



Happiness, political orientation, and religiosity



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ABSTRACT

Previous research has focused on how happiness is independently associated with political orientation and religiosity. The current study instead explored how political orientation and religiosity interact in establishing levels of happiness. Data from both the 2012 General Social Survey and the 2005 World Values Survey were used. Results from both data sets support prior research by showing a positive association between happiness and both political conservatism and religiosity. Importantly, it was found that political conservatism and religiosity interact in predicting happiness levels. Specifically, the current results suggest that religiosity has a greater effect on happiness for more politically conservative individuals compared to more politically liberal individuals.

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1. Introduction

Research on happiness has gained importance over the past few decades in both psychology and economics (Diener, 2000; Di Tella & MacCulloch, 2006; Frey & Stutzer, 2002). This renewed interest in the science of happiness has not been confined to the laboratory. For instance, a number of nations have begun to develop national measures of subjective well-being to complement traditional measures of national well-being, such as GDP (Self, Thomas, & Randall, 2012). An underlying assumption of this line of research is that subjective measures of well-being provide useful insight into an individual's quality of life. As a result, a central focus in happiness research has been to explore how individual differences in various psychological variables relate to levels of happiness. Two variables of particular interest have been religiosity and political orientation.

Numerous studies have found a positive relationship between measures of religiosity and subjective well-being (e.g., Abdel-Khalek, 2011; Francis & Lester, 1997; French & Joseph, 1999; Soydemir, Bastida, & Gonzalez, 2004). This relationship holds when religiosity is defined by religious belief or attitude (Dezutter, Soenens, & Hutsebaut, 2006), by behavioral aspects such as attendance or participation in religious services (Poloma & Pendleton, 1990), as well as personal acts such as prayer (Maltby, Lewis, & Day, 1999). Explanations for the positive association between religiosity and happiness include the idea that religion provides, among other things, a source of social support, purpose in life, enhancement of healthier lifestyle choices, and a coping mechanism (see Hicks & King, 2008; Horning, Davis, Stirrat, & Cornwell,

2011; Pullen, Modrcin-Talbott, West, & Muenchen, 1999; Steger & Frazier, 2005).

As it relates to political orientation, prior research has demonstrated that political conservatism is associated with increased subjective well-being (Brooks, 2008). For example, Napier and Jost (2008) found that political conservatism is positively associated with life-satisfaction and happiness. Van Hiel and Brebels (2011) went on to discover that conservatism can act as a protection of self-esteem in a sample of older people. Schlenker, Chambers, and Le (2012) also found political conservatism to be associated with increased self-esteem. In fact, Schlenker et al. (2012) found conservatism to be associated with increased satisfaction across a number of domains, including marriage, family life, job, and health/physical condition. Conversely, conservatism was negatively associated with depression and other measures of mental health problems.

Various explanations have been put forth for the association between political conservatism and subjective well-being, including system-justification theory (Napier & Jost, 2008), certain personality and attitudinal variables associated with positive adjustment (Schlenker et al., 2012), as well as terror management theory and social identity theory (Van Hiel & Brebels, 2011; Van Hiel & De Clerq, 2009). However, because political conservatism and religiosity have often been found to be associated with each other (Duriez, 2003; Miller & Wattenberg, 1984), it could be that the association between happiness and political conservatism is due to religiosity. Yet, it has been found that political conservatism and religiosity account for unique proportions of variance in happiness levels (Napier & Jost, 2008). As a result, it is possible that political orientation and religiosity interact in predicting happiness. For

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example, it may be the case that the association between religiosity and happiness is not uniform across political orientations.

The current study sought to explore how, if at all, political orientation and religiosity interact in establishing levels of happiness. Data from the most recent versions of the General Social Survey (GSS, 2012) and the World Values Survey (WVS, 2005) were used. Because the bivariate relationships between subjective well-being and both political orientation and religiosity have been demonstrated in numerous countries and cultures (e.g., Napier & Jost, 2008; WHOQOL SRPB Group, 2006), it was important to use data from countries around the world. Moreover, both the GSS and WVS datasets include measures of happiness, political orientation, and religiosity, and, as a result, provide excellent means of investigating any interactive effect of political orientation and religiosity on happiness in large representative samples.

2. Methods

2.1. General Social Survey

The GSS is currently administered every two years by the National Opinion Research Center to residents of the United States. The survey includes a large battery of attitudinal, psychological, and opinion variables. Importantly for the current study, happiness, political orientation, and religiosity variables are all included in the survey. Data from the most recent 2012 GSS were used for the current study.

2.1.1. Measures

All variables were coded so that higher values were associated with more of the construct (e.g., greater happiness, greater religiosity).

