

CHILD ABUSE, PERSONALITY, AND SPIRITUALITY  
AS PREDICTORS OF HAPPINESS IN MALTESE  
COLLEGE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the incremental validity of spirituality and religiosity controlling for personality and child abuse history among Maltese college students. A total of 214 female and 98 male undergraduates completed the Spiritual Transcendence Scale, the Brief Adjective Rating Scale, the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire, items about religious practices, a positive affect scale, a negative affect scale, and the Satisfaction with Life scale. Multiple regression analysis indicated that spirituality but not religious practices predicted positive affect and satisfaction with life after controlling for child abuse history and personality. The study suggests that spirituality may be an important potential source of resiliency for persons with a childhood history of abuse. Spirituality's ability to predict positive but not negative affect suggests it may be especially suited as a useful variable in the positive psychology movement.

Research has established a consistent relationship between important life events and one's tendency toward transcendence (Ellison, 1991; Marrone, 1999; Pargament, 1992; Young, Cashwell, & Shcherbakova, 2000). Adjustment to negative events in one's life often results in seeking spiritual consolation and meaning. For example childhood trauma is related to increased religious behaviors such as frequency of prayer and self-reported spiritual experience (Lawson, Debring, Berg, Vincelle, & Penk, 1998).

Spirituality can serve both as a predictor variable and an outcome variable. Most studies have found that spirituality was negatively affected in victims of child abuse. This finding was consistent across gender and types of abuse (Hall, 1995; Rossetti, 1995). A closer look at this research, however, indicates that the picture is complex. The destruction of the

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parent-child relationship by child abuse predicts a distrust of God and a perception of God permitting the abuse, but does not erase victims' expressed need for a spiritual connection (Kane, Cheston, & Greer, 1993). Similarly, child abuse is related to religious injury and spiritual distress, as well as to increased frequency of prayer and spiritual seeking (Lawson et al., 1998). Finally, many studies even suggest the potential resourcefulness of spirituality against negative events (Marrone, 1999; Pargament, 1997; Sullivan, 1993; Young, Cashwell, & Shcerbakoua, 2000), but it remains unclear how such effects occur.

Another potential confound in understanding the relationship between religiosity and child abuse is how religion and spirituality are operationalized in different studies. Are religious practices and spirituality precisely the same dimension? Even though they are highly correlated, they predict differentially to a variety of outcomes (Ciarrocchi & Deneke, 2004; Zinnbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999).

For the purpose of this study, spirituality was understood as the individual's "efforts to construe a broad sense of personal meaning within an eschatological context" (Piedmont 2001, p. 5). As people question their purpose in life, they construct spiritual answers that give meaning to life. Empirical research has looked at the functional value of spirituality to well-being specifically from three perspectives: as a coping mechanism against negative events, as social support, and as providing meaningfulness in life (Ellison, 1991; Marrone, 1999; Young et al., 2000). All three aspects of spirituality are potentially relevant for mediating or moderating the effects of child abuse.

Positive psychology may shed new light on this complex reality. Crises challenge our deepest beliefs and assumptions: that good people are somehow immune from harmful events, that life makes sense, and that we have control over what happens. Tedeschi (1998) found that for most people life crises ultimately lead to what he calls "post-traumatic growth." After basic assumptions are shattered most people construct a new framework for understanding their life narratives that incorporates the tragic event. Campbell (1999) calls this phenomena "ego shock." Such negative events could change old habits, self-perceptions, and assumptions, leaving only the raw experience of the world.

Campbell found that for more than half the people who took part in his studies, ego shock resulted in positive long-term effects on their lives. The new framework that develops does not cancel out what happened but replaces it with a different perspective. Accordingly, through

expanding a person's worldview, resiliency drives a successful recovery by motivating people to discover new strengths in the midst of adversity.

This study is meant to explore the well-documented effects of child abuse on well-being and also to determine whether spirituality may have a relationship to the well-being of victims. Baumeister (1991) noted that "suffering stimulates the need for meaning" because "people analyze and question their sufferings far more than their joys" (p. 232). It seems that as meaning-seekers, humans find different ways of arriving at this point in their life (Wink, 1999). Religious beliefs may counter hopelessness and form an important part of this equation. Such a pattern was found for depressed psychiatric inpatients (Murphy et al., 2000).

