

THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS ATTRIBUTES IN THE MANIFESTATION OF EMPATHIC ANGER IN GENERATION Z STUDENTS FROM THE WEST UNIVERSITY OF TIMISOARA

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Abstract

The existing literature on empathic anger presents a variety of perspectives. While some scholars view it as a constructive expression of anger, others delineate it as a specific form of emotional empathy. On the other hand, the role of religion in society remains a topic of interest among researchers due to the beneficial impact it has on the emergence of prosocial behaviors. These findings suggest that religion plays a significant part in maintaining social order and cohesion. Nevertheless, only a limited number of studies have addressed empathic anger within the context of religion. In light of the aforementioned considerations, the first part of the study aims to ascertain the degree of empathic anger, religious attitude, and level of religious involvement among Generation Z students. The second part of the study examines the influence of religious components on the manifestation of empathic anger in respondents. The results indicated that although empathic anger is only correlated with religious behavior, religious attitudes also exert some influence on the manner in which students relate to injustice.

Keywords

religious attitude; religious practices; anger; empathy; empathic anger

Introduction

In literature (Neuman, 2011), the term "*religion*" is typically used to refer to a set of beliefs and practices surrounding the worship of a God through formalized rituals. These beliefs and practices are collectively referred to as the "*belief system*" of the adherents to that religion. In James' view (1902), religion includes the "primary" religion that each individual experiences directly and personally, as well as the "secondary" (or institutional) religion in the form of inherited tradition (Hill & Pargament, 2003). In a distinct approach, Durkheim (2010 [1912]) posits that religion is inextricably linked to the social cohesion and integration of societies. For the purposes of the present study, the authors have chosen to focus specifically on the Christian religion, which they understand as a unified system of beliefs and practices concerning sacred things, uniting all adherents in a single community called a church. In this context, religion provides a system of norms and rituals that facilitate the maintenance of a high level of solidarity and social cohesion, thereby contributing to the avoidance of social anomie. From the authors' perspective, religion is a social phenomenon that can promote individual solidarity and integration, providing emotional and normative foundations that encourage members of society

to transcend their individual interests (Schnabel & Groetsch, 2014). Weber (1966 [1922], 2002 [1905]) posits that religion is not merely a conservative force, arguing that throughout history, religiously inspired movements have often been a driving force behind significant social change. The authors highlight the disturbing and often revolutionary impact of religious ideals on establishing social order, noting the role of religious ideology in initiating social movements aimed at challenging unjust systems of authority. While religion has played a role in facilitating social change, it has also been responsible for significant human suffering through its role in religiously motivated conflicts and wars (Giddens, 2000). According to recent perspectives, the term "*religion*" has been transformed into a fixed system of ideas or ideological commitments, which, as Wulff (1996) notes, fails to represent the dynamic personal element of human piety (Hill & Pargament, 2003). Furthermore, as sociologist Berger states (1969, 2000), religion serves as a "*sacred vault*" and "*symbolic universe*" inhabited by the individual, helping to integrate the various facets of life and providing a comprehensive understanding of reality and the meaning of existence (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Constantineanu, 2009).

In the current context, several studies have been conducted in the scientific community to understand the relationship between religion and health, psychological functioning, and decision making. Sociological research has focused on patterns of religious perception and practice in relation to social status and the impact of belief in the divine on social causes and consequences. In this regard, Wilson (1982) asserts that the attractiveness of religion to individuals is contingent upon the specific social group or class to which they belong (Schieman, 2010). Thus, the integrative effect of religion, even in modern societies, has been confirmed by several empirical studies. Research has shown that individual religiosity can lead to a reduction in crime and delinquency due to social control, adherence to religious norms, and belief in the consequences of one's actions in the afterlife (Schnabel & Groetsch, 2014). It is argued that religious teachings exert a positive influence, with the majority of religions promoting such values as altruism, compassion, and the formation of social connections through the medium of religious institutions. The relationship between an individual's religious affiliation, worship attendance, and other aspects of social life has been a central area of investigation in the field of sociology of religion. Sociologists have observed that people who practice religion have better outcomes in terms of health and well-being than those who do not practice religion. At the same time, religion provides strict behavioral guidelines on lifestyle factors that affect physical health (Fenelon & Danielsen 2016). It provides a framework for ideological beliefs and ultimate concerns and can influence beliefs and behaviors in a variety of ways, including perceptions of one's own and others' behavior and attitudes (Hood & Swanson 2018).

