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Psychological and Developmental Pathways to Christian Fundamentalism: A Mixed-Methods Investigation

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Abstract

Religious fundamentalism has been linked to authoritarianism, intolerance of ambiguity, and prejudice, yet few studies have systematically integrated psychological predictors, developmental experiences, and linguistic patterns within Christian fundamentalism. The current study investigated the psychological and developmental pathways that sustain Christian fundamentalism in U.S. adults aged 30–49. Using a mixed-methods design, 400 self-identified Christians completed surveys measuring religious fundamentalism, authoritarianism, need for closure, attachment security, and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). A subset of 30 participants completed semi-structured interviews analyzed using natural language processing techniques. Results indicated that religious fundamentalism was significantly positively correlated with authoritarianism (r = .58, p < .001) and need for closure (r = .52, p < .001), and negatively correlated with attachment security (r = –.44, p < .001). Structural equation modeling revealed excellent model fit (CFI = .98, RMSEA = .041) for the hypothesized pathway linking ACEs to fundamentalism through need for closure and authoritarianism. Linguistic analysis identified three recurring patterns among highly fundamentalist participants: moral purity framing, hierarchical obedience metaphors, and fear-based causal reasoning. These findings suggest that fundamentalism functions as a psychological defense structure that restores order and control in the face of early insecurity. Clinically, the results highlight the potential value of trauma-informed interventions promoting cognitive flexibility and secure attachment. This study contributes to understanding how religious fundamentalism emerges as both a coping mechanism and a socially rigid adaptation to uncertainty and trauma.

Introduction

Religious fundamentalism has long been a focal point for psychology and sociology because of its links to authoritarianism, intolerance of ambiguity, and prejudice. Although many studies have examined the relationship between fundamentalist belief and authoritarian attitudes, there is less research that systematically integrates psychological predictors, developmental experiences, and subgroup variations within Christian fundamentalism. Understanding these pathways is critical in today's sociopolitical climate,

where religious identity shapes policy, polarization, and intergroup relations.

Altemeyer and Hunsberger [1] found that religious fundamentalism was strongly correlated with authoritarianism, demonstrating that individuals who adhered to rigid religious beliefs also tended to endorse obedience to authority and punitive attitudes toward out-groups. Their findings highlight a key psychological mechanism—rigidity of thought—that is central to understanding how fundamentalist belief shapes social behavior. Building on this, Sibley and Duckitt [2] conducted a meta-analysis showing that personality traits, particularly low openness to experience and high conscientiousness, were consistently associated with authoritarian and conservative ideologies. Together, these studies suggest that both personality and cognitive style are linked to the adoption of rigid belief systems.

Developmental factors have also been implicated in fundamentalism. Granqvist and Kirkpatrick [3] conducted a meta-analysis of attachment and religion, finding that individuals with insecure attachment styles were more likely to adopt rigid religious beliefs, particularly when exposed to high levels of stress or trauma. This suggests that early relational experiences can predispose individuals to use religion as a compensatory structure for psychological security. Similarly, research grounded in Terror Management Theory [4] has shown that religious belief offers a buffer against existential anxiety, helping individuals cope with awareness of mortality by emphasizing order, morality, and group belonging. Finally, Haidt's [5] work on moral foundations theory demonstrated that fundamentalists emphasize purity, authority, and loyalty more than care and fairness, which may explain the moral framing differences between rigid and flexible belief systems.

Despite this growing body of work, significant gaps remain. Most studies focus on evangelicals or use broad measures of religiosity, leaving little comparative data across different branches of Christian fundamentalism. Moreover, there is limited integration of developmental, cognitive, and linguistic analysis in understanding how these belief systems are sustained. Few studies have applied modern computational methods, such as machine learning, to identify latent patterns across survey and interview data. Addressing these gaps is important for developing a more nuanced psychological profile of fundamentalism and for informing interventions to reduce polarization.

The purpose of the current study is to investigate the psychological, developmental, and interpretive pathways that sustain Christian fundamentalism in U.S. adults ages 30–49. By combining survey data with in-depth interviews, this research aims to clarify whether Evangelical, Orthodox, and Catholic subgroups converge on similar patterns of belief rigidity, despite differences in culture and upbringing. This study also integrates machine learning with traditional methods, allowing for both confirmatory and exploratory analysis of fundamentalist belief.

