LIFE SATISFACTION AND SPIRITUALITY IN ADOLESCENTS

Brien S. Kelley and Lisa Miller

Abstract

The association between life satisfaction and dimensions of religiosity/spirituality was explored in an ethnically and denominationally diverse sample of 615 adolescents using the Satisfaction with Life Scale and the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness/Spirituality (BMMRS). Results indicate that most dimensions of religiosity and spirituality are associated with life satisfaction, but that Daily Spiritual Experiences accounts for the largest amount of variance in the models, and attenuates the relationship of other dimensions with life satisfaction when entered into simultaneous regressions. Dimensions of the BMMRS were more predictive than single-item measures of religious service attendance, frequency of prayer, or degree of religiousness/spirituality. Results are discussed in the context of previous adolescent research in the positive psychology of religiosity/spirituality.

All we have to do is turn our minds to things spiritual, and the way to happiness is a rapid one. Erasmus, 1503 (cited in McMahon, 2006)

Insofar as a religious or spiritual life is meant to imbue virtue, happiness, and health, the interface of the psychology of religion and spirituality with positive psychology is a fertile area for empirical research (McCullough & Snyder, 2000; Pargament & Mahoney, 2002; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The preponderance of research concerning the relationship between religion/spirituality (R/S) and subjective well-being (SWB) indicates that there is a small to moderate positive association between dimensions of R/S and satisfaction with life (LS), happiness, positive affect, and other indicators of positive functioning (Argyle, 1999; Diener & Clifton, 2002; Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Ellison, 1991; Ferriss, 2002; Levin & Chatters, 1998; Myers, 2000). Various measures of religiosity and spirituality have been investigated with adults, including service attendance, prayer, religious certainty, religious social support, meaning making, a relationship to the divine, and other devotional practices and attitudes, but the results are equivocal surrounding which dimension, or pattern of dimensions, is most salient in predicting SWB (see Hill, 2005, for a description of the variety of R/S scales). The association is even less clear with younger samples, and while research into the positive psychology of R/S with adolescents...
is growing, more attention is needed to elucidate the mechanisms and relationships that are unique to youth in order to best understand the relationship of R/S and mental health throughout the lifespan (Huebner, 2004; King & Benson, 2006; Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Miller & Kelley, 2005).

Religion/Spirituality and Life Satisfaction in Adults

Diener and colleagues’ (1985) Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) is one of the oldest and widest used measures of positive functioning in empirical psychology, and is intended to capture the cognitive component of SWB, which for the SWLS is described as an individual’s subjective, non-domain-specific appraisal of their lives, with the criteria left open to the individual’s own standards and priorities (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Life satisfaction has been extensively studied with populations across the globe (see Diener & Suh, 2000; Park & Huebner, 2005), from adolescence onward (Huebner, 2004; Neto, 1993; Pavot & Diener, 1993), and with a large variety of potentially associated variables, including personality, psychosocial, and demographic predictors (see Diener et al., 1999, for a review). It is closely related to the emotional valences of positive and negative affect, but has distinct influences and cognitive appraisal processes, and strong temperamental and genetic components that are mediated by interpersonal skills and environmental conditions (Diener et al., 1999; Diener & Lucas, 2003; Stubbe, Posthuma, Boomsma, & De Geus, 2005).

Positive, but relatively small associations have been consistently found between measures of R/S and LS. Diener and Clifton (2002), in a probability sample of 1,034 adults in the United States, found a .07 correlation between LS and belief in a higher power and belief in a soul, and in a sample of 52,634 worldwide, found a .08 correlation between a single item measure of LS and the summation of four items reflecting religiosity: importance of G-d, participation in prayer or meditation, attendance at church, and frequency of prayer. Within this study, the elderly had the strongest demographic association, race and income were not significantly related, and having prayed in the last day was the strongest predictor of LS. However, the authors pointed out that while the associations were significant because of the large sample size, they were quite small (especially when compared to other demographic variables’ correlations with LS, such as age, $r = .14$; income,