Well-being for believers? Contextualising the effects of religiosity on life-satisfaction

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Approach

Background: Higher personal religiosity tends to be associated with greater happiness

Several quantitative studies have found that self-reported individual religiosity is associated with higher reports of individual satisfaction. Religiosity has become a standard control variable in economic models of life-satisfaction.

This finding has been shown to be robust for a number of operationalisations of religiosity and for comprehensive socio-economic controls.

Explanations for this tendency have been offered in terms of an intrinsic mechanism (based on for example feelings of stability associated with religiosity) or extrinsic mechanisms (for example the embeddedness in religious communities).

Based on these findings policy suggestions have been made suggesting for example a greater importance of religious schools for the UK, as school children have been shown to be happier if they have more religious/spiritual.

Cautionary considerations: The rational for this study — Contextualising religiosity

While robustness was shown for religiosity in the models, these models are not as uniform when the models are applied to different measures of life-satisfaction/objective well-being.

Many of the studies that investigated this relationships used samples drawn from only one country or, if the studies were comparative, the compared the individual-level based results from a small number of countries only.

However, qualitative studies have shown that the role of religiosity can vary greatly with regards to its importance for happiness (partly due to different conceptions of happiness itself).

This investigation therefore aims to explore whether the individual-level positive effect of religiosity on life-satisfaction is altered or moderated when taking into account contextual religiosity.


Results

Main effects of individual religiosity

Without contextualisation both attitudinal and practised religiosity show significant, positive effects on life-satisfaction in accordance with previous findings.

After contextualisation however this effect is weakened and in most models rendered statistically insignificant for both, attitudinal and practised religiosity.

Main effects of contextual religiosity

There are no observable direct effects of average levels of religiosity on individual life-satisfaction.

This finding applies to models with and without interaction terms and both, for mean attitudinal and practised religiosity.

Interaction effects between context and individual religiosity

Individual attitudinal religiosity is significantly moderated by both, mean attitudinal and practised religiosity. With higher context religiosity, greater levels of individual attitudinal religiosity are associated with greater life-satisfaction.

For individual practised religiosity there is no such robust, significant interaction effect with either of the context variables.

Conclusion

The standard use of religiosity as a control variable in quantitative models predicting life-satisfaction is therefore questionable.

Similarly, policy recommendations based on individual-level analyses need to be scrutinised to understand whether identified relationships relating to religiosity are due to intrinsic or extrinsic mechanisms.

Recommendations for further research

Qualitative projects should aim to explore in depth how people might perceive the role of religiosity for them personally in the context of the importance religiosity takes in their environment. More detailed accounts of the differences between attitudinal and practised religiosity should be sought in order to more adequately explore the possible differences between relevant intrinsic and extrinsic processes.

References