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FROM RELIGIOSITY TO ATHEISM, HOW GENDER SHAPES NON-BELIEF

by

Gustav Lundberg

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the Sociology

Alison Bianchi
Thesis Mentor

Spring 2017

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
Sociology have been completed.

Jennifer Haylett
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Abstract

Past research on the sociology of religion has shown that women are generally more religious than men. This pattern appears to be robust and it has often been proposed by researchers as a universal fact, at least in Western societies. Increasingly however, researchers have become interested in the beliefs of not just the religious, but also the “nones”, individuals that are unaffiliated with any organized religion. In particular, I am interested in understanding what drives the beliefs of those that are not just unaffiliated with religious organizations or agnostics, but those that explicitly identify as atheists. A first step in this process was, therefore, to examine whether a similar gender pattern emerged for individuals that reported that they were atheists. Using data collected from the World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 6 to create binary regression models, I compared examined atheism and related factors across nine countries. I found that across most of the countries, women were on average less likely to be atheist than men, all other things being equal.

Introduction and Background

Despite the wealth of research that exists on the subject of religiosity, current researchers have lamented the lack of research on atheists (Bainbridge 2005). However, the research conducted on religiosity is likely to play a key role in developing a deeper understanding of atheism.

That women tend to be more religious than men has been a consistently replicated finding over the last decades of research examining religion (Hoffman 2009). Specifically, measures commonly used by sociologists studying religion, such as strength of affiliation, attendance frequency, and prayer frequency suggest that women are more religious than men (Miller et al. 2002; Sullins 2006; Roth and Kroll 2007). Ironically, although this has led to gender differences in religiosity being viewed as something approaching a “universal social fact,” there are no commonly accepted or completely empirically supported explanations (Miller and Stark 2002). Various explanations have been provided for this gender gap in religiosity, but, unfortunately, there is still wide disagreement in the field regarding what causes this pattern. Potential explanations range from vulnerability (Walter et al. 1998, Norris et al. 2011), personality and psychology (Thompson 1991, Francis 1997; Freese et al. 2007), historical processes (Tzebiatowska et al. 2012), social structure and status (Luckman 1967, de Vaus et al. 1987, Cornwall 1989; Hastings et al. 2013; Schnabel 2016a), to differences in risky behavior rooted in biology.

It has often been suggested that because men are more prone to risky behavior they are also less religious than women (Miller et al. 1995). Developing this theory further, researchers have also proposed that higher levels of testosterone are responsible for the difference in religiosity between men and women (Stark 2002, Stark et al. 2002). However, in contrast to

these predictions, risk preferences have been found to mediate only a very small portion of gender differences in religiosity (Freese 2004). Furthermore, the association between risk aversion and religiosity may diminish over time (Schnabel et al. 2016c). Socialization has also been argued to be an important factor in religiosity. An example of this is data indicating the strong effect that non-religious spouses, parents, and peer groups have on claims of no religion (Baker et al. 2009). Another proposed explanation is that because atheism is socially risky, members of marginalized social groups tend to avoid identifying as atheists (Edgell et al. 2006a). This is reflected in findings from national surveys that suggest that atheists are less likely to be accepted or trusted, both in public and privately, than most other ethnic, religious or other minority groups (Edgell et al. 2006b). Identity may also play a key role in religiosity, as the large amount of social sanctions for women to be religious and the associated identity validation they receive from religious organizations interact to strengthen their religious identity (Stryker and Burke 2000). The complex relationship between psychological sanctions and rewards has been proposed as another explanation, focusing on the expectation that women may face to be religious (Schnabel 2016a).

A major issue with research on religiosity and especially the “nones” (individuals unaffiliated with any particular religion) has been the tendency to lump atheists, agnostics, and individuals that are simply indifferent together into one cohesive group (Bainbridge 2005). As a result, I have specifically focused on atheists and avoided any issues of over-generalization in the research that follows. In particular, it has been suggested that researchers should take great care to separate nonbelief from nonbelonging (Baker et al. 2009b).