Finally, to attain methodological rigor in understanding the relationship between child abuse and religious variables it is important to rule out alternative explanations. Personality, for example, is a robust predictor of subjective well-being and accounts for the largest portion of variance over other psychosocial variables (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998). Failure to control for plausible explanations is a recurrent criticism of religious research (Sloan, Bagiella, & Powell, 2001).

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to measure the relationship between spirituality and religious practices to determine how well they predicted subjective well-being in a population of college students with or without a history of child abuse. We hypothesized, based on previous research that controlled for personality (Ciarrocchi & Deneke, 2004), that spirituality but not religious practices would predict subjective well-being. In keeping with this same research we hypothesized further that spirituality would predict the positive aspects of subjective well-being, namely positive affect and cognitive well-being, but would have no relationship to negative affect. The literature on child abuse suggests that a reported history of such events would be related to decreased positive aspects of subjective well-being and increased negative affect. We presumed that such would be the case and predicted that this effect would occur in a cross-cultural sample. The design chosen here will help determine whether spirituality and religious practices could compensate, as it were, for the negative impact of child abuse. The final research question, therefore, is whether reported abuse in childhood will totally attenuate the relationship between spirituality and religious practices with subjective well-being.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Data were collected from students of the University of Malta and the Gozo Sixth Form College during a single semester. The student population from which these two samples were selected represented 13% of the Maltese general population between the ages of 18 and 25 years old. Table 1 illustrates that the mean age represents a typical student population. Surveys were sent to 800 students randomly selected by computer from among a pool of students who volunteered for such studies. Participants consisted of 312 students, for a response rate of 39%. Six surveys were invalid due to incomplete data. The sample included 214 female respondents (68.6%), and 98 male respondents (31.4%).

### *Measures*

*Childhood Trauma Questionnaire.* The Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ) is a 28-item Likert-scale, which captures a history of child abuse and neglect across multiple dimensions (Bernstein et al., 1994). Five subscales form the CTQ: emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, and physical neglect. The alpha reliabilities for this Maltese sample are .82, .77, .93, .83, and .46, respectively. More recently, a 28-item short form CTQ has been further validated in a large sample (Bernstein & Fink, 1998). Clinical cutoffs for the 28-item version are used to categorize history of abuse against no history of abuse. For the purpose of this study, an overall composite abuse index score was created based on the total scores of the five subscales. This composite score was then reciprocally transformed to meet the assumptions of normal distribution.

In this sample, 11% of respondents fell in the severe abuse and neglect range, 25% qualified as moderately abused, 57% reported minimal abuse, and 7% reported none, based on the criteria described above. These percentages are highly similar to rates in the United States based on the studies that validated the CTQ (Bernstein & Fink, 1998).

*The Spiritual Transcendence Scale.* Spirituality was measured through the Spiritual Transcendence Scale (STS), a 24-item measure scored on a Likert-type scale (Piedmont, 1999). The STS is a unidimensional factor structure comprised of three facet scales: Universality, Prayer Fulfillment, and Connectedness. Alpha reliabilities for these three facets for

the Maltese sample are .78, .67, and .47, respectively. Piedmont (1999) found that the STS has significant cross-observer validity. Furthermore, the STS was found to predict important psychological outcomes such as stress experience and well-being, even after controlling for personality's predictive effects.

*Religious Practice Scale.* Religious practices were measured by combining two items from the demographic section: frequency of prayer and church attendance. The alpha reliability of the scale was .71.

*Brief Adjective Rating Scale.* Developed by McCrae and Costa (1985), the Brief Adjective Rating Scale (BARS) is an 80-item bipolar adjective measure of personality based on the five-factor model of personality. The alpha reliabilities of the five dimensions, neuroticism (tendency to experience negative emotions), extraversion (tendency to experience positive emotions), openness to experience (interest in a variety of internal and external experiences), agreeableness (tendency to be cooperative and agreeable in human relationships), and conscientiousness (degree to which a person is disposed to be dutiful to one's role and obligations), for this sample are .71, .80, .75, .72, and .82, respectively. The BARS was found to have good psychometric properties both in adult and college student samples (McCrae & Costa, 1985).

