Religiosity and Life Satisfaction among Mexican, Dutch and Italian Female and Male Students

Radosveta Dimitrova
Tilburg University, the Netherlands

Domínguez Espinosa Alejandra del Carmen
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), Mexico

Abstract

This chapter examines whether for young females and males in Mexico, Italy and the Netherlands religiousness is associated with life satisfaction. We draw on recent model of religiousness (Saroglou, 2011) to apply a comparative approach across three cultures. Participants were 201 Mexican, 244 Dutch and 131 Italian young adults who completed the Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness Scale (Saroglou, 2011) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985). Results showed that Dutch compared Italians and Mexicans reported lower scores in religious believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging, whereas no gender differences emerged. A path model using structural equation modelling showed that religiousness dimensions were significantly related to life satisfaction for males and females across cultural groups. Results highlight relevant differences on the big four religious dimensions, while also supporting the significant association between religiousness and life satisfaction for male and female youth in three different cultural contexts.

Keywords: Gender, religiousness, life satisfaction, Mexico, Italy, the Netherlands
Introduction

Sixty eight percent or nearly five billion people around the world would say that religion is important in their lives (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011) and research has consistently shown that religious people are generally more happy and satisfied with life (Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Koenig & Larson, 2001). However, research has also suggested that people in economically developed nations tend to abandon religion (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2007), and this is particularly true for Northern Europe and nations with highest levels of well-being in the world (Diener, Helliwell, & Kahneman, 2010). In Northern Europe, the majority of population is atheist or nonreligious (Koenig & Larson, 2001) and has been shown to experience the highest levels of well-being in the world (Diener et al., 2010). One explanation suggests that economic growth may be responsible for declines in religiosity (Barro & Mitchell, 2004). In economically developed countries, people are better able to achieve high well-being without relying on religion due to better infrastructure and general living conditions. In wealthy nations, people might feel less need for social resources and less interested in organized religion such that secure circumstances may be associated with less religiosity. On the contrary, in less economically developed nations, religion is most beneficial for people by helping them to cope with difficult circumstances and difficult life context (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2007). In addition, research has shown a distinct gender difference in religiosity, with women consistently displaying higher levels of religiosity than men (Miller & Stark, 2002). Traditional socialization theory suggests that females are taught to be more religious than males such that feminine attributes emphasized in the society are more consistent with religious roles (e.g., gentleness, nurturance, and conformity to societal roles).

This chapter draws on recently introduced model by Saroglou (2011) of four components of religion namely believing (beliefs relative to external transcendence), bonding (rituals and emotions), behaving (adherence to norms and moral arguments) and belonging (community and social group cohesion). To assess these four religiousness factors, a new measurement tool was employed, the Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness Scale (Saroglou, 2011). We make use of this scale by applying it to Mexican, Dutch and Italian samples for the first time. The big four dimensions are also universal and easily applicable across various religious and cultural contexts, therefore providing an excellent framework to study gender and cultural variability in religion and life satisfaction in different cultural groups.
This chapter examines whether religion has a greater association with life satisfaction in Mexico, Italy and the Netherlands and whether there are gender differences on this relation in young adults. Drawing on the conceptual model, we address two research questions: (1) Are there gender and ethnic differences in the salience of religiosity components between Mexican, Italian and Dutch youth? (2) Does religion benefit youth’s life satisfaction? In so doing, we address two important literature gaps. First, there is little work on the joint influence of the four religious dimensions on life satisfaction. Second, much work investigates only one cultural group in one country. The chapter applies a comparative approach to investigate youth in Mexican, Dutch and Italian contexts because similarities and differences in these countries may be particularly salient in affecting youths’ religiousness and life satisfaction.

In relation to the first research question, two specific hypotheses are advanced. First, based on past research, we expect girls to be more religious than boys across cultural contexts (Hypothesis 1). Second, prior evidence documents that Italians and Mexicans show high levels of religiousness than Dutch (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Therefore, we expected that Dutch youth will have the lowest score on religiousness (Hypothesis 2). In Italy, 80% of the population is Catholic (Gruber, 2005) and religion is very important for the society, family and everyday life. Also, Italy and Mexico compared to the Netherlands, are more traditional countries and religion is used to have a great influence on the life of its citizens than in other European countries, where religion has traditionally been more a matter of private choice (Ciairano, 2004).

In relation to the second research question, the extent to which the four dimensions of religiousness predict life satisfaction across cultural groups was examined. To address this question, a path model of religiousness and life satisfaction was tested. According to this model, different components form one latent factor of religiousness, which is positively related to life satisfaction. Most studies find a very strong positive association between religiousness and life satisfaction. For example, a meta-analysis by Witter and colleagues (1985) reports that most of research findings point out that religion is positively associated with subjective well-being. Consequently, it was hypothesized that youth across cultures, who have strong and developed religiousness across all four domains will feel better in life (Hypothesis 3).
Methods

Participants

The present chapter was based on a sample of 577 participants with Mexican (n = 201), Italian (n = 131) and Dutch (n = 244) background. The average age was 22.70 years (SD = 5.03). Participants for this study were recruited from several public universities in Mexico, Italy and the Netherlands. Written instructions at the beginning of the questionnaires were given. Participants were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and confidential and that they were free to discontinue their participation at any time. They were also ensured that if interested, they will receive a final report with the results of the study.

Measures

Sociodemographic data. All participants provided data on their ethnicity, gender, age.

