

Factors that Influence a Change in Religious Faith Among Young Adults

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The phenomenon of religious change has been neglected in the majority of psychological research. Instead, previous research has focused on how it influences therapy (see Gartner, Larson, & Allen, 1991 for review) or the factors that directly influence religious beliefs (King, Elder, & Whitbeck, 1997). This study was designed to examine what factors contribute to a change of strength in religious faith. The hypothesis was made that the factors of hometown size, gender, peer relationships, recent traumatic experience, and level of education would be the most predictive factors of a perceivable change, although many factors were also examined.

These factors were chosen based upon previous research and deductive reasoning. King et al. (1997) studied the effect of environment on religiosity, finding rural adolescents to be much more religious than their urban counterparts. The same study also found a higher level of church involvement among adolescent girls than boys (King et al., 1997). Peer influence on religious behavior is split, with some researchers (Ozorak, 1989) finding a higher level of influence than others (Erikson, 1992). A study by Edmons and Hooker (1992) found that traumatic life events were related to a change in belief in God. Finally, level of education has been significantly correlated with untraditional views of God, independent of gender (Willits & Funk, 1989).

Methods

A sample of 181 undergraduate students from psychology and philosophy classes was used in this study. Participants were predominately Caucasian ($n = 155$) and Protestant ($n = 123$). Three fixed-order questionnaires were used to measure the participants' past and current religious beliefs as well as gather basic information about them. A brief demographic questionnaire was administered in order to provide descriptive information about the participants, followed by the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SCSORF; Plante & Boccaccini 1997), and then a researcher developed questionnaire to examine factors that had an influence on change of strength in religious faith. The SCSORF was developed as a quick, reliable measure to determine current strength of religious faith (Plant & Boccaccini, 1997). It was adapted in this study to measure current and past religious beliefs by using it twice, once after the demographic questions and once at the end of the questionnaires. For the first SCSORF the participants were asked to answer the questions by responding how they currently felt and for the second the participants were asked to answer the questions as they would have during their senior year of high school. Participants were recruited from undergraduate psychology and philosophy classes and given course extra credit for their participation. The questionnaire was administered in groups of 27-45 and was completed in an average of 15 minutes.

Results

Specific analyses of the data were conducted using a mixed design ANOVA. No main effect of time was found in the sample, indicating a lack of change in strength of religious faith among the participants. However, many of the analyses point to distinct difference in religious faith among specific groups. College rank shows a significant main effect, with a negative correlation between level of education and strength of faith (Fig. 1). Current living situation also shows a significant main effect and distinct group differences, with those living in a closer community of people (on-campus housing and fraternities/sororities) showing a higher degree of faith (Fig. 2). SES factors, such as parental education level and parental occupation, were found to have no influence on the strength of religious faith. Peer influences on faith are very evident as the attendance of religious services by friends had very significant main effects (Fig. 3). Gender was also found to have a significant main

effect, with males having lower strength of faith than females (Fig. 4). The factors of hometown size and traumatic experiences had no effect on either change of faith or strength of faith.

