



# God Primes Increase Interpersonal Regrets

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## Introduction

Recent research has demonstrated the effects of religious priming on cognition and behavior in the present. For example, priming participants with religious concepts promotes cooperation in economic games (Shariff & Norenzayan, 2007), increases public self-awareness (Gervais & Norenzayan, 2012), and activates submissive thoughts and behavior (Saroglou, Corneille, & Cappellen, 2009).

Theories used to explain these effects typically focus on religion's role in regulating social behavior and building and binding together cooperative communities (e.g., Graham & Haidt, 2010; McCullough & Willoughby, 2010; Shariff, et al., 2009).

We sought to understand whether religious priming might also influence reflections on past behavior through these same mechanisms.

Regret helps regulate behavior by making decision-making processes more careful (Reb, 2008) and behavior less risky (Richard, van der Pligt, & de Vries, 1996). Likewise, recalling regrets can promote improved behavior in the same domain (Morrison, 2012).

We hypothesized that participants primed with religious concepts would be more vigilant about behaviors in the social domain and would therefore recall more interpersonal regrets relative to those who were not primed with religion.

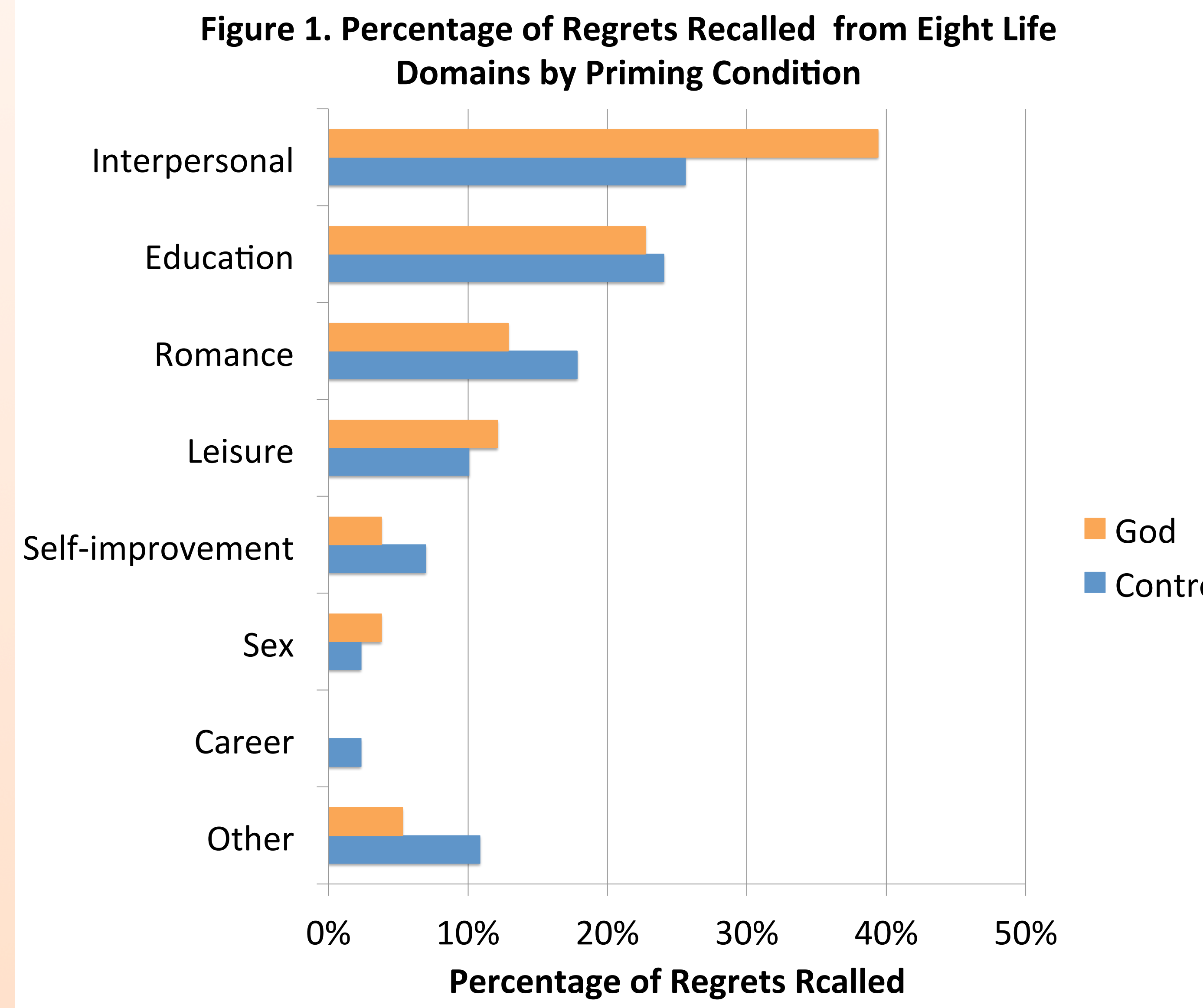
## Method

Eighty-seven undergraduates completed a study for partial course credit.

Participants first completed a "handwriting analysis task" in which they were asked to copy five sentences and to write a brief essay. For half of participants (God condition), two of the five sentences contained a God theme, and the essay prompt asked them to answer the question "What does God know?" For the other half of participants (Control condition), the sentences contained no discernable theme, and the essay prompt asked them to answer the question, "What does your favorite professor know?"

Participants were then told that they would be asked to recall three regrets. They completed a "cognitive focusing task," which they were told would help them block out distractions and focus on their pasts. Participants were instructed to focus on the center of the screen and press a key when one of three target words, "FOCUS," "LEFT," or "RIGHT," appeared. This task was actually 30 trials of a subliminal priming procedure. Each trial consisted of a focal point (+; 2000 ms), followed by a pre-mask (#####; 5 ms), prime word (GOD or SOP; 15 ms), and target word (FOCUS, LEFT, RIGHT). After 10, 20, and 30 trials, participants were asked to recall a different regret, which they would record later.

