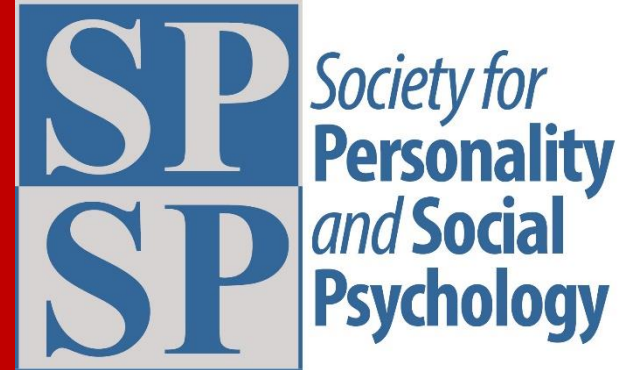


Are Atheists Immoral? Patterns of Values of Atheists, Deists, and Theists on Moral Foundations



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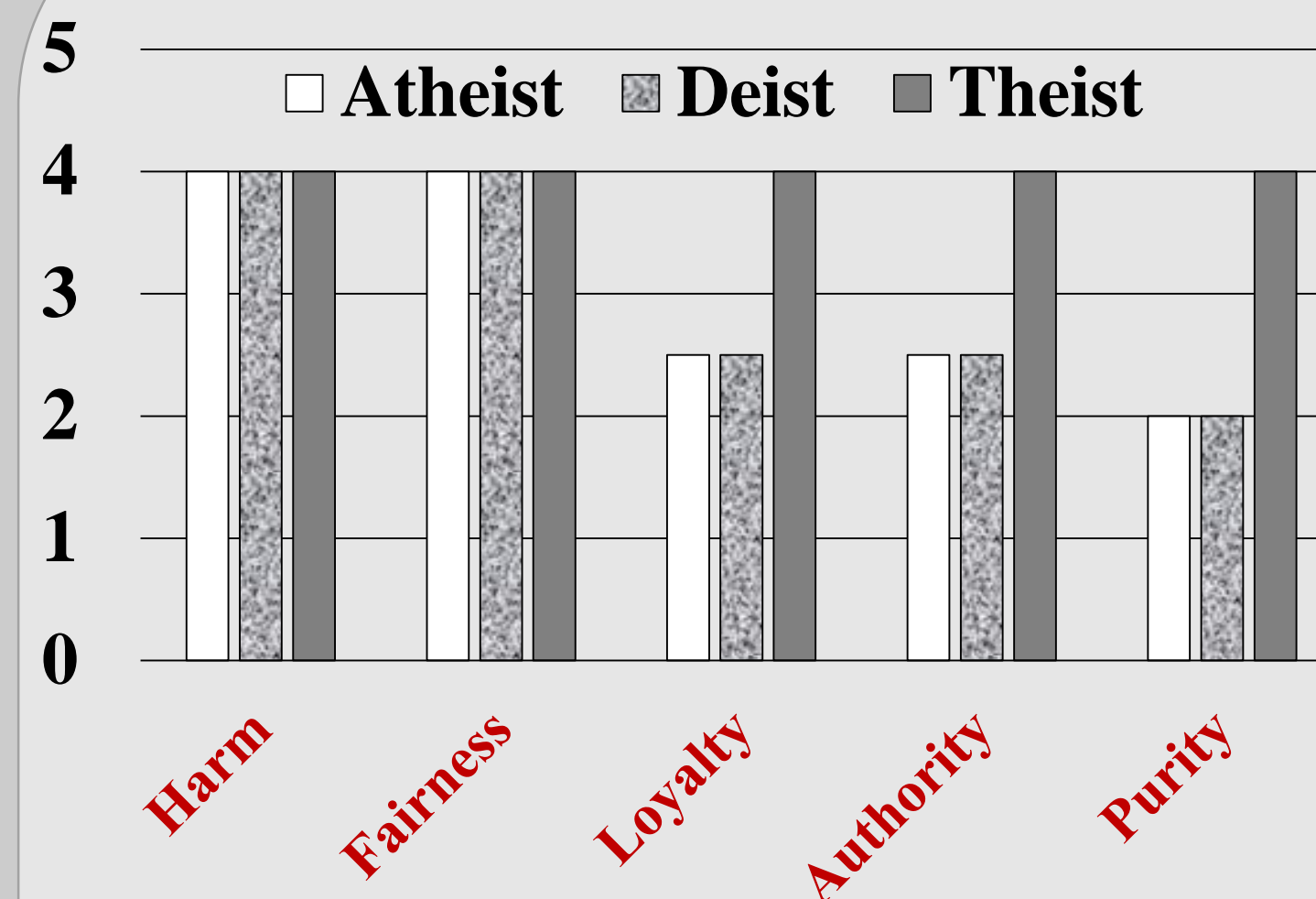
Introduction