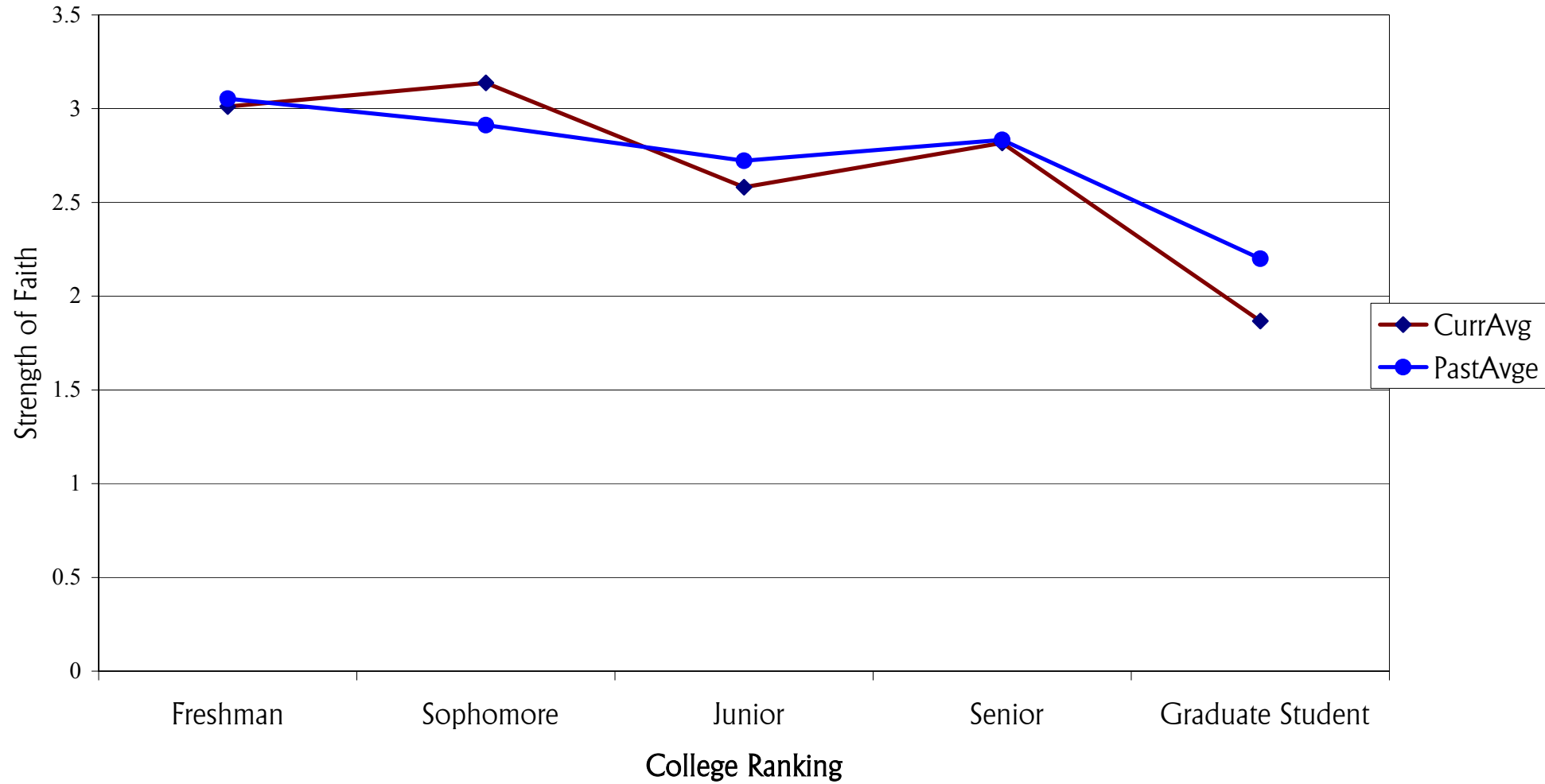
Discussion

The main hypothesis that certain factors would be more indicative of a change in the strength of religious faith was not supported. The lack of change in faith strength in the sample could be responsible for this finding. Due to the significant differences among groups such as college rank and living situation, the author feels that either the method of reporting past strength of faith was flawed or the participants' memories were inaccurate. A longitudinal instead of cross-sectional study could solve this problem. Previous research was both supported and challenged by this study. The influence of gender on religiosity was upheld, as were the impacts of level of education and peer influence. The association of traumatic factors with a change in faith was not supported by the current data and neither was the influence of growing up in a rural vs. urban environment. One new finding was the strength of faith compared to current living situation. Those who lived in communal groups (residence halls, fraternity/sorority houses) had a much higher overall strength of faith than those who lived off-campus. This should lead to further research on living situations and religious beliefs.