After all of the trials completed, participants were instructed to write down the regrets they had recalled during the cognitive focusing task.



## Results

Three research assistants, blinded to hypothesis and condition, coded the regrets. Regrets were coded according to the life domain most impacted by the regretted behavior. Coders showed good reliability ( $K = .65$ ). The life domain categories used were:

### Regret Domains

**Interpersonal** – Affects relationships with friends and family

**Education** – Relates to educational attainment, grades, etc.

**Romance** – Affects romantic relationships

**Leisure** – Affects leisure activities, such as hobbies

**Self-improvement** – Deals with personal qualities, self-control, etc.

**Sex** – Relates to sexual behavior (excepting sexual health)

**Career** – Relates to work, job opportunities, or career

**Other** – Does not fit other domains

The number of regrets recalled within each domain was summed for each participant. T-tests by condition on the number of regrets recalled for each domain revealed a significant difference only for the interpersonal domain ( $t(85) = 2.13, p = .04$ ). Participants in the God condition ( $M = 1.18, SD = 1.04$ ) reported more interpersonal regrets than in the Control condition ( $M = .77, SD = .75$ ).

## Discussion

Participants in the God condition recalled more regrets with interpersonal consequences than did participants in the Control condition. That no differences were found in the other domains suggests that this finding is not an artifact of an effect on other types of regrets; rather, the increase in interpersonal regrets was offset by minor reductions spread across the other domains.

These results support the conclusion that religious primes activate interpersonal concerns and that these concerns apply not only to present behavior but also to the recall of past behavior.

Given regret's role in regulating behavior (Morrison, 2012; Richard, van der Pligt, & de Vries, 1996) and decision-making (Reb, 2008), we believe that our results support existing theories that claim religion promotes pro-social behavior by increasing interpersonal closeness with group members and the regulation of social behavior.

## References

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