HOPE, SPIRITUALITY, OPTIMISM, PESSIMISM, AND ANXIETY: A KUWAITI-AMERICAN COMPARISON

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ABSTRACT

Abdel-Khalek’s Arabic Scale of Optimism and Pessimism and Kuwait University Anxiety Scale were translated into English. Scioli’s (2007) multidimensional trait hope scale was translated into Arabic. Results obtained from 211 American and Kuwaiti young adults confirmed the applicability of the Scioli Hope scale in an Arabic sample while re-confirming the value of the Abdel-Khalek scales for English samples. Greater optimism and overall hope was reported by Kuwaitis as compared to Americans. While Kuwaitis reported greater spiritualized hope, Americans reported greater non-spiritualized hope. For Kuwaitis, but not Americans, greater spiritualized hope was associated with less pessimism and anxiety. For Kuwaitis and Americans, hope derived from spiritual integrity was the strongest correlate of greater optimism as well as lower pessimism and anxiety.

Three trends can be identified in contemporary psychology: a greater investment in matters of religion and spirituality; globalization of the field, including an increasing number of international conferences and cross-cultural programs of research; and most recently, positive psychology. The research on hope and spirituality described in this paper is an attempt to address each of these influences. We begin with brief reflections on each of these topics, restricting our focus on cross-cultural issues to the study of emotions.

Religion and Spirituality

The topics of religion and spirituality, so important to the vast majority of the world’s population, today and for countless millennia, virtually disappeared from the psychological literature for nearly a century (see for example Jones, 1994). However, over the past decade, psychology

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appears to have rediscovered spirituality. This particular trend is due to a number of forces, some operating within the field of psychology, and others reflective of larger cultural and historical changes. Many, if not most, psychologists now acknowledge that spirituality matters and that it constitutes a legitimate topic of study.

Undoubtedly, there may be emotional costs as well as benefits associated with religious or spiritual beliefs and practices (e.g., Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006). But for the greater part of the 20th century, psychology in the main presumed that religion or spirituality was more likely to constitute maladaptive responses to the human condition. What distinguishes most of the current work on the psychology of religion is a focus on the adaptive consequences of having a religious or spiritual foundation. We review just a portion of this work, focusing on research by the first author.

Abdel-Khalek and his colleagues obtained positive relationships between religiosity and subjective well-being including happiness, satisfaction with life, physical health, and mental health (Abdel-Khalek, 2006, 2007; Abdel-Khalek & Lester, 2007). Moreover, they found greater religiosity to be associated with lower levels of psychopathology, including decreased anxiety, depression, and neuroticism. In several studies, items drawn from measures of religiosity were packaged in the same protocol with items from measures of positive and negative psychological functioning (e.g., optimism and depression). When subjected to statistical factor analyses, it was very common to find one combined factor of “religiosity and wellbeing” or one bipolar factor, representing “religiosity and wellbeing” versus “psychopathology.” These findings were replicated in children (Abdel-Khalek, 2009), adolescents, college students, and middle-aged adults (Abdel-Khalek, 2008) as well as among Kuwaiti, Saudi, and American participants. Many of these studies utilized large sample sizes, some with as many as 6 to 7000 participants.

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Emotion

The human condition encompasses a range of both positive and negative emotions. Culture imposes a second nature that interacts with biology to affect the quantity of positive and negative emotions experienced by its members (Averill, 1997). For example, studies have shown