

Religious Commitment and Well-Being in College Students: Examining Conditional Indirect Effects of Meaning in Life

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Abstract There is systematic and quantitative evidence that religious commitment is associated with indicators of well-being, such as positive emotions and moods, absence of negative emotions, and satisfaction with life; however, researchers remain far from a consensus regarding which mechanisms may account for these observed relationships. Although religious commitment influences well-being through many different mechanisms, meaning in life is probably the predominant one. Thus, we examined the bidimensional conceptualization of meaning in life as a potential mechanism between religious commitment and well-being. The study was cross-sectional in nature. Survey data were collected from 92 college students, aged 17–21. A battery of self-report measures was used for tapping religious commitment, well-being, and meaning in life. Even though presence of meaning, search for meaning, religious commitment, and well-being correlated moderately with each other, presence of meaning carried a substantial proportion of variance in predicting well-being for girls/women. This study suggests that religious commitment influences a person's sense of meaning in life, which, in turn, influences her/his well-being. And, we hope that these results encourage professionals to explore with their clients the fundamental questions of meaning and purpose in life.

Keywords Religious commitment · Presence of meaning · Search for meaning · Well-being

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Introduction

In an increasingly secular and global society, some question whether religion contributes to, or impedes, well-being (Diener et al. 2011). In the early twentieth century, Freud considered religion to be a psychopathological, neurotic wish-fulfillment. However, the current zeitgeist of work on religion and well-being seems much more charitable. Today, religion is viewed as a powerful coping mechanism (Pargament and Park 1997) and a (perhaps uniquely suited) system to provide meaning in life (Park 2005). Indeed, even Freud admitted that, "... only religion can answer the question of the purpose of life. One can hardly be wrong in concluding that the idea of life having a purpose stands and falls with the religious system" (Freud 1961/1927, p. 25).

Most scholars of religion now agree that religion often positively affects well-being, but recent questions of interest have become more specific. Who does religion affect positively and under what conditions? Who does religion affect negatively and under what conditions? Worthington (1988) suggested a model addressing such questions. The key variable in Worthington's model is *religious commitment*, which is defined as the degree to which a person adheres to his or her religious values, beliefs, and practices and uses them in daily living. Religious commitment has been operationalized and measured in several ways, including membership or nonmembership in religious organizations, the degree of participation in religious activities (such as frequency of attending church), the attitudes and importance of religious experience, and belief in traditional religious creeds (Hill and Hood 1999).

Religious Commitment and Meaning in Life

The importance of the search for and presence of meaning recurs in philosophical accounts of the good life from ancient Greece onward. Psychological attention grew from the 1940s on, in particular, through the work of Victor Frankl who asserted that the need for meaning is a basic human drive (Frankl 1963). Meaning in life can be defined as a personal experience that includes the cognizance of order, coherence and purpose in one's existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals, and an accompanying sense of self-realization, order, and coherence out of one's existence, which includes affective, motivational, cognitive, relational, and personal components related to the fulfilment of purpose, efficacy, value and justification, and self-worth (Steger 2012). Being religious or spiritual may lead to a higher sense of meaning in life because individuals can acknowledge a purpose or reason for why things happen (Frankl 1963).

Meaning in Life and Well-Being

Although there is no consensus around a single definition of well-being, however, there is general agreement that at minimum, well-being includes the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g., contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment, and positive functioning (Frey and Stutzer 2002; Andrews and Withey 1976; Diener 2000; Ryff and Keyes 1995). In simple terms, well-being can be described as judging life positively and feeling good (Diener et al. 1997; Veenhoven 2008). The experience of meaning in life has been recognized as an important contributor to health and well-being (e.g., Ryff and Singer 1998; Wong and Fry 1998). Even in much broader efforts to define well-being, meaning in life is regarded as a valuable indicator of positive functioning (e.g., Diener and Seligman 2004). The

components considered to be central to the experience of meaning—feeling that life matters, identifying a sense of purpose, and achieving an understanding of one’s self and one’s life—hold direct implications for well-being (see Shek 1992 for additional explorations of how meaning and purpose facilitate well-being).