Empathy, according to Eisenberg & Strayer (1987), is defined as an emotional response that arises when one's own emotional state aligns with another person's emotional state (Smith, 2006). The term is typically conceptualized as an emotional response that is more attuned to the circumstances of another individual than to one's own (Díaz-Galván et al., 2015). Thus, it promotes prosocial behavior and enables people to interact effectively in the social world by helping individuals understand and share the feelings of others, an essential life skill (Gambin & Sharp, 2016; Cui & Li, 2022). Based on the premise that empathy is an essential prerequisite for altruistic behavior, social interaction, cooperation toward common goals, and prosocial behavior, other studies have found that successful social functioning is underpinned by the ability to empathize (Khanjani et al., 2015). Similarly, from a functional perspective, anger has been conceptualized in relation to other emotions, on the assumption that certain behaviors may be linked to certain underlying emotional states (Frijda, et al., 1989; Roseman et al., 1994). In this way, emotions function as guiding principles that shape behavior in two ways. They do so either directly, through specific action tendencies that resolve the emotion's central issue, or

indirectly, in a detached manner, by appealing to the concept of informational affect (Zeelenberg et al., 2008). Although research has predominantly concentrated on the adverse effects of anger, recent scholars have proposed that, contingent upon specific characteristics, the outward display of anger can be functional and adaptive in certain circumstances. In terms of attribution processes, anger has been identified as a key factor in the emergence of punitive behaviors directed towards the individual perceived as the source of blame, as well as in the manifestation of prosocial behaviors towards individuals not involved in the blame assignment process (Van Doorn et al., 2014). From an alternative standpoint, in order to gain a deeper comprehension of anger and associated behaviors, some researchers have proposed that it is essential to examine the fundamental source of an individual's anger. Thus, if anger is triggered by an act that thwarts one's personal interests, then it is called *personal anger*, and if it is triggered by observing or learning about acts that harm another individual, then it is called *empathic anger* (Keck 2019). A different perspective holds that when an individual experiences anger in response to the perceived mistreatment of another, this anger is deemed to be empathic in nature. In other words, if an individual is concerned about the welfare of another, and that individual becomes angry upon witnessing the unfair treatment of that person, this emotion is considered to be empathic anger (Batson et al., 2007). Other authors associate empathic anger with empathy in general, and affective empathy in particular. This special form of empathy appears to be rooted in an individual's capacity to be perceptive to, and to empathize with, the emotional states of others. It encompasses a sense of concern for their well-being and an inclination to react emotionally to their feelings and concerns (Renate et al., 2011). At the same time, although seemingly related, empathic anger is distinct from moral anger, which is described as an emotional state caused by a primary appraisal of a violation of moral standards. This is because empathic anger is primarily focused on acknowledging and addressing the harm done to the other person, although it can clearly arise in response to a violation of moral standards. Similar to personal anger, empathic anger tends to motivate retaliatory actions against the source of the perceived aggression. What differentiates empathic anger is its additional promotion of the interests of the victim of the perceived harm. Thus, extensive research has demonstrated that empathic anger is significantly linked to a desire to assist the victim, as opposed to merely seeking retribution against the perpetrator. Consistent with these findings, some authors have suggested that empathic anger may be a way to overcome fearful silence when observing mistreatment. In addition, empathic anger can signal the presence of the power and confidence needed to address the inappropriate behavior of others, as well as empathic concern for the well-being of others (Keck, 2019).

In light of these considerations, this paper presents an exploratory study that aims to investigate the relationship between religion-related attributes and empathic anger among Generation Z sociology students at the University of Timisoara West, Romania. Our main research hypothesis was that Christian beliefs and practices would influence the level of empathic anger in Generation Z students.

Materials and methods

This study aimed to ascertain the relationship between religious attributes and empathic anger in Generation Z students with a sociology major at the West University of Timisoara in Romania.

The study set three *objectives*:

- a) To determine the level of religiosity of students.
- b) To identify the level of empathic anger of students.
- c) To investigate the relationship between religious attributes and empathic anger.

