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The affective dimension of religion and personal happiness among students in Estonia

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Abstract

A sample of 150 students in Estonia (119 from a secular university and 31 from a Lutheran theological institute) completed the Oxford Happiness Measure and the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity. The data found no significant correlation between these two variables, and challenges the generalisability to Estonia of the general findings from studies conducted in the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Israel that consistently reported a positive association between the affective dimension of religion and personal happiness.

Introduction

A long-standing interest within the psychology of religion concerning the association between religion and happiness has been re-kindled by the current prominence of positive psychology. After reviewing previous empirical studies in this field, Francis, Jones, and Wilcox (2000) concluded that the discrepant findings could be accounted for, at least in part, by the wide range of definitions and measurements (of happiness and religion) used in such studies. As a corrective to this confusion, Francis, Jones, and Wilcox (2000) proposed initiating a series of studies, conducted among different samples, but agreeing on common measures. Specifically they proposed employing the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989) alongside the family of attitudinal measures initiated by Francis (1978a, 1978b).

The Oxford Happiness Inventory builds on Argyle and Crossland's (1987) suggestion that happiness comprises three components: the frequency and degree of positive affect or joy; the average level of satisfaction over a period; and the absence of negative feelings, such as depression and anxiety. This instrument presents 29 sets of four items, designed to reflect different and incremental levels of happiness and from which respondents are required to select their preferred response.

The Francis family of attitudinal scales concentrates on the affective dimension of religion. Francis argues that the affective dimension gets closer to the heart of an individual's religion than the behavioural dimension (say church attendance) that may be subject to contextual constraints, and than the cognitive dimension (say beliefs) that may be influenced by denominational and sectarian upbringing. This family of instruments include the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis, Lewis, Philipchalk, Brown, & Lester, 1996), the Katz-Francis

Scale of Attitude toward Judaism (Francis & Katz 2007), the Sahin-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Islam (Sahin & Francis, 2002), and the Santosh- Francis Scale of Attitude toward Hinduism (Francis, Santosh, Robbins, & Vij, 2008).

In the first of a series of studies, Robbins and Francis (1996) examined the association between scores recorded on the Oxford Happiness Inventory and on the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity among a sample of 360 first-year undergraduate students in Wales. They found a significant positive correlation between the two variables ($r = .26, p < .001$). In the second study, Francis and Lester (1997) replicated the first study in a different cultural context, among a sample of 212 undergraduate students in the United States of America. They found a positive correlation of similar magnitude ($r = .28, p < .001$). In the third study, Francis and Robbins (2000) went outside the undergraduate community and recruited a sample of 295 individuals, ranging in age from late teens to late seventies, from a variety of courses on the psychology of religion. They found a correlation in a similar range ($r = .30, p < .001$).

The next three studies were drawn together and published in one paper by Francis, Jones, and Wilcox (2000). The three samples reported in this paper covered adolescence, young adulthood, and later life. The adolescent sample comprised 994 secondary school pupils during the final year of compulsory schooling (15- to 16-year-olds). The young adult sample comprised 456 first-year undergraduate students in Wales. The third sample comprised 496 members of the University of the Third Age, a relatively informal educational network for senior citizens (10% were in their fifties, 50% in their sixties, 34% in their seventies, and 6% were aged eighty or over; 66% were female and 34% were male). The partial correlations between attitude toward Christianity and happiness scores, after controlling for sex and for personality,

were as follows: adolescence, $r = .10$, $p < .01$; young adulthood, $r = .20$, $p < .001$; later life, $r = .16$, $p < .01$. The next study reported by Francis, Robbins, and White (2003) among 89 students in Wales also found a positive correlation between the two variables ($r = .38$, $p < .001$).

Moving outside the Christian tradition, two further studies explored the association between the Oxford Happiness Inventory and the Katz-Francis Scale of Attitude toward Judaism among Hebrew-speaking students in Israel. In the first study among 298 female students, Francis and Katz (2002) reported a beta weight of $+1.11$ ($p < .05$) after controlling for personality. In the second study among 203 male students, Francis, Katz, Yablon, and Robbins (2004) reported a positive correlation ($r = .23$, $p < .001$).

Standing against the consensus of these nine studies, a study reported by Francis, Ziebertz, and Lewis (2003) among 331 students in Germany failed to find a significant correlation between attitude toward Christianity and happiness scores.

Against this background, the aim of the present study was to extend then research tradition to Estonia in order to test whether the association between religion and happiness in that cultural context reflects the general trend identified by the majority of previous studies or supported the findings from the study conducted in Germany.

Although the Oxford Happiness Inventory has demonstrated good psychometric properties, there remains one significant disadvantage with this instrument. Since each of the 29 items has been designed with four fixed-response options, the instrument requires quite a lengthy questionnaire. In order to address this problem, Hills and Argyle (2002) proposed the development of the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, an instrument which retained the same 29 basic issues of the parent

instrument, but re-expressed each issue in terms of the conventional Likert-type response format (with 12 items reverse coded). Employing the two instruments side-by-side in the same study, Hills and Argyle (2002) reported a correlation of .80 between scores recorded on the Oxford Happiness Inventory and scores recorded on the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire.