- ◆ 53% of Americans support the idea that a belief in God is necessary to be moral (Pew Research Center, 2014).
- ◆ Research consistently finds that atheists are trusted less than other similarly disliked groups in society, such as gay men. Descriptions of criminal acts are more likely to be considered representative of atheists. In one study, participants did not significantly differentiate between atheists and rapists when deciding which group was most representative of a description of a criminal (Gervais et al., 2011).
- ◆ Distrust appears to be a primary motivator in anti-atheist prejudice. One study found that belief in God was related to a greater amount of distrust of atheists and that belief in a God that monitors behavior mediated the relationship between belief in God and distrust of atheists (Gervais et al., 2011).
- ◆ **Moral Foundations Theory:** five foundations divided into *individualizing* foundations of harm/care & fairness/reciprocity (emphasize concerns for individuals) and *binding* foundations of in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (emphasize group concerns and closely relate to religious belief and practice; Graham & Haidt, 2010; Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009; Haidt, Graham, & Joseph, 2009; Haidt, Koller, & Dias, 1993).

- ◆ As it stands, the idea that atheists cannot be trusted because they are perceived as immoral is widespread (Gervais, 2014), especially among believers. However, apparently no previous study has examined what moral values atheists typically hold. **The present research sought to determine whether atheists exhibit a consistent pattern of values on Moral Foundations and, if so, how it compares to the patterns exhibited by non-atheists (theists and deists).** The more that atheists resembled non-atheists in their patterns of moral values, the less support the public perception would have as an accurate representation of atheists' standards of conduct.

Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1:** All belief groups will give equally high priority to Harm and Fairness.
- Hypothesis 2: (a)** Theists will give more priority to Loyalty, Authority, Purity than will Atheists and Deists. **(b)** Theists will give equal priority to all foundations, but Atheists and Deists will prioritize the *individualizing* foundations over the *binding* foundations.



Hypothesis 3 (Moral Judgment): (a) When presented with simple scenarios involving harming someone for selfish purposes, the groups will give the same ratings of their moral sentiments (high ratings of wrong, low ratings of right) because the action violates the harm/care foundation. (b) For a complex scenario involving killing one person to save everyone else in a group that includes the actor, theists should give higher ratings of right than atheists and deists (because the action affirms binding values) but the three belief categories should give equal ratings of wrong (because the action violates the harm/care foundation).

Methods

Participants

- ◆ Recruited from social media, including Facebook and Twitter, where links to the online survey were distributed to various notable individuals in the secular community
- ◆ 492 total (280 female, 199 male)
- ◆ 46.5% Atheist, 19.1% Agnostic
- ◆ 28% very liberal, 34.6% liberal, 19.7% moderately liberal, less than 6% conservative (all variations)
- ◆ 40% European American, 35% American

