



Individual differences in childhood religious experiences with peers



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ABSTRACT

Childhood religious experiences with peers are important in the development of religiosity. However, peers' influence on these experiences has not been properly operationalized and measured. We addressed this limitation by developing the Childhood Religious Experiences with a Peer Inventory (CREPI). In Study 1 ($n = 254$), an act nomination procedure generated 106 items describing childhood religious experiences with a same-sex peer. These experiences were specific things that the peer said to, did to, or did with a participant during their childhood. In Study 2 ($n = 458$), participants indicated how frequently each item occurred in their childhood. Factor analysis yielded 27 items organized into three factors: *Peer Proselytization*, *Shared Activities*, and *Peer Dialogue*. The CREPI allows researchers to quantify peer influence on childhood religious experiences, enabling future investigation of whether and how these influences predict adult religiosity.

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Peers influence individuals' acquisition of cultural information, social norms, and values, which affect individuals' later views (Harris, 1995; Reitz, Zimmermann, Hutteman, Specht, & Neyer, 2014). Peers influence individuals throughout childhood, adolescence, and into early adulthood, because they often share similar social environments and socially-relevant characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity, abilities, and interests (Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Madsen & Vernon, 1983). Peers influence important psychological characteristics and behaviors, such as drinking habits (Borsari & Carey, 2001), sexual behaviors (Whitaker & Miller, 2000), and body image and self-esteem during adolescence (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006). Further, language fluency and expressiveness of peers affects language development in early childhood (Mashburn, Justice, Downer, & Pianta, 2009).

In particular, childhood and adolescence (i.e., ages 5–18 years; Moran, 1991) are important developmental periods for the acquisition of religious beliefs, because individuals in these phases are more sensitive to peer influence and pressure to conform than adults (Berndt, 1979; Erickson, 1992; O'Hara, 1980). Religious peers in these developmental periods often actively encourage church attendance (Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004), and religious peer networks in childhood predict church commitment as an adult (Thomas & Cornwall, 1990). An individual's commitment to a religious community as an adult (e.g., being committed to a church) has the strongest direct effect on their level of religiosity, while community relationships and religious socialization (e.g., having friends who attend church) influence adult religiosity *indirectly* (Cornwall, 1989).

That peers influence religious beliefs has been well documented (e.g., Cornwall, 1988; Desrosiers, Kelley, & Miller, 2011; Erickson, 1992; French, Purwono, & Triwahyuni, 2011; Ozorak, 1989; Regnerus et al., 2004; Schwartz, 2006). However, the *specific ways* in which peers exert pressure on individuals to adopt religious beliefs is unknown. Several studies have investigated the role of peers in the acquisition of religious beliefs, above and beyond the influence of home environments and parents. For example, the influence and support of peers (compared with parents) accounts for more variance in adult religious faith and spiritual development (Desrosiers et al., 2011; Schwartz, 2006), and having religious peers is a strong predictor of one's own religiosity (French et al., 2011). Participation in religious services and activities are strongly predicted by peers' church attendance (Martin, White, & Perlman, 2003; Ozorak, 1989; Regnerus et al., 2004) and peers' religiosity (Cornwall, 1988). The influence of peers on participation in religious activities increases from early to late adolescence (Madsen & Vernon, 1983; O'Hara, 1980). Similar findings of peer influence on the acquisition of religious beliefs have been documented cross-culturally and in Christian, Mormon, and Muslim samples (Cornwall, 1988; French et al., 2011; O'Hara, 1980; Schwartz, 2006). These findings suggest that peers influence the development and long-term acquisition of religious beliefs during childhood and adolescence.

Previous investigations of peers' religious influence during childhood have been limited theoretically and empirically. The construct of peers' influence on childhood religious experiences has not been properly operationalized and measured, and the specific ways that peers exert their influence has not been specified. Studies often do not assess *how* peers influence an individual, but instead associate indirect

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measures of peer influence (e.g., number of religious friends; French et al., 2011; Gunnoe & Moore, 2002) with individuals' later behaviors (e.g., "During the past 7 days did you miss the five daily prayers?"; French et al., 2011). Attempts to assess peer influence on the acquisition of religious beliefs often include single-item, general, or unidimensional measures such as: "How comfortable do you feel discussing religion and spirituality with your friends?" (Desrosiers et al., 2011); "How frequently do you partake in these discussions?" (Desrosiers et al., 2011); "When you were about 16, how many of your friends regularly went to church or religious services?" (Gunnoe & Moore, 2002). Additionally, studies often use different measures to quantify peer influences, which hinders scientific advancement when studies are compared or meta-analyzed (e.g., Gunnoe & Moore, 2002; Kristensen, Pedersen, & Williams, 2001; Maton, 1989; Schwartz, 2006). The psychometric parameters of many measures have not been explored (e.g., French et al., 2011) and, therefore, are of unknown reliability or validity (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Additionally, these measures do not assess the specific, quantifiable, childhood religious experiences that are influenced by peers—that is, the *specific ways* that peers influence childhood religious experiences.