#### *Subjective Well-Being*

Well-being was examined from three different dimensions: cognitive well-being or global life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect.

*Satisfaction with Life scale (SWL).* The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWL) is a 5-item scale that measures life satisfaction and cognitive well-being (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and is a staple of research in subjective well-being. The alpha reliability of our Maltese sample was .95.

*Affect Measures.* The Affect Balance Scale is a 10-item *yes-no* questionnaire which consists of five items each measuring positive and negative affect (Bradburn & Noll, 1969). It is widely used in research on subjective well-being and has shown good to excellent internal consistency. The alpha reliability for this sample was .62.

#### *Procedure*

The questionnaires were mailed to participants who agreed to participate. Students were sent a packet containing a cover letter, an informed consent form, and the surveys. They had one week to respond. An

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Age	20.45	2.37	18–25
Neuroticism	52.36	8.56	26–72
Extraversion	49.06	9.60	24–76
Openness	51.23	11.61	27–85
Agreeableness	48.55	8.20	24–89
Conscientiousness	46.96	11.09	11–75
Spirituality	80.93	11.12	43–111
Religious Practices	7.40	1.90	2–10
Positive Affect	3.14	1.32	0–5
Negative Affect	2.37	1.57	0–5
Cognitive Well-being	23.66	6.59	6–35
Total Abuse	.21	.72	0–5

*N* = 312.

incentive was offered in the form of two drawings from among the participants, each receiving a gift voucher.

## RESULTS

### *Demographics*

Of the 312 students who participated in this study, 97% identified themselves as Roman Catholic, 0.6% as Protestant, and 2.2% did not define their religion. The majority of the respondents' parents have at least a high school education. Twenty-two percent and 12% of participants' fathers and mothers had college-level education, respectively. Most of the respondents are religiously active people: over 61% pray often and more than 65% attend church services regularly.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and alpha reliabilities for the study variables. Table 2 shows the intercorrelations for all variables. The correlation between religiosity and spirituality was significant ( $r = .28, p < .001$ ), but did not reach redundancy. Consistent with research that does not control for personality, significant correlations were obtained for both religiosity and spirituality with subjective

Table 2. Correlations Among the Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Neuroticism	-.12*									
Extraversion	-.10	.38*								
Openness	-.24*	.38*	.04							
Agreeableness	-.29*	.39*	.24*	.43*						
Conscientiousness	.18*	-.20*	.11	-.21*	-.29*					
Total Childhood Abuse	-.09	.13*	-.15*	.22*	.19*	-.26*				
Religious Practices	-.07	.19*	.00	.23*	.26*	-.16*	.28*			
Spirituality	-.27	.23*	.12*	.04	.19*	-.14*	.06	.24*		
Positive Affect	.36*	-.15*	-.02	-.17*	-.22*	.16*	-.15*	-.04	-.15*	
Negative Affect	-.38*	.33*	.07	.13*	.40*	-.34*	.17*	.24*	.47*	-.37*

*N* = 312. \**p* < .05.

well-being measures, although neither correlated with negative affect or neuroticism.

### *Hypothesis Testing*

It was hypothesized that spirituality and religiosity would have unique variance in predicting the components of well-being over and above the contribution of personality and history of child abuse. To determine this possibility, a series of hierarchical regressions were performed for all predictor variables with each subjective well-being criterion variable, namely, positive affect, negative affect, and cognitive well-being. For each model, total child abuse history was entered in step one, personality variables in step two, and either spirituality or religiosity in step three.

Table 3 presents the results for these hierarchical regressions. Reported history of child abuse was significantly related to all three components of subjective well-being as was demonstrated in the zero-order correlations. Child abuse had its greatest association with cognitive well-being explaining four to six times more variance than it did for either positive or negative affect. Personality was strongly related to all aspects of subjective well-being as predicted. Even controlling for child abuse, personality explained from 12% to 22% of the variance for the separate subjective well-being components.