Measures

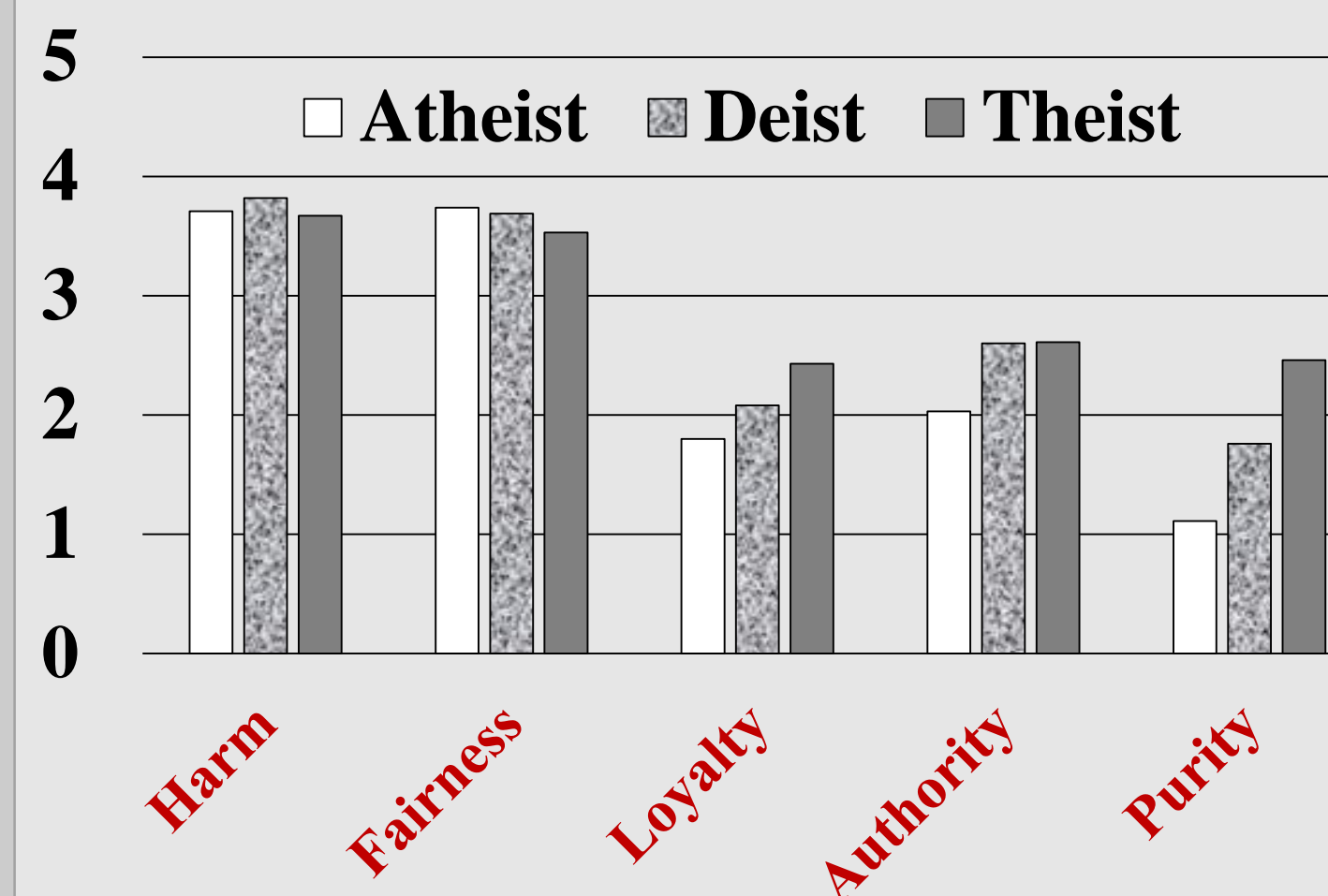
- ◆ Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ)
- ◆ Three moral scenarios, each using separate scales for feelings of right and wrong (bivariate measurement)
- ◆ Categorization of theological beliefs (atheist, deist, theist)
- ◆ Demographics: Ethnicity, gender, age, religious affiliation, and political orientation

Procedures

- ◆ Data were collected through an online survey using SurveyMonkey.
 - ◆ Moral vignettes were taken from Koenigs et al. (2007), two of them simple ("Hired Rapist", "Smothering for Dollars"), and one of them complex ("Lifeboat 2") involving sacrificial harm
 - ◆ Categorization of Theological Beliefs: Six Y/N belief profile questions, five referring to theist belief (Ex: "Do you believe in a God that monitors your behavior?") and one referring to deistic belief ("Do you believe in a God that created the universe, but refrains from interacting with it?")
- Atheist** = No to all six questions
Theist = Yes to at least one theism question, no to deism question
Deist = Yes to deism question, no to all others