Current Study

In the light of aforementioned literature, it is reasoned that individuals with high levels of religious commitment might find their lives meaningful in the hope of gaining an increased insight into the situation to maximize their feelings of well-being. Thus, one of the goals of this study was to examine the indirect effects of religious commitment on well-being via presence and search dimensions of meaning in life. And, we hypothesized that (1) religious commitment would be associated with well-being; (2) religious commitment would be related to presence and search dimensions of meaning; (3) the presence and search dimensions of meaning would be associated with well-being; and (4) the associations between religious commitment and well-being would be reduced or eliminated when controlling for presence and search dimensions of meaning. Next, we also anticipated that the gender of the participants would moderate the indirect relationship between religious commitment and well-being via presence and search dimensions of meaning in life.

Methods

Participants

Data were collected from 92 students enrolled in various colleges in Kashmir valley. There were 39 boy (42%) and 53 girl (58%) students. Their ages ranged from 17 to 21 [mean (M) = 19.61, standard deviation (SD) = 2.04]. Regarding participants’ domicile, 40% were urban, 16% were semiurban, 32% were rural, and 12% were semirural.

Measures

Religious Commitment Inventory-10

Religious Commitment Inventory (RCI-10; Worthington et al. 2003) is a 10-item scale used to assess an individual’s current level of religious commitment and religiosity. The RCI-10 includes items such as “It is important to me to spend periods of time in private religious thought and reflection” and “My religious beliefs lie behind my whole approach to life.” The RCI-10 has been widely validated and has strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$) and strong test–retest reliability ($r = .87$; Worthington et al. 2003). The scale’s coefficient alpha was .87 in the current study.

Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale

Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS; Tennant et al. 2007) is a 14-item measure of mental well-being covering subjective well-being and psychological functioning, in which all items are worded positively and address aspects of positive mental health. The scale is scored by summing responses to each item answered on a 1–5

Likert scale. The minimum scale score is 14 and the maximum is 70. A higher score indicates a higher level of mental well-being or positive mental health. The standardized Cronbach's alpha for the student sample and for the general population were .89 and .91, respectively. In the current study, the scale's Cronbach's alpha was .85.

Meaning in Life Questionnaire

Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ; Steger et al. 2006) consists of two five-item subscales, Presence (MLQ-P; perceived meaning) and Search (MLQ-S; motivation to discover meaning). Items are rated on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (absolutely *untrue*) to 7 (absolutely *true*), and thus scores could range from 7 to 35, with higher scores indicating greater perceived and motivation to discover meaning in life. The MLQ-P and the MLQ-S have been shown to be reliable, with alpha coefficient estimates of internal consistency of .82 and .87, respectively. The alpha coefficients for the MLQ-P and MLQ-S in this sample were .89 and .83, respectively.

Procedure

The undergraduate students were told that the purpose of the study was to examine religious commitment and mental well-being. Interested students would sign up for the study and participate in the study at a designated classroom. These students were asked to read and sign the informed consent document before they filled out paper copies of the questionnaire, which took them approximately 15–20 min to complete. At the end of the study, they were debriefed about the purpose of the study.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Prior to any statistical enterprise, the data were assessed for tests of normality by examining the skewness and kurtosis of the distribution for each measure. All study measures were deemed normally distributed. The assumption of linearity and homoscedasticity was verified through the examination of the bivariate scatterplots between the study measures. The assumption of linearity was considered to be violated if a nonlinear relationship was found. In addition, the assumption of homoscedasticity was met if the pattern on the scatterplot suggested variance was normally distributed. These assumptions were met for all measures. We centered the religious commitment and presence of meaning to avoid multicollinearity with their product term (Aiken and West 1991).