The first hypothesis concerning spirituality was confirmed. Table 3 illustrates that spirituality contributed significant additional variance to both positive affect and cognitive well-being even after controlling for child abuse and personality. The hypothesis that spirituality would not predict negative affect was also confirmed.

Religious practices, as predicted, did not contribute additional significant variance to any subjective well-being component when controlling for childhood abuse and personality. This is noteworthy in that the zero-order correlations (Table 2) indicate significant associations between religious practices with negative affect and cognitive well-being. Personality and child abuse history appear to fully mediate these effects.

The beta weights in Table 4 further clarify the relationship between the predictor variables and the subjective well-being components. Neuroticism, extraversion, and agreeableness carried the majority of the predictive variance for the outcomes. The negative beta weights, however, for agreeableness predicting to positive affect and cognitive



Table 3. *Hierarchical Regression Predicting Subjective Well-Being*

Criterion Step	Predictor Variable	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$F$ Change
<b>Positive Affect</b>				
1	Total Abuse	.02	.02	5.71*
2	Personality	.14	.12	8.23***
3	Spirituality	.17	.04	14.21***
3	Religious Practices	.14	.00	.02
<b>Negative Affect</b>				
1	Total Abuse	.03	.03	8.22**
2	Personality	.15	.13	9.23***
3	Spirituality	.16	.00	.36
3	Religious Practices	.16	.01	1.76
<b>Cognitive Well-Being</b>				
1	Total Abuse	.12	.12	41.04***
2	Personality	.33	.22	19.73***
3	Spirituality	.35	.02	6.85**
3	Religious Practices	.33	.00	.57

Note: Each step 3 predictor variable entered separately.  
 $N = 312$ . \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 4. *Beta Weights for Predictors of Subjective Well-Being*

Predictor Variable	Positive Affect	Negative Affect	Cognitive Well-Being
Neuroticism	-.24***	.32***	-.30***
Extroversion	.22***	-.10	.26***
Openness	.01	.07	-.10
Agreeableness	-.15*	-.01	-.18***
Conscientiousness	.09	-.08	.26***
Total Childhood Abuse	-.14**	.16**	-.34***
Religious Practices	.01	-.08	.04
Spirituality	.21***	.03	.13**

$N = 312$ . \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

well-being are counterintuitive. Most previous empirical research links agreeableness in a positive direction with these outcomes (Watson, 2000). This result may be related to agreeableness' entry into the regression equation as a block with the other personality factors. The zero-order correlations for agreeableness with positive affect and cognitive well-being, in contrast, were significant in the predicted direction. Finally, conscientiousness predicted to cognitive well-being, thus rounding out the importance of personality in its myriad facets as related to subjective well-being. The beta weights also confirmed that spirituality is positively related to positive affect and cognitive well-being, whereas religious practices have no relationship whatsoever to the subjective well-being outcomes.

#### DISCUSSION

Spirituality contributed positively to cognitive well-being and positive affect after controlling for personality and child abuse history. Religious practices have no significant effect on subjective well-being. These findings replicate a series of studies ranging from nonclinical to clinical samples (Ciarrocchi & Deneke, 2004; Francis & Katz, 2002; Geary, Ciarrocchi, & Sheers, 2004). The current study extends this pattern for spirituality and religious practices to a cross-cultural sample of young adults. Cross-cultural research is thus consistent with research in the United States that the degree of spiritual transcendence has a stronger relationship to subjective well-being than do religious practices.