To address these issues, we developed a quantitative measure for childhood religious experiences, the Childhood Religious Experiences with a Peer Inventory (CREPI). This measure has theoretical and applied value for the study of religiosity. For example, it allows researchers to test hypotheses about the development and transmission of religiosity via peer influence, to identify the specific ways peers exert their influence, and to identify the types of peer influence that impact adulthood religiosity. In Study 1, we use an act nomination procedure (Buss & Craik, 1983) to identify a wide range of items. In Study 2, we secure evidence of the reliability and validity of the CREPI. Both studies followed procedures used to develop a related measure, the Childhood Religious Experiences with a Primary Caregiver Inventory (Tratner et al., 2017).

Methods

Study 1: Act Nomination.

Participants and Procedure.

We recruited 254 undergraduates from the human subjects pool at a US Midwestern university for an online survey. Prospective participants were provided a link to a consent form, and those who electronically signed the consent form, and indicated that they were at least 18 years old, could access the survey. Participants took part in this study to meet research participation requirements in introductory psychology and research methods courses.

Using an act nomination procedure (Buss & Craik, 1983), we asked participants to list 10–15 specific things a same-sex, similar-age peer did with, did to, and/or said to them during their lives (i.e., childhood through the present) that may have affected their religious beliefs and practices today (e.g., "My friend encouraged me to go to church every Sunday"; "My friend and I prayed before meals"; "My friend criticized me for breaking a biblical rule"). Because individuals model the behaviors of peers who are more similar to themselves (Bandura, 1986), we used a same-sex and similar-age peer as a reference for peer influence.

Results

We collected 3271 responses. Following Buss (1988), a team of four research assistants (two females) consolidated the responses by inspecting them and removing vague, redundant, or irrelevant acts. This process resulted in 106 items that we used in Study 2 as a preliminary list of items for the CREPI.

Study 2: Psychometric Assessment.

Participants

Participants were 458 individuals, 18 to 50 years old (90.4%; $M = 32.4$; $SD = 7.2$), half female (50.2%), mostly Christian (43.8%),

heterosexual (83.8%), and Caucasian (74.7%). Participants selected a same-sex friend about which to respond (see Materials). The majority of selected friends were Christian (68.4%), Caucasian (72.9%), and of similar age to the participant (62.8% were the same age). The friendships began, on average, when the participants were 9.3 years old ($SD = 3.5$).

Materials

Participants completed an online survey composed of two parts: The preliminary version of the CREPI (106 items) and demographic questions. Participants were asked to identify a person from their childhood whom they considered their best (or closest) friend while they were growing up. "Childhood" was defined as the period when participants were <18 years old. We instructed participants to select a friend that was 1) the same sex as them, 2) raised in a different household than them, and 3) <10 years older or younger than them (and who might therefore serve as an appropriate social model; Bandura, 1986). We instructed participants to indicate the frequency with which they experienced each of the 106 items, on a 7-point Likert scale (0 = *Never*, 6 = *Always*). The online survey automatically inserted the friend's name and gender pronouns based on the participant's initial response. Sample items include: "[Friend's name] told me I should use a religious text as a guide for life", "[Friend's name] pointed out contradictions within my religion", and "[Friend's name] and I volunteered for a religious organization". Participants provided demographic information about themselves and their friend (e.g., age, sex, religious affiliation), their friend's first name, and the age at which they became friends.

Procedure.

Prospective participants viewed an advertisement for the study on MTurk's job listings. We implemented MTurk filters recommended by Peer, Vosgerau, and Acquisti (2013): MTurk participants could access and participate in this study if they had successfully completed at least 95% of at least 500 accessed MTurk jobs. Participants were compensated US\$3.50 upon completion.

Results

An analysis of histograms and error bars indicated 73 items (of 106) with considerably low variance (i.e., >70% of participants scored "0"). Examples of such items are "[Friend's name] told me I should not believe in God" and "[Friend's name] told me he hated religion." The low variance for these items suggests that they are not frequent enough to justify inclusion in a measure of peer influence on childhood religious experiences. For parsimony, we excluded these items from further analyses. We evaluated the discriminative power of the remaining 33 items, considering the median total score as the dividing point. We calculated the total score across items for each participant, then divided these scores into two criterion groups (i.e., those above and those below the median; $Mdn = 0.92$). We entered the items into a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) to evaluate differences in mean scores (dependent variables) between the criterion groups. We rejected the null hypothesis [i.e., no difference in mean scores of the items for the criterion groups; $Wilks' \Lambda = 0.27$, $F(33, 421) = 34.80$, $p < 0.001$]. Univariate tests indicated that all items discriminated between individuals who scored high and those who scored low on the overall scale (all $ps \leq 0.001$).

We performed a factor analysis after ensuring the suitability of the data [Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test, 0.93; Bartlett's sphericity test, $\chi^2(528) = 11,193.66$, $p < 0.001$]. The Kaiser criterion (eigenvalue ≥ 1), scree plot (Cattell criterion, see Fig. 1), and a parallel analysis (Horn criterion) indicated retention of 5, 3, and 3 factors, respectively.

Because the Horn criterion is the most rigorous of the three criteria (Garrido, Abad, & Ponsoda, 2013), and because two of the three criteria (Cattell's and Horn's criteria) suggested a three-factor structure, we performed another factor analysis, setting the number of factors to three,

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