The following *hypotheses* were put forth for further investigation:

- 1) In contrast to the prevailing secularism of modern Western culture, Generation Z students exhibited moderate to high levels of religiosity.
- 2) Despite the prevalence of individualism in contemporary society, Generation Z students display a moderate to high level of empathic anger.
- 3) Individuals belonging to Generation Z are prone to experiencing empathic anger as a consequence of their exposure to Christian beliefs and practices during their formative years, specifically during childhood and adolescence”.

The study was conducted between January and February 2024 on a sample of students enrolled in the first-year sociology program at West University of Timisoara. Prior to completing the questionnaire, participants were informed on the anonymity of the responses they would provide. A social survey was employed as the research method.

The questionnaire used was designed in a manner that facilitated ease of completion and included a combination of open- and closed-ended questions. It comprises two focus areas - religious attributes and empathic anger, and it is structured in three sections. In the first section, participants were requested to provide their gender, age, marital status, and religious affiliation. The concept of religion-related attributes (section 2) is based on the work of Parboteeah et al. (2008) and covers religious attitudes that describe personal religious convictions and the spiritual commitment people have to religion (e.g. "*I believe that it is God who decides man's fate*"), as well as expressions of faith such as practical activities specific to the denomination (e.g. "*My behavior reflects the Christian values specific to the community I am part of*"). Levels of empathic anger (section 3) were measured by questions based on the Empathic Anger as a Trait Scale developed by Vitaglione and Barnett (1999), which assesses how people react to situations of social injustice (e.g. "*I feel upset when witnessing physical abuse towards another person*"). Items 2 and 3 have been constructed using a scale model, with respondents rating the statements on a scale of 1 to 4 (1- strongly disagree, 2 - disagree, 3 - agree and 4 - strongly agree). The score for each construct was calculated by summing the responses to the corresponding question (Reniers et al., 2011). The questionnaire data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 21 and Jamovi 2.4.14.

Results and discussions

The sample consisted of 39 participants, with ages ranging from 18 to 26 years ($M = 19.44$, $SD = 1.41$). 15.40% of respondents were male and 84.60% were female, with the percentage of students in relationships (12.82%) being lower than the percentage of students not in relationships (87.17%). The majority of respondents identified as Orthodox Christians (71.8%), with a notable number of individuals (10.30%) identifying as atheists or agnostics. Pentecostalism was the second most prevalent religious affiliation (7.70%). The sample distribution is presented in **Table 1**.

The overall score for religiosity (calculated as the sum of religious attitude and behavior) ranged from 6 to 23 ($M = 13.58$, $SD = 4.52$), and the overall score for empathic anger ranged from 13 to 20 ($M = 17.71$, $SD = 2.11$), indicating that respondents are religious persons which exhibited a moderate to high level of this type of empathy in social contexts.

Table 1. Demographic data of the sample (N = 39)

Variable		N (%)
Age	≤ 20 years	35 (89.80)
	> 20 years	4 (10.30)
Gen	Female	33 (84.60)
	Male	6 (15.40)
Marital status	Single	33 (84.60)

Religious affiliation	In a relationship	5 (12.80)
	Divorced/separated	1 (2.60)
	Atheist/agnostic	4 (10.30)
	Orthodox	28 (71.80)
	Catholic	1 (2.60)
	Pentecostal	3 (7.70)
	Baptist	2 (5.10)
	Other confession	1 (2.60)

The scores obtained for each variable in the study were subjected to a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to ascertain whether they exhibited a normal distribution. As the linearity hypothesis was not found to be significantly violated (exact $p > .05$ (2-tailed) was obtained for all variables in study), Pearson correlation analysis was employed to investigate the relationship between empathic anger and religious attributes (**Table 2**).

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations and Pearson correlation coefficients for the new obtained variables (N = 39)

Variable	M	SD	Religiosity	Religious attitude	Religious behavior
Empathic anger	17.71	2.11	-.158	.053	-.345*
Religiosity	13.58	4.52	1	.923**	.923**
Religious attitude	8.12	2.45	-	1	.705**
Religious behavior	5.46	2.44	-	-	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

The findings suggest that only religious behavior and empathic anger were significantly correlated in negative direction, at $r(37) = .345$, $p < .05$, $r^2 = .119$. The effect is medium, according to Cohen's theory (1988), the r^2 value indicating that approximately 12% of the variability in empathic anger can be predicted by religious behavior. A weak correlation that was not significant was found between religious attitude and empathic anger ($r(37) = .053$, $p > .05$).

