



When God's (not) needed: Spotlight on how belief in divine control influences goal commitment☆



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HIGHLIGHTS

- People defensively mobilized their religiosity under control threat to pursue goals.
- Belief in divine control increased goal commitment when self-efficacy was low.
- This facilitating effect occurred as external agency strengthens contingency beliefs.

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ABSTRACT

People regularly set goals, but often fail to remain committed to them. In particular, people's commitment to their goals flags when their self-efficacy is low—when they doubt their ability to bring about their desired outcomes through their actions. We propose that when people feel low self-efficacy, reminders of external forces that ensure contingency in the world can help them restore their goal commitment. Moreover, we propose that one such external force is a powerful, interventionist God, and thus that reminders of a powerful God can help restore people's goal commitment when they feel low self-efficacy. In Study 1, we manipulated self-efficacy and measured religiosity. More religious people were more committed to their goals—a facilitating effect—but *only* when we had first made them feel low self-efficacy. In Study 2, we manipulated both self-efficacy and the salience of religious belief in a controlling vs. creating God. When we reminded participants of their beliefs in a controlling God, we again observed a facilitating effect when we also made them feel low in self-efficacy. Their beliefs in a creating God, in contrast, had no effect. In Study 3, we used a different experimental paradigm, and found additional support for the facilitating effect at low self-efficacy while providing evidence of mechanism.

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1. Introduction

People do not always pursue the goals they claim to hold. Dieters make New Year's resolutions they fail to keep, young professionals open retirement savings accounts that they fail to contribute to, and students set goals for their academic courses that they fail to live up to with their studying behavior. Of course, there are all sorts of reasons why people's commitment flags, even toward goals they sincerely value, but one such factor is self-efficacy, or their belief in their capacity to produce given attainments (Bandura, 2006). Here, we propose that one way of helping people low in self-efficacy stay committed to their

goals is to reinforce their belief in the contingency between actions and outcomes, and more specifically to remind them of a powerful supernatural agent—God—who enforces that contingency.

2. Low self-efficacy, belief in contingencies, and goal pursuit

People's commitment to a valued goal, or their determination to pursue it in spite of obstacles, is strong when they feel they can achieve it—that is, when they feel that attaining the desired outcome is feasible (Kruglanski et al., 2002). When individuals sense that they are able to reach their goal through behaviors they can perform—i.e., when they feel high in self-efficacy—they are generally committed, and willing to take goal-directed actions.

In contrast, when self-efficacy is low, people are unlikely to be committed even to goals they value highly (Bandura, 1989, 2006). Part of what it means to feel low self-efficacy is to doubt that one's outcomes are within reach. In such a state, people's goal commitment may benefit

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from being reassured that the world is orderly and structured, and a place where causes reliably generate effects. In other words, people low in self-efficacy may be better able to maintain their commitment to valued goals when they are reassured of contingencies in the world. Contingencies provide the sense that there is a predictable method, a path forward toward goals, and thereby bolster people's goal commitment (Kay, Laurin, Fitzsimons, & Landau, 2014; Locke & Latham, 2002; Mitchell, 1974).

We propose here that individuals high in self-efficacy do not need external reminders of contingencies to be committed to their goals: their self-efficacy could not even exist if they did not have faith in contingencies (Landau, Kay, & Whitson, 2015), and therefore should be highly committed already. In contrast, contingencies should be especially useful in bolstering the commitment of individuals low in self-efficacy, who, without contingencies, doubt that pursuing goals would be worth their effort. Supporting this idea, when people experience a failure (i.e., when they experience a threat to their success), those who believe their outcomes are contingent on their actions and environments are more likely to remain committed, compared to those who see no such contingency (Plaks, Grant, & Dweck, 2005).

3. God's role in validating contingencies

So, what kinds of beliefs might reinforce people's sense of contingency, and restore their commitment when they feel low self-efficacy? Research has identified a variety of socio-cognitive strategies that may fit the bill: endorsing secular and religious systems (Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; Laurin, Kay, & Moscovitch, 2008), turning to scientific progress (Meijers & Rutjens, 2014) and social ingroups (Fritsche et al., 2013), seeking structure in hierarchical organizations (Friesen, Kay, Eibach, & Galinsky, 2014), or finding patterns in random noise (Whitson & Galinsky, 2008). All these strategies help reassure people that the world is orderly and structured and guided by contingencies.

