

Religiosity and Spirituality as Predictors of Subjectively Perceived Happiness in University Students in Slovakia

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Abstract

Several research projects discuss the existence of weak to moderately strong positive relation between religiosity/spirituality on the one hand and subjective well-being, life satisfaction or quality of life on the other hand (see Kelley & Miller, 2007). Variables related to religiosity and spirituality of a person may be perceived in two ways: as protective factors of attaining subjective well-being or as barriers limiting its attainment. The objective of this study is verification of mutual relationship between the indicators of religiosity and spirituality with regard to subjectively perceived happiness and verification of predictive strength of these indicators with regard to subjective happiness. The sample of research participants consisted of 194 university students aged 18 to 26. The research used 4 tools: The Expressions of Spirituality Inventory-Revised (MacDonald, 2000), The Salience in Religious Commitment Scale (Roof & Perkins, 1975), Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) and The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Hills & Argyle, 2002). Using multiple hierarchical linear regression (stepwise), we obtained 2 dimensions of spirituality as significant predictors of subjective happiness – Existential Well-Being and Experiential/Phenomenological Dimension. Demographic data and confession types were not proved as predictors of happiness.

Keywords: religiosity, spirituality, subjective happiness, quality of life

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Introduction

The relationship between spirituality or religiosity and various dimensions of quality of life has been extensively examined during the recent decades (Sawatzky, Ratner & Chiu, 2005). Several researchers discuss the existence of a weak to moderately strong positive relationship between various indicators of religiosity or spirituality on the one hand and subjective well-being, life satisfaction or quality of life on the other hand (see Kelley & Miller, 2007). Several research findings may be quoted to support the above mentioned relationship. Abdel-Khalek (2010) found that religiosity may be considered as a salient component of, and a contributing factor to, quality of life of Muslim college students. Rule (2007) states a significant but not very strong statistical relationship between religiosity and quality of life. Diener and Clifton (2002) verified a mutual relationship between religiosity and happiness and also between religiosity and life satisfaction in two large samples (1,034 and 52,624 respondents). In both cases and in both samples a statistically significant but weak positive relationship was observed: $r = .07$ or $.08$ in the case of correlation between religiosity and life satisfaction and $r = .06$ in the case of religiosity and happiness.

Thomas and Washington (2012) verified the relationship between "health-related quality of life" and religiosity in patients with hemodialysis and they found a weak but inverse relationship between them ($\beta = -.15$). Kačmárová (2012) verified the relationship between quality of life and the concept of God which consisted of feelings towards God and ideas of God and she found weak to moderately strong relationships (correlation coefficients from $-.08$ to $.416$). This was a case of age-specific sample of seniors. McIntosh, Poulin, Silver and Holman (2011) focused their attention on the affective component of subjective well-being in relation to religiosity and spirituality, in which religiosity and spirituality independently predicted higher positive affect ($\beta = .09$ for spirituality and $\beta = .12$ for religiosity). Sawatzky, Ratner and Chiu (2005) in their extensive meta-analytical study verified the relationship between quality of life and spirituality. They found a moderate effect size in assessing simple bivariate correlations, which is a result that supports findings of the weak to moderately strong relationship between monitored variables. The result of regression analyses was interesting. On the basis of these analyses, variability of the relationships between monitored variables was influenced by different operational definitions of spirituality and quality of life. At the same time other potential mediators, such as age, gender, ethnicity or religious affiliation, were not proved in regression analyses.

Therefore generally the existence of predominantly weak relationships between the indicators of religiosity and spirituality with regard to various indicators falling under the widely defined construct of quality of life may be predicted. However, it is necessary to pay special attention to the method of measuring (operational defining) spirituality and religiosity, since an identically named construct has different characteristics with a different way of measuring. It is not the intention of this study to dwell in detail on theoretical specification of the notions of spirituality and religiosity, or on the notions covered under the concept of quality of life. In the area of quality of life there is relative consensus regarding fundamental notions (Babinčák, 2013).

In defining spirituality and religiosity several approaches may be found: a) those that perceive these notions as mutually exchangeable synonyms; b) approaches defining these notions as independent distinguishable constructs; and c) those that try to classify these notions into a hierarchical structure, most frequently in the sense of spirituality as a notion superior to religiosity which is a component of spirituality. In our study we will adhere to the pragmatic

approach – and we will use these notions as they were defined by the authors of the methodologies used in our research (it is closest to the third approach).

