

Article

Relating with God Contributes to Variance in Happiness, over that from Personality and Age

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Received: 9 May 2013; in revised form: 20 June 2013 / Accepted: 21 June 2013 /

Published: 24 June 2013

Abstract: A previous study on university students reported that personal, communal, and environmental spiritual well-being contributed to happiness over and above personality but that relating with God did not. In this study, happiness was assessed using a modified Oxford Happiness Inventory. Personality scores were obtained using forms of Eysenck's Personality Questionnaire. Four domains of spiritual well-being were determined using Fisher's Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire. Relationship with God was reflected by the Transcendental domain of spiritual well-being in this instrument. Studies with 466 university students from Australia, Northern Ireland, and England, 494 people attending churches in Ballarat, and 1002 secondary school students in Victoria showed that relating with God accounts for variance on happiness, over and above personality, and age.

Keywords: happiness; personality; age; relation with God

1. Introduction

Quality of relationship with God provides a measure of one of four domains of spiritual well-being, the other three being relationship with self (in terms of meaning, purpose, and values in life); relationship with others (in terms of morality, culture, and religion [for those for whom it is important]); and relationship with the environment (beyond care, nurture, and stewardship to a real connection with nature) [1]. These four domains of spiritual well-being have been assessed using the Spiritual Health And Life-Orientation Measure (SHALOM), which was developed with secondary school students, with the intention that language and conceptual clarity suitable for 12–18 year-olds should make the instrument appropriate for use with adults as well [2].

The focus of spiritual ‘well-being’ fits with contemporary studies in the emerging field of positive psychology, which is dedicated to understanding the process of human happiness [3]. Happiness is a multi-faceted concept often used synonymously with the notion of subjective well-being. Diener described three components of happiness as ‘frequency and degree of positive affect or joy; absence of negative feelings, such as depression or anxiety; and average level of satisfaction over a period’ [4]. The Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI), which is largely based on the inverse of the Beck Depression Index [5], is one of the most frequently used instruments for assessing happiness [3,6,7].

Consistent findings have been made in a number of studies relating happiness with personality traits, to the extent that happiness has been described as ‘a thing called stable extraversion’ [8]. Extraversion (+) and Neuroticism (−) appeared to be the strongest predictors of happiness levels in several studies [3,9,10]. Personality has been reported as a greater determinant of happiness than social class, money, social relationships, work, religion, or other external variables [3,11].

Questions have been raised concerning any relationship between age and happiness, or life satisfaction. Fukuda contended there is an age effect for happiness with downward movement for 18–55 (and 80–89), and with upward movement for 56–69 [12]. Although previous support for such a U-shaped relationship between life satisfaction and age had been presented [13], others conclude there is only a weak U-shaped pattern in happiness for the 20–60 age range [14]. Keeping age in mind, no age differences were found across a study of religious denominations, although conceptualizations of God varied dependent on religious affiliation [15]. Relationship with God, which would be built on people’s conceptualizations of God, has also been found to be more strongly associated with happiness than is social cohesion, which was indicated by religious attendance in a study by Childs [16].

Other studies with adults variously report positive correlations between church attendance and life satisfaction [17], and participation in religious activities and well-being [18], whereas, religious practice and happiness were positively associated among students in Germany [19], but not in Estonia [20]. Among young adults in Qatar, a relationship was found between health, well-being, and religiosity [21], but church attendance did not predict life satisfaction among adolescents [22], or well-being of graduate students [23]. The conclusions that perceived control acts as mediator between religiosity/spirituality and well-being in adults [24], and that intrinsic religiosity leads to improved spiritual well-being among seminary students [25], point to internal motivation being a key to positive outcomes in well-being. Therefore, variations in findings by church attendance and religious affiliation are not surprising, particularly among the young, because many children are forced to attend by parents [26] so they would not be likely to relate kindly to religion or God. The main motivation for some adolescents’ and adults’ participation in religious activities is obviously for human companionship, more than to celebrate and build relationships with God. In addition, religious affiliation appears to be a historical legacy for many, which is useful at times of census, weddings, and funerals, evidenced by marked variations, at least in Australia, between approximately 70% who claim religious affiliation on the census and about 5% who regularly attend religious activities [27].

