



## Brief Report

## Religiosity moderates the relationship between negative affect and life satisfaction: A study in 29 European countries



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## ABSTRACT

Many religions contend that the key to well-being is living one's life based on religious standards, rather than having certain emotional experiences. On this basis, it is predicted that the relationship between positive and negative affect and life satisfaction would be stronger in less religious individuals. Using multi-level modeling in a sample of 50,130 participants from 29 European countries, this study reveals that religiosity moderates the relationship between negative affect and life satisfaction, such that life satisfaction is less strongly influenced by the frequency of negative emotions in more religious (vs less religious) individuals.

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## 1. Introduction

Research has shown that the strength of the relationship between affective experience and life satisfaction depends on various cultural factors. For example, affective experience is more strongly predictive of life satisfaction in more individualistic and developed cultures, and in cultures that emphasize self-expression over survival (e.g., Kuppens, Realo, & Diener, 2008; Kööts-Ausmees, Realo, & Allik, 2013; Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). In addition to cultural factors, the strength of the relationship between affective experience and life satisfaction also depends on various individual factors. For example, Yamasaki, Sasaki, Uchida, and Katsuma (2011) found that this relationship depended on individuals' tendencies to suppress certain emotions. In the present study, it is suggested that a person's level of religiosity may also moderate the relationship between the frequency of affective experience and general life satisfaction.

In many world religions, emotional experience is considered as too temporary and marginal to be the main criterion against which well-being is evaluated (Joshanloo, 2013, 2014; McMahon, 2006). Instead, these religions emphasize a lifestyle characterized by adherence to virtues such as selflessness, performing one's religious duties, and salvation. Many religious traditions posit that positive emotional experience in the absence of a religious lifestyle has limited value. They also maintain that unpleasant emotional

experience and suffering may be indicative of a good life if one's life is lived in conformity with religious standards (e.g., Ching, 2003; Dambrun & Ricard, 2011). Not surprisingly, the emphasis on affective experience as an indicator of well-being mainly emerged after the age of the Enlightenment when the importance of religion in individuals' daily lives started to decline (McMahon, 2008).

In the present study, it was hypothesized that religiosity would moderate the relationship between positive and negative affect and life satisfaction, such that this relationship would be stronger in less religious individuals. To test this hypothesis, I conducted multi-level modeling in a multi-national sample, controlling for age, gender, education, social support, religious affiliation, national level of religiosity, and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita.

## 2. Method

## 2.1. Participants

The data are drawn from the sixth round of the European Social Survey (2012). The sample used in the present study consisted of 50,130 respondents from 29 nations who have completed all measures of the study.

## 2.2. Measures

## 2.2.1. Life satisfaction

Participants answered the question "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?" on an

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11-point scale ranging from 0 = *extremely dissatisfied* to 10 = *extremely satisfied*. Single-item measures of life satisfaction have demonstrated a substantial degree of criterion validity with multiple-item measures of life satisfaction (e.g., Cheung & Lucas, 2014).

### 2.2.2. Religiosity

Religiosity was measured with participants' answers to three questions: "Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?", "Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?" (reverse-scored), and "Apart from when you are at religious services, how often, if at all, do you pray?" (reverse-scored). The first question is rated on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 = *not at all religious* to 10 = *very religious*, whereas the last two questions are rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 = *every day* to 7 = *never*. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale in the whole sample was 0.80, ranging from .63 in Albania to .86 in Slovakia.

### 2.2.3. Affect

Respondents reported how often over the past week they experienced four positive affective states: "were happy", "enjoyed life", "had lot of energy", and "felt calm and peaceful", as well as five negative affective states: "felt depressed", "felt everything did as effort", "felt lonely", "felt sad", and "felt anxious" on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *none or almost none of the time* to 4 = *all or almost all of the time*. The Cronbach's alpha of the positive affect scale in the whole sample was 0.79, ranging from .69 in Belgium to .86 in Bulgaria. The Cronbach's alpha of the negative affect scale in the whole sample was 0.80, ranging from .71 in Kosovo to .86 in Czech Republic.

### 2.2.4. Perceived social support

Prior research suggests that perceived social support is among the most important mechanisms that enable the positive effects of religiosity on mental well-being (e.g., Nelson, 2009). Accordingly, perceived social support was included as a control variable in the present study. Responses to the question "To what extent do you receive help and support from people you are close to when you need it?" were used to measure this variable. This question is rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 = *not at all* to 6 = *completely*.