Out of the great number of studies dealing with spirituality and religiosity in relation to quality of life (as an illustration, Sawatzky, Ratner and Chiu (2005) in their meta-analysis identified 3,040 such studies), only some assess subjective happiness (Abdel-Khalek, 2014; Aghababaei, 2014; Francis, Katz, Yablon & Robbins, 2004; Golparvar & Abedini, 2014; Gundlach, 2013; Holder, Coleman & Wallace, 2010; Pessi, 2011; Princy & Kang, 2013; Sahraian, Gholami, Javadpour & Omidvar, 2013; Singh & Malik, 2012). In our research we decided to focus in particular on this construct, which is primarily psychological, in contrast to the rather interdisciplinary notion of quality of life.

Happiness, together with subjective well-being and satisfaction with life, is considered as "psychological" concept of quality of life. Some of the researchers even consider happiness as a synonym to concept of quality of life respectively to concept of well-being (Veenhoven, 2006). Veenhoven differentiates between the general happiness and its components. General happiness refers to a degree to which individual rates its quality of life as a pleasant. Concept of happiness defined like this represents a stable attitude towards one's life and includes associated feelings and beliefs. These feelings and beliefs are considered to be aspects of the happiness. Haller and Hadler (2006) described 5 different approaches of how to define the happiness: 1) Happiness as a stable trait of person. 2) Happiness as a consequence of objective life event. 3) Happiness as a function of one's usefulness. 4) Happiness as a result of comparison with other groups of individuals (relative satisfaction). 5)

Happiness as a persisting national or cultural trait. It is not convenient to completely identify happiness, together with subjective well-being (to clarify differences/resemblances of these constructs see Džuka, 1996), with the concept of quality of life. They can be defined as components of broadly defined construct of quality of life, output variables representing a subjective reflection of the quality of life, or constructs in its nature different from the quality of life. In case that happiness and quality of life are considered as two dissimilar constructs, the essential aspect of their diversity is, that constructs of happiness more likely refers to characteristics of person who assess (degree of one's satisfaction with life or degree of one's happiness) than to object of assessment. This is well documented by strong correlations between forementioned constructs and personality traits as extraversion, neuroticism (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Holder & Klassen, 2010; Hřebíčková, Blatný & Jelínek, 2010; Meliksah & Weitekamp, 2007) or self-esteem (Joshnloo & Afshari, 2009), which indicates that these constructs are relatively stable personality traits.

The theoretical review presented above illustrates the relation between religiosity/spirituality and different components of quality of life, subjective well-being and happiness. This research is focused on subjectively assessed happiness as a psychological indicator of quality of life. The research is aimed to clarify the impact of different aspects of religiosity/spirituality on experiencing happiness. There have been no similar research performed in local linguistic and cultural context (from some perspectives Slovakia might be considered as a specific country – it inclines to traditional christian values and orientation, but is member of EU which declares its orientation to liberal system of values). Within the researches that have been done at the multinational level, there can be found lack of uniformity in terms of conceptualisation of happiness, spirituality and religiosity. Our aim was to enrich and elaborate previous findings in this area of research. The objectives were:

1) Verification of the mutual relationship between selected indicators of spirituality/religiosity and subjectively assessed happiness (as an independent construct).

2) Comparison of predictive strength of the indicators of spirituality/religiosity in relation to subjective happiness measured in two different ways.

Methods

Participants

Research sample consisted of 194 university students majoring in Psychology, Social Work, Political Science and Philosophy (none of them have been studying religiously based specialisation; neither have been studying at the faculty founded on religious background). Students studying at the university in Eastern Slovakia were chosen using the accidental sampling method. The average age of the students was 22.8 (from 18 to 26 years old). The division based on gender and faith is shown in table 1.

Table 1
Description of research sample

Religious affiliation	Male	Female	Total	%
Catholic	54	73	127	65.5
Protestant	8	9	17	8.8
Atheist	34	16	50	14.4
Other	0	0	0	11.3
Total	96	98	194	100.0
Age	Frequency	%		
18	2	1.0		
19	7	3.6		
20	10	5.2		
21	32	16.5		
22	21	10.8		
23	47	24.2		
24	47	24.2		
25	16	8.2		
26	12	6.2		
Total	194	100.0		

Instruments

We used 2 measures to assess religiosity and spirituality independently from religious affiliation and 2 measures to examine subjective happiness (global assessment versus multidimensional assessment).

1) The Expressions of Spirituality Inventory-Revised (ESI; MacDonald, 2000) – methodology for determining experiences, attitudes, convictions and lifestyle concerning spirituality. Religiosity and spirituality are perceived as a multi-dimensional construct consisting of five areas: a) Cognitive Orientation towards Spirituality (COS), b) Experiential/Phenomenological Dimension (EPD), c) Existential Well-Being (EWB), d) Paranormal Beliefs (PAR) and e) Religiousness (REL). The ESI-R's α coefficients range from .788 for PAR to .933 for COS. Detailed description of the scales used is specified in the appendix.