Previous studies have shown inconsistent results in the relationship between religion and happiness, depending on measures used [28]. Five studies by Francis and others suggest a consistent relationship between happiness (measured using the OHI) with religiosity (assessed using the Francis Attitude to Christianity Scale (FACS)) [29]. Although Francis *et al.* claimed that the OHI was an appropriate measure of happiness, based on an adequate theoretical discussion of this construct, Kashdan later

raised concerns about conceptual issues related to the OHI and the subsequent Oxford Happiness Questionnaire [30]. The authors of the OHI acknowledged that a loose array of constructs was assessed by this instrument [31]. The composition of the FACS is, as its name suggests, decidedly Christian, with five of its 24 items relating to Jesus, two items mention the bible and three items, the church. The other 14 items are more religious, not specifically Christian, with eight mentioning God, five prayer and one, both of these.

A more compact, general measure of relationship with God will be reported in this paper, as will a modified OHI. Studies in this paper will bypass the uncertainties of trying to assess the relationship with God through religious activities and affiliation, by directly addressing it through responses to the five items comprising the Transcendental domain of the Spiritual Health And Life-Orientation Measure (SHALOM) [2].

In a study with university students, Gomez and Fisher [32] reported that personal, communal, and environmental spiritual well-being provided additional variance to the prediction of happiness over personality dimensions assessed using Eysenck Personality Questionnaires [33]. As transcendental spiritual well-being (relationship with God) did not provide similar influence in that sample, it was predicted that relationship with God could possibly be a critical factor in particular groups, such as those who are religious. In order to test this hypothesis, and any relationship with age of respondents, the emergent questions for this research became, ‘In what circumstances does connecting with God relate to happiness, over and above personality?’ and, ‘Does age enter this equation?’

2. Materials and Methods

Following approvals from the University of Ballarat Human Research Ethics Committee, several studies were conducted using SHALOM, and the OHI, together with Eysenck Personality Questionnaires (EPQs) to investigate how happiness relates to personality, age, and relationship with God.

2.1. Materials

2.1.1. Assessing Relationship with God

SHALOM is a 20-item measure, with five items for each of four domains of spiritual well-being, all assessed using a five-point Likert scale (from 1 = very low to 5 = very high), to elicit two responses, showing each person’s ideals for spiritual well-being, as well as their lived experiences in each of the four domains. The quality of relationship with God (TRAB) is reflected in the importance of developing ‘personal relationship with the Divine/God’, ‘worship of the Creator’, ‘oneness with God’, ‘peace with God’, and ‘prayer life’. A domain score is calculated by taking the mean value of responses to the five items. Only the lived experience scores will be used in this paper [2].

2.1.2. Assessing Happiness

The OHI comprises 29 items, each scored from 0 to 3. The respondent chooses one of four sentences constructed to reflect incremental steps defined as unhappy or mildly depressed, a low level of happiness, a high level of happiness, and mania. For example, item 1 of the OHI:

- 0 I do not feel happy.
- 1 I feel fairly happy.
- 2 I am very happy.
- 3 I am incredibly happy [34].

A summary happiness score is obtained by calculating the mean value of the items assessed in the factor. Factor analysis will be used to report a modified 19-item version of the OHI in this paper.

2.1.3. Assessing Personality

Various forms of Eysenck's Personality Questionnaires (EPQ) [33] were also used in these studies. The Junior and Adult versions of the Revised and abbreviated EPQs (JEPQR-A and EPQR-A) each comprise 48 questions with Yes/No responses, which yield factor scores for the personality variables Extraversion, Neuroticism, and Psychoticism, with an attendant Lie scale, which indicates social-desirability of responses [35,36].

2.2. Participants

2.2.1. Study 1. University Students

The cohort in this study comprised 302 students from an Australian public university, 133 pre-service teachers from a religious university in Northern Ireland, and 31 pre-service teachers from an English public university. At the end of lectures, the university students were invited to participate in the survey comprising SHALOM, OHI, and EPQR-A, and some demographic details. The task took 10 to 15 minutes, with 80 to 90% of students participating.

2.2.2. Study 2. Church-Attenders

People who attended church services in six denominations in Ballarat, Victoria were invited to complete the survey comprising SHALOM, EPQR-A, and OHI together with some demographic details. There was an 80%–90% participation rate with 494 respondents taking 10 to 20 minutes to complete the survey.

