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Cultural religiosity: A neglected but powerful dimension of culture[☆]

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Cultural religiosity has received little attention in psychology. This is an oversight, as cultural religiosity is an impactful cross-cultural dimension. We proceed to demonstrate that cultural religiosity shapes human psychology through three paths. First, cultural religiosity influences personal religiosity, which has many personal consequences. Second, cultural religiosity engenders personal consequences, independent of personal religiosity. Finally, cultural religiosity qualifies many of the effects of personal religiosity on personal consequences. The three paths are not unique to cultural religiosity; equivalent paths exist for virtually all cross-cultural dimensions. Yet, the three paths are particularly impactful in the domain of cultural religiosity.

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When psychologists think of cross-cultural dimensions, cultural religiosity does not spring to their minds immediately. We argue here that this is unfortunate, because cultural religiosity is an important cross-cultural dimension. In Section ‘Cultural religiosity’, we describe cultural religiosity. In Section ‘Three paths on how cultural religiosity shapes human psychology’, we delineate three paths on how cultural religiosity influences human psychology. In Section ‘Cultural religiosity is particularly powerful’, we document the power of those paths.

Cultural religiosity

Culture is situated at different geographic levels [1^{••}]. Cultural religiosity can be observed at the country level (people score higher on religiosity in Indonesia and lower in Sweden 2^{••}), at the state-level (people score higher on religiosity in the US state of Mississippi and lower in the state of Vermont 3), and at more granular geographic levels (e.g. regions — 4[•]; cities — 5[•]). Formally, then, cultural religiosity means the average religiosity of people within a given geographic unit. But what does it mean psychologically?

Cultural religiosity is a global construct. Like most global constructs at the person level, cultural religiosity is probably best conceptualized as hierarchical (*cf.* 6). At an abstract level, cultural religiosity reflects a global cultural norm to be religious. At a more concrete level, it reflects more specific norms shared by all world religions [7], including communion (i.e. altruism, forgiveness, warmth; 8[•]) and conservation (i.e. tradition, restraint, security; 9[•]). At an even more concrete level, cultural religiosity reflects very specific norms, including honoring poor people as much as rich people [10], refraining from feeling superior to others [8[•]], and disapproving of suicide [11^{••}]. The top half of Figure 1 displays the hierarchical structure of cultural religiosity.

