

Religion, the Forbidden, and Sublimation

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Abstract

Sublimation is a process whereby forbidden thoughts and emotions are channeled into productive and often creative ends. Recent experiments and surveys have provided evidence for sublimation and have also suggested variation, such that Protestants (compared with Catholics and Jews) were more likely to minimize troublesome affect and displace it into creative work. Emotion per se did not induce sublimation among Protestants; rather, it was the forbidden or suppressed nature of the emotion that was important. Attending to the religious and cultural dimensions of thought and to dual-process theories of the mind can help us understand responses to the human predicament of encountering the forbidden.

Keywords

sublimation, religion, defense mechanisms

All people have thoughts and emotions that they wish they did not have. The way people deal with and respond to these threatening thoughts and emotions has interested religious figures, philosophers, and scholars for centuries. Within psychology, such concerns were at the center of the psychoanalytic movement, and although contemporary psychology has lost most of its Freudian flavor, the study of how people cope with forbidden or threatening emotions is still an important area of research.

One way people can cope with troubling thoughts and impulses is by using *defense mechanisms*, a term covering a variety of cognitive and emotional processes that may involve denying, inhibiting, redirecting, or transforming such forbidden material. One specific mechanism we have focused on is *sublimation*—a process by which people take forbidden or suppressed emotions and desires and channel them toward productive, often creative, ends. We have found that people of different religions tend to differ in their usage of particular defense mechanisms. And in recent work, we have found that Protestants are much more likely to engage in sublimation than are their Catholic and Jewish counterparts.

To understand why we were able to find evidence for sublimation among Protestants in particular, it is necessary to understand (a) some basic differences between Protestantism versus Catholicism and Judaism (two other Western religions in the Judeo-Christian tradition) and (b) some of the psychological processes underlying

sublimation. Both of these will necessarily involve some oversimplification.

Protestant Theology as Conducive to Sublimation

Protestant theology is particularly conducive to sublimation for a few reasons. First, Protestants may be more likely than people of other religions to perceive taboo thoughts and desires as sinful, threatening, and likely to be acted upon—which might compel Protestants to use defense mechanisms to deal with such impulses. This is partially because—to oversimplify—Protestant theology generally places considerable moral weight on one's thoughts and feelings, consistent with Jesus's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount:

You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, "You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment." But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. . . . You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully

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has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matthew 5:21–28, New International Version)

Additionally, Protestantism generally holds that the way to salvation is through faith, rather than deeds. This contrasts strongly with Judaism (which focuses on behaviors rather than beliefs) and, to a lesser degree, with Catholicism (which primarily emphasizes works rather than faith as the route to salvation).

Supporting Protestants' tendency to moralize thoughts, Adam Cohen and Paul Rozin (2001) found that contemporary Protestants evaluate as sinful someone who merely thinks about, for example, committing adultery or violence. However, Jews and, to a lesser extent, Catholics more strongly differentiate between thinking and doing. Further, Protestants, compared with Jews and Catholics, are more likely to believe that bad thoughts and impulses will eventuate in bad acts and, conversely, that bad acts derive from bad souls (Cohen & Rozin, 2001; Li et al., 2012). Because Protestants should thus find inappropriate thoughts and emotions more threatening, they should be more likely to try to minimize and suppress such thoughts and emotions and shuttle them out of consciousness. As noted below, this minimization of threatening affect likely is a crucial component of Protestant sublimation.