2.2.3. Study 3. Secondary School Students

Following approvals from principals, parents, and students, secondary students in three Catholic schools, six Christian Community schools, and one other non-government school in Victoria completed a survey comprising SHALOM, OHI, Junior EPQR, and some demographic variables in class, under the supervision of teachers, who followed instructions from the author. The survey took approximately 20 minutes of class time. Participation rates varied from 45% in the non-government school to 95% in the Christian Community schools, with a total of 1002, 12–18 year-olds participating.

As no significant differences were found by gender for happiness (OHI) and relationship with God (TRAB), in any of these three studies, gender details of participants will not be shown here.

2.3. Limitations

The participants in each study reported here do not necessarily represent the total population from which they were drawn. The majority of participants in these studies came from Ballarat, a regional centre, 100km west of Melbourne. Ballarat has a population of 95,000, of whom 95% are Caucasian. In *Study 1- Universities*, University of Ballarat supplied 65% of university students in this study. In *Study 2 - Church-attenders*, only Christian churches in Ballarat are represented in this study. Although Buddhist, Jewish, and Islamic groups in Melbourne were invited, circumstances did not permit their participation. In *Study 3 - Secondary schools*, several Jewish schools in the Melbourne area declined participation with apologies that they felt a little over-researched. Several denominational Christian church schools gave a similar reply. No response came from any of the Islamic schools in Melbourne that were invited to participate.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Measures

3.1.1. Relationship with God (Transcendental Spiritual Well-Being via SHALOM)

The five items used to assess transcendental spiritual well-being cohered strongly to yield a discreet factor which indicated levels of relationship with God among the university students, church-attenders, and secondary school students (see Table 1 for values).

3.1.2. Personality (via Eysenck Personality Questionnaires)

Factor analyses of the 48-item Eysenck Personality Questionnaires yielded four factors for Extraversion (sociable, sensation-seeking, carefree, and optimistic traits), Neuroticism (anxious, worrying, and moody traits), Psychoticism (solitary, troublesome, cruel, inhumane traits) and a Lie scale (indicating social desirability of responses) for each of the three groups reported here (see Table 1 for values). The low alpha coefficient reported for the Psychoticism scale indicates problems associated with measuring this dimension of personality, especially among religious groups [35].

Table 1. Mean (SD) and α coefficients for factors on happiness, personality, and relating with God.

	Total	University students		Church attenders		Secondary students	
N	1952	456		494		1002	
factor	M(SD)	M(SD)	α	M(SD)	α	M(SD)	α
OHI-19	1.54(.49)	1.42(.43)	.89	1.45(.49)	.91	1.63(.50)	.90
contentment	1.61(.57)	1.54(.51)	.85	1.65(.56)	.88	1.62(.59)	.86
express happiness	1.85(.52)	1.79(.47)	.77	4.62(.49)	.82	1.99(.50)	.75
quality of life	1.15(.68)	.94(.61)	.77	1.99(.50)	.80	1.29(.68)	.78
Extraversion	8.63(3.20)	8.55(3.11)	.84	6.75(3.59)	.84	9.60(2.55)	.78
Neuroticism	6.16(3.26)	5.92(3.23)	.80	4.79(3.40)	.82	6.95(2.95)	.76
Psychoticism	2.69(2.17)	2.56(1.87)	.56	2.19(1.57)	.33	2.99(2.48)	.74
Lie scale	4.09(2.53)	3.80(2.32)	.65	4.95(2.90)	.70	3.79(2.33)	.64
Relate with God	3.21(1.24)	2.70(1.29)	.96	3.99(.81)	.90	3.06(1.22)	.94

3.1.3. Happiness (Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI))

The original Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI) comprised 29 items, for which Hills and Argyle proposed a seven factor structure [31], in which some items cross-loaded onto more than one factor. In response to Kashdan's criticism of the construct of the OHI [30], factor analyses were performed here to check for consistency in structure of a happiness measure between groups of different status and age. Principal components analyses (PCA) with Varimax rotation of the OHI data for the three groups reported here showed that 19 of the items loaded consistently onto three discreet factors. These explained 42% to 47% of the variance, with the other ten items explaining another 8% to 12% of variance, but distributed inconsistently across one to three additional factors among the three groups.