I predicted that gender would be a reliable predictor of atheism, and that men would be more likely to be atheist than women. I also predicted that level of education, both having some

college education and having completed a university degree, would similarly predict the probability that a respondent would be atheist. I expected that this would occur because education serves as a powerful tool for socialization and because the highest level of education an individual has attained is a useful proxy for socioeconomic status. In contrast, I did not predict that age group, number of children, or marital status would increase/decrease the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist.

Methods

Data from the World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 6, which was gathered from 2010-2014, was analyzed for this project. Although, the WVS contains data from some 57 countries (collecting data from well over 85,000 respondents), I limited my analysis to several countries that had enough respondents that identified as atheists for meaningful statistical analysis. I was particularly interested in analyzing a diverse range of countries and therefore sought to avoid selecting only “WEIRD” (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) countries. Based on these criteria, I selected Argentina, China, Japan, Kuwait, Russia, Sweden, Uruguay, and the United States as the countries I would analyze.

For each country, I examined age group, highest educational level attained, gender, marital status, and number of children. Highest educational level attained was collapsed into ‘some university education’ and ‘university degree’ due to limitations related to how the WVS asked respondents about their educational level. I was particularly interested in looking at how ethnic group and religious denomination might affect atheism, however, because the data collection regarding these variables appeared to vary widely between each country I chose to exclude them from my models. Prior to data analysis, I excluded all respondents that did not answer whether they were atheist or not.

To analyze how these variables interacted with atheism, I performed a binary logistic regression to estimate the probability that an individual would be atheist given the presence of other variables. Values generated as part of the binary logistic regression models were then converted into probabilities using the formula $((EXP(X)-1) * 100)$ recommended by Long (1997). In the Appendices found at the end of this paper, I have included a table summarizing all my findings, as well as the final step of the regression models I used to create these data.

Analysis and Results

Argentina. Being female decreased the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (-16.97%, $P = .002$). The more children a respondent had, the less likely they were to be atheist (-23.89%, $P = .001$). Having some university education increased the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (180.38%, $P = .002$). Having completed a university degree increased the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (261.47%, $P = .002$).

Marital status did not significantly predict the likelihood that a participant was atheist (3.87%, $P = .60$). Similarly, age group also did not significantly predict whether a respondent would be atheist (-9.52%, $P = .544$).

China. Having completed a university degree increased the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (261.47%, $P = .002$). Being female decreased the likelihood that respondents would be atheist, but the results were not significant (-16.97%, $P = .052$).

Having some university education did not significantly affect the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (-26.36%, $P = .132$). Marital status did not significantly predict the likelihood that a participant was atheist (1.11%, $P = .702$). Number of children did not significantly predict the likelihood that a participant was atheist (-6.20%, $P = .274$). Similarly,

age group also did not significantly predict whether a respondent would be atheist (12.08%, $P = .102$).

Japan. Being female decreased the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist (-52.24%, $P < .001$). In contrast, being married increased the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist (8.87%, $P = .036$).

Number of children did not significantly affect the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (-1.19%, $P = .886$). Having some university education, 55.74%, $P = .348$, and having completed a university degree, 20.56%, $P = 0.227$, did not significantly affect the likelihood that respondents would be atheist. Similarly, age group also did not significantly predict whether a respondent would be atheist (13.50%, $P = 0.087$).

Kuwait. Being female increased the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist (-73.67%, $P = .049$). Having some university education, -68.71%, $P = .016$, and having completed a university degree, -83.57%, $P = .003$, decreased the probability that respondents would be atheist. Being married significantly increased the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (28.79%, $P = .004$).

Number of children did not significantly affect the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (-11.75, $P = .277$). Similarly, the age group of the respondents was not a significant indicator of their likelihood of being atheist (29.69%, $P = .279$).

Russia. Being female decreased the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist (64.05%, $P < .001$). Similarly, age group was a significant predictor of whether a respondent would be atheist (23.74%, $P = .02$).

Number of children did not significantly affect the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (-15.04%, $P = .07$). Having some university education, -48.26%, $P = .17$, and having

completed a university degree, -15.89% , $P = .358$, did not significantly affect the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist. Finally, Marital status did not significantly predict the likelihood that a participant was atheist (0.70 , $P = .863$)

Sweden. Being female decreased the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist (-53.05% , $P < .001$). Age group decreased the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist (-26.07% , $P = .001$). Marital status, being married, was a significant predictor of whether a respondent would be atheist (9.97% , $P = .035$).