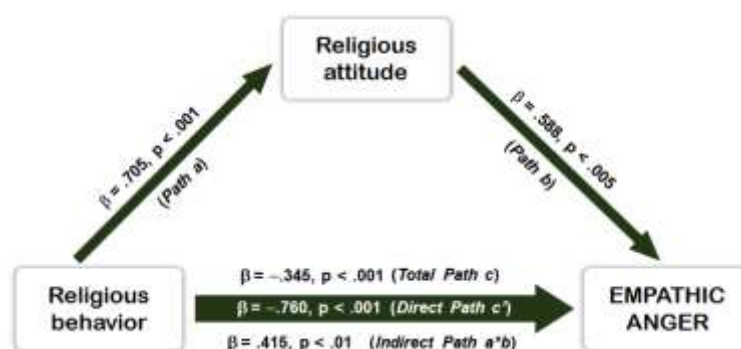


Figure 1. Mediation model of religious attitudes' effect on the relationship between religious behavior and empathic anger

In the final phase of the investigation, mediation analysis was employed to ascertain if religious attitude, regarded as a mediating variable, can influence the relationship between religious behavior and empathic anger (**Figure 1** and **Table 3**). The results of the mediation analysis demonstrate that the overall effect of religious behavior on the manifestation of empathic anger was significant ($\beta = -.345$, 95% CI $[-.601, -.059]$, $p < 0.05$). The religious behavior exerted a substantial positive impact on religious attitude ($\beta = .705$, 95% CI $[.516, .928]$, $p < 0.001$), which, in turn, also demonstrated a noteworthy positive effect on empathic

anger ($\beta = .588$, 95% CI [.235, .818], $p < 0.005$). The indirect mediating effect through religious attitude was found to be significant ($\beta = .415$, 95% CI [.156, .605], $p < 0.01$), suggesting that religious attitude plays a partial mediating role in the relationship between religious behavior and empathic anger among Generation Z students.

Table 3. Mediating effect of religious attitude between religious behavior and empathic anger

Type	Effect	Estimate	SE	95% CI		β	z	p
				Lower	Upper			
Indirect	Rel.bhv $\Rightarrow$ Rel.att $\Rightarrow$ Emp.Ang	.358	.129	.156	.605	.415	2.77	.006
Component	Rel.bhv $\Rightarrow$ Rel.att	.706	.114	.516	.928	.705	6.20	< .001
	Rel.att $\Rightarrow$ Emp.Ang	.508	.164	.235	.818	.588	3.10	.002
Direct	Rel.bhv $\Rightarrow$ Emp.Ang	-.657	.164	-.928	-.362	-.760	-4.01	< .001
Total	Rel.bhv $\Rightarrow$ Emp.Ang	-.298	.132	-.601	-.059	-.345	-2.27	.023

Conclusions

The present study examines the relationship between religious components and empathic anger, and how they manifest in Generation Z students at the Department of Sociology, West University of Timisoara. The obtained results showed that the respondents express a considerable level of empathic anger, being at the same time people with a moderate level of religiosity, thus confirming the first two hypotheses. Pearson correlation analysis revealed that there was no significant correlation between religious attitude and empathic anger. However, religious behavior was found to be negatively correlated with empathic anger, explaining 11.9% of the variance. This finding supports the third hypothesis to a limited extent. It is conceivable that the respondents lacked familiarity with the notion of "empathic anger", leading them to associate the items pertaining to this concept with a negative connotation (resembling anger). Nevertheless, partial correlation and mediation analysis demonstrated that, despite the absence of a direct correlation with empathic anger, religious attitude serves as a mediator in the indirect influence of religious behavior. Additionally, a difference was observed in the direction of association with empathic anger between the two religious components. It was therefore found that a positive association exists between religious attitude and empathic anger. Conversely, high levels of religious involvement appear to be associated with a reduction in empathic anger. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that, although an individual who demonstrates a high level of religious involvement is likely to empathize cognitively with instances of injustice, participation in religious practices may serve to temper such empathy by prompting a more reserved response.

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