Three paths on how cultural religiosity shapes human psychology

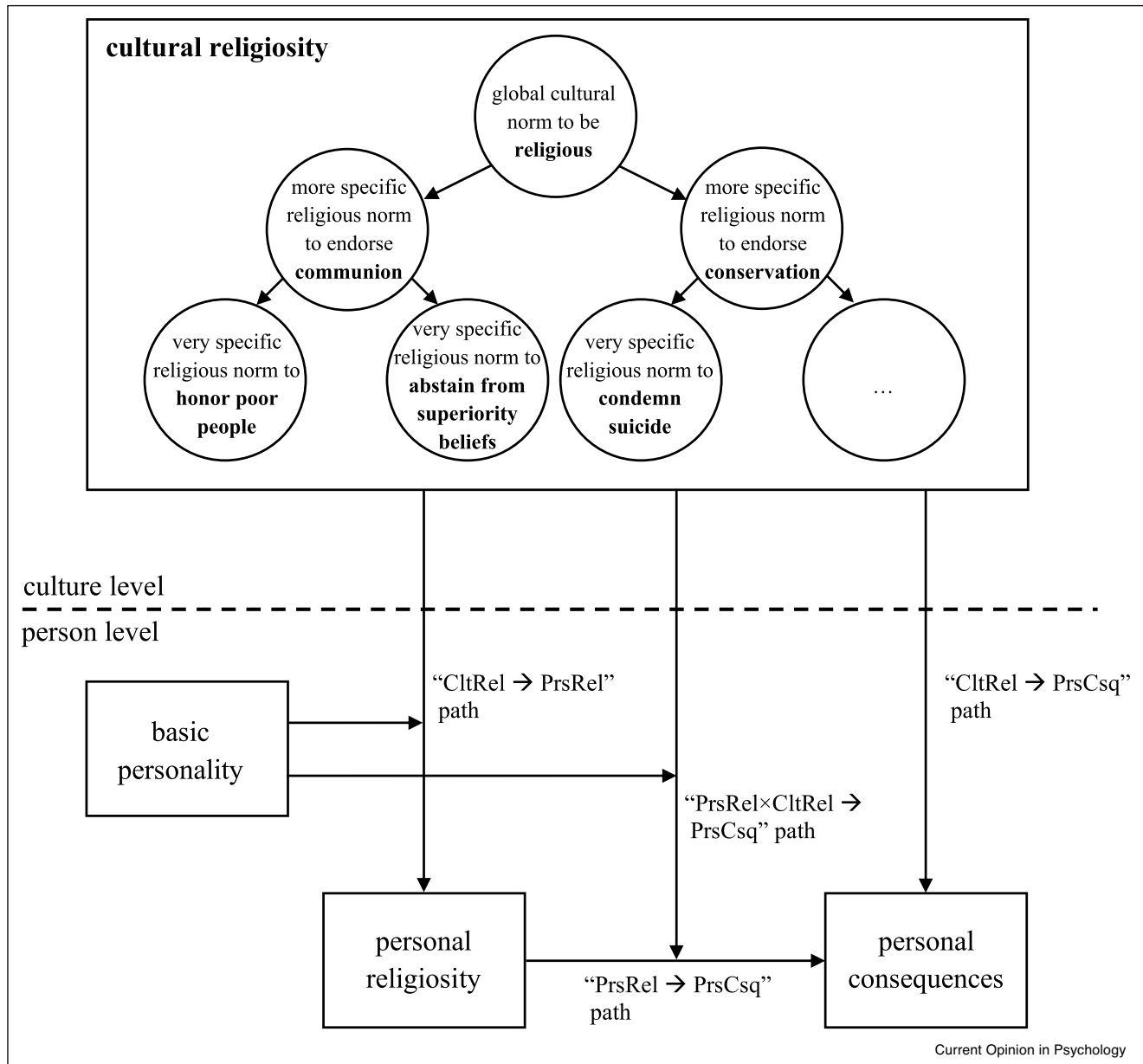
This section describes three paths on how cultural religiosity influences human psychology (Figure 1). The relevant empirical evidence has originated largely in sociology, illustrating the potential for synergy between psychology and sociology.

Path 1: Cultural religiosity shapes personal religiosity, which has personal consequences

People introject social norms, a behavioral law endorsed across social sciences (psychology: 12; sociology: 13; political science: 14). As an instance of this law, socialization in religious cultures makes people more religious [15^{••}]. The effect of cultural religiosity on personal religiosity is by itself an illustration of how cultural religiosity shapes human psychology (Figure 1’s path ‘ClRel → PrsRel’). Once shaped by cultural religiosity, personal religiosity has personal consequences (Figure 1’s path ‘PrsRel → PrsCsq’). Stated otherwise, cultural religiosity most

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Figure 1



Three paths that describe how cultural religiosity shapes human psychology.

Note. The figure only includes the paths focal to the present article, while omitting (for clarity reasons) other paths, such as the one from basic personality to personal religiosity.

likely exerts many of its effects indirectly through personal religiosity (e.g. psychological health — 16; self-control — 17; social trust — 18*).

Personal consequences can be not only single variables (as per the above three examples), but also intraindividual effects, like the effect of stress on substance use. Personal religiosity appears to attenuate that effect [19]. Likewise, personal religiosity appears to attenuate the effect of sensation seeking on substance use [20] and the effect

of income inequality on lower life satisfaction [21]. In these cases, cultural religiosity probably attenuates all those intraindividual effects indirectly through personal religiosity.

Basic personality moderates Figure 1’s path ‘CltRel → PrsRel → PrsCsq.’ Within the Big Two framework, high communion and low agency are linked to norm conformity [22]. Hence, the association between cultural and personal religiosity is strengthened by those Big Two

characteristics [23]. Within the Big Five framework, high agreeableness, high conscientiousness, and low openness are linked to norm conformity [24]. Hence, the association between cultural and personal religiosity is strengthened by those Big Five characteristics [24]. Finally, within the HEXACO framework, the association between cultural and personal religiosity is strengthened by high honesty-humility, high agreeableness, high conscientiousness, and low openness [25].