Descriptive Data

Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, and Cronbach's alphas for all the variables are presented in Table 1. In particular, Cronbach's alpha values were well above the suggested minimum value of .70 (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994). Second, all of the observed variables were significantly moderately associated with each other except for gender and WEMWBS (see Table 1).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and inter-construct correlations

	1	2	3	4	5
1. RCI-10	.87	.29**	.27**	.34**	– .28**
2. MLQ-P	–	.89	.32**	.34**	– .21*
3. MLQ-S	–	–	.83	.25*	– .22*
4. WEMWBS	–	–	–	.85	– .19
5. Gender	–	–	–	–	na
Mean	32.63	14.91	15.13	48.88	na
(SD)	(2.98)	(2.14)	(1.92)	(3.18)	na

Numbers along the diagonal are internal consistencies of the scales

Gender was coded as 0 = girls, 1 = boys. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ (two tailed); $N = 92$

RCI-10, Religious Commitment Inventory-10; MLQ-P, Meaning in Life Questionnaire-presence dimension; MLQ-S, Meaning in Life Questionnaire-search dimension; WEMWBS, Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale

Test for Indirect Effects

To investigate the indirect effect of religious commitment on well-being via presence and search dimensions of meaning in life, we used Process Procedure for SPSS Release 2.15 by Hayes (2013). The bootstrap estimates presented here is based on 5000 samples. The estimates of 95% CIs and summary of indirect effect analysis are presented in Table 2 and Fig. 1.

The total and direct effects of religious commitment on well-being were $b = .39$, $p < .001$, and $b = .28$, $p < .05$. The difference between the total and direct effects was the total indirect effect through presence of and search for meaning, with a point estimate of .1112 and a 95% bootstrap confidence interval of .0258 to .2203. Because zero is not in the 95% confidence interval, we can conclude that the total indirect effect of religious commitment on well-being is significant. The Kappa squared (Preacher and Kelley 2011) equalled, $k^2 = .098$, 95% BCa CI (.033, .205). This represents a relatively small effect size according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines. The true indirect effect involving presence of meaning was estimated to be .0768, with a 95% confidence interval of .0074–.1675. Because zero is not included in this interval, we can conclude that the indirect effect is significantly different from zero at $p < .05$. The $k^2 = .068$, 95% BCa CI (.014, .160). This

Table 2 Regression results for testing indirect effects

	Point estimate	Percentile 95% CI		BC 95% CI	
		Lower	Upper	Lower	Upper
MLQ-P	.0768	.0074	.1675	.0150	.1850
MLQ-S	.0344	– .0211	.1115	– .0133	.1250
Total	.1112	.0258	.2203	.0353	.2357

BC, bias corrected; 5000 bootstrap samples; MLQ-P, Meaning in Life Questionnaire-presence dimension; MLQ-S, Meaning in Life Questionnaire-search dimension; total, total indirect effect of religious commitment on well-being through via MLQ-P and MLQ-S

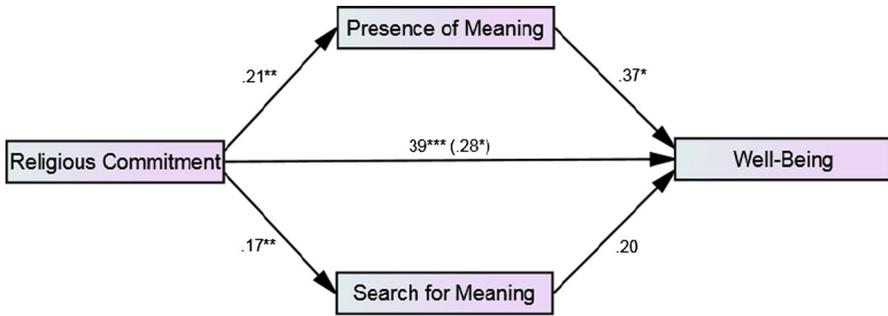


Fig. 1 Path values represent unstandardized regression coefficients. The value outside of the parentheses represents the total effect of religious commitment on well-being prior to the inclusion of presence of and search for meaning. Value in the parentheses represents the direct effect of religious commitment on well-being after the presence of and search for meaning are included. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

represents a small effect size according to Cohen’s (1988) guidelines. However, the specific indirect effect through search for meaning was not significant because its 95% confidence interval, $-.0211$ to 1115 , contained zero. Thus, search for meaning was not included in subsequent analysis because it did not carry a substantial proportion of variance in predicting well-being.

