

# Explaining the Link Between Religiosity and Wellbeing

## Self-Forgiveness and Stability in Identity as Neglected Factors?

Rita Phillips, Vince Connelly & Mark Burgess  
Department of Psychology, Oxford Brookes University

### Introduction

Previous research outlined a moderate to strong positive relationship between religiosity and psychological/physiological wellbeing [1]. However, studies which observed reasons for these beneficial effects yielded inconsistent and ambiguous results [2]. This ambiguity might be a result of the exclusive and excessive use of quantitative measures. To examine which reasons may underlie previously identified factors, this study took a qualitative approach in observing the relationship between religiosity and wellbeing.

### Method and Participants

Eight in-depth autobiographic-narrative interviews were conducted and analysed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA [3]). The sample focussed on participants from different, international Charismatic Christian movements who had experienced a religious conversion and prayed for at least one hour daily.

### Results

#### Theme 1: The Religious Catharsis of Identity

Situations which caused identity threat in combination with the impossibility to utilize existing identity stabilisation strategies (i.e. imprisonment, emigration, abuse) evoked a reconceptualization of identity - previous social identities were substituted with new religious identities:

Here I was - Freshman! New city, new people, new life: Party, alcohol, drugs...abuse. "Just admit that you love it"... that's what he said... the shame... the guilt... I was not me - maybe never have been me? I realized that all I am - it was hollow, superficial...it wasn't me [...] There was this building... one day, I entered it. It was a church - the place where I found my true me.

Back then I was a bit like Dagobert Duck in his Money Bin. My reputation, my car pool of ten cars, my yachts, bodyguards and the penthouses all around the world - that was me! I was nothing else than my possessions! But in prison I hit rock bottom - everything was gone! [...] I found a book: "The good news" - being in prison I thought reading 'good news' would cheer me up a bit - it was the New Testament. And through these stories I started to understand who I truly am.

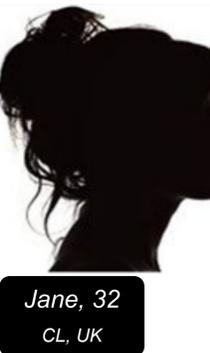


#### Theme 2: Finding Identity as 'Child of God'

Ritualised forms of atonement allowed self-forgiveness and created additional distance to 'past' social identities. Highly emotional responses allowed to affirm the new religious identity as being accepted by God and justified through God's love and mercy. This served as foundation on which basic identity needs (i.e. self-esteem, acceptance) were answered:

During confession something happened. I don't know. I came out of the room and started crying. I couldn't stop - I felt this overwhelming love - acceptance the first time in my life. And no hate - not for myself, not even for my dad... somehow as if I wasn't myself anymore. Reborn. Unbelievable.

I thought God could never forgive me. Still, on that day I gave my whole life to Jesus ... and this moment after I said the prayer - the feeling like ... indescribable... love, affection... no human words can describe this feeling. I understood : Who am I not to forgive myself if God has done so? As a 'Child of God' I can let go - have to let go.



#### Theme 3: Implications - Shifting Perceptions of Reality

Identity changes reframed the perception of the past and present, creating a continuous overarching narrative of one's life

Never would say that my past was ... great - but it was a way to find to God - my way. The suffering, the pain - it lead me to God!

Yes sure, I have experienced painful situations - before and after my conversion- the difference is that I know that it's God's way to purify me - to become the truer me!



#### Theme 4: Implications - Adjusting malicious lifestyles

Stability in identity raised self-esteem and -efficacy. This enabled participants to identify and change detrimental, self-harming lifestyles (i.e. addictions, eating-disorders).

For God I am more than my body - well for the others... I don't care what they think. So, it was just like - flip! I didn't want to vomit after eating anymore.

No, I just couldn't do drugs anymore - not even for the guys. I am worth more than that 'cause I am beloved by the Almighty.



### Conclusion

The 'Child of God' identity promoted self-acceptance and forgiveness which, in turn, also affected self-esteem, self-efficacy and contributed to a continuous self-narrative. Therefore, the beneficial effects of religiosity on wellbeing may be explained by reducing identity threat through satisfying basic tenets of identity construction more securely than mundane identities [4]. Research which indicated a link between identity-stability and psychological/physiological wellbeing supports this idea [5]. Due to potential health-benefits, more research on the impact of religiosity on identity-stability and identity-stability on wellbeing is necessary to fully understand the phenomenon.

#### References:

[1] Moreira-Almeida, A., Lotufo Neto, F., & Koenig, H. G. (2006). Religiosity and mental health: a review. *Revista brasileira de psiquiatria*, 28(3), 242-250. Hackney, C. H., & Sanders, G. S. (2003). Religiosity and mental health: A meta-analysis of recent studies. *Journal for the scientific study of religion*, 42(1), 43-55. Powell, L. H., Shahabi, L., & Thoresen, C. E. (2003). Religion and spirituality: Linkages to physical health. *American psychologist*, 58(1), 36. Koenig, H. G., McCullough, M. E., & Larson, D. B. (2001). Religion and health. *New York, NY: Oxford University Press Inc*, 1, 276-291. [2] Okulicz-Kozaryn, A. (2010). Religiosity and life satisfaction across nations. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 13(2), 155-169. Putnam, R. D. (2001). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon and Schuster. Ayele, H., Mulligan, T., Gheorghiu, S., & Reyes-Ortiz, C. (1999). Religious activity improves life satisfaction for some physicians and older patients. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 47(4), 453-455. Salsman, J. M., Brown, T. L., Brechting, E. H., & Carlson, C. R. (2005). The link between religion and spirituality and psychological adjustment: The mediating role of optimism and social support. *Personality and social psychology bulletin*, 31(4), 522-535. [3] Smith, J. A. (Ed.). (2015). *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*. Sage. [4] Jaspal, R., & Breakwell, G. M. (Eds.). (2014). *Identity process theory: Identity, social action and social change*. Cambridge University Press. [5] Donahue, E. M., Robins, R. W., Roberts, B. W., & John, O. P. (1993). The divided self: concurrent and longitudinal effects of psychological adjustment and social roles on self-concept differentiation. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 64(5), 834.