### 2.2.5. Religious affiliation

All religious affiliations that accounted for more than 1000 participants in the overall sample were recoded into dummy variables, and included in the analyses. These affiliations included Roman Catholic, Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Judaism, and Islam. The left-out category included all other religious affiliations, and those not affiliated with any religion.

### 2.2.6. National-level variables

The national religiosity scores provided by Diener, Tay, and Myers (2011) were used to assess religiosity at the national level. This index captures the average importance of religion in individuals' daily lives for each nation based on the data provided by the Gallup World Poll from 2005 to 2009. GDP per capita (in US \$) was used to measure the economic functioning of the nations (World Bank, 2012).

### 2.2.7. Other individual-level covariates

Age, gender (male = 0, female = 1), and highest level of education (ranging from 0 = *not completed ISCED level 1* to 800 = *ISCED 6, doctoral degree*) were also included for each participant.

## 3. Results

Descriptive statistics, sample sizes, and national means for the variables of the study are reported in Table 1. Correlations among individual-level variables are presented in Table 2. Multi-level modeling was used to test the main hypothesis of the study. An intercept-only model (Hox, 2010) was first tested. The results of this analysis showed that there was statistically significant variability in life satisfaction at the individual ( $b = 4.671$ , Wald  $Z = 158.274$ ,  $p$  (one-sided)  $< .001$ ) and cultural ( $b = 1.023$ , Wald  $Z = 3.731$ ,  $p$  (one-sided)  $< .001$ ) levels. In a second analysis, all the predictors were added to the model, as well as the interaction terms between positive affect and religiosity and between negative affect and religiosity. Considering that the interaction between positive affect and religiosity was not significant ( $t_{\text{interaction term}} = -1.077$ ,  $p = 0.281$ ), it was removed from the model. Both the intercept and the slopes of individual-level predictors were allowed to vary across the nations. For reasons of model identification, however, education and the dummy variables of religious affiliation were specified as fixed effects. Following Enders and Tofighi (2007) and Nezlek's (2010) guidelines, continuous individual-level variables were group-mean centered, and national religiosity and GDP were grand-mean centered. For an acceptable level of power, multi-level analyses require a sample of at least 30 groups that each has at least 30 individuals (Hox, 2010). A sample of 50,130 participants nested in 29 groups used in the present study seems to ensure sufficient power.

Adding all of the variables to the model reduced the unexplained within-culture variability in life satisfaction by 25.26%. The remaining amount of unexplained variance at the individual level was significantly different from zero ( $b = 3.491$ , Wald  $Z = 157.977$ ,  $p$  (one-sided)  $< .001$ ). Adding all of the variables to the model reduced the unexplained between-culture variability in life satisfaction by 65.49%. The remaining amount of unexplained variance at the cultural level was significantly different from zero ( $b = .353$ , Wald  $Z = 3.429$ ,  $p$  (one-sided)  $< .001$ ).

The estimates related to the fixed effects are presented in Table 3. Whereas the interaction between positive affect and religiosity was not significant (and thus it was removed from the model), the interaction between negative affect and religiosity was a significant predictor. This indicates that religiosity moderates the relationship between negative affect and life satisfaction. The moderation is shown in Fig. 1, which is produced using the tools provided by Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006). As evident from the figure, the correlation between negative affect and life satisfaction was stronger in less religious individuals. Simple slopes for high, moderate, and low levels of religiosity were  $-.847$ ,  $-.897$ , and  $-.948$ , respectively (all significant at  $p < .001$ ). The correlations between affect variables and life satisfaction for all of the countries are reported in Table 1.

## 4. Coda

The majority of world religions regard negative emotions and adversity as unavoidable parts of life that may bring spiritual benefits and provide important opportunities for psychological and spiritual growth (Nelson, 2009). Hence, religious individuals may have less difficulty in discovering meaning in suffering (Idler, 1995). In keeping with this line of reasoning, the present study revealed that the life satisfaction of more religious (vs less religious) individuals was less strongly influenced by the frequency of negative emotions. Religiosity, however, did not moderate the effect of positive affect, suggesting that religion is more relevant when dealing with negative experiences than positive experiences. In fact, one of the major functions of religion is to "give answers

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