Having some university education did not significantly affect the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (16.65% , $P = .554$). Having completed a university degree did not significantly the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (32.31% , $P = .12$). Number of children did not significantly affect the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (-9.24 , $P = .244$).

Uruguay. Being female decreased the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist (-57.09% , $P < .001$). The more children a respondent had, the less likely they were to be atheist (-15.89% , $P = .041$). Similarly, age group decreased the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist (-26.21 , $P = .014$).

Having some university education did not significantly affect the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (-44.90% , $P = .226$). Having completed a university degree did not significantly the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (16.77% , $P = .702$). Finally, Marital status did not significantly predict the likelihood that a participant was atheist (3.63% , $P = .508$).

U.S. Being female decreased the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist (-39.83% , $P = .014$). Having completed a university degree increased the likelihood that respondents would

be atheist (151.43%, $P < .001$). Similarly, age group decreased the likelihood that a respondent would be atheist (-26.80%, $P = .013$).

Having some university education did not significantly affect the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (74.37%, $P = .057$). Marital status did not significantly predict the likelihood that a participant was atheist (8.00%, $P = .145$). Number of children did not significantly affect the likelihood that respondents would be atheist (-13.41%, $P = .099$).

Discussion

The results of six binary logistic regressions (Argentina, Japan, Russia, Sweden, Uruguay, and the United States) confirmed my hypothesis that women would be less likely to be atheist than men. In my analysis of Chinese respondents, the same pattern occurred in the data, but was not significant. Interestingly, in my regression model for Kuwait, the opposite pattern emerged, and women were more likely to be atheist than men. Other variables showed more diverse patterns of atheism across different countries.

Having some college education increased the likelihood of a respondent being an atheist in Argentina and the United States, but the opposite was true for respondents from Kuwait. Similarly, in Argentina, a participant with a completed university degree was more likely to be atheist, while in Kuwait this was associated with a lower probability of a participant being atheist. In Japan, Kuwait, and Sweden, being married increased the chance that a respondent would be atheist. An interesting pattern emerged in relation to age group, as respondents in Russia were more likely to be atheist as they increased in age, while respondents in Sweden, Uruguay, and the US had a higher probability of not being atheist as they increased in age. Finally, the number of children a respondent had only predicted a decreased likelihood of atheism in Argentina and Uruguay.

Limitations. Many of the limitations of this study stem from the way that questions were asked during the WVS Wave 6 or in how the data was collected. For example, in several countries respondents would not answer questions regarding atheism at all, making it impossible to use data from those countries to construct regression models.

Future directions. With the gender gap being supported by data from the majority of countries I analyzed, a logical next step would simply be to expand the number of countries used in the analysis. Incorporating more variables would likewise be a reasonable, but important, next step. Particularly, by focusing more on an intersectionality approach and trying to gain a better understanding of how gender, earnings, and religiosity varies by race (Schnabel 2016a). In addition, I would like to expand my research questions to address how political views or ideologies may be affecting atheism and whether it is related to political backlash from recent events (Hout et al. 2014). Finally, because people with lower social obligations have been found to be more likely to be atheists (Bainbridge 2005), I believe that the use of network science methodology to study atheism may prove to be helpful in gaining a better understanding of how our environment and those around us affect our nonbelief.

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Appendix

Demographic Tables

Table 1 Marital Status

<i>Married</i>	349	1799	1372	739	1073	482	1286	332
<i>Living together as married</i>	170	23	33		136	199	180	190
<i>Divorced</i>	40	27	100	58	289	68	195	64

<i>Separated</i>	63	3	15	41	37	58	43	46
<i>Widowed</i>	84	95	105	26	323	56	112	87
<i>Single</i>	270	265	363	300	310	277	383	225

