“Analyzing the relationship between well-being and autonomous vs. non-autonomous choice of religion”

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**Abstract**

There is a plethora of research that shows a significant positive correlation between religion and well-being. There is also an increasing controversial debate of children’s autonomy and choice concerning religion. Considering the high prevalence and significance of religion in people’s lives, I plan on developing a study to determine if the correlation between well-being and religion is different for people who choose their religion as autonomous individuals versus people whose religions were chosen for them by adults in their lives.

**Introduction**

Religion has a large significance and great impact in many people’s lives. 74% of American adults identify with some sort if religion (*In U.S., decline of Christianity continues at Rapid Pace,* 2020). There has been significant research concluding a significant positive correlation between religion and well-being (Witter et al., 1985; Van Cappellen et al., 2014).

There is also an increasing debate concerning the autonomy of children, focusing on the question of how much autonomy they should be allowed. There is the argument that there is value to teach kids their culture, reasoning, and ethical framework through religion, and that this can be done before they are able to think critically. This argument suggests that children are able to make an informed decision about whether they want to pursue religion fully after they are taught the basics early (MacMullen, 2004; Pedersen, 2019). Autonomy in Sunday school has not been found to predict either religiosity or relationship to God (Ingersoll, 2019). There is another point of view which suggests that it is unfair to force opinions, even religious opinions, on children, because they have yet gotten to the developmental stage where they are able to understand the full consequences of their decisions and values. This is compared to political beliefs, and it is argued that if children are unable to have political beliefs, they are too young to hold religious beliefs (Dawkins, 2015; Russo, 2021).

I will be combining these two relevant elements into one research question and study. I will be analyzing the correlation between well-being and religion through the lens of autonomy and investigating whether this correlation is different for people who had religious autonomy as a child versus people who had less religious autonomy as a child. I will also measure participant’s feelings of gratitude, as this has often been correlated with well-being and religion as well, so it will be interesting to note if it is autonomy or simply gratitude that is having an impact (Lai, et al, 2017).

**Research questions/hypotheses**

My study will aim to answer the following questions: (1) Is there a correlation between well-being and religion? (2) Is the correlation between religion and gratitude? (3) Is the correlation between well-being and religion stronger for people who identify with Western religions versus people who identify with Eastern religions? (4) Is the correlation between well-being and religion stronger or weaker for people who chose their religion autonomously versus people whose religion was chosen for them by adults in their lives?

Previous research has been inconsistent about which specific religion is most strongly correlated with well-being, and it is often dependent on the country the study is conducted in. For example, Western religions are more strongly correlated with well-being when the study is conducted in a Western country, but Eastern religions are more strongly correlated with well-being when the study is conducted in an Eastern country. For this reason, I hypothesize that Western religions will be more strongly correlated with well-being in this study.

I hypothesize that, concurrent with previous research, there will be a correlation between well-being and religion. Additionally (and also concurrent with background research), I hypothesize that gratitude will be positively correlated with both religion and well-being.

I also hypothesize that the correlation between religion and well-being will be stronger for people who chose their religion as autonomous individuals than people whose religions were chosen for them by adults in their lives.

**Methods**

Sample:

Since I am conducting a correlational study, I will be using a convenient sample as opposed to a random sample. I will put my survey on social medias and use snowball sampling by asking people who fill out my survey to share it on their social media as well. Participants will be told that if they participate, they will be entered into a raffle to win one of ten $25 Amazon gift cards. I will aim to have 1,000 participants.

Measures:

* Religiosity:

Participants will fill out a couple measures of religiousness (all self-reported). One will be an index of personal religiousness (Saroglou and Munoz-Garcia 2008) which consists of only three questions (used in (Van Cappellen et al., 2014) α= .77. The three items are the importance of God in life, the importance of religion in life, and the frequency of prayer. Religiosity will also be measured by the frequency of attendance at religious services.

