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Anne Njenga
Dominican University of California

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Relationship of the Openness Personality Trait and Development of Belief in God

Anne W. Njenga

Background

The development of an individual’s beliefs about God is significantly influenced by teachings of parents. However, not all children have the exact same beliefs as their parents. This study examined what may be the characteristics of individuals who have similar or differing beliefs than those to which they were exposed as a child.

Prior research has found that:
- Openness to experience was the personality characteristic that differed most between the religious and non-religious respondents. (Caldwell-Harris, 2012)
- Even non-religious people can hold very strong views and stick to these opinions avidly. (McCrae et al, 1999)
- Beliefs in emerging adulthood show an increase in a skeptical view of religious institutions. (Arnett, Jensen (2002)

The adult’s beliefs about God are proposed to be a combination of the set of ideas taught by the parent and the personality characteristic of the adult child, which have allowed the individual to retain or migrate away from those teaching.

References
Arnett, J. J. (2002). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. American Psychologist, 55, 469-480
Caldwell-Harris, C. L. (2012). Understanding atheism/non-belief as an expected individual-difference variable. Religion, Brain and Behavior, 2(1), 4-23

Methods

PARTICIPANTS
- 26 females & 14 males; 30 to 65 years old
- All – family and friends of researcher
- Primarily – Residents of Kenya, Africa (see Note below)

MATERIALS
Big Five Personality Inventory – provided evaluation of an individual’s levels of Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism.
Similarity of Beliefs Questionnaire – 11-item checklist that evaluated an individual’s current/adult beliefs about God; the same 11 questions were used to detail the family beliefs that the person was taught as a child.
The “Similarity of Beliefs Score” was determined equal to the total number of items that were identical for the participant’s current beliefs and those taught by family when growing up.

PROCEDURE
- Participants were contacted by email and Facebook.
- Questionnaire materials were completed anonymously at an online survey site.

Notes - Re. KENYAN SOCIETY: Primarily – Christian faith; over 80% are very religious people.

Results

TEST OF HYPOTHESIS
Higher Openness was found with greater Similarity of Beliefs
Not significantly related: \[ r = +0.24 \quad p = 14\% \]
Hypothesis is not supported.

Conclusion

- The study demonstrated specific relationship among personality, religious beliefs, and parental influence for this primarily Kenyan sample.
- Participants’ levels of the Openness personality traits appear to have no relationship with having a different set of beliefs than those which where taught to them as children.
- Higher levels of Extroversion are related to a greater likelihood to hold onto the beliefs held by the parents.
- Higher levels of Neuroticism are related to a decrease in likelihood of holding onto same beliefs
- Agreeableness and Contentiousness traits are not related factors to formation of adult beliefs.
- The true significance of these relationships is difficult to determine due to the small sample size (n = 40).

EVALUATION OF OTHER PERSONALITY TRAITS

Traits with significant relationship to Similarity of Beliefs
Extroversion: \[ r = +0.28 \quad p = 4.7\% \]
Neuroticism: \[ r = -0.29 \quad p = 3.9\% \]

Traits with NO significant relationship to Similarity of Beliefs
Agreeableness: \[ r = +0.15 \quad p = 32\% \]
Conscientiousness: \[ r = +0.19 \quad p = 18\% \]