2) The Salience in Religious Commitment Scale (SRC; Roof & Perkins, 1975) – three-item scale measures "the importance an individual attaches to being religious" (p.111). It is used to

determine the extent to which adults consider their religious beliefs to be important. Measured construct is very similar to Allport's concept of internalized religiosity (Halama et al., 2006). The SRC's α coefficient is .913.

3) Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999; translation into Slovak language - Babinčák, 2008) – it is a 4-item measure of global subjective happiness which represents a global, subjective assessment of whether one is a happy or an unhappy person (p.139). The SHS's α coefficient is .791.

4) The Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ; Hills & Argyle, 2002). OHQ is a tool for measuring happiness as a multidimensional construct which includes frequent experiencing of positive affect or joy, high average level of satisfaction and absence of negative feelings, such as depression and anxiety. It has 29 items and the OHQ's α coefficient is .898.

While SHS represents a one-dimensional measure, OHQ includes several dimensions and resembles the concept of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984). Other monitored variables were gender, age, domicile and self-classification into the categories of believer/unbeliever.

Results

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of scales used (N=194)

Variable/Scale	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std.deviation	Skewness
Age	18	26	22.80	1.78	-.356
ESI – COS	.00	4.00	2.15	1.05	-.303
ESI – EPD	.00	4.00	1.47	.93	.128
ESI – EWB	.83	4.00	2.63	.76	-.006
ESI – PAR	.00	4.00	1.75	1.14	.008
ESI – REL	.00	4.00	2.09	1.05	-.338
SRC	.00	7.00	3.46	1.89	.218
SHS (average items)	.75	7.00	4.95	1.05	-.216
OHQ (average items)	.79	5.66	4.22	.59	.341

Note: COS - Cognitive Orientation towards Spirituality; EPD - Experiential/Phenomenological Dimension; EWB - Existential Well-Being; REL – Religiousness; SRC - Saliency in Religious Commitment Scale; SHS – Subjective Happiness Scale; OHQ - Oxford Happiness Questionnaire

Simple matrix of bivariate correlations between the indicators of spirituality and two methodologies measuring happiness is shown in Table 3. Only Existential Well-Being significantly correlates with happiness ($r = .694$ or $.650$).

Table 3

Correlations (Pearsons r) between monitored variables and happiness (SHS, OHQ)

Variable/Scale	SHS	OHQ
Age	.017	.008
Domicile	-.002	.036
Gender	.132	.100
Type of confession	-.056	-.038
ESI		
Cognitive Orientation towards Spirituality	-.043	-.035

Experiential/ Phenomenological Dimension	.062	.051
Existential Well-Being	.694**	.650**
Paranormal Beliefs	-.055	-.128
Religiousness	.096	.114
The Saliene in Religious Commitment Scale	.053	.040

Note: ** means $p < .01$; SHS – Subjective Happiness Scale; OHQ - Oxford Happiness Questionnaire; ESI - The Expressions of Spirituality Inventory-Revised

We used multiple hierarchical linear regression analysis (stepwise method) to verify how the variables of gender, domicile, type of believer, religiosity and spirituality as predictors influence subjectively perceived happiness as a criterion. In both regression models Existential Well-Being and Experiential/Phenomenological Dimension of Spirituality were identified as the predictors of happiness. EWB explains 42% or 48% variability of happiness values and EPD around 3% (Table 4).

Table 4

Regression models for indicators of spirituality (ESI), religiosity (SRC), age, gender, domicile and type of faith as predictors and subjectively assessed happiness (SHS, or OHQ) as a criterion (accepted models $p < .05$)

Predictor	R	R ² change	b	T	p
Subjective Happiness Scale (F_{total} (2,191) = 101.499; p < .001)					
ESI – Existential Well-Being	.694	.482**	1.001	14.194	.000
ESI – Experiential/Phenomenolog. Dimension of Spirituality	.718	.033**	.208	3.622	.000
(Constant)			2.010		
Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (F_{total} (2,191) = 77.836; p < .001)					
ESI – Existential Well-Being	.650	.422**	.531	12.440	.000
ESI – Experiential/Phenomenolog. Dimension of Spirituality	.670	.027**	.106	3.045	.003
(Constant)			2.670		

Note: * means $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; gender, domicile and type of faith were dichotomic variables (man/woman, city/village, believer/non-believer)

Besides the main findings we report also several additional results. When comparing respondents by classification into the category of believer/non-believer, we found differences in correlations of spirituality/religiosity with happiness. In believers besides EWB also REL ($r = .170$) significantly correlated with happiness. In non-believers ($N=54$) besides EWB also COS ($r = -.286$) correlated with happiness.