Another important difference that is likely to contribute to Protestants' tendency toward sublimation is the quasi-religious status accorded to productive work in Protestantism. According to sociologist Max Weber (1905/2002), the Protestant work ethic derived from John Calvin's doctrine of a "calling" (glorifying God through work in one's vocation) and worldly asceticism (see also Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Uhlmann & Sanchez-Burks, in press). Prompted by the belief that the status of one's salvation was largely unknowable, Calvinists sought signs and reassurances that they were saved. Tireless devotion to and success in one's calling was viewed as one of the best ways to rid oneself of religious doubt and evil temptation. Even as other parts of Calvinist theology fell away, this sanctification of work diffused throughout other Protestant denominations, particularly the more ascetic ones, such as Methodist and Baptist sects. In essence, doing productive work—rather than cataloging one's sins for rituals of confession, repentance, and atonement (as in the Catholic sacrament of reconciliation)—became a way to deal with anxieties about depravity and salvation. Without formal rituals for confession and atonement (as found in both Catholicism and Judaism), Protestants could use work to reduce depravity-related anxieties.

Thus, combining the points above, Protestants may be particularly likely to minimize forbidden impulses and emotions and pour their energies into productive work

as a means to reduce anxiety over those forbidden urges. Weber himself recognized that his conception of the Protestant ethic was similar to Freudian concepts of sublimation. Similarly, Freud—for his part—recognized that sublimating forbidden urges into productive activity might have potential consequences for economic development. Wandering around New York, Freud purportedly wondered aloud about the sublimation that must have gone into building all those skyscrapers (Larsen & Buss, 2008).

A Modern Theoretical Account of Sublimation Processes

Freud—a self-admitted "Protestant in sexuality"—believed Protestantism was conducive to the sublimation of sinful urges, and he saw creative activity as one of the highest forms of sublimation (Meng & Freud, 1963; Westerink, 2009). The idea that sexual and aggressive urges are a source of energy that can be harnessed for productive ends is an old idea (it can be found in Eastern and Western folklore and is reflected in the quote famously attributed to Balzac, "There goes another novel," after having sex). Freud's contribution was to argue that the creative process was a way that conflicts over the forbidden could be worked out, with the inappropriate urges being expressed in a disguised or highly attenuated form. However, we need not take on the excess baggage of psychoanalytic theory to give an account of how sublimation could work. Information-processing theories and dual-process models of the mind can account for the phenomenon.

First, the sublimating process is one in which troublesome thoughts, impulses, and emotions get moved toward less conscious areas of the mind, where they become transformed by loose, associational styles of thinking. Freud referred to these less conscious, imagistic, ideational ways of thinking as *primary process* thinking. Today, scholars might call such processes "associative" (as opposed to rule based), "experiential" (as opposed to rational), or "System 1 thinking" (as opposed to System 2 thinking; Epstein, 1994; Sloman, 1996; Stanovich & West, 2000). Either way, the underlying notion is that these less conscious ways of processing are looser, more associational, and, hence, more capable of making transformative, creative leaps of imagination, as compared with more straightforward, logical thinking processes. This argument about less conscious types of processing also resonates with contemporary theorizing about the role of *incubation* in creativity, in which our minds continue to work on unresolved issues and problems even as our conscious attention is focused elsewhere (Sio & Ormerod, 2009; Strick, Dijksterhuis, Bos, Sjoerdsma, & van Baaren, 2011; Wegner, 2009).

Information-processing models of the mind can also account for the way troublesome affect and impulses get suppressed and displaced. As Erdelyi (1985, updating Dollard & Miller, 1950) argued, threatening material can be gated out of consciousness at various stages of processing, being let back in only when it has become sufficiently safe and nonthreatening. Thus, for example, forbidden material may re-enter the more conscious areas of our mind when it has become sufficiently disguised through associational thinking, sufficiently attenuated, or sufficiently displaced away from the original target and into a more acceptable channel (as when, for example, aggressive impulses are expressed through one's art rather than through actual violence). In sublimation, Erdelyi noted, the channels through which the impulses are expressed, such as work or art, are not merely safe but positively valued.