In summary, the evidence for the ‘ClRel → PrsRel’ path is plentiful and so is the evidence for the ‘PrsRel → PrsCsq’ path. Future research will need to provide direct evidence for indirect effects of cultural religiosity through personal religiosity on personal consequences.

Path 2: Cultural religiosity affects personal consequences, independent of personal religiosity

Cultural religiosity also has personal consequences independent of personal religiosity (Figure 1’s ‘ClRel → PrsCsq’ path). For example, cultural religiosity is linked to conservative views of morality [26], opposition to euthanasia [27], and disapproval of homosexuality [28]. It is also linked to lower personal acceptance of suicide [29]. Building on Durkheim’s [30] view, the sociological explanation for that independent effect of cultural religiosity is ‘that suicide is more strongly prohibited by churches than it is in other settings, and that the role of religious communities goes beyond that of protecting their own members’ (11^{••}; p. 802). More generally, religious norms pervade religious cultures and, thus, also impact their inhabitants independent of personal religiosity.

Cultural religiosity also has intrapersonal effects (independent of personal religiosity). Cultural religiosity appears to attenuate the intrapersonal effects of lower income on psychological maladjustment [10], financial hardship on lower life satisfaction [31], affective experiences on higher life satisfaction [32], and injustice on lower well-being [33].

In summary, the evidence for path 2 is considerable, but more research is needed. One should assess personal consequences at the person level, and control for personal religiosity [18[•]], thus assuring that the effect of cultural religiosity is not indirect through personal religiosity (i.e. the ‘ClRel → PrsRel → PrsCsq’ path) or spurious to personal religiosity. Future research should also examine whether basic personality moderates path 2.

Path 3: Cultural religiosity qualifies the effect of personal religiosity on personal consequences

Cultural religiosity can additionally shape human psychology by qualifying the effects of personal religiosity on personal consequences (Figure 1’s ‘PrsRel × ClRel → PrsCsq’ path). The ‘religiosity fit effect’ is a classic

example [34]. It stipulates that personal religiosity confers greater health benefits when cultural religiosity is high [35^{••}]. To illustrate, one study ($N = 1,188,536$) examined whether the association between personal religiosity and self-esteem is moderated by cultural religiosity at the country-level ($n = 28$), state-level ($n = 243$), and city-level ($n = 1932$) [35^{••}]. The results revealed that country-level, state-level, and city-level religiosity moderated the association between religiosity and self-esteem independent of each other. In effect, a rather strong association between personal religiosity and self-esteem was estimated in the most religious city of the most religious state of the most religious country, $\beta = .31$, 95% CI [.27, .36]. By contrast, no significant association was estimated in the least religious city of the least religious state of the least religious country, $\beta = -.02$, 95% CI [−.05, .01].

Basic personality moderates the ‘PrsRel × ClRel → PrsCsq’ path. Within the Big Two framework, low agency and high communion breed the desire for person-culture fit [23]. Consequently, the religiosity fit effect is particularly powerful for people high in communion and those low in agency [36[•]]. For similar reasons [24], the religiosity fit effect is particularly powerful for people high in agreeableness and neuroticism and those low in openness, extraversion, and conscientiousness [36[•]].

The religiosity fit effect is a specific instantiation of the ‘PrsRel × ClRel → PrsCsq’ path. Other instantiations follow. Personal religiosity predicts disapproval of suicide, most so when cultural religiosity is high [37]. Personal religiosity predicts a higher sense of control over one’s life, but only if cultural religiosity is high [38]. Personal religiosity predicts distrust in science, but less so if cultural religiosity is high [39]. Religious people are less likely to hold a university degree, but less so if cultural religiosity is high [40]. Finally, personal religiosity predicts self-enhancement in self-central domains (e.g. communion), but that effect is *not* attenuated in religious cultures [8[•]]; in fact, religious people self-enhance more in religious cultures [8[•],41]. Those latter results indicate limits to the effectiveness of religious cultural norms (here: anti-superiority beliefs; Figure 1): Cultural religiosity is apparently not powerful enough to curb basic psychological needs (self-enhancement; 42). Notably, though, the evidence is restricted to a few Western cultures [8[•],41]. Cross-cultural studies on religiosity and self-enhancement are in high demand.