Test for Conditional Indirect Effects

Conditional indirect effect is demonstrated when the effect of religious commitment on well-being, via meaning in life, differs in strength across different levels of gender. To assess conditional indirect effect, we first tested the four conditions suggested by Ng et al. (2008): (1) significant effect of religious commitment on well-being; (2) significant effect of religious commitment on presence of meaning; (3) significant interaction between presence of meaning and gender in predicting well-being; and (4) different conditional indirect effect of religious commitment on well-being, via meaning in life, across different levels of gender. The last condition is the essence of conditional indirect effect and establishes whether the strength of the indirect effect via meaning in life differs across the levels of gender (Hayes 2013; Ng et al. 2008).

Our results above demonstrated that religious commitment was significantly related to well-being, supporting Condition 1 of conditional indirect effect. Condition 2 was also supported by our results, in which religious commitment was positively associated with presence of meaning. To test for Condition 3, we examined whether the interaction of presence of meaning with gender was significant in predicting well-being. Results of the moderated regression of gender on well-being, organized by the religious commitment and presence of meaning, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 shows that the interaction term for presence of meaning with gender ($b = -.71, p < .05$) was significant in predicting well-being. Taken together, Condition 3 was satisfied. Hence, results based on the first three conditions indicated that gender could moderate the indirect effect of religious commitment on well-being.

To further validate findings of conditional indirect relationship, we examined Condition 4, which requires the magnitude of the conditional indirect effect of the religious commitment via presence of meaning to be different across different levels of gender. We used Hayes (2013) Process Procedure for SPSS Release 2.15 to compute the conditional

Table 3 Regression results for testing moderation for well-being

Factor and statistic	Presence of meaning	Well-being
Religious commitment	.21**	.29*
Presence of meaning		.76**
Gender		– .44
Presence of meaning × gender		– .71*
R^2	.08	.23
F	8.02**	6.58***

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$;*** $p < .001$

indirect effects. Following Preacher et al. (2007) recommendation, we used two values (e.g., 0 and 1) for a dichotomous moderator, gender, representing girls and boys, respectively. Table 4 presents the estimates and bootstrap confidence intervals for the conditional indirect effects of religious commitment across different levels of gender.

Results show that the conditional indirect effects of religious commitment on well-being were stronger and significant for girls but weaker and nonsignificant for boys.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to empirically test a recent speculation that religious commitment influences well-being via meaning in life. We also investigated the conditional indirect effect of religious commitment on well-being via presence of meaning. That is, whether the indirect effect of religious commitment on well-being via presence of meaning is contingent upon the gender of the participants. We examined these question using indices of religious commitment, well-being, and meaning in life. Commensurate with study hypotheses, significant associations were found between religious commitment and well-being; between religious commitment and presence and search dimensions of meaning in life; and between the presence and search dimensions of meaning in life and well-being. This finding confirms and substantiates previous results demonstrating a relationship between religiousness, meaning in life, and positive psychological outcomes (e.g., life satisfaction, self-esteem, and optimism) in university students (Steger and Frazier 2005). In addition, Kennedy and Kanthamani (1995) in a community sample demonstrated an association among transcendent experiences, importance of religion, meaning in life, and subjective well-being.