Experimental Evidence for Sublimation

Recent experiments have supported the idea that Protestantism is conducive to the sublimation of forbidden or suppressed impulses, and they have provided insights into the process through which such impulses are displaced into creative work. For example, in two studies, participants were induced to have forbidden erotic thoughts (Hudson & Cohen, 2014; Kim, Zeppenfeld, & Cohen, 2013). Specifically, male participants who had sisters completed a photo-diary task in which they wrote about fictitious memories of growing up. They were given photographs paired with prompts and were instructed to really get into the task, imagining and writing about the situations and memories as if they were their own. The set of photographs began innocuously enough, with the initial pictures showing a young boy and girl playing. For half the participants, the last few prompts involved brother-sister interactions (e.g., "Last summer my sister and I went on a cruise we won at a raffle. We had a great time together. . ."). For the other half of the participants, "my sister" was replaced with "my girlfriend." Independently of the sister-versus-girlfriend manipulation, we also varied the attractiveness of the woman in the photos. For half the participants, the woman was relatively plain. For the other half, the woman was actually a swimsuit model wearing bikinis and other clothes that accentuated her sexual attractiveness.

The manipulations were designed to produce conflict in the condition in which participants had erotic thoughts about the attractive, bikini-clad woman they were imagining and writing about as their sister. In this condition, participants were likely to feel an erotic pull toward the woman, even as they were writing about and imagining her as their sister. Given that they were forced to write and think about her as a sister, the feelings that would

possibly have to be suppressed or sublimated were erotic ones rather than fraternal ones.

In one experiment, after this photo-diary task, participants were asked about career goals and workplace values. These questions examined the extent to which participants wanted to pursue specifically creative jobs (as, e.g., an author, fashion designer, or architect) and preferred roles involving creating, making, and building, as opposed to other sorts of jobs stressing equally laudatory goals, such as benevolence or connecting with others (Hudson & Cohen, 2014). In another experiment, we gave participants an actual opportunity to create, asking them to write a short poem and to create a sculpture from a ball of clay (Kim et al., 2013).

Results from both studies were consistent. Conflicted Protestants in the erotic-sister condition became especially drawn to creative careers, as if they had something they needed to work out through productive, creative expression. Further, when they had an opportunity to actually do creative work, Protestants who were induced to have taboo desires excelled at it, writing better poems and making better sculptures (as rated by expert judges; see Fig. 1). Catholic and Jewish participants showed none of these effects.

A different experimental paradigm extended these findings beyond forbidden erotic thoughts to anger and also explored the process underlying sublimation by explicitly manipulating whether participants were supposed to suppress their anger from consciousness (Kim et al., 2013). The experiment compared three groups: One group recalled an anger-provoking incident from their past and was instructed to suppress thinking about it. Another recalled an anger-provoking incident but was instructed to suppress thinking about an innocuous topic (for example, a horse). The third group recalled a neutral event and was instructed to suppress thinking about an innocuous topic.

Next, participants had an opportunity to make a sculpture, create funny captions for cartoons, and make a collage from various photographs. Again, their work was later rated by expert judges. Protestants who recalled an anger-provoking incident and then suppressed thinking about it did the best work. Anger by itself was not the key ingredient; those who wrote about an anger-provoking incident but suppressed thinking about something innocuous were not particularly creative. Rather, it was only suppressed anger that led to the best work among Protestants (Fig. 2a). Again, Catholic and Jewish participants did not show these effects.

Notably, the studies suggested not only that suppression is a key mechanism underlying Protestant sublimation but that *displacement* was a key process also. Specifically, we found evidence that forbidden urges were displaced into the safer outlet of creative work—Protestants' work was