Any number of explanations is possible for these findings. It may well be that, as sociologist of religion Rodney Stark has put it, the gods of one's religion are more important than its rituals (Stark, 2001, 2002). That is, religious practices may be important in many aspects of religion's role in society, but the religious beliefs that people maintain have a stronger relationship with their overall sense of well-being. The mechanism by which this relationship occurs is purely speculative at this point. Meaning making is certainly a plausible explanation. Spiritual transcendence, which often is attached to religious beliefs, may provide broad enough forms of meaning to allow people to adapt to the vicissitudes of everyday life and thus maintain an emotional homeostasis. Religious practices themselves, however, are well-known to have a variety of motivations (Allport, 1964), and these motivations predict differentially to subjective well-being. This does not

mean necessarily that all forms of spiritual transcendence are equally positive. There is an equally large literature which suggests that certain forms of religious beliefs and coping are detrimental in that they are related to increased emotional distress (Pargament, 1997). Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that feeling a sense of connection to a purpose greater than oneself is related to human flourishing. Of all the available meaning-making systems that allow people to transcend their self-centered focus, religion and spirituality rank as the most readily available to the largest number of individuals.

From the standpoint of positive psychology these results extend the concept of human flourishing in the face of potentially traumatic childhood experiences. Roughly the same percentage of students in this sample reported childhood abuse events as in the United States. There are many clinical and empirical reports of people using spiritual and religious forms of coping in the face of such experiences (Pargament, 1997). This research consistently points out that religious and spiritual coping enable people to experience less distress. This is one of the first empirical studies to indicate that childhood abuse does not take away the benefits of spiritual transcendence. This finding is noteworthy in that it controlled for personality, which is a highly salient predictor of happiness. For positive psychology to continue to progress as a science as well as to develop scientifically derived applications for everyday life, it must address the issue of resilience. Given that tragedy and setbacks are integral to life, what we learn from positive psychology must have application to coping with such events if it is to have credibility in the larger social world. Child abuse is a particularly good platform from which to study variables related to positive psychology. Society's concern for victims of child abuse is well-intentioned and necessary. It is equally important that victims themselves and society discard notions that the effects of such experiences are incompatible with eventual psychological well-being. Positive psychology can have a most useful role in allowing people to access their strengths in the wake of such untoward events.

Child abuse is also important for the social scientific study of religion because it is at the nexus of spirituality and meaning making. As is well-known clinically, many victims blame God for what happened to them, so that a form of meaning making that might be solace for some becomes suffering for others. This reaction is heightened for those victimized by religious leaders or people who profess strong religious beliefs. How people assimilate and accommodate their religious world-views in the face of child abuse can add a dimension of understanding

to trauma recovery precisely because it is so often connected to noteworthy parental figures. Object relation theorists have led the field in noting the spiritual and emotional confabulation that results in these cases (Rizzuto, 1979, 1982).

A second implication for the field of positive psychology to arise from research in spirituality is that it predicts positive affect and cognitive well-being and tends to have little or no relationship to negative affect. This phenomenon suggests that some effects of spirituality may be counterintuitive. That is, many of the conceptual and practical approaches to religion and spirituality have seen its role in terms of coping with emotional pain. Ironically, multiple studies now demonstrate that, when controlling for personality, including neuroticism, spirituality has little ability to reduce negative affect (Ciarrocchi & Deneke, 2004; Geary et al., 2004; Walsh, 2001). These results suggest that positive psychology would do well to continue its interest in spirituality and transcendence as key character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Far from being a human quality that speaks only to the dark side of human nature and experience, the real power of spirituality from a functional psychological standpoint may be its ability to enhance human flourishing.

This study has several limitations. It was a sample of convenience in university students. The cross-sectional nature of the design limits causal inferences. Obviously, longitudinal research with child abuse victims will permit stronger conclusions. Similarly, all the measures were self-report, thus raising questions as to the accuracy of the participants' memory. As noted above, however, the fact that students in a different culture reported similar rates of child abuse as in the United States at least provides some face validity for the veracity of the child abuse history. The study's strength includes its relatively large sample size and the measure of control that was utilized to rule out plausible alternative explanations.

The study points to the continued utility of an incremental validity model for religious research (Piedmont, 1999). Although this series of investigations has utilized the five-factor model of personality, it is particularly noteworthy that research with different five-factor instruments has demonstrated the incremental validity of spirituality. In other words, spirituality's ability to predict to salient psychosocial outcomes over and above personality does not result from some artificial relationship to a single instrument, but can hold its own with a variety of comprehensive measures of personality.

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