Religiousness. The Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness Scale developed by Saroglou (2011) was used. The scale measures four basic dimensions (believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging) of religiousness with a total of 12 items. The four dimensions refer to four components of religion: beliefs, emotions/rituals, moral norms, and group/community. Sample items were “In religion, I enjoy belonging to a group/community”, “Belonging to a religious tradition and identifying with it is important for me”, “Referring to a religious tradition is important for my cultural/ethnic identity”, and “I am attached to the religion for the values and ethics it endorses”. Internal reliability measured with Cronbach’s coefficient α were .91 in the Mexican, .95 in the Dutch and .94 in the Italian samples.

Life Satisfaction was measured with The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The scale consists of 5 items rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Sample items included “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”, “I am satisfied with life”, and “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing”. Internal reliability measured with Cronbach’s coefficient α were .91 Mexican, .89 in the Dutch and .87 in the Italian sample.

Results

The main research questions were addressed in two steps. First, gender and group differences in religiousness among groups were examined by carrying out a MANOVA, which included religiousness domains (i.e., believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging) as dependent variables, group (Dutch and Italian) and gender (males and females) as independent variables. Second, the question of whether
religiousness is a positive predictor of life satisfaction was addressed in a multigroup structural equation model between females and males to test associations among the four religiousness domains and life satisfaction (Bollen, 1989). A significant ethnic group difference was found for all religiousness domains with Dutch being much lower than Italians and Mexicans. Overall, Dutch compared to Italians and Mexicans, showed lower scores on religious believing \( (F(1, 553) = 20.70, p < .001) \), bonding \( (F(1, 553) = 13.16, p < .001) \), behaving \( (F(1, 553) = 15.79, p < .001) \), and belonging \( (F(1, 553) = 40.70, p < .001) \). This finding confirms the expectation Dutch that have less attachment and feel weakly connected to religion than the Italians and Mexicans. However, no significant gender effect was found for religious domains across groups.

Next, the second research question was tested to see if religiousness was related to life satisfaction for Mexican, Dutch and Italian females and males. It was expected that believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging together form one latent factor of religiousness, which is positively related to life satisfaction. A multigroup structural equation model with gender (males and females) was designed using direct paths from religiousness as latent variable including believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging components and life satisfaction as manifest variable. The structural covariances model showed an excellent fit, \( \chi^2 (15, N = 577) = 30.50, p = .010, CFI = .991, RMSEA = .043 \). The path of religiousness and life satisfaction was statistically significant across gender and groups. This is in line with the expectations and confirms the relation between religiousness and better well-being (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Model of Religiousness and Life Satisfaction of Mexican, Dutch and Italian Males and Females**

![Figure 1](image_url)

*Note: Coefficients represent standardized regression weights for the structural covariances model. The first coefficient represents males, the second females. *\( p < .01 \).*** \( p < .001 \).
Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to examine the differences in religiousness domains and the relation to life satisfaction among Mexican, Dutch and Italian males and females. The results largely supported the hypotheses and expectations. A group difference was found for religiousness, whereby Dutch scored lower compared to their Italian and Mexican peers. This result is in line with expectations that Italians and Mexicans are more interdependent to their religion than Dutch. Previous studies have provided support for this finding, indicating that Italians and Mexicans have a stronger cohesion with their religion compared to Northern European groups. Similarly, in the present chapter, the strength of the religious bond is more present in Mexican and Italian than Dutch groups. The Dutch sample scored lower on all religiousness domains of believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging than the Italian and Mexican samples, which is consistent with the prediction that religious issues are less salient for Dutch individuals. In line with this finding, Ciairano (2004) also found that religion has a greater influence on the life of Italians compared to their peers in other European countries. Therefore, it seems that Italians and Mexicans have a stronger religious identity and overall attachment to religion than their Dutch peers. However, contrary to the second hypothesis, there were no gender differences for religiousness, which indicates that Mexican, Italian and Dutch males and females do not differ in overall religiousness. A possible interpretation might be the lack of exposure to religious issues. It may be that young generations of boys and girls in these cultures would have equally clear and committed sense of religiousness. These young males and females probably do not have to deal with religious issues. Therefore, Mexican, Dutch and Italian boys and girls do not differ in all domains of religiousness but certainly future studies are necessary to investigate this issue.

In relation to the second research question, all domains of religiousness were positively related to one factor and significantly predicting life satisfaction of males and females across cultural groups. This means that according to expectations, there is a significant relation between ones’ feelings of life satisfaction and strongly developed religiousness. This finding is in line with general theory and research on the beneficial role of religion on subjective well-being. Similarly, our data suggests that Mexican, Dutch and Italian males and females who were strongly connected to their religiousness experience enhanced psychological well-being.
Several limitations need to be mentioned. One shortcoming of this research was its sample as it consists primarily of students. Future studies will need to test the generalizability of findings in community or youth samples. Another shortcoming involves the methods used to collect data as future work should include multi informants or information from other sources such as peers and parents, which may give a more deep understanding of the multifaceted nature of different religiousness components in diverse cultural contexts. Lastly, more caution should be paid to the relatively small samples that may affect the external validity of results in relationship to the target population across countries. We used a convenience student samples, most widely employed in cross-cultural psychology research, while also paying attention to factors that may affect the representativeness of the groups (e.g., sample design and coverage of the general student population in diverse settings). Although the results can be generalized with confidence to the populations of interest, future studies employing large community samples are desirable. Despite these limitations, we provide an interesting view of the relationship between different domains of religiosity and life satisfaction across gender and cultural groups. The general findings indicate that Mexican, Dutch and Italian males youth differ in levels of endorsement of believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging to their religion and that there is a significant positive relationship between religiousness and life satisfaction.

References