Here, though, we focus on one particular source of contingencies: the belief in powerful, interventionist God. Of course, religions and their accompanying beliefs in powerful Gods serve many intrapersonal psychological needs, reducing feelings of self-uncertainty (Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010), providing a sense of meaning and helping people cope with tragic events (Pargament, 2013), and giving people the sense that they are good and valuable members of society (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2010). Most relevant to our purposes, though, powerful supernatural agents reassure people that the world generally follows a systematic order (Inzlicht, McGregor, Hirsh, & Nash, 2009; Kay et al., 2008; Laurin et al., 2008). Consequently, we predict that the idea of a powerful, interventionist God would help restore goal commitment among individuals low in self-efficacy.

This prediction runs counter to prior research that has demonstrated that powerful Gods can instead undermine goal pursuit (Laurin Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2012). This research, however studies the effect of religious thinking on goal pursuit in neutral environments—that is, in the absence of threats to self-efficacy. However, we focus specifically on individuals who are doubting their ability to control their outcomes, which can threaten their faith in contingencies in the world (Kay et al., 2008). The literature on religious coping has long argued that, in situations of distress, religion could help individuals regain a sense of control (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Pargament et al., 1988, 1990). This research notes that when people encounter difficulty (in our context, when they experience low self-efficacy), they look to God for strength to carry on (Pargament et al., 1988, 1990). When people's lives are going smoothly (in our context, when they experience high self-efficacy), they may instead be tempted to passively defer responsibility to God, which may explain the undermining effect found in past research. In short, we propose that in the context of low self-efficacy specifically, thinking of a powerful God who “has things under control” should be

reassuring, and thus restore people's commitment to important personal goals.

4. Overview

Three studies explore these predictions in the context of retirement savings (Studies 1 and 2) and environmental responsibility (Study 3). Study 1 examines how dispositional religiosity influences the causal relationship between low self-efficacy and goal commitment. Study 2 specifically isolates people's belief in divine control, and provides evidence of its causal role. Study 3 replicates the results of Study 2 using a different type of priming, and explores potential alternative explanations for effect.

4.1. Study 1

Study 1 tested our hypotheses by observing how religiosity relates to goal commitment when people are made to feel low (vs. high) self-efficacy. We expected that religiosity reflects at least to some (imperfect) degree people's belief in a powerful, intervening God, and that therefore when we induced low self-efficacy, we would see a stronger positive relationship between religiosity and goal commitment. For this first (exploratory) study, we chose a measure of religiosity that would tap into people's general disposition toward religion, and then narrowed down the cause of our effect in subsequent studies.

4.1.1. Method

4.1.1.1. Participants. Participants ($N = 164$) completed a study online using Toluna, an online pool where participants complete surveys in exchange for points they later redeem for money. We determined sample size by allocating fifty participants per experimental condition (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2013) intentionally over-sampling by 50% given the continuous moderator. We used this calculus in all studies (based on a rule of thumb designed to balance power and collection costs). See Table 1 for demographic information for all studies.

4.1.1.2. Procedure. Participants first reported their level of religiosity, embedded among filler questions. Next, they completed a self-efficacy manipulation, and lastly a measure of goal commitment.

4.1.1.2.1. Religiosity. Participants completed the Religious Commitment Inventory-10 (Worthington et al., 2003). This 10-item scale measures participants' religious values, beliefs, and practices in daily life (e.g., “Religious beliefs influence all my dealings in life”, “I often read books and magazines about my faith”; 5-point scale: 1 = not at all true of me; 5 = totally true of me; $\alpha = 0.96$). These items do not pertain directly to beliefs in divine control, nevertheless beliefs in divine control are typically highly correlated with religiosity (e.g., Laurin, Shariff, Henrich & Kay, 2012).

Table 1
Demographics (Studies 1 to 3).

	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Sample size	164	250	317
Residence	United States	United States	United States
Gender	70.1% female	40.8% female	78.9% female
Age	34 (range: 18–54)	29 (range: 18–65)	34 (range: 18–54)
Religious affiliation			
Christian	50.6%	29.6%	58.0%
Non-denominational	32.9%	33.2%	30.6%
Atheist	7.9%	28.0%	4.4%
Buddhist	0.6%	1.6%	1.3%
Hindu	1.2%	0.4%	0.6%
Jewish	3.7%	2.8%	1.6%
Muslim	1.2%	1.2%	0.6%
Other	1.8%	3.2%	2.8%

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