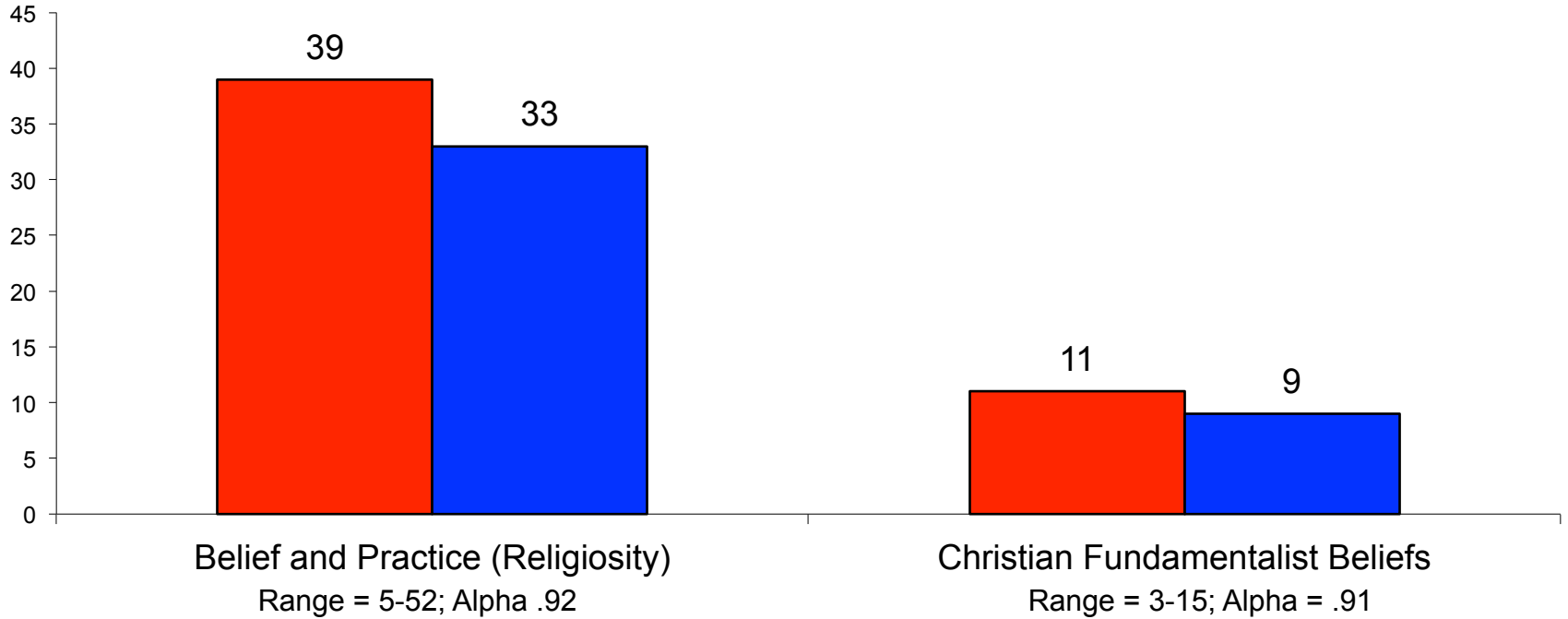
... and now back to our program

The following slides show:

- Descriptive differences in Religiosity and Fundamentalism by school type.
- Descriptive differences differences Well-Being by school type.