Table 2 Number of Children

<i>No children</i>	286	351	489	368	509	420	655	229
<i>1 child</i>	177	958	276	119	716	183	324	173
<i>2 children</i>	223	619	834	174	721	356	623	233
<i>3 children</i>	158	183	332	173	143	150	308	156
<i>4 children</i>	66	72	42	149	26	45	160	69
<i>5 children</i>	32	20	7	88	10	7	65	29
<i>6 children</i>	10	6	2	54	8	3	35	14
<i>7 children</i>	7	3		16	3	2	8	13
<i>8 or more children</i>	11			19	1	1	15	

Table 3 Age Group

<i>18-25</i>	205	306	125	230	307	231	253	157
<i>26-50</i>	434	1199	780	810	936	406	854	431
<i>51-64</i>	185	469	582	98	556	234	660	169
<i>65+</i>	152	238	518	30	378	297	432	187

Table 4 Some College

<i>No College</i>	883	2043	1977	974	2056	1056	1741	888
<i>Some College</i>	93	169	28	194	112	112	458	56

Table 5 University Degree

<i>No College</i>	921	1836	1545	874	1594	759	1370	886
<i>University Degree</i>	55	376	460	294	574	409	829	58

Table 6 Atheist

<i>Not Atheist</i>	906	1586	1729	1104	1996	952	2094	831
<i>Atheist</i>	70	626	276	64	181	216	105	113

Table 7 Female

<i>Not Female</i>	449	1075	999	724	936	551	1063	441
<i>Female</i>	527	1137	1006	408	1241	617	1136	503

Binary Logistic Models

Summary of Findings

	ARG	CHN	JPN	KWT	RUS	SWE	URY	USA
<i>Marital Status</i>	0.038	0.011	0.085	0.253	0.007	0.095	-0.037	0.077
<i>MS Prob. %</i>	3.873123	1.106072	8.871707	28.78833	0.702456	9.965886	-3.63239	8.004208
<i>Sig. # of Childre n</i>	0.601	0.702	0.036	0.004	0.863	0.035	0.508	0.145
<i># of Childre n %</i>	-0.273	-0.064	-0.012	-0.125	-0.163	-0.097	-0.173	-0.144
<i>Sig. HELA 2A</i>	-23.8907	-6.1995	1.19283	11.7503	15.0409	-9.2444	15.8862	13.4112
<i>HELA 2A %</i>	0.035	0.274	0.886	0.277	0.07	0.244	0.041	0.099
<i>Sig. HELA 2B</i>	1.031	-0.306	0.443	-1.162	-0.659	0.154	-0.596	0.556
<i>HELA 2B %</i>	180.3868	-26.3613	55.73723	-68.714	48.2632	16.64909	-44.8989	74.36838
<i>Sig. HELA 2B%</i>	0.002	0.132	0.348	0.016	0.17	0.554	0.226	0.057
<i>Sig. HELA 2B%</i>	1.285	0.419	0.187	-1.806	-0.173	0.28	0.155	0.922
<i>Sig. HELA 2B%</i>	261.4668	52.04404	20.56273	-83.569	15.8862	32.31298	16.7658	151.4314
<i>Sig. HELA 2B%</i>	0.002	0.001	0.227	0.003	0.358	0.12	0.702	0

<i>Age Group</i>	-0.1	0.114	-0.145	0.26	0.213	-0.302	-0.304	-0.312
<i>Age Group %</i>	-9.51626	12.07521	-13.4978	29.69301	23.73847	-26.0662	-26.2139	-26.8018
<i>Sig.</i>	0.544	0.102	0.087	0.279	0.02	0.001	0.014	0.013
<i>Sex %</i>	-0.827	-0.186	-0.739	0.552	-1.023	-0.756	-0.846	-0.508
<i>Sex %</i>	-56.2641	-16.9726	-52.2409	73.6723	-64.0485	-53.0459	-57.0872	-39.8302
<i>Sig.</i>	0.002	0.052	0	0.049	0	0	0	0.014

Regression Models Final Step

Argentina

Variables in the Equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a	Age_Group	-.100	.165	.369	1	.544	.905
	HELA2A	1.031	.326	9.999	1	.002	2.803
	HELA2B	1.285	.411	9.792	1	.002	3.614
	Female	-.827	.271	9.321	1	.002	.437
	Marital Status	.038	.072	.274	1	.601	1.038
	Children	-.273	.129	4.466	1	.035	.761
	Constant	-2.008	.516	15.160	1	.000	.134

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Age_Group, HELA2A, HELA2B, Female, Marital Status, Children.