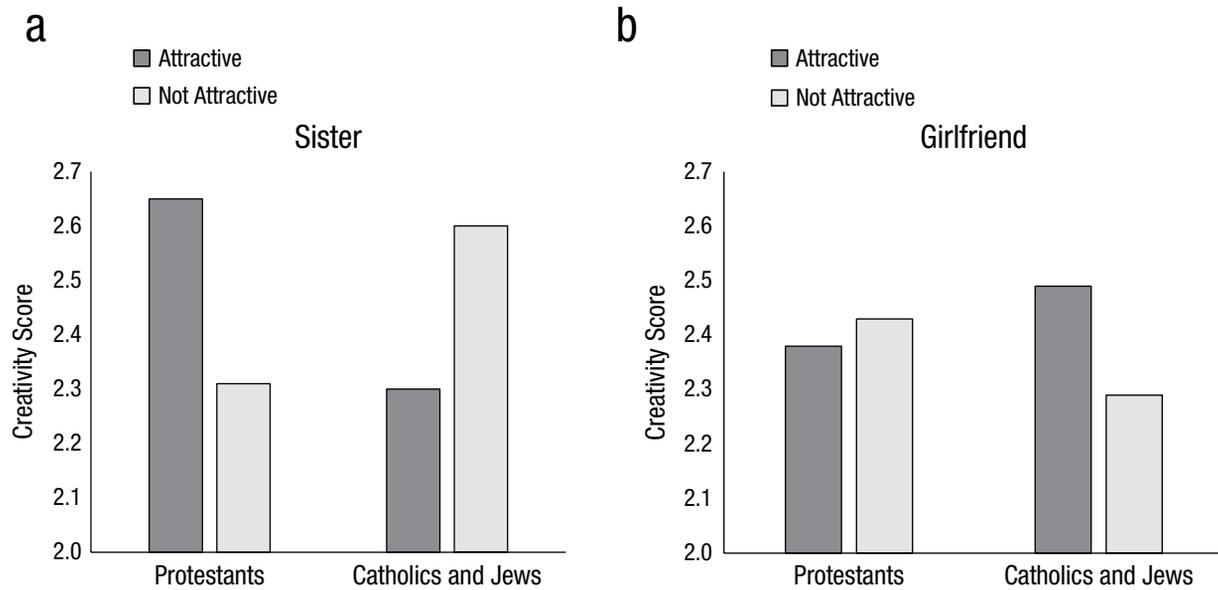


Fig. 1. Mean score on sculpture-making and poetry-writing tasks as a function of participants' religious group, whether participants wrote about a sister or a girlfriend, and whether the sister or girlfriend was attractive or not attractive. Adapted from Table 3 of "Sublimation, Culture, and Creativity," by E. Kim, V. Zeppenfeld, and D. Cohen, 2013, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 105, p. 648. Copyright 2013 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.