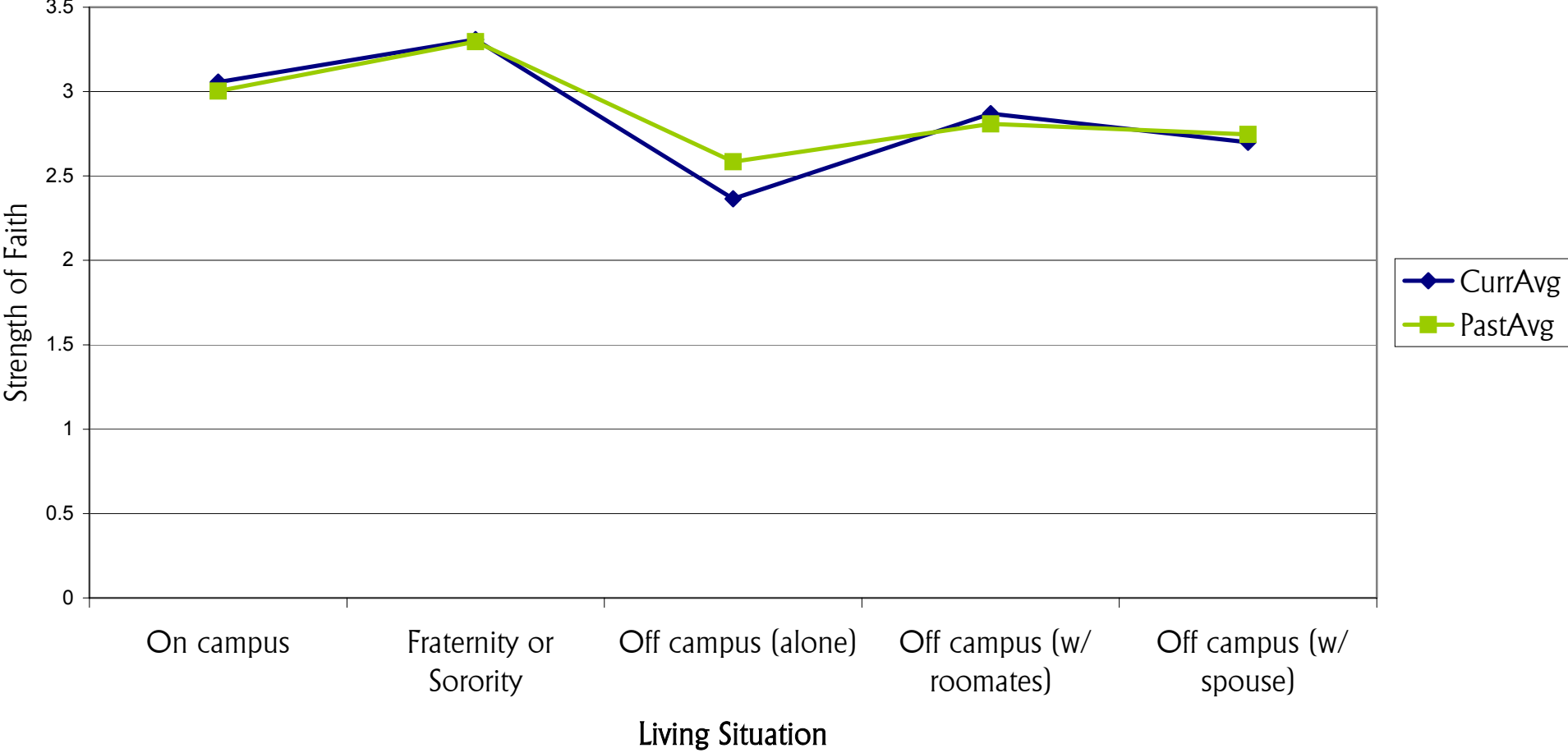
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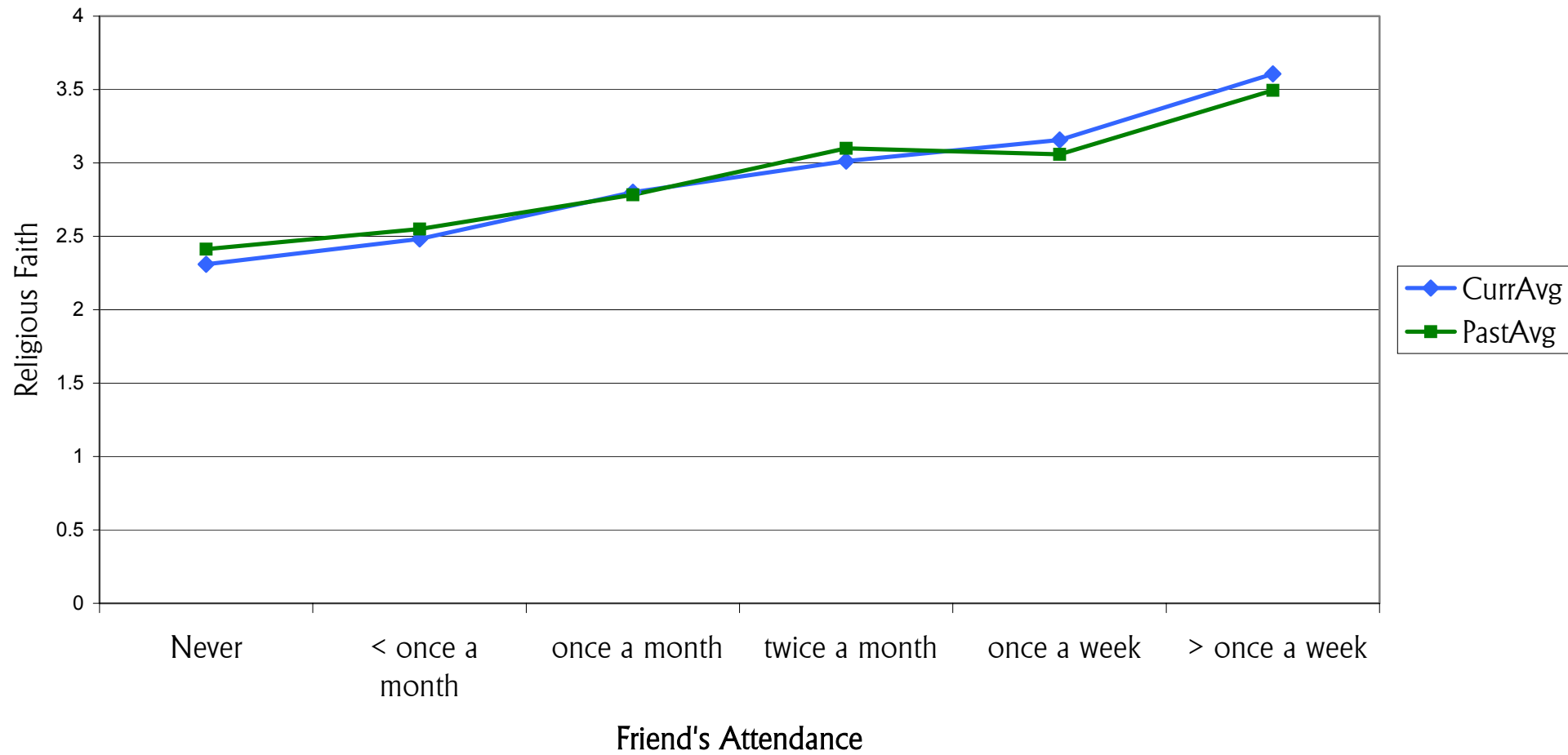
Religious Faith vs. Class Rank



Religious Faith vs. Living Situation



Religious Faith vs. Friend's Church Attendance



Religious Faith vs. Gender