The results of the indirect effect analysis revealed that the association between religious commitment and presence of meaning is uniquely relevant to well-being; however, the association between religious commitment and search for meaning is not uniquely relevant to well-being. Specifically, the results showed that presence of meaning carried a substantial proportion of variance in predicting well-being, whereas search for meaning did not show any such effects. The results further revealed that religious commitment–well-

Table 4 Conditional indirect effect results for religious commitment across levels of gender

Moderator	Presence of meaning		Bootstrap 95% CI	
	Level	Conditional indirect effect	Lower	Upper
Gender	Girls	.1568	.0527	.3188
	Boys	.0103	– .0848	.1061

being association remained significant after controlling for search for and presence of meaning. Thus, the indirect effect of religious commitment on well-being was significant, only via presence of meaning.

Next, our conditional indirect effect model demonstrated support to the study's expectations and, thus, addresses the missing role of context in the association between religious commitment and well-being. The results showed that the indirect effect of religious commitment on well-being via presence of meaning was strong and significant for girls and weak and nonsignificant for boys. In fact, this line of finding fetches support from prior investigations demonstrating higher levels of religious commitment (Pargament 1997; Miller and Stark 2002) and search for and presence of meaning (Steger et al. 2009) in women than men. This study, therefore, suggests that gender has a debilitating effect on the relationship between religious commitment and well-being via presence of meaning.

As described above, religious commitment predicted well-being differently through different paths in this study. Even though presence of meaning and search for meaning are similar in the way that they are both an accounts of the good life, however, Steger et al. (2006) argue that they are independent. Presence of meaning is indicative of meaning rather than simply a desire for meaning. According to Steger et al. (2008) "people theoretically experience the presence of meaning when they comprehend themselves and the world, understand their unique fit in the world, and identify what they are trying to accomplish in their lives." While having meaning is associated with psychological well-being, the search for meaning is not necessarily healthy; Steger et al. (2008) show that it can arise from different underlying motivations in different people, and therefore, have positive or negative effects on psychological health. It follows that the presence of meaning is more closely linked with well-being than the search for meaning.

Although Chamberlain and Zika (1988) reported that measures of meaning was a significant link between intrinsic religiousness and life satisfaction in a sample of 188 stay-at-home mothers in New Zealand, however, the meaning measures that the researchers used have been criticized as having excessive item overlap with the outcome variable in the study—namely, life satisfaction (e.g., Frazier et al. 2003; Yalom 1980). In addition, results from this sample may not generalize to the typical populations seen by counsellors. In the present study, we addressed this issue using a two-dimensional measure of meaning, having potentially less item overlap with the criterion variable, and more generalizable and typical populations.

Thus, we found strong support for presence of meaning carrying a significant proportion of variance in predicting well-being, specifically, for girls/women, suggesting that religious individuals (e.g., girls) might experience greater well-being because they derive meaning in life from their religious feelings and activities. More specifically, we believe our development of the conditional indirect effect model of religious commitment-well-being association and our empirical findings lay a broad framework and implicative foundation for future inquiry that could further our understanding of the relationship between religious commitment and well-being. As the results of our study demonstrate that presence of meaning may be a central mechanism that links religious commitment to well-being. Future research should examine other potential mechanisms that can advance our understanding of the process through which religious commitment affects well-being.

This study was limited in several ways. First, this research was cross-sectional in nature making it impossible to draw conclusions on cause-effect relations. Therefore, longitudinal studies that may reveal bidirectional effects are warranted. Second, although we did assess one of the most commonly used constructs (i.e., religious commitment), we did not use a variety of methods to assess religiousness. Replication of these results with other measures

of religiousness would increase confidence in meaning in life as a link between religious commitment and well-being. Last, this study assessed only student population; hence, these results may not be extrapolated to other populations.

Despite these limitations, we believe we have provided empirical support for the hypothesis that presence of meaning carried a substantial proportion of variance in predicting well-being. We believe that the religious commitment influences a person's sense of meaning in life, which, in turn, influences her well-being. We hope that future research will focus more generally on the role of meaning in life, specifically presence of meaning, or perceived meaning, in fostering well-being. Finally, we hope that these results encourage professionals to explore with their clients the fundamental questions of meaning and purpose in life.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict interests

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