

Prayer, Personality and Purpose in Life: An Empirical Enquiry among Adolescents in the UK

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Abstract

The linkage between religion and purpose in life is a matter of theoretical interest within the two fields of empirical theology and psychology of religion. Empirical evidence for this linkage remains vulnerable according to the measures of religion and purpose in life employed. Conceptually prayer provides an interesting test of this linkage in light of both the personal nature of this religious activity and of the persistence of prayer among individuals who do not attend worship services. This study draws on data provided by 10,792 13- to 15-year-old students from five different parts of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and London) to test the connection between prayer and purpose-in-life (assessed by an established single-item measure) after taking into account personal differences (age and sex), psychological differences (Eysenck's three dimensional model of personality), and religious differences (affiliation, and worship attendance). The data demonstrate that prayer frequency adds additional prediction of enhanced levels of purpose in life among young people after taking all other variables into account, and that prayer frequency is a stronger predictor of purpose in life than religious affiliation or worship attendance.

Keywords

personality – prayer – psychology – purpose in life – religion

Purpose in Life and Psychological Enquiry

Purpose in life is a construct of considerable interest within the broad field of individual differences. Following the pioneering work of Frankl (1978),

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purpose in life is understood to be essential to the meaning-making process which confers meaningfulness, a core component of psychological wellbeing. It is purpose in life which makes living worthwhile and which helps to prevent despair leading to actions such as suicide. Building on Frankl's work, empirical research establishing the contours and correlates of purpose in life has been facilitated by the development of the Purpose in Life Test, developed by Crumbaugh (1968) and Crumbaugh and Maholick (1969), and more recently by the Purpose in Life Scale developed by Robbins and Francis (2000). Other studies have routinely assessed purpose in life by a single item measure (see Francis & Robbins, 2009).

Early empirical research concerned with the psychological correlates of purpose in life, as reviewed by Yalom (1980), focused largely on the relation between purpose in life and psychopathology, anxiety or negative affect. More recently, this perspective continues with studies that link lower levels of purpose in life with living with HIV disease (Lyon & Younger, 2001), higher levels of suicidal ideation (Edwards & Holden, 2001), higher levels of general anxiety (Bigler, Neimeyer, & Brown, 2001), higher levels of fear of death and death avoidance (Ardelt, 2003, 2008), higher levels of depression (Heisel & Flett, 2004; Hedberg, Gustafson, Alèx, & Brulin, 2010), higher risk of suicidal behaviours (Wang, Lightsey, Pietruszka, Uruk, & Wells, 2007), higher risk of psychosis and psychotic episodes (Turner et al., 2007), and higher risk of addiction to substances (Martin, MacKinnon, Johnson, & Rohsenow, 2011).

In the late 1980s work by Zika and Chamberlain (1987, 1992) focused attention more strongly on the positive correlates of purpose in life, including psychological wellbeing, positive affect and life satisfaction. This perspective continues with studies that link higher levels of purpose in life with recovery from alcoholism (Carroll, 1993; Waisberg & Porter, 1994), positive self-image (Shek, 1992), higher levels of self-esteem, balanced affect, cognitive wellbeing, and better health (Coward, 1996), greater happiness (Lewis, Lanigan, Joseph, & de Fockert, 1997), psychological wellbeing (Bigler et al., 2001; Thoits, 2012), mature defence mechanisms and mature coping strategies (Whitty, 2003), higher levels of perceived mental and physiological health (Nygren et al., 2005), higher levels of hope and satisfaction in life (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009), and better developed emotional responses in coping with mental stress (Ishida & Okada, 2011). In a factor analytic study, Compton (2001) found that purpose in life was associated with a range of different measures including: life satisfaction, happiness, positive affectivity, self-acceptance, existential wellbeing, self-esteem, and environmental mastery. There is also a long history of demonstrating the direct relationship between purpose in life and pro-social attitudes (Pearson & Sheffield, 1975; Shek, Ma, & Cheung, 1994; Francis & Robbins, 2006).