China

Variables in the Equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a	Marital Status	.011	.030	.146	1	.702	1.011
	Children	-.064	.059	1.198	1	.274	.938
	HELA2A	-.306	.203	2.264	1	.132	.736
	HELA2B	.419	.127	10.845	1	.001	1.520

Age_Group	.114	.070	2.673	1	.102	1.121
Female	-.186	.096	3.779	1	.052	.830
Constant	-1.082	.184	34.774	1	.000	.339

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Marital Status, Children, HELA2A, HELA2B, Age_Group, Female.

Japan

Variables in the Equation

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a Marital Status	.085	.040	4.408	1	.036	1.088
Children	-.012	.081	.020	1	.886	.988
HELA2A	.443	.473	.881	1	.348	1.558
HELA2B	.187	.154	1.460	1	.227	1.205
Age_Group	-.145	.084	2.935	1	.087	.865
Female	-.739	.142	27.178	1	.000	.477
Constant	-1.365	.299	20.811	1	.000	.255

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Marital Status, Children, HELA2A, HELA2B, Age_Group, Female.

Kuwait

Variables in the Equation

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a Marital Status	.253	.088	8.287	1	.004	1.288
Children	-.125	.115	1.184	1	.277	.883
HELA2A	-1.162	.481	5.845	1	.016	.313
HELA2B	-1.806	.606	8.879	1	.003	.164
Age_Group	.260	.240	1.171	1	.279	1.297

Female	.552	.281	3.866	1	.049	1.737
Constant	-3.841	.663	33.594	1	.000	.021

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Marital Status, Children, HELA2A, HELA2B, Age_Group, Female.

Russia

Variables in the Equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a	Marital Status	.007	.043	.030	1	.863	1.008
	Number of Children	-.163	.090	3.277	1	.070	.849
	HELA2A	-.659	.480	1.885	1	.170	.517
	HELA2B	-.173	.189	.843	1	.358	.841
	Age_Group	.213	.092	5.405	1	.020	1.238
	Female	-1.023	.169	36.527	1	.000	.359
	Constant	-2.204	.281	61.611	1	.000	.110

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Marital Status, Number of Children, HELA2A, HELA2B, Age_Group, Female.

Sweden

Variables in the Equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a	Marital Status	.095	.045	4.431	1	.035	1.099
	Number of Children	-.097	.083	1.356	1	.244	.908
	HELA2A	.154	.261	.349	1	.554	1.167
	HELA2B	.280	.180	2.415	1	.120	1.324

Age_Group	-.302	.093	10.476	1	.001	.739
Female	-.756	.162	21.855	1	.000	.470
Constant	-.709	.313	5.122	1	.024	.492

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Marital Status, Number of Children, HELA2A, HELA2B, Age_Group, Female.

Uruguay

Variables in the Equation

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a Marital Status	-.037	.056	.439	1	.508	.964
Children	-.173	.085	4.193	1	.041	.841
HELA2A	-.596	.492	1.467	1	.226	.551
HELA2B	.155	.404	.146	1	.702	1.167
Age_Group	-.304	.123	6.102	1	.014	.738
Female	-.846	.217	15.223	1	.000	.429
Constant	-.493	.387	1.623	1	.203	.611

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Marital Status, Children, HELA2A, HELA2B, Age_Group, Female.

United States

Variables in the Equation

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a Marital Status	.077	.053	2.123	1	.145	1.081
Number of Children	-.144	.087	2.729	1	.099	.866
HELA2A	.556	.293	3.614	1	.057	1.744
HELA2B	.922	.249	13.713	1	.000	2.513

Age_Group	-.312	.126	6.125	1	.013	.732
Female	-.508	.207	6.046	1	.014	.602
Constant	-2.540	.424	35.862	1	.000	.079

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: Marital Status, Number of Children, HELA2A, HELA2B, Age_Group, Female.