



# Personal beliefs/experiences and stigma toward voice-hearers

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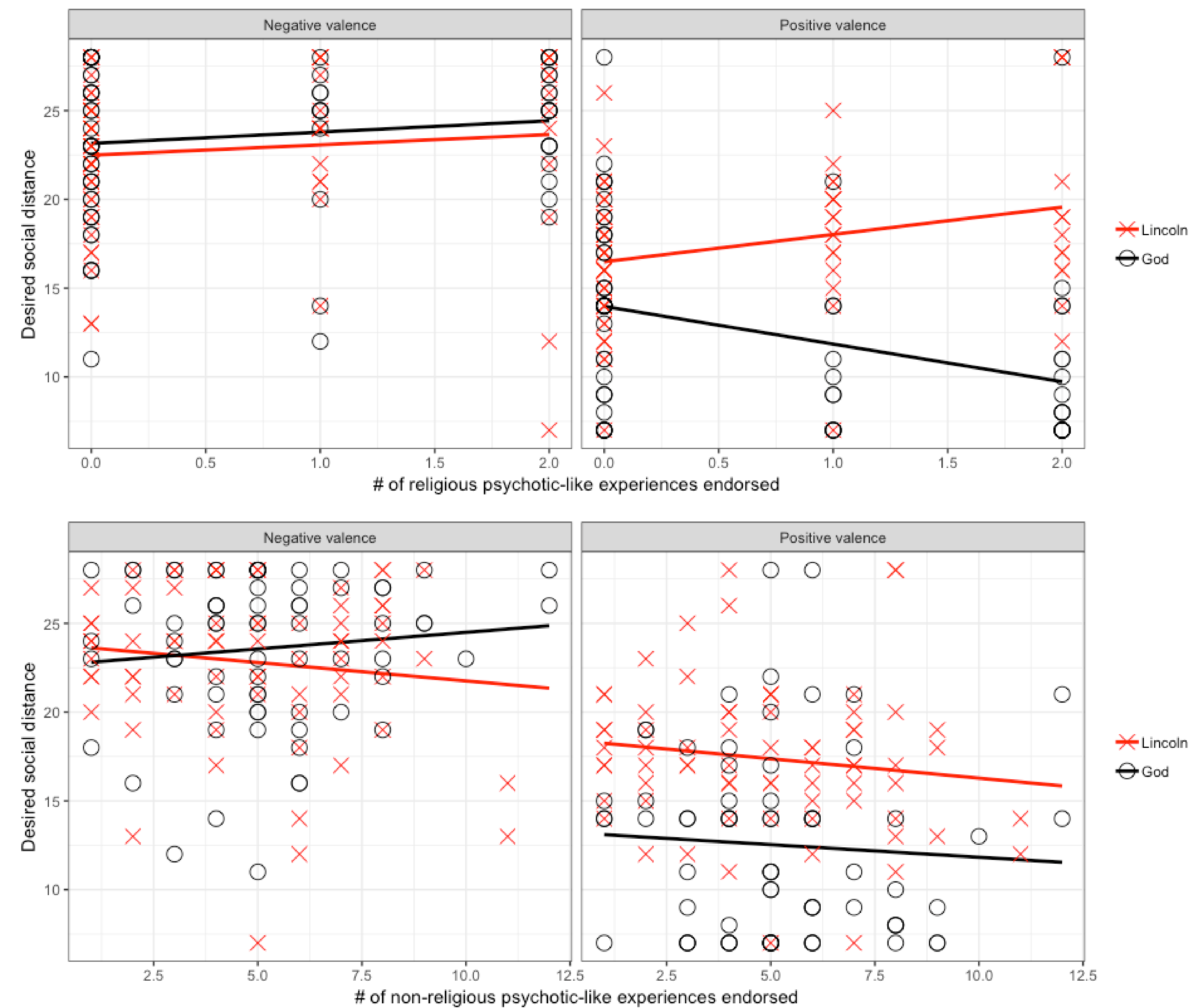
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## INTRODUCTION

Stigma is one of the primary public health barriers facing people with psychosis. However, studies have documented wide variation in the degree of stigma endorsed by members of the public and experienced by people who hear voices, motivating researchers to identify predictors of individual differences in stigma. One possible predictor of stigma toward voice-hearing experiences is one's own experience of psychotic-like phenomena. It is plausible that people who have had similar experiences to a voice-hearer would endorse decreased stigma toward that person. This previously untested hypothesis is important given recent findings which show that psychotic-like experiences are common in the general public and disproportionately represented in certain subcultures such as religious groups.

## METHODS

144 students were presented with vignettes describing people who hear voices. All participants read about a person who hears negative voices and one who hears positive voices, with half reading about people who hear *Abraham Lincoln*, and the other half reading vignettes with the words *Abraham Lincoln* replaced with the word *God*. We modeled interactions between vignette conditions and the number of psychotic-like beliefs endorsed by participants from the religious and non-religious subscales of the PDI (Delusions Inventory) using Bayesian multilevel regression in Stan.



## RESULTS

People who endorsed more religious experiences desired significantly less social distance from God-hearers ( $p < .005$ ), particularly when the God-hearing experience was positive ( $p = .001$ ). There was no significant main effect of religious experiences on social distance desired from voice-

hearers, and no significant relationships between religious experiences and perceptions of mental illness or dangerousness. Relationships between non-religious psychotic-like experiences/beliefs and social distance, perceived dangerousness, and perceptions of mental illness were not significant.

## DISCUSSION

Personal psychotic-like beliefs and experiences may not be generally associated with decreased stigma toward voice-hearers, but having beliefs or experiences that are similar to those of the particular voice-hearer in question may decrease stigma toward that voice-hearer. We document an effect consistent with this hypothesis in the context of religious versus non-religious voice-hearing experiences: people with more religious beliefs/experiences desired less social distance from people who heard voices with religious content.

### Religious beliefs/experiences

Participants were asked to answer yes or no to the following questions:

“Do you ever feel that you are especially close to God?”

“Do you ever feel as if you have been chosen by God in some way?”

### Voice-hearer vignette text

Participants read the following vignettes, with the voice randomly attributed (between-subjects) to either *God* or *Abraham Lincoln*:

*Positive voice.* “Nancy often hears the voice of [God/Abraham Lincoln] giving her guidance and advice. The voice says comforting things, and once told her that she has been chosen to spread the word of [God/Abraham Lincoln]. She recently went through some hardships at work, but felt she was able to persevere in part because of the voice's presence in her Life.”

*Negative voice.* “Jessica often hears the voice of [God/Abraham Lincoln] talking to her. He often says insulting things and once ordered her to murder someone. She recently quit her job, believing she was acting in accordance with [God's/Abraham Lincoln's] wishes.”