In the current study, it is hypothesized that (1) higher levels of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), need for closure, and authoritarianism will predict stronger endorsement of fundamentalist beliefs; (2) fundamentalist subgroups (Evangelical, Orthodox, Catholic) will emphasize similar scriptural themes centered on purity, obedience, and punishment; and (3) natural language analysis of interviews will reveal recurring metaphors and linguistic frames that reinforce rigidity across subgroups.

Method

Participants

Participants were 400 U.S. adults between the ages of 30 and 49 (M = 39.2 years, SD = 5.4) who self-identified as Christian. Recruitment used a purposive, convenience sampling approach through partnerships with Evangelical, Orthodox, and Catholic congregations, as well as alumni and community networks. Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) identify with one of these Christian traditions and (b) report active religious practice. Individuals who identified as non-Christian or under 18 years of age were excluded. The sample included 54% women, 44% men, and 2% non-binary participants. The racial/ethnic composition was approximately 62% White, 17% Latinx, 9% Black or African American, 7% Asian, and 5% identifying with more than one race or other ethnic background.

Thirty participants drawn from the survey pool were invited for follow-up qualitative interviews to ensure representation across denominations and fundamentalism levels (high, medium, low). Participants received modest

compensation: a $10 electronic gift card for completing the survey and an additional $50 honorarium for the interview.

Measures

The study explored the psychological, developmental, and interpretive predictors of religious fundamentalism. The independent variables included Adverse Childhood Experiences, Need for Closure, Authoritarianism, Attachment Security, and Disgust Sensitivity. The dependent variables were Religious Fundamentalism and Prejudice Toward Out-Groups.

The Religious Fundamentalism Scale [1] contained 20 items rated on a 9-point agreement scale (α = .91). The Right-Wing Authoritarianism Scale (short form) measured endorsement of obedience and conformity (10 items; α = .85). The Need for Closure Scale [6] assessed preference for order and decisiveness (15 items; α = .84). The Experiences in Close Relationships-12 captured attachment anxiety and avoidance (12 items; α = .80–.87). Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE-10) tallied exposure to abuse or household dysfunction before age 18. The Three-Domain Disgust Scale measured pathogen, moral, and sexual disgust (21 items; α = .90). The Moral Foundations Questionnaire [5] indexed moral priorities across five domains.

Procedure

The study used a correlational, explanatory sequential mixed-methods design combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews. After IRB approval, recruitment announcements were distributed through church bulletins, alumni newsletters, and social media. Interested participants followed a secure Qualtrics link, read an electronic informed-consent statement, and indicated consent by proceeding. They then completed the online survey (approximately 25 minutes). Data were stored anonymously on encrypted university servers.

From those who consented to interviews, 30 participants were selected using maximum-variation sampling to ensure denominational and score diversity. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, audio-recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim. Each session lasted 60–90 minutes.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics summarized participant demographics and all variables. Inferential analyses included multiple regression and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using lavaan in R. Model fit was evaluated with CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR indices. For the qualitative component, thematic analysis identified recurring psychological and linguistic themes, while machine learning methods detected latent groupings and patterns.

Results

Descriptive statistics were calculated for all study variables (see Table 1). Scores on the Religious Fundamentalism Scale (RFS) ranged from 20 to 180 (M = 121.34, SD = 28.45). Participants reported moderate levels of authoritarianism (M = 4.8, SD = 1.2) and need for closure (M = 4.5, SD = 1.3). The sample's mean Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) score was 2.7 (SD = 1.9), suggesting mild to moderate early adversity.

Bivariate correlations indicated that religious fundamentalism was significantly positively correlated with authoritarianism (r = .58, p < .001) and need for closure (r = .52, p < .001), and negatively correlated with attachment security (r = –.44, p < .001). Higher ACE scores were moderately associated with higher authoritarianism (r = .35, p < .01) and greater need for closure (r = .30, p < .05).

