SPIRITUALITY OR RELIGIOUSNESS: WHICH SERVES AS THE BETTER PREDICTOR OF ELEMENTS OF MENTAL HEALTH?

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ABSTRACT

Social scientists contend that significant advancements in religion and spirituality research may be achieved via incremental validity studies using the Five Factor Model of personality. This study examined spirituality and religiousness as predictors of elements of mental health, which was operationalized as a combination of purpose in life, resilience, satisfaction with life, and pro-social behavior, while controlling for personality. Based upon the findings from existing research, it was hypothesized that spirituality would predict purpose in life and satisfaction with life better than religiousness, and religiousness would predict resilience and pro-social behavior better than spirituality. Using Piedmont's ASPIRES instrument, and controlling for personality, a study was performed utilizing a series of hierarchical regression analyses. Results supported the incremental validity of the ASPIRES instrument (ΔR² scores ranged from .06 to .02). Contrary to the hypotheses, spirituality was a better predictor than religiousness for resilience and for pro-social behavior.

Keywords: ASPIRES, Five Factor Model, spiritual transcendence, religiousness, personality, purpose in life, resilience, satisfaction with life, pro-social behavior

With the advent of positive psychology, emphasis has shifted from ascertaining deficits to examining people's strengths. The Search Institute (see Benson et al., 2006) has developed comprehensive lists of 40 developmental assets that appear to provide protective factors for children and adolescents. Examples include having a sense of personal power, awareness of a purpose in life, resistance skills, and providing service to others. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has recommended concentrating on wellness and has begun a campaign to improve life expectancy for people with mental illness (see Center for Mental Health Services, 2010; SAMHSA, 2010). They have determined that the eight domains of wellness encompass emotional, environmental,
financial, intellectual, social, physical, occupational, and spiritual aspects of people's lives. Peterson and Seligman (2004) provided a comprehensive classification of character strengths and included spirituality and religiousness as strengths of transcendence. They noted that these elements “inform the kinds of attributions that people make, the meanings they construct, and the ways they conduct relationships” (p. 600). For this study, a strengths-based model was utilized, and mental health was operationalized as a combination of purpose in life, satisfaction with life, resilience, and pro-social behavior, based on the burgeoning research showing associations between these variables and psychological wellness.

If spirituality and religiousness impact mental health, which domain appears to bring forth the greatest results? Does spirituality exert more power in certain areas, while religiousness has its distinct fields of influence? Current research indicates spirituality appears to impact purpose in life and satisfaction with life, while religiousness has stronger associations with resilience and pro-social behavior. Also, if the constructs are elements of individual differences, what do they contribute over and above personality factors? Based on Piedmont's advice to advance the field via incremental validity research using the Five Factor Model (1999b), existing theory (in this case, Frankl’s [1959] notion of the will to meaning), and empirical studies, we hypothesized that spirituality would predict purpose in life and satisfaction with life better than religiousness, and religiousness would predict resilience and pro-social behavior better than spirituality.

Understanding Spirituality and Religiousness as Psychological Constructs

Spirituality and religiousness provide insights into the human condition and consequently are fundamental concepts for studying the psychology of religion. While many early psychologists equated these elements with pathology, there were some notable exceptions. For example, Jung (1938/1966) spoke of the religious nature of the human psyche, emphasized that devotion could be healthy, and included the Deity in his archetypes. He viewed religion as the “fruit and the culmination of the completeness of life” (p. 50). Allport (1950) identified the religious sentiment as the fundamental underpinning of the personality, which impacted additional elements of mental health, and he identified attributes distinguishing mature from immature religion. While examining the relationship between religious practice and prejudice (Allport & Ross, 1967), he developed the