

## INTRODUCTION

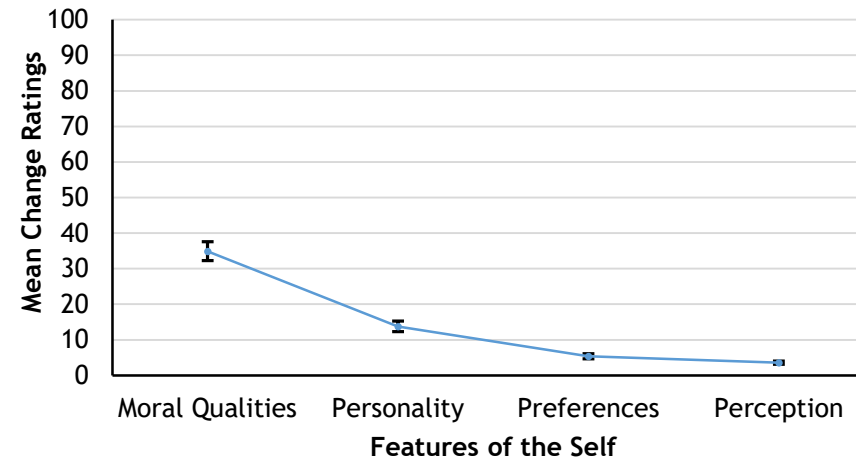
Previous work in our lab found a curvilinear relationship, showing that as people's beliefs about god(s) were clearer—regardless of what those beliefs were—the clearer they were about their own identity (Kitchens & Phillips, 2018). These findings suggested that beliefs about god(s) are a central feature of the self. In the present work, we conducted two experimental studies to test this directly. We relied on research showing that moral qualities (e.g., honesty) are *the essential* features of identity (Strohming & Nichols, 2014). From this, we reasoned that if God-beliefs are a defining aspect of the self, then changes to these beliefs would primarily alter people's perception of those moral qualities that are *the essential* self (Exp. 1). Similarly, if someone adopted religious beliefs, then this would change how people interpret that person's identity more than if other aspects of that person changed (Exp. 2).

## EXPERIMENT 1

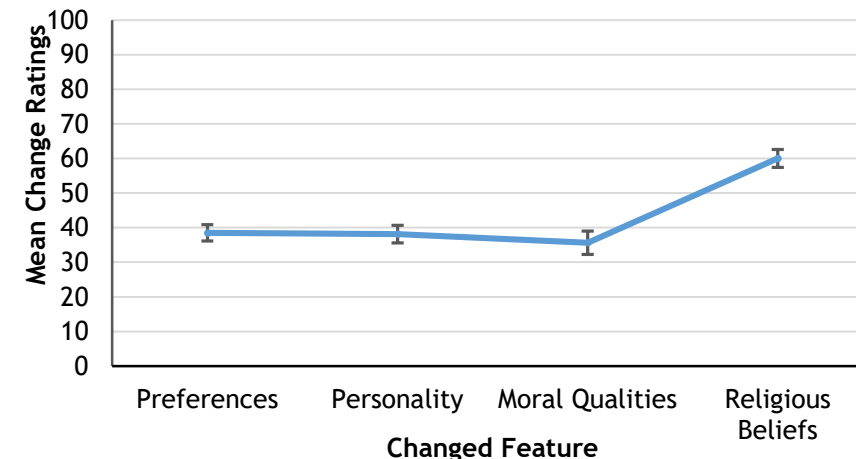
**Method:** Students ( $N = 85$ ; 64 females;  $M_{age} = 19.42$ ,  $SD_{age} = 0.97$ ) were prompted to imagine taking a pill “that, once swallowed, would permanently change your belief in God.” Next, participants individually viewed 32 aspects of identity that represented moral qualities (e.g., honesty), personality traits (e.g., outgoing), personal preferences (e.g., enjoys shopping), and perceptual abilities (e.g., ability to hear). For each of those features, they rated the extent to which taking that pill would change that feature on a scale from 0% (*no change*) to 100% (*complete change*).

**Results:** There was a significant difference in the change ratings across these features,  $F(3, 252) = 134.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.62$ . Most relevant, participants indicated that changing their belief in God would change the essential, moral qualities more than their personality traits, personal preferences, and perceptual processes ( $ps < .001$ ; see Figure 1). Thus, participants thought that changing their beliefs about God would change their essential self the most.

**Figure 1:** Participants' perceived change across features as a function a change in belief in God



**Figure 2:** Participants' perceived change in friend as a function of a change in features



## EXPERIMENT 2

**Method:** M-Turk workers ( $N = 77$ ; 41 males;  $M_{age} = 35.19$ ,  $SD_{age} = 10.46$ ) imagined meeting an old friend they had not seen in 40 years. At that meeting, they learned that their friend changed. Next, they individually read 24 aspects that had changed in their friend, representing personality traits, personal preferences, moral characteristics (e.g., always tells the truth), and religious beliefs (e.g., attends religious service). Each were rated on a on a scale from 0% (*no impact on my friend as a person*) to 100% (*completely change who my friend is*).

**Results:** Participants believed their friend would be a different person as a function of the types of features that changed,  $F(3, 228) = 22.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.23$ . As seen in Figure 2, participants imagined the greatest change to their friend's identity when their friend acquired religious beliefs ( $ps < .001$ ). Thus, a change in religious beliefs impacted participants' perception of identity the most.

## CONCLUSION

Utilizing previously established paradigms for identifying core features of the self-concept (Strohming & Nichols, 2014), we found that participants believed that changing beliefs in God changes the essential self more than other aspect of the self (Exp. 1). We also found that participants believed that the greatest change to identity would come from acquiring religious beliefs (Exp. 2). These findings suggest that God-beliefs are a central feature of identity.

## REFERENCES

- Kitchens, M. B., & Phillips, R. E. III (2018). A curvilinear relationship between beliefs about God and self-concept clarity. *Psychology of Religion & Spirituality*, Advanced online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/rel0000181>
- Strohming, N., & Nichols, S. (2014). The essential moral self. *Cognition*, *131*, 159-171.