Results

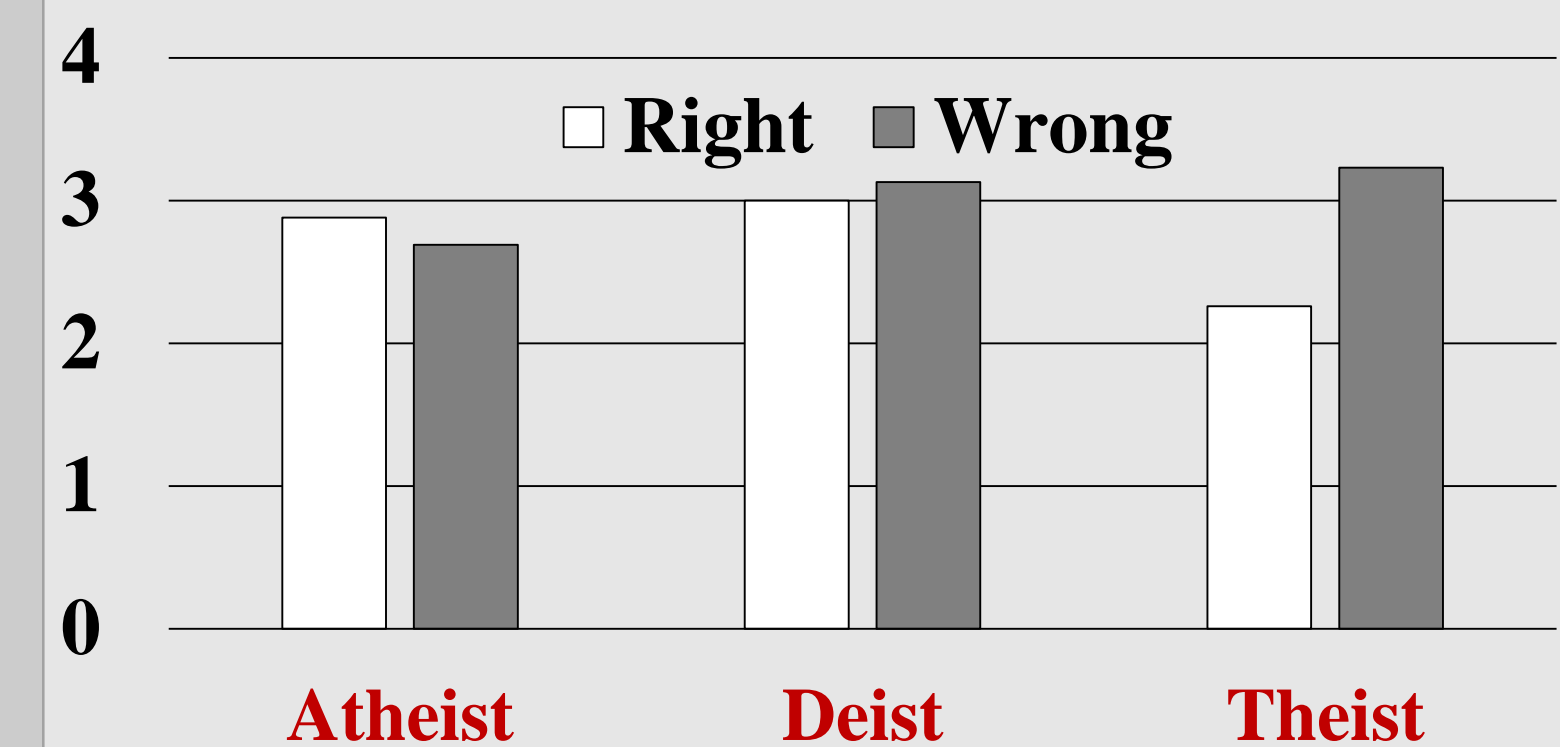
- Hypothesis 1:** As predicted, no difference on Harm, but Atheists > Theists on Fairness ($p < .01$).
- Hypothesis 2: (a)** As predicted, Theists > Atheists on Loyalty, Authority, Purity ($p < .001$), but **(b)** for all groups, *individualizing* foundations > *binding* foundations ($p < .001$).



Statistically significant main effect for belief groups on the combined moral categories, $F(10, 972) = 21.93$, $p < .001$; Pillai's Trace = .37

- Hypothesis 3 (simple scenarios):** As predicted, atheists, deists, and theists gave equally high ratings of wrong and equally low ratings of right (no significant group x rating scale interaction).

- Hypothesis 3 (complex scenario):** Contrary to predictions, atheists rated sacrificial harm significantly more right and significantly less wrong than did theists ($p < .01$). However, all groups exhibited moral ambivalence, with moderate ratings of both right and wrong (Navarick, 2013).



Conclusions

- ◆ Contrary to the widely-held stereotypes, atheists showed basically the same overall pattern of moral values on the MFQ as did theists.
- ◆ All belief groups gave higher priority to the *individualizing* foundations than to the *binding* foundations, possibly reflecting an effect of this sample's overall liberal political orientation.
- ◆ Atheists exhibited somewhat greater emphasis on fairness, and somewhat less emphasis on in-group loyalty, respect for authority and spiritual purity, in comparison to theists.
- ◆ On the simple scenarios, contrary to the public's perception of immorality, atheists showed the same levels of moral aversion as theists and deists to rape and to killing a dying patient to make money. For the complex scenario involving sacrificial harm, theists felt the action was more wrong and less right than did atheists and deists, which was unexpected. However, all belief groups exhibited moral ambivalence, expressing feelings of both wrong and right.

References

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