Cultural religiosity is particularly powerful

Cultural norms influence individuals (Section ‘Path 1: Cultural religiosity shapes personal religiosity, which has personal consequences’), but the strength of such effects is different for different cultural norms. The effect of cultural religiosity on personal religiosity is particularly strong [15^{••}], accounting for about 35% of the variance in personal religiosity — a convergent finding in sociology

[43**] and psychology [44]. By contrast, the ‘who-is-who’ of cross-cultural dimensions account for much less variance in their person-level equivalents: collectivism (10%), social values (8%), cultural tightness (7%), basic personality (7%). Indeed, from the 19 cross-cultural dimensions studied, cultural religiosity emerged as the single most powerful one by clear margin (cultural religiosity: 34%, average of other cross-cultural dimensions: 12%; 44). But why so?

The answer, according to sociology, is the *sociality* of religion, ‘a predominantly social phenomenon, in which people are socialized, controlled, and possibly sanctioned by their parents, family, neighbors, religious community, schoolteachers, and other socializing agents’ (45**, p. 870). From a psychological perspective, sociality matters for an additional reason. Norms related to social phenomena are publically particularly visible and can, thus, be perceived more readily and more accurately. Accurate perception of cultural norms is a precondition to conformity [46].

This answer, however, is incomplete, given that many other cross-cultural dimensions concern social phenomena, too. We supplement it by capitalizing on a more unique feature of religion, the *ambivalence* that accompanies contemporary religious belief. When people are ambivalent towards an issue, they pay more attention to relevant social norms and conform to them [12]. Ambivalence pertinent to religion takes the following form. On the one hand, religious belief is tempting, because it satisfies many psychological desires [47]. For instance, most Christian believers feel a close personal connection with an omnipresent, almighty, and perfectly benevolent God [48]. That personal relationship feels like a safe haven [49] and allows Christians to bask in God’s reflected glory, providing a boost to self-esteem [42]. On the other hand, people desire to stay in touch with reality [50]. That desire may conflict with religiosity, which can be considered irrational [51] or even delusional [52]; in fact, psychiatrists often face the difficult decision to judge whether a person’s beliefs reflect religiosity or schizophrenia [53]. Taken together, people will be ambivalent towards religion, because they will experience an inherent conflict between what Freud called the pleasure principle (a religious craving) and the reality principle (an obligation to reject irrational beliefs). Ambivalence, in turn, will encourage conformity to the religious cultural norm.

The strong effect of cultural religiosity on personal religiosity is relevant not only for the ‘ClRel → PrsRel’ path, but also for the other two paths. More precisely, two conclusions follow from the strong effect of cultural religiosity on personal religiosity. First, cultures are relatively homogenous in their endorsement of religiosity, and that homogeneity renders it difficult for religious deviants to diverge from ambient religious norms (*cf.* 54). Second, cultures vary widely in their religiosity

(compared to variance within cultures), and large variance is a statistical precondition for finding strong effects.

There is another reason, pertaining to all paths, why cultural religiosity is so powerful. Religious norms are sacred for believers [55]. Therefore, believers consider religious norms non-negotiable [56]. Consequently, believers may well be insistent that others adhere to those norms, even when those others are not religious themselves. Believers may also feel perturbed, if others violate religious — and, thus, sacred — norms. In an effort to spare believers’ feelings and for the sake of interpersonal relationships, non-religious people in religious countries may also adhere to religious norms.

Conclusion

When psychologists think of cross-cultural dimensions, cultural religiosity does not immediately spring to mind. We sought to make a case that it should, though. We outlined three paths on how cultural religiosity shapes human psychology, and reviewed evidence documenting their effectiveness. The synergy of psychology and sociology promises to sketch out new and exciting research directions.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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