The first of the three consistent factors can be called 'contentment' (comprising feel happy, optimistic, satisfied, in control, life is rewarding, pleased, life is good, find beauty, meaning and purpose), as each of these items fits well into the definition of contentment as 'an internal satisfaction that does not demand changes in external circumstances' [37]. The second set of items is self-explanatory, being called 'expressions of happiness' (comprising joy/elation, fun with others, cheerful effect, laugh, amused). The third set of items clearly reflects 'quality of life' (comprising effort, rested, energetic, mentally alert, healthy). These three factors display aspects of Diener's multi-faceted description of happiness [4], but do not match any of the original factors in the structure of OHI proposed by Hills and Argyle [31]. When these three factors were themselves subjected to PCA, they were found to cohere into a single higher-order factor, which can be called 'happiness', constituting a modified 19-item OHI (OHI-19). Confirmatory factor analysis was performed using AMOS (Analysis of Moment Structures) to investigate the construct validity of the resultant three-factor OHI-19. Values of fit indices displayed acceptability for the OHI-19, for the relative Chi-square (with $\chi^2/df = 3.08$, which is <5), Normed Fit Index = .93 ($>.90$), Comparative Fit Index = .95 ($>.93$) and Root Mean Square Error Approximation = .046 ($<.05$) [38]. The resultant Cronbach's alpha values for the OHI-19 were strong at .89, .91, and .90 for the university student, church-attenders, and secondary school samples, respectively (see Table 1 for details).

3.1.4. Age

Results from the three studies were combined to facilitate comparison by age, because of consistency in the instruments used to collect respondents' views.

3.2. Identifying Variations in Happiness

SPSS (Statistical Product & Service Solutions) for Windows 19 was used to perform three-step hierarchical regression analyses on happiness as the dependent variable, with personality scores for Extraversion, Neuroticism, Psychoticism, and Lie scale entered in step 1, and age in step 2, and relationship with God (TRAB from SHALOM) in step 3.

3.2.1. Happiness and Personality

In line with previous studies [39], the two personality constructs of Extraversion (+) and Neuroticism (−) were found to be major contributors in explaining the variance in happiness, as assessed using the modified OHI-19 (see Table 2).

Closer inspection of the three component subscales of OHI-19 (in Table 2) revealed a comparable contribution to explanation of variance in ‘contentment’ and ‘quality of life’ by Extraversion and Neuroticism. However, it was not surprising to note the strong relationship between Extraversion and ‘expressions of happiness’, as both relate to positive affect.

Table 2. Results of hierarchical regression analyses of happiness among university and religious secondary school students and church-attenders, by personality (step 1), age (step 2), relationship with God (step 3) (standardized beta and R^2 values shown).

	Modified Oxford Happiness Inventory OHI-19	Contentment	Expressions of happiness	Quality of life
<i>Step 1 (R^2)</i>	(.29 ***)	(.26 ***)	(.32 ***)	(.16 **)
Extraversion	.36 ***	.26 ***	.48 ***	.20 ***
Neuroticism	−.31 ***	−.37 **	−.13 ***	−.25 ***
Psychoticism	−.00	−.06 **	−.03	.06 **
Lie	.16 ***	.12 ***	.05 *	.20 ***
<i>Step 2 (ΔR^2)</i>	(.03 ***)	(.00 *)	(.03 ***)	(.03 ***)
Age	−.22 ***	−.08 ***	−.22 ***	−.24 ***
<i>Step 3 (R^2)</i>	(.02 ***)	(.02 ***)	(.01 ***)	(.02 ***)
God (TRAB)	.17 ***	.18 ***	.10 ***	.16 ***

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001.

3.2.2. Happiness and Age

Combination of the three projects reported here enabled investigation of happiness by age, at step 2 in the regression analysis. These studies did not support a U-shaped relationship of happiness with age. However, higher values were reported by younger respondents, with greater consistency among those aged 20 upwards (see Table 3). In particular, teenagers reported greater ‘expressions of happiness’ and ‘quality of life’ than older respondents, with consistent measures of ‘contentment’ being reported across the age span.

3.2.3. Happiness, Personality, Age, and Relation with God

After controlling for personality and age, step 3 of the multiple regression analysis revealed that relationship with God explained small, yet significant, additional variance in happiness among the populations studied here. In other words, it appears that people who have positive relationship with God also have greater contentment and higher quality of life. They show greater expressions of happiness as well (see Table 2). These findings complement the formative work by Francis and others [29], and extend it by considering the additional effect of age. Further studies are warranted

with more diverse populations to check the consistency of these findings, using the modified Oxford Happiness Inventory, Eysenck's Personality Questionnaires together with the spiritual well-being questionnaire called SHALOM.

