

Views of Suffering and Emotional Well-Being

Introduction

Attempts to reconcile the suffering that takes place in the world with the existence of a morally good God have been made by philosophers and theologians over the course of history. These attempts are referred to as theodicies (Green, 2005). Theodicies have been studied profusely in the field of theology; however, little empirical research has been conducted to investigate how a person's theodicy relates to his or her emotional well-being. This project will empirically investigate the theological concept of theodicy in order to understand the ways in which it is related to emotional well-being. The relationship between people's personal theodicies, image of God, and experiences of life stress will also be examined in order to expand upon the understanding of the relationship between theodicies and well-being. The goals of this study are to gain a better psychometric understanding of the newly developed Views of Suffering Scale (Hale-Smith, Park, & Edmondson, 2012), examine the relationship between views of suffering and emotional well-being, examine the relationship between views of suffering and images of God (which will also investigate the validity of the scale), and investigate the relationship between stressful life events, views of suffering, and images of God.

There is a dense psychological literature investigating the relationship between religious concepts and well-being. For example, research has explored topics relating to religious motivations (e.g. Cohen, Hall, Keonig, & Meador, 2005; Byrd, Hageman, & Isle, 2007), religious social support (e.g. Ellison & George, 1994; Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, & Boardman, 2001), and religion and negative emotions (e.g. Macavei & Miclea, 2008). Numerous studies have found a negative correlation between religiosity levels and depression (Miller,

Warner, Wickramaratne, & Weissman, 1997; Aukst-Margetić, Jakovljević, Margetić, Bišćan, & Šamija, 2005), anxiety (Mann, McKeown, Bacon, Vesselinov, & Bush, 2008; Abdel-Khalek, 2009), and a positive correlation between religiosity and positive affect (Patrick & Kinney, 2003) and happiness (Francis, Katz, Yablon, & Robbins, 2004).

In addition, a number of studies have examined the relationship between conceptions of God and well-being. Belief in a benevolent, just, and supportive God has been found to be associated with more positive coping outcomes among people who had experienced serious negative life events in the past year (Pargament, Ensing, Falgout, Olsen, Reilly, et al., 1990). Anger towards God have been found to be negatively correlated with age and religiosity, and with regards to measures of past experience, atheists and agnostics tended to have negative views of God (or a hypothetical God; Exline, Park, Smith, & Carey, 2011). Conceptions of God as deistic and supportive have been found to be correlated with both positive and negative mental health, but conceptions of God as abandoning were correlated with poorer mental health (Phillips, Pargament, Lynn, & Crossley, 2004). In a sample of psychiatric patients, belief in God was associated with greater reductions in depression and self-harm and with greater improvements in psychological well-being (Rosmarin, Bigda-Peyton, Kertz, Smith, & Rauch, 2013). Stronger belief in God-mediated control has been found to be correlated with higher levels of optimism and self-worth, greater life satisfaction, and less death anxiety (Krause, 2005). A loving conception of God is correlated with lower psychological distress (Levin, 2002). In addition, a negative correlation was found between religiosity and depressive symptoms, and this correlation was stronger among participants experiencing unusually high stress due to negative life events (Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003).

Although a number of studies have investigated the relationship between religiosity and well-being, and the relationship between conceptions of God and well-being, the literature on views of suffering and their relationship with the aforementioned concepts is very scarce. The aim of the present study is to begin to fill this gap in the literature and offer a better understanding of the ways in which people's views of suffering relate to other psychological concepts.

Method

Participants

Participants for the study will consist of a random sample of Notre Dame students recruited via e-mail. The students will be asked if they would like to participate in the study for a ten dollar compensation. The emails will be sent out until a sample of 200 to 225 participants is obtained.

Instruments

Views of Suffering. The Views of Suffering Scale (VOSS; Hale-Smith, Park, & Edmondson, 2012) will be used to assess participants' views of suffering. This relatively new scale was developed in order to assess people's views of suffering based on prominent religious belief systems. Two studies have addressed the reliability and validity of the scale. In the first study, the researchers gathered a body of theodicy-related beliefs based on a variety of North American denominational religious beliefs, beliefs unassociated with any denomination, and non-theistic beliefs. Based on a large sample of responses from college undergraduates, ten subscales were identified using factor analysis (see appendix for subscales and their descriptions). In the second study, a new sample of students was tested to assess the factor

structure, reliability, and validity of the scale. To determine test-retest reliability, the researchers examined the correlation coefficients between time 1 and time 2 of a 14-day interval. Cronbach's alphas were used for each subscale to determine the internal consistency. Validity was assessed by comparing the subscales with related constructs, other VOSS subscale scores, and demographic data. The researchers demonstrated good reliability and validity for their scale.

Well-being. Psychological well-being will be assessed using the short-form of the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995).

Image of God. Participants' perception of God will be assessed using the God Image Scales (GIS; Lawrence, 1997).

Stressful Life Events. Life stressors will be measured using the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS; Holmes & Rahe, 1967) and the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983).

Procedure

All participants will be asked to give demographic information similar to the information that was asked for by Hale-Smith, Park, and Edmondson (2012) in their preliminary study on the VOSS. In multiple-choice questions, participants will be asked about their beliefs about God, their religious affiliations, and their perceptions of their religiosity and spirituality. Then participants will be given the VOSS (Hale-Smith, Park, & Edmondson, 2012), the DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), the God Image Scales (Lawrence, 1997), the SRRS (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), and the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). To prevent order effects, the order in which the scales are given to the participants will be randomized. Upon completion of the survey, participants will be mailed their compensation.

Implications

Understanding beliefs about suffering can have a wide range of both psychological and theological implications. Theologically, the results of this study are important because they will make a connection between particular theological beliefs about God and suffering and empirically supported data. In psychology, religious beliefs are particularly relevant in relation to coping strategies and approaches to clinical interventions (Strawbridge, Shema, Cohen, & Kaplan, 2001; Walker, Gorsuch, & Tan, 2005). The results of this study will help psychologists grasp the relationship between beliefs about suffering and well-being, and this will allow them to be more effective in their treatment strategies. Thus, there is the opportunity for the current gap between psychological science and theological understanding to be narrowed.

If my grant proposal is accepted, I will send out the surveys as soon as possible. I will be meeting weekly with Dr. Dan Lapsley, the director of my research lab, and Paul Stey, our lab's graduate assistant, in order to monitor the progress of the study, the results, and the data analysis. This study is important to me for a number of reasons. Firstly, I hope to use this research for my senior thesis project. In addition, I hope to use my research experience as a foundation for my graduate studies. With regards to academic publications, there are a number of journals, such as the *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, and the *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, that are exclusively dedicated to the integration of psychological and theological research. The results of my research may contribute to the growing literature on psychological and theological topics, and I believe the subject may be of interest to the academic community. Thus, I hope to submit the paper for publication in an academic journal and presentation at a psychological conference.

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Appendix

Subscale items in the Views of Suffering Scale from Hale-Smith, Park, & Edmondson (2012)

1. Divine Responsibility: Free Will perspectives
2. Suffering God: beliefs about God suffering with people
3. Overcoming: beliefs about overcoming suffering through prayer and/or faith
4. Encounter: beliefs about suffering as a divine encounter
5. Soul-Building: beliefs about suffering as a divinely intended personal growth experience
6. Providence: beliefs about God's control over suffering
7. Unorthodox: unorthodox theistic views
8. Limited Knowledge: Open Theistic views reflecting God's limited foreknowledge
9. Retribution: beliefs related to suffering as retribution or karma
10. Random: beliefs about suffering as being random or purposeless