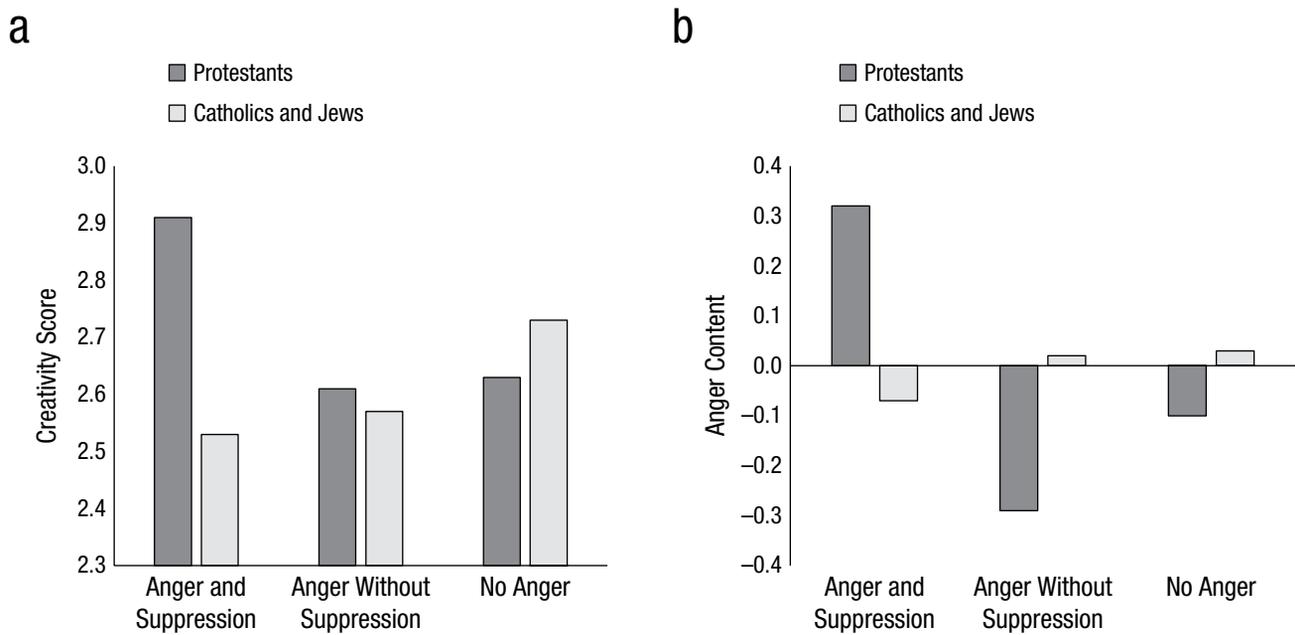


Fig. 2. Results from Kim, Zeppenfeld, and Cohen (2013). Panel (a) shows mean combined creativity scores on sculpture-making, collage-making, and cartoon-captioning tasks as a function of participants' religious group and condition (whether participants had to recall an anger-provoking incident and then suppress it, recall an anger-provoking incident but suppress a neutral thought, or not recall an anger-provoking incident and suppress a neutral thought). Panel (b) shows mean scores for anger content displayed in the tasks as a function of participants' religious group and condition. Adapted from Tables 13 (a) and 14 (b) of "Sublimation, Culture, and Creativity," by E. Kim, V. Zeppenfeld, and D. Cohen, 2013, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 105, pp. 655–656. Copyright 2013 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.

permeated with themes of the forbidden and suppressed topics. In the study involving forbidden erotic thoughts, the best work was done by Protestants who attempted to turn

their thoughts in a purer direction even as they produced sculptures with subtle sexual symbolization (e.g., phallic symbols). In the study involving suppressed aggression,

