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Religious orientation, religious coping and happiness among UK adults

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Abstract

It has been demonstrated that the relationship between religiosity and happiness varies according to the precise measures used and the samples studied. To examine further the generalisability of this association the present work examined the relationship between religiosity and happiness within the context of the distinction between subjective and psychological well-being. One hundred and thirty eight UK adults completed two measures of both religiosity (the 'Age Universal' Religious Orientation Scale [Intrinsic and Extrinsic subscales] and the Religious Coping Scale [Positive and Negative subscales]) and happiness (the Depression–Happiness Scale and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire Short-Form). In general, no significant associations were found between religiosity scores and happiness scores. However, both higher intrinsic orientation scores and positive religious coping were significantly associated with higher scores on the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire Short-Form. It is proposed that these differential findings are consistent with the theoretical distinction between subjective and psychological well-being. It is suggested that when religiosity is related to happiness, it is related to psychological well-being, which is thought to reflect human development, positive functioning and existential life challenges.
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Keywords: Religiosity; Religious orientation; Religious coping; Happiness; Well-being

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1. Introduction

Within the psychology of religion there is renewed empirical interest in examining the relationship between religion and happiness. Previous research has employed a variety of different measures of both religiosity, including measures of religious attitude, behaviour and practice, and happiness, including both single item and multi-item scales, among a variety of different samples. The results of these studies have largely been equivocal (for an overview see Robbins & Francis, 1996) and are difficult to integrate due to the divergent methodologies employed.

In contrast, two sets of recent studies have employed more systematic methodologies and have both utilised the same measure of religiosity, the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis & Stubbs, 1987). One series of studies has examined the relationship between religion and happiness among various populations by employing the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity and the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989). Results among samples of 360 undergraduates in the UK (Robbins & Francis, 1996), 212 undergraduates in the USA (Francis & Lester, 1997), 100 undergraduates in the UK (French & Joseph, 1999), 994 15–16-year-olds in England (Francis, Jones, & Wilcox, 2000), 456 first-year undergraduate students attending one institution in Wales (Francis et al., 2000), 496 members of a branch of the University of the Third Age in the south of England (Francis et al., 2000), 295 UK individuals, ranging in age from late teens to late seventies (Francis & Robbins, 2000), and 89 undergraduate students in Wales (Francis, Robbins, & White, 2003a), have demonstrated a significant positive association between scores on the Oxford Happiness Inventory and scores on the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity. However, Francis, Ziebertz, and Lewis (2003b) did not report a significant correlation among 331 undergraduate students in Germany. Two related studies, reported by Francis and Katz (2002) and by Francis, Katz, Yablon, and Robbins (in press), administered the Hebrew translation of the Oxford Happiness Inventory together with the Katz-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Judaism (Francis & Katz, 2002) to samples of 298 Hebrew-speaking female and 203 Hebrew-speaking male undergraduates in Israel. After taking into account individual differences in personality, these data demonstrated a significant association between religiosity and happiness.

In contrast to this body of work, a smaller series of studies has employed the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis & Stubbs, 1987) and the Depression–Happiness Scale (Joseph & Lewis, 1998; McGreal & Joseph, 1993) among various populations. Results among samples of 154 Northern Irish undergraduate students (Lewis, Lanigan, Joseph, & de Fockert, 1997), 64 English Anglican priests (Lewis, Maltby, & Burkinshaw, 2000) and 70 English congregational members of the Anglican Church (Lewis et al., 2000) have demonstrated no significant association between scores on the Depression–Happiness Scale and scores on the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity. However, French and Joseph (1999) did report a significant association among 100 undergraduates in the UK. In addition, related research by Lewis (2002) among a sample of 154 Northern Irish university students demonstrated a positive association between scores on the Depression–Happiness Scale and frequency of church attendance.

The differential associations of the Oxford Happiness Inventory and the Depression–Happiness Scale with the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity, is somewhat surprising given that there is strong evidence for the high correlation between the two measures of happiness (French & Joseph, 1999; Hills & Argyle, 2002; Joseph & Lewis, 1998).

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