Figure 2

Religion by School Type



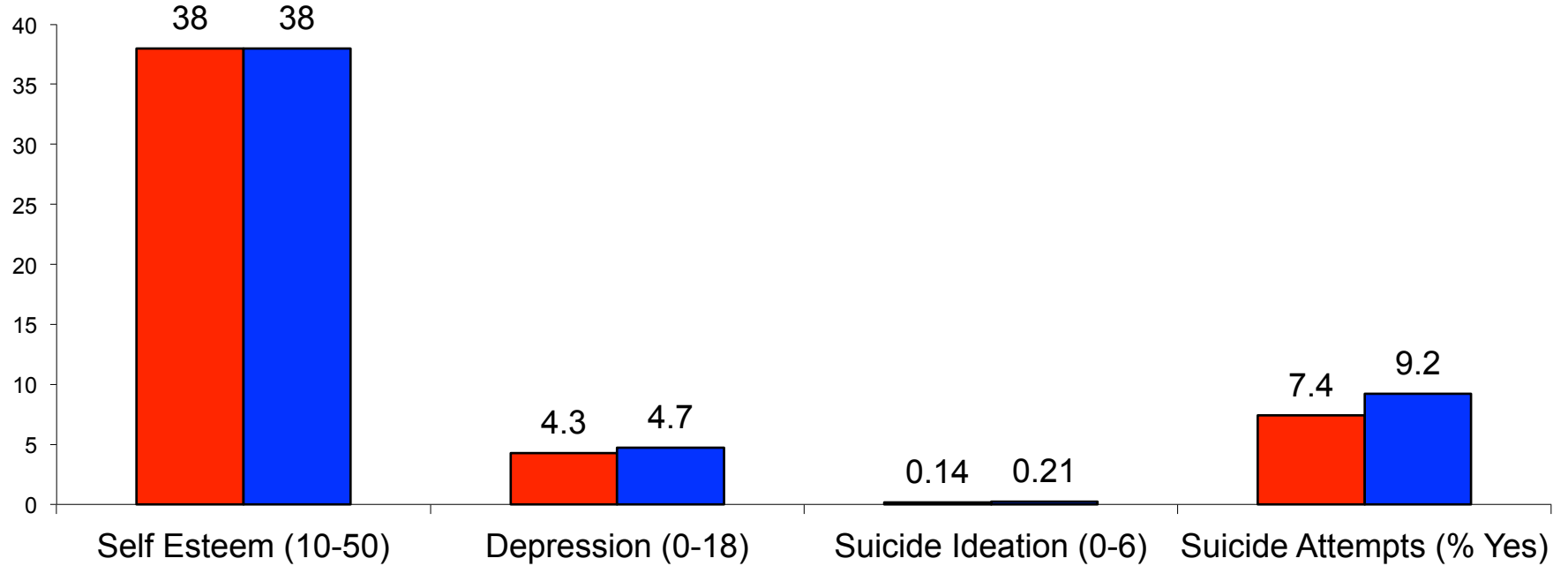
Comparative Percentages

■ Christian Schools

■ Public Schools

Figure 3

Well-Being by School Type



Comparative Percentages

■ Christian Schools

■ State Schools

Table 1. Personal Religion & Well-Being

	Self Esteem	Depression	Suicide Ideation	Suicide Attempt
Independent Variables				
Age	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Standardized Coefficient				
Sex (F=1)	-1.618**	.523**	n.s.	n.s.
Standardized Coefficient	-.120**	.074**		
Race (Non-Anglo=1)	n.s.	.359*	.058**	n.s.
Standardized Coefficient		.049*	.069**	
Religiosity Scale	.051**	-.022*	n.s.	n.s.
Standardized Coefficient	.080**	-.068*		
Fundamentalism Scale	.168**	n.s.	-.011**	n.s.
Standardized Coefficient	.094**		-.106**	
**p < .01				
*p < .05				
R Squared	0.038	0.017	0.016	0.006

**Table 2. Religion &
Well-Being:
Public vs. Christian Schools**

	Self Esteem	Depression	Suicide Ideation	Suicide Attempt
Independent Variables				
Age	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Standardized Coefficient				
Sex (F=1)	-1.591**	.528**	n.s.	n.s.
Standardized Coefficient	-.118**	-.075**		
Race (Non-Anglo=1)	n.s.	.358*	.092**	n.s.
Standardized Coefficient		.049*	.065**	
Religiosity Scale	.062**	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Standardized Coefficient	.098**			
Fundamentalism Scale	.164**	n.s.	-.022**	-.005*
Standardized Coefficient	.092**		-.124**	-.063*
Schools (Christian=1)	-.685*	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Standardized Coefficient	-.052*			
**p < .01				
*p < .05				
R Squared	0.040	0.017	0.019	0.005

Summary – Religion and Well Being

Context Excluded

- Sex (Female) is negative for Self-Esteem and positive for Depression.
- Race (Non-Anglo) is positive for Depression and Suicide Ideation.
- Religiosity is positive for Self-Esteem and negative for Depression.
- Fundamentalism is positive for Self-Esteem and negative for Suicide Ideation.

Summary – Religion and Well Being

Context Included

- Sex (Female) is negative for Self-Esteem and positive for Depression.
- Race (Non-Anglo) is positive for Depression and Suicide Ideation.
- Religiosity is positive for Self-Esteem and negative for depression.
- Fundamentalism is positive for Self-Esteem and negative for Suicide Ideation.
- Contextual effects of Religion are largely absent.

The Take-Away

- Self-esteem, depression, and matters related to suicide (emotions and affect) seem more connected to individual religious beliefs and practices rather than religious context.
- Other research suggests religious context seems more prominent in suppressing deviance than in enhancing well-being.
- Contextual effects regarding deviance may be related more to surveillance and social norms rather than beliefs and ideologies.