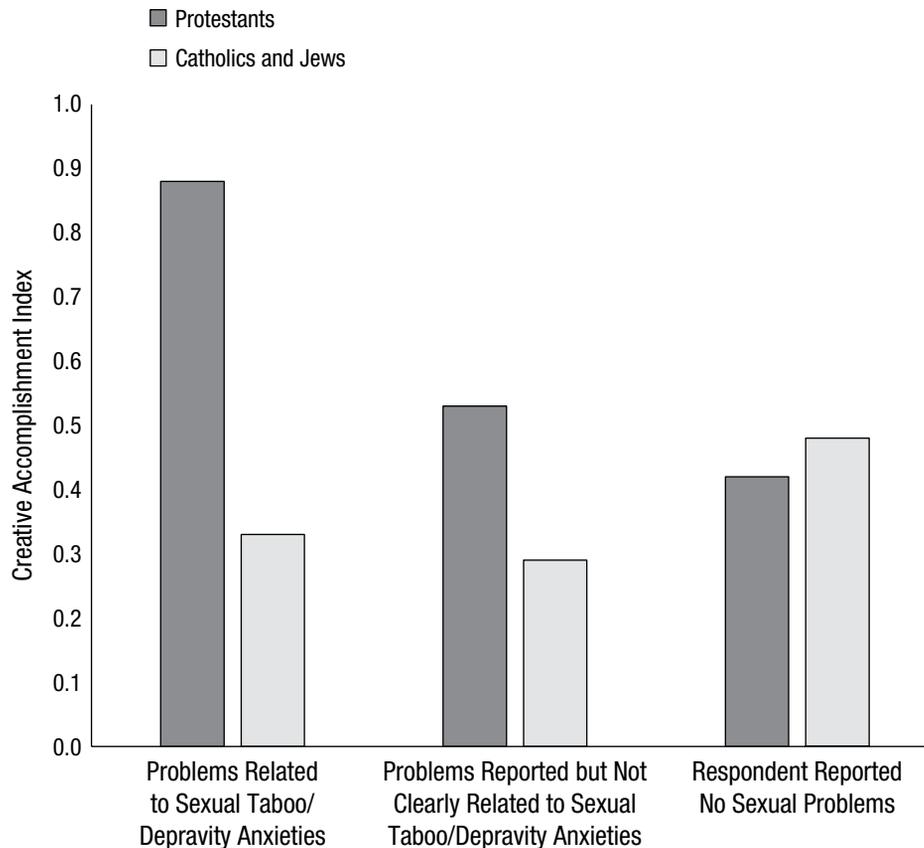


Fig. 3. Creative accomplishment among adults in the Terman (1992) Life-Cycle Study of Children With High Ability as a function of participants' religious group and whether participants reported problems related to sexual taboo/depravity anxieties, reported sexual problems not clearly related to such anxieties, or reported no sexual problems. Adapted from Table 1 of "Sublimation, Culture, and Creativity," by E. Kim, V. Zeppenfeld, and D. Cohen, 2013, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 105, p. 645. Copyright 2013 by the American Psychological Association. Adapted with permission.

Protestants who had to suppress thinking about an anger-provoking incident produced the sculptures, collages, and captions that manifested the most anger and were rated as the best by our expert judges (Fig. 2b).

Survey Evidence

Laboratory experiments were complemented by survey evidence supporting the same processes (Hudson & Cohen, 2014; Kim et al., 2013). In one study, we analyzed data from the Terman Life-Cycle Study of Children With High Ability's sample of gifted children (Terman, 1992); in another, we analyzed data from a more recent probability sample of the U.S. population. The Terman study began in the 1920s with a sample of high-IQ children in California, and participants were followed for decades afterward. Relevant to our concerns, participants were asked in 1950 about any "major problems or marked difficulties related to sex." Respondents were classified either as (a) having problems related to anxieties about sexual depravity or taboo sexual behaviors,

(b) having problems not clearly related to depravity or taboo, or (c) not having reported a major sexual problem. Consistent with laboratory findings, it was Protestants with anxieties related to depravity or taboo sexual behavior who ended up choosing the most creative careers and having the most creative achievements (Fig. 3). Again, this was not true of their Catholic and Jewish counterparts (Kim et al., 2013).

In another study, we analyzed data from a more recent (early 1990s) and representative sample of Americans (not simply those with high IQs). Here also it was "conflicted" Protestants—those who had taboo desires but tried to rule their sexual lives by their religious beliefs—who ended up in the most creative professions (Fig. 4; Hudson & Cohen, 2014). Again, for the Protestants, conflict over one's desires (rather than desires per se) seemed to be crucial for sublimation. Catholics and Jews did not show this effect. If anything, among Catholics and Jews, it was the nonconflicted "libertines"—those who had taboo desires and separated their sexuality from their religious beliefs—who were the most creative.

