Religious Coping and Gratitude in Emerging Adulthood

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Abstract

This study focused on understanding how emerging adults’ use of religious coping strategies related to a grateful disposition. A sample of 319 college students provided responses related to their use of coping strategies, including religious and secular coping coupled with measures of personality, satisfaction with life, affect, and gratitude. Results indicated emerging adults who reported higher levels of positive religious coping strategies also indicated higher levels of gratitude. Conversely, respondents reported an inverse correlation between negative religious and self-directed religious coping and gratitude. Using hierarchical regression analyses, we found that religious coping, specifically negative religious coping, predicted participants’ gratitude even after accounting for subjective well-being, secular coping, and personality factors. Implications for these findings are discussed in light of challenges faced by emerging adults today.

Keywords

Gratitude – religious coping – subjective well-being – satisfaction with life

There is a consensus in the literature that religiously and spiritually-inclined individuals tend to experience higher levels of gratitude, but mechanisms underlying this link are unclear. Religious coping, specifically, may indeed be one explanation for this link. In particular, emerging adults who are at a tenuous time in their lives may find that their use of religious coping relates to...
their dispositional gratitude, which has been defined as a “part of a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world” (Wood, Froh, & Geraghty, 2010, p. 891). Thus, the present study builds on prior research focused on gratitude and religiousness by investigating the relation between gratitude and religious coping for emerging adults after accounting for robust factors such as general coping strategies, subjective well-being, and personality, as each has strong ties to both religious coping and gratitude.

Gratitude and Emerging Adulthood

The conception of emerging adulthood is a time between 18–25 years of age that involves settling into adult roles but not yet fully embracing the staid aspects of adult life (Arnett, 2007). Further, emerging adulthood is comprised of a heterogeneous group of individuals who have a life course in common, frequently with a focus on higher education. This time of life may be reflective of western cultures that focus on individuation over group cohesion, and specifically in this study we focus on a college student population of emerging adults. Indeed, emerging adults are exploring their identities through self-focus without commitments to later adult roles such as parenting and marriage (Arnett, 2004). Thus, there is a pertinent component of life for these individuals focused on coping with change and even questioning their worldviews outside the purview of their parents or caregivers (DeHaan, Yonker, & Affholter, 2011). These worldviews may include religious or spiritual questions that relate to their well-being and feelings of gratitude, which are the focus of this study.

Gratitude, the feeling of gratefulness for one’s gains (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), can be viewed in several ways: as an attitude, virtue, trait, manner of coping (Emmons & McCullough, 2003) or a moral emotion (McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001) with a life orientation focused on perceiving and appreciating the positive aspects of life (Wood, Maltby, Stewart, & Joseph, 2008). Gratitude can play a role in the appraisal of one’s life events (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000), and the potential for gratitude to increase the positive perception of life events can explain the relationship between a grateful outlook and subjective well-being. Watkins, Woodward, Stone, and Kolts (2003) asked participants to generate a list of people to whom they were grateful and a list of things for which they were grateful, and they then asked participants to write a letter of gratitude. Participants reported increased levels of positive affect, which supports the theory that gratitude is an affective trait of subjective well-being. Watkins (2004) asserted that by instituting a routine