When we added interactions of indicators of spirituality/religiosity and classifications into the category of believer/non-believer (model with a dependent variable SHS) into regression models, another predictor was added into the resulting model – the interaction of EPD and classifications into the category of believer/non-believer (R^2 change = .017). High EPD values are more frequently associated with high levels of happiness in believers than in non-believers.

Discussion

Research findings repeatedly confirm a connection between religiosity, spirituality and various aspects of quality of life (as an umbrella construct for several psychological variables). Usually these are positive relationships, while obtained correlation coefficients are most frequently low or moderate (Kelley & Miller, 2007). Despite that, observed relationships are relatively stable.

The idea of a connection between spirituality and quality of life is demonstrated also in the effort of authors of different conceptions of quality of life to include the spiritual dimension among the areas of multidimensional construct of quality of life (see e.g. the concept of quality of life by World Health Organization, WHOQOL Group, 1998).

In our research we focused on happiness as a variable of global subjective assessment of quality of life and we analysed its relationship towards indicators of religiosity and spirituality. We used two different operational definitions of happiness. The first one treats happiness as overall subjective assessment, to what extent a person considers themselves happy, and it may be asked about by one or a small number of similar questions. The second operational definition is broader; it does not consider happiness unidimensionally but the overall assessment of a person's happiness consists of several aspects, such as frequent experiencing of positive affects or joy, high average level of satisfaction, absence of negative feelings, such as depression and anxiety etc.

Besides main objectives we were also interested in finding whether with different conceptualizations of the same construct we acquired comparable results.

On the level of correlations we have not obtained tight relations between religiosity/spirituality and happiness (except EWB). In regression models, Existential Well-Being and Experiential/Phenomenological Dimension of Spirituality were demonstrated as significant predictors of happiness values among demographic variables and subscales of ESI and SLC methodologies. Detailed description of said aspects of religiosity and spirituality is given in the appendix. For both tools for measuring happiness we obtained the effect of experiential and existential dimension of spirituality while the cognitive, behavioural and paranormal elements of religiosity, or the aspect of internalised religiosity, were not confirmed. We did not find any major differences in the results based on different conceptualizations of subjective happiness. Simultaneously, a different impact of the existential dimension of spirituality on the values of happiness in believers and non-believers was indicated. This result, however, requires more detailed examination.

On the basis of obtained results we can agree with the assertions of those authors who found only a weak relation between the indicators of religiosity/spirituality with regard to happiness. A possible explanation may be sought in the mediator effect of other variables, based on which religiosity and spirituality do not affect happiness directly. For example according to Zullig, Ward and Horn (2006), perceived spirituality and life satisfaction was fully mediated by self-perceived health, and the perceived religiosity and life satisfaction was partially mediated by self-perceived health. "Students who describe themselves as spiritual or religious are likely to report greater self-perceived health and that greater self-perceived health likely influences life satisfaction" (p.267). Another mediator effect is presented by Cowlshaw et al. (2013); their results showed that the meaningfulness dimension of SOC (Sense of Coherence) mediated the influence of spirituality on life satisfaction over time, suggesting that spirituality may influence older adults' experience and perception of life events, leading to a more positive appraisal of these events as meaningful.

Sawatzky, Ratner and Chiu (2005) give the type of religiosity/spirituality, or quality of life, definition as a moderator of the relationship of the variables that we monitored. That means the way how the variables are defined and operationalised influences the relation between the variables more than age, gender, or other similar indicators. This moderator is important especially due to the absence of generally accepted definition of spirituality, religiosity and happiness.

Conclusion

In our research those dimensions of spirituality and religiosity which inform about positive functioning and deep spiritual experiences or spiritual existence were demonstrated as predictors of subjective happiness. For better understanding of connections between religiosity/spirituality and happiness it is necessary to focus on the mediators mediating this relationship.

The results of our research confirmed predictive power of selected indicators of spirituality and religiosity and their relation with happiness. These results support findings of other authors that already delved into this topic. With regard to fact that there is no global consensus about definition and conceptualisation of analysed constructs (religiosity, spirituality, happiness), benefit of this study (and similar ones) is a fact that even through there is no unified terminology and there are several possibilities of measurement of these constructs, the results are comparable to previous ones and allow us to think about and to discuss how important are the roles of religiosity and spirituality for experiencing happiness. One of the limitations (besides methodological issues – choosing the tools that measure only some of the aspects of religiosity and spirituality; and accidental sampling method) is focusing on the population of university students. We suggest that further research in this area might be focused on comparison of data gathered from different population samples, for example comparison between different age or education categories of respondents.

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