* Well-being:

Well-being will be measured by two measures: *The Satisfaction With Life Scale* and *Life Orientation Test-Revised*. The former instructs participants to rate 5 items (ex. “The conditions of my life are excellent”) on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates “strongly disagree” and 7 indicates “strongly agree”. Scores are added and the summed value indicated how satisfied one is with their life (Diener, et al., 1985). The *Life Orientation Test-Revised* instructs participants to rate 10 items (ex. “I’m always optimistic about my future”) on a 5-point Likert scale, where 0 indicates “strongly disagree” and 4 indicates “strongly agree”. Reverse items are reverse coded and the participant’s responses are summed (Scheier, et al., 1994).

* Questionnaire determining level of autonomous/nonautonomous choice of religion:

I will be creating the questions to measure this variable, because there is not a reliable measure that already exists. Participants will answer how much they agree with items on a 7-point Likert scale. 1 will indicate complete disagreement, while 7 will represent complete agreement. In order to be sure if its validity, I will calculate Cronbach’s alpha after the study is completed.

Example questions: “I have attended religious services since before I can remember”, “I have been exposed to different religions”, and “I identify with the religion I do because my parents or another adult in my life exposed me to this religion when I was a child”. Reverse items will be calculated accordingly. A participant’s responses will be summed and the mean will be calculated to determine their total score for the level of autonomous religion. High scores will indicate high autonomy.

* Gratitude:

Gratitude will be measured using the GQ-6 Scale. This measure is a 6-item self-report questionnaire that asks participants to rate 6 items (ex. “I have so much in life to be thankful for”) on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates “strongly disagree” and 7 indicates “strongly agree”. Reverse items are reverse scored, and the items are summed and the mean is calculated as the final score (McCullough, et al., 2002).

* Demographics:

Participants will fill out demographic information at the end of the survey. Participants will fill out their gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, socio-economic status, what religion they identify with, if there are any religions they have previously identified with (and why they may have converted). I would also like to ask questions about how dedicated they are to their religion and what parts of their religion they value the most (services, community, values, ect).

**Challenges/limitations**

Because of the correlational nature of my study, there will be high external validity, but low internal validity. This means that my study will not have any manipulated variables and will be able to connect to real life. However, my study will have no evidence for a causal relationship. The nature of religious autonomy makes the development of an experimental design particularly difficult, as it is not ethical to randomly assign children to groups of complete religious autonomy or complete religious non-autonomy.

I will be using a measure that I make myself to measure level of autonomy that a person exerted over their religious choice (or lack of it). This means that the validity of this measure will be less certain than measures developed by researchers in the past. However, I will be able to use criterion validity to assess the correlation between different questions on my measure. I will make sure that items which should be correlated together are correlated together.

**Expected Findings**

I expect most of the findings to be concurrent with previous research. I expect that religion will be positively correlated with well-being and gratitude. It is also expected that Western religions will be more strongly correlated with well-being than Eastern religions.

The nuance of this study is the addition of the measure of religious autonomy. I expect that religious autonomy will also be positively correlated with well-being.

**Conclusion**

This study will have to be repeated and retested, especially due to the use of a new measure to calculate religious autonomy. However, the results could have significant implications as parents choose how they introduce their children to religion and could change the culture surrounding religion in order to maximize well-being. In conclusion, this research is important as the autonomy of children becomes increasingly important and can shed light on the importance (or lack of importance) of this practice concerning religion.

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**Budget:**

The most significant aspect of budget for this study will be researcher compensation.

Participants will be recruited through social media and will require little compensation ($250 for Amazon gift cards).

Materials: $0

Researcher compensation: 80 hours x $20 an hour = $1600

Participant compensation: 10 gift cards x $25 = $250

Total budget: $1850

**Timeline:**

Week 1: Background research = 15 hours

Week 2: Development of methods = 10 hours

Week 3: Data collection = 10 hours

Week 4: Development of presentation/paper = 20 hours

Week 5: Development of presentation/paper = 25 hours