Although as yet no published studies have reported on the association between the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire and the Francis family of attitude scales, Robbins, Francis, and Edwards (2008) reported a positive correlation ($r = .23, p < .01$) between the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire and prayer frequency among a sample of 131 students in Wales.

A second adaptation of the Oxford Happiness Inventory has been offered for on-line completion at www.coachingtohappiness.com and for the purposes of the present study will be named the Oxford Happiness Measure. While the Oxford Happiness Inventory proposed 29 sets of four items each intended to define different and incremental levels of happiness (unhappy or mildly depressed; a low level of happiness; a high level of happiness; and manic), the Oxford Happiness Measure has basically taken the 29 items originally intended to characterise the ‘manic level’ (with five of them somewhat modified) and arranged these for scoring on a five-point scale from *less time* to *more time*. The test developers have not as yet published the psychometric properties of this new instrument. As yet no published studies have reported on the association between the Oxford Happiness Measure and the Francis family of attitude scales. The present study intends to be the first to employ the Oxford Happiness Measure in their context.

Method

Sample

A sample of 150 students participated in the survey (119 from a secular university and 31 from a Lutheran theological institute). The majority of the participants were female (79%) and 21% were male; 54% were between the ages of 18 and 20 years, 24% were in their twenties, 9% were in their thirties, and the remaining 12% were aged forty or over.

Measures

The affective dimension of religion was assessed by the Estonian translation of the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Elken, Francis, & Robbins, in press). This is a 24-item Likert-type instrument concerned with affective response toward God, Jesus, bible, prayer, and church. Each item was assessed on a five-point scale: *agree strongly*, *agree*, *not certain*, *disagree*, and *disagree strongly*. This instrument provides a range of scores between 24 and 120, with high scores representing a more positive attitude.

Happiness was assessed by the Estonian translation of the Oxford Happiness Measure (Francis, Robbins, & Elken, in press). This is a 29-item Likert-type instrument. Each item was assessed on a five-point scale: *agree strongly*, *agree*, *not certain*, *disagree*, and *disagree strongly*. This instrument provides a range of scores between 29 and 145, with higher scores representing greater happiness.

Data analysis

The data were analysed by SPSS, employing the following routines: frequency, reliability, correlation, and regression.

Results

Table 1 presents the scale properties of the two instruments employed in the study: the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity and the Oxford Happiness Measure. Both instrument displayed excellent levels of internal consistency reliability

as demonstrated by the alpha coefficient (Cronbach, 1951). The Pearson product moment correlation between the two variables did not reach a level of statistical significance ($r = .12, ns$). The finding in this case is unequivocal: in this sample of Estonian students there is no significant association between the affective dimension of religion and personal happiness, even when the sample includes a mixture of students attending a secular university and attending a Lutheran theological institute.

[Insert table 1 about here]

Conclusion

The present study has built on an established research tradition concerning the association between the affective dimension of religion (employing the Francis family of attitude measures) and personal happiness (employing the Oxford family of happiness measures) in two novel ways: by extending the research tradition to Estonia and by employing the Oxford Happiness Measure. The failure of this study to find a significant positive association between the affective dimension of religion and personal happiness is an important finding for two reasons. First, this finding cautions against the tendency to generalise conclusions within the psychology of religion formulated within specific cultural contexts to other contexts. This study suggests that the association between religion and happiness documented by previous studies in the United Kingdom, in the United States of America and in Israel may not necessarily hold true in Estonia. Second, this finding is consistent with the findings reported by Francis, Ziebertz, and Lewis (2003) in Germany. Taken together, the present study conducted in Estonia and the earlier study conducted in German suggest that there may be cultural contexts in which the association between religion and personal happiness does not hold true.

The research tradition to which the present study belongs, both carries practical implications for Christian education and suggests the boundaries within which such practical implications may apply. Overall the research tradition points to a positive association between religion and personal happiness. Within the Jewish and Christian tradition this finding is consistent with the proclamation of the Psalmist, 'Happy is everyone who fears the Lord'. (Psalm 128) and with the proclamation of the Gospels, 'Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires' (Matthew 5). Overall, the research tradition provides empirical support from such theologically-informed affirmations. This study, however, provides a salutary reminder that there may be political and social contexts in which faith may bring personal struggle rather than personal joy, and in which faith may lead to social exclusion rather than social inclusion. Indeed the Psalmist who promised happiness also proclaimed sadness, 'By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept' (Psalm 137). The Gospels that promised happiness also proclaimed tribulation, 'And a sword will pierce your own soul too (Luke 2).

Limitations with the present study that may need to be addressed in future research within this tradition include the relatively small number of participants, the non-random nature of the sample and the decision to employ the Oxford Happiness Measure rather than the better established Oxford Happiness Inventory or Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. The intriguing findings of this study nonetheless require further replication and extension in Estonia. Fresh studies in other cultures are also required to establish the boundaries beyond which it is unsafe and unsound to generalise the conclusions established by studies within the particular area of the empirical psychology of religion conducted in the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Israel.

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Table 1

Scale Properties

Scale	Alpha	Mean	SD
attitude toward Christianity	.98	70.6	27.1
happiness	.89	94.3	13.6