Table 3. Mean (SD) values & ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) of happiness scales by age.

Age	N	OHI-19	Contentment	Expressions of happiness	Quality of life
12–17	1002	1.63 (.50)	1.62 (.59)	1.99 (.50)	1.29 (.68)
18–19	224	1.53 (.44)	1.61 (.51)	1.95 (.48)	1.04 (.63)
20s	275	1.43 (.45)	1.57 (.53)	1.74 (.44)	.98 (.64)
30s	124	1.42 (.49)	1.59 (.61)	1.62 (.49)	1.06 (.65)
40s	114	1.39 (.48)	1.59 (.57)	1.50 (.47)	1.09 (.66)
50s	104	1.38 (.48)	1.62 (.57)	1.53 (.49)	.98 (.64)
60+	109	1.38 (.44)	1.64 (.52)	1.58 (.44)	.91 (.64)
total	1952	1.54 (.49)	1.61 (.57)	1.85 (.52)	1.15 (.68)
ANOVA	F(6,1910)	15.7	.38	45.5	15.5
	p	<.001	.90 ^{ns}	<.001	<.001

4. Conclusions

In light of diversity in findings from previous studies of religiosity and church attendance with happiness and well-being, a direct measure of relationship with God was used here, instead of potentially flawed methods of assuming that religious activities, such as church attendance and religious affiliation, necessarily imply relationship with God. To this end, the importance of relating with God was assessed by the transcendental domain of the Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire, called SHALOM. Happiness is a multi-faceted construct, often referred to as subjective well-being, assessed here using a modified 19-item Oxford Happiness Inventory (OHI-19), in which Factor Analysis revealed three components, called ‘contentment’, ‘expressions of happiness’, and ‘quality of life’. The happiness scales (OHI-19 and its three subsets) all related positively with Extraversion and negatively with Neuroticism, as measured by Eysenck's Personality Questionnaires. The younger secondary school students reported greater happiness than the other participants in these studies. This work has shown that relating with God provided additional, small yet significant, explanation of variance in happiness, over and above that by personality and age.

Given the relatively small size of groups reported on here, additional replication studies are needed, with the instruments employed here, to check if a significant positive relationship between happiness and relationship with God is consistently shown among other people in other places.

5. Postscript

One of the reviewers raised the question as to how this paper relates to Piedmont's claim that spirituality represents an additional factor of personality [40]. As that question is tangential to the key focus of this paper, comments will be made in this postscript. An opposing view to Piedmont's is presented by Unterrainer *et al.* who claim ‘religiosity could be understood as a personality trait..., whereas spirituality or the amount of Spiritual Well-Being might be better conceived as a distinctive

indicator of subjective well-being' ([41], p. 124). Subjective well-being is often equated with happiness. In my work, spirituality is based on Fisher's definition:

Spirituality is concerned with a person's awareness of the existence and experience of inner feelings and beliefs, that give purpose, meaning and value to life. Spirituality helps individuals to live at peace with themselves, to love (God and)* their neighbour, and to live in harmony with the environment. For some, spirituality involves an encounter with God, or transcendent reality, which can occur in or out of the context of organised religion, whereas for others, it involves no experience or belief in the supernatural (NB * These words are placed in parentheses as they will be meaningless to those people who do not relate with [or believe in] God ([1], p. 190).

This definition underpinned the development of the Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire (called SHALOM) used in this study. Previous research has shown that the Personal, Communal, and Environmental domains of spiritual well-being explain variance in happiness over and above personality [32]. This study showed that the fourth domain of spiritual well-being, relating with God, does likewise. So, spiritual well-being is definitely related to happiness, or subjective well-being. The four domains of spiritual well-being are expressions of who a person is at their very core, or heart level. Therefore these features could fit with a definition of personality, described as 'a dynamic and organized set of characteristics possessed by a person who uniquely influences his or her cognitions, emotions, motivations, and behaviors in various situations' [42]. If personality is an enduring feature of a person, and relating with God has been shown to lead to change in people's lives, would this indicate that relating with God (one aspect of spirituality) leads to change in personality? Or, that spirituality/spiritual well-being *per se* is an aspect of personality? Further work is needed to clarify the relationship between personality and spiritual well-being.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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