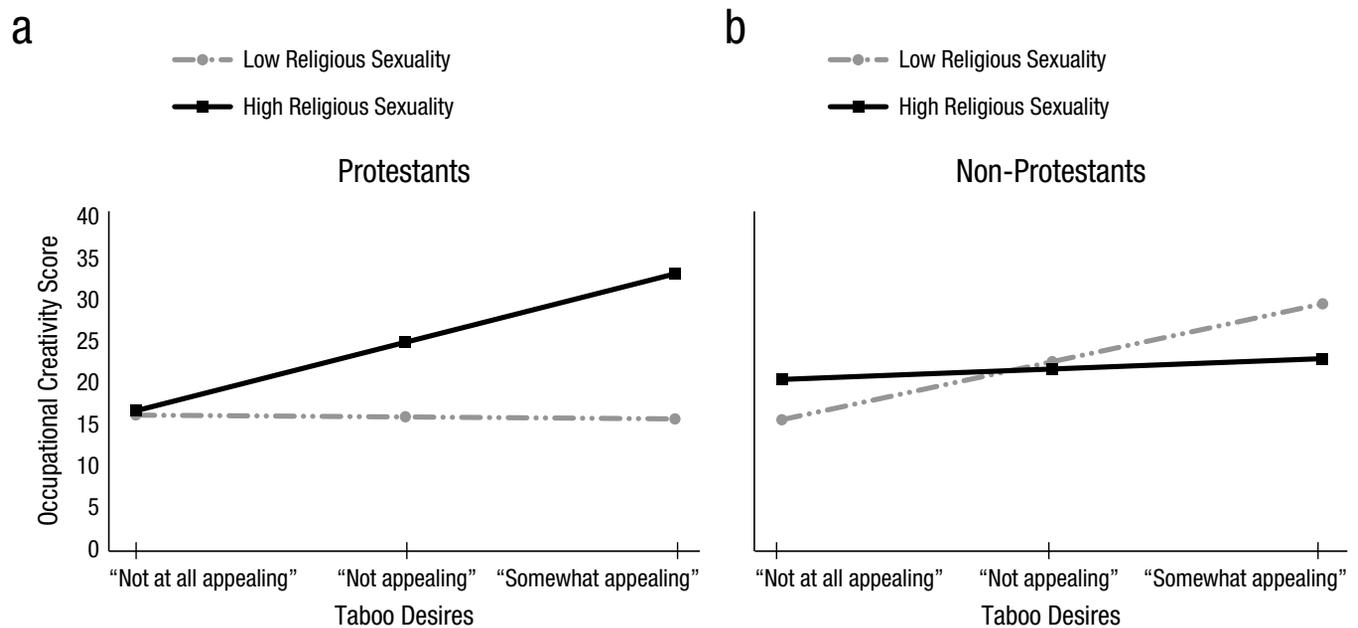


Fig. 4. Occupational creativity scores as a function of respondents' religious group, taboo desires, and likelihood of ruling their sexual behavior by their religious beliefs (Hudson & Cohen, 2014).

Conclusion

Although Freudian psychology has fallen into disrepute, its ideas about sublimation have parallels in the work of one of sociology's most influential theorists, Max Weber, and in modern dual-process models of the mind that distinguish between more conscious rational processes and less conscious loose and associational ones. Our recent research suggests that religious and cultural dimensions may be important determinants of how likely sublimating processes are among a given group of people. This should not be surprising—religions do not differ only in the content of what is forbidden; they also differ in whether certain mental processes (thoughts, feelings, impulses) themselves are forbidden, in their prescriptions for responding to such mental processes, and in sanctioned routes for redeeming oneself. Sublimation is one interesting process by which people cope with the human predicament of encountering the forbidden. Further examination of the religious and cultural traditions that guide people into and out of such predicaments will likely lead to other discoveries as well.

Recommended Reading

Baumeister, R., Dale, K., & Sommer, L. (1998). Freudian defense mechanisms and empirical findings in modern social psychology: Reaction formation, projection, displacement, undoing, isolation, sublimation, and denial. *Journal of Personality*, 66, 1081–1124. A survey of findings in social

psychology relevant to Freudian defense mechanisms (ironically, the two defenses about which social psychologists had not yet produced data were sublimation and displacement).
 Epstein, S. (1994). (See References). An article that introduces one influential dual-process model of the mind, contrasting the experiential system (holistic, affective, associational) with the rational system (analytic, logical, abstract).
 Erdelyi, H. (1985). (See References). A very readable explanation of Freud's theories, interpreted through the lens of cognitive psychology.
 Uhlmann, E., & Sanchez-Burks, J. (in press). (See References). An article reviewing psychology experiments that seem to bear out Weber's thesis and highlight the massive influence Puritanism still has on contemporary American culture.
 Weber, M. (2002). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. NY: Penguin. (Original work published 1905) Not easy reading, but a classic in sociology that outlines the Calvinist worldview and its consequences for work.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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