A multiple regression analysis examined predictors of religious fundamentalism. The overall model was significant, $F(5, 394) = 42.67$, p < .001, R^2 = .35. Authoritarianism (β = .41, p < .001) and need for closure (β = .27, p < .01) emerged as the strongest unique predictors, followed by ACE scores (β = .18, p < .05). Attachment avoidance was a negative predictor (β = –.19, p < .05).

The structural equation model (SEM) tested the hypothesized pathway—ACEs → Need for Closure → Authoritarianism → Fundamentalism → Prejudice. Model fit was excellent, $\chi^2(4) = 7.25$, p = .12, CFI = .98, RMSEA = .041, SRMR = .029. Indirect effects revealed that the relationship between childhood adversity and fundamentalism was mediated by both need for closure and authoritarianism, supporting the sequential pathway.

Natural-language processing (topic modeling and clustering) of interview transcripts revealed three recurring linguistic patterns among highly fundamentalist participants: (1) moral purity framing (e.g., "clean vs. unclean," "corruption"), (2) hierarchical obedience metaphors (e.g.,

"God's chain of command," "divine order"), and (3) fear-based causal reasoning (e.g., "sin brings disaster," "faith protects from chaos"). Less fundamentalist participants displayed metaphorical or integrative language emphasizing community and compassion.

Discussion

The current study examined the psychological and developmental pathways that contribute to Christian fundamentalism in U.S. adults aged 30–49. Consistent with previous research by Altemeyer and Hunsberger [1], fundamentalist belief was strongly associated with authoritarianism and cognitive rigidity. The results extend this literature by identifying a sequential pathway linking early adversity (ACEs) to authoritarianism and need for closure, which together predict stronger adherence to literalist religious interpretations.

The negative relationship between attachment security and fundamentalism aligns with Granqvist and Kirkpatrick's [3] meta-analytic findings that insecure attachment predicts religious conversion and intensification, suggesting that fundamentalism may serve as a compensatory attachment figure for individuals with disrupted early bonds. These findings support the view that fundamentalism functions as a psychological defense structure that restores order and control in the face of early insecurity.

The observed linguistic patterns echo Haidt's [5] moral foundations framework: highly fundamentalist participants prioritized purity, authority, and loyalty, while more flexible believers emphasized care and fairness. This aligns with Sibley and Duckitt's [2] meta-analysis showing that low openness and high conscientiousness predict ideological rigidity. Together, these findings suggest that fundamentalism may not arise from simple theological conviction but from interacting psychological needs for certainty, belonging, and control.

Implications

These results contribute to understanding how religious fundamentalism can emerge as both a coping mechanism and a social identity framework. Clinically, the findings highlight the potential value of trauma-informed interventions that promote cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation, and secure attachment for individuals leaving high-control religious environments. From a policy standpoint, the results suggest that community-level education emphasizing critical thinking and emotional literacy could mitigate extremist tendencies reinforced through authoritarian religious structures.

Strengths and Limitations

A major strength of this study is its integration of psychological theory, developmental data, and linguistic analysis. The large sample size and mixed-methods design enhance ecological validity and allow triangulation of quantitative and qualitative results. The use of machine learning to identify latent patterns in language provides an innovative methodological contribution to the psychology of religion.

However, several limitations must be noted. The cross-sectional design prevents causal inference. The sample, though diverse, was limited to self-identified Christians within the United States, which restricts generalizability to other religions or cultural contexts. Self-report measures are susceptible to social desirability bias, particularly on topics involving morality and faith. The study's model also explains only part of the variance in fundamentalism; additional factors—such as political ideology, education, or community influence—likely contribute to the phenomenon.

Future Directions

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine how early adversity and need for closure evolve over time in relation to religious identity. Expanding this model to include non-Christian or interfaith samples would clarify whether these mechanisms are universal or culture-specific. Neural and physiological measures of threat sensitivity could further test whether fundamentalism operates as a defensive cognitive style.

Conclusion

This study contributes to a growing body of evidence that religious fundamentalism can be understood as a psychologically functional, but socially rigid, adaptation to uncertainty and trauma. By uncovering the pathways linking early adversity to cognitive and moral rigidity, the findings highlight opportunities for both personal and societal

transformation through empathy, education, and open dialogue.

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