

Study examines accountability to God, psychological well-being

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WACO—Religious believers who embrace accountability to God experience greater psychological well-being in several areas, according to a study from researchers with Baylor University, Westmont College and Hope College.

Specifically, the study shows they experience higher levels of mattering to others, dignity and meaning in life, but not necessarily happiness.

The study also found that this relationship is stronger among those who pray more often, suggesting accountability coupled with communication may be a powerful combination for well-being.

The study, “Perceptions of Accountability to God and Psychological Well-Being Among U.S. Adults,” appears in the *Journal of Religion and Health*. It relies on data from the 2017 Baylor Religion Survey, a national survey of American religious beliefs, values and behaviors.

“A good deal of research examines how aspects of religious life such as church attendance, prayer and meditation are associated with psychological well-being, but no one has examined how feelings of accountability to God might play a role,” said lead author Matt Bradshaw, research professor of sociology at Baylor University’s Institute for Studies of Religion.

Focus on ‘theistic accountability’

The study focuses on what the authors call theistic accountability. In this view, embracing accountability to God in a virtuous manner is distinct from

mere conformity to the social norms of one's religious group, the researchers wrote.

Rather, people who welcome accountability to God seek to discern God's will with wisdom in order to prosper and better understand their purpose in life.

"People who embrace theistic accountability see themselves as answerable to God," said co-author Blake Victor Kent, assistant professor of sociology at Westmont College. "They welcome responsibilities that are associated with their faith and view accountability to God as a gift that helps them lead happy and successful lives.

"Accountability has been examined philosophically as a virtue relevant to the spiritual life, but until now, no one had quantified it."

The researchers used two items from the survey to assess accountability to God:

- "I decide what to do without relying on God."
- "I depend on God for help and guidance."

"Why should we expect perceptions of accountability to God to be associated with well-being?" Bradshaw said. "It's because humans are social creatures, and our psychological health is bound up in positive and constructive relationships, not only with other people, but also with God."

New approach

The study adds a new approach to a larger body of research in religion and health that has been building for several decades.

"So much of the research examines religious attendance," Kent said. "And we certainly looked at that. But after confirming that church attendance

was associated with our outcomes, we found that accountability to God helps explain a lot more of what is going on in that connection between religion and well-being.”

For example, the researchers noted that the results for happiness were significant when they excluded other religious items from the analysis. This suggests accountability matters but it is also related to other facets of religious life such as the social aspects of attendance, which could matter more for happiness as part of a person’s psychological well-being.

“Further, it may be that happiness varies more on a daily basis compared with the other outcomes and may therefore be more strongly correlated with social and psychological factors that change quickly from day to day compared with relatively stable characteristics like accountability to God,” the researchers wrote.

More work to do

The researchers plan to produce more work using the accountability to God framework, including the development of better ways to assess accountability, possibly providing a new avenue for understanding how religion and well-being can work hand in hand.

“Religious systems can impose external pressures on individuals to behave in particular ways,” said co-author Byron Johnson, distinguished professor of the social sciences and ISR director. “But they also operate through individual yearnings, moral frames and religious impulses.”

In other words, accountability in the religious realm may help people internalize and act upon their moral obligations under the loving hand of God to good effect, Johnson said.

In addition to Bradshaw, Kent and Johnson, study authors included

Charlotte vanOyen Witvliet of Hope College, along with Sung Joon Jang and Joseph Leman with ISR. The research was made possible through the support of a grant from the Templeton Religion Trust.