2.1.1.1. Happiness. The 2012 GSS included a subjective measure of happiness (*happy7*). The exact wording of the question was “If you were to consider your life, in general, how happy or unhappy would you say you are, on the whole?” Respondents were then to rank their level of happiness on a seven point scale (1 = “Completely Unhappy”, 2 = “Very Unhappy”, 3 = “Fairly Unhappy”, 4 = “Neither Happy nor Unhappy”, 5 = “Fairly Happy”, 6 = “Very Happy”, 7 = “Completely Happy”). Previous versions of the GSS (other than 2002) have solely included a three point happiness item, so the inclusion of this seven point item in the 2012 version allows for more granularity in assessing levels of happiness. Single-item happiness scales have also been found to have high temporal stability and concurrent, convergent, and divergent validity (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

2.1.1.2. Political orientation. Respondents to the 2012 GSS ranked their political orientation (*polviews*) on a seven point scale (1 = “Extremely Liberal”, 2 = “Liberal”, 3 = “Slightly Liberal”, 4 = “Moderate”, 5 = “Slightly Conservative”, 6 = “Conservative”, 7 = “Extremely Conservative”). Scores were mean-centered for all analyses. There has been a recent debate over whether political orientation should be thought of as a unidimensional or multidimensional construct (e.g., Choma, Hafer, Dywan, Segalowitz, & Busseri, 2012). However, self-placement on single-item liberal-conservative scales has been found to strongly predict relevant real-world behavior, such as voting preferences (see Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009).

2.1.1.3. Religiosity. The 2012 GSS included a number of religiosity measures. Seven were identified and deemed relevant for the current study. These seven measures included a nine point scale ranking of religious attendance (*attend*, 0 = “Never”, 8 = “More than

once a week”), a six point scale on the frequency of prayer (*pray*, 1 = “Never”, 6 = “Several times a day”), an eleven point scale on the frequency of religious activity (*relactiv*, 1 = “Never”, 11 = “Several times a day”), a four point scale on the strength of religious affiliation (*relitin*, 1 = “No Religion”, 4 = “Strong”), a six point scale on belief in god (*god*, 1 = “Do not Believe”, 6 = “Know God Exists”), a four point scale on the degree respondents identified as a spiritual person (*sprtpn*, 1 = “Not Spiritual”, 4 = “Very Spiritual”), and a four point scale on the degree respondents identified as a religious person (*relpersn*, 1 = “Not Religious”, 4 = “Very Religious”). Scores on these seven religiosity measures were standardized and then averaged together to create a religiosity index. The reliability of this index was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$).

2.1.1.4. Demographic variables. The following three demographic variables were included as control variables: a continuous measure of age (*age*), a dichotomous measure of sex (*sex*, 0 = female, 1 = male), and the number of educational years completed (*educ*).

2.2. World Values Survey

The WVS is administered to residents of nations around the world. Similar to the GSS, happiness, political orientation, and religiosity variables are all included in the survey. Data from the most recent 2005 WVS were used for the current study.

2.2.1. Measures

All variables were coded so that higher values were associated with more of the construct.

2.2.1.1. Happiness. The 2005 WVS included a subjective measure of happiness (*V10*). The exact wording of the item was “Taking all things together, would you say you are. . .” Respondents were then to rank their level of happiness on a four point scale (1 = “Not at all happy”, 2 = “Not very happy”, 3 = “Quite happy”, 4 = “Very happy”).

2.2.1.2. Political orientation. Respondents to the 2005 WVS ranked their political orientation (*V114*) on a ten point scale (1 = “Left”, 10 = “Right”). Scores were mean-centered for all analyses.

2.2.1.3. Religiosity. The 2005 WVS included a number of religiosity measures. Five were identified and deemed relevant for the current study. These five measures included a four point scale ranking of importance attached to religion (*V9*, 1 = “Not at all important”, 4 = “Very important”), a three point scale ranking of membership in religious organization (*V24*, 0 = “Not a member”, 2 = “Active member”), a seven point scale on how often religious services are attended (*V186*, 1 = “Never”, 7 = “More than once a week”), a three point scale on the degree respondents identified as a religious person (*V187*, 1 = “A convinced atheist”, 3 = “A religious person”), and a ten point scale on the importance of god (*V192*, 1 = “Not at all”, 10 = “Very”). Scores on these five religiosity measures were standardized and then averaged together to create a religiosity index. The reliability of this index was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$).

2.2.1.4. Demographic variables. The following three demographic variables were included as control variables: a continuous measure of age (*V237*), a dichotomous measure of sex (*V235*, 0 = female, 1 = male), and the highest educational level attained (*V238*, 1 = “No formal education”, 9 = “University level education”).

2.2.2. Sample

Political orientation data were not available for the following four nations: China, Russia, Iran, and Malaysia. As a result, data

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