

Contentment among Religious Individuals: An Exploratory Factor Analysis

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Abstract

This present study aimed to explore the experience of contentment among religious priests and nuns. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on the responses of 358 religious individuals on a 100-item questionnaire, developed from interviews conducted with 29 religious individuals on how they experience contentment in their lives. Results suggest that a four-factor structure—characterized by pursuing purpose, accepting and actualizing self, belonging in the community, and receiving affirmation from others—describe the experience and components of contentment among religious. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future directions are also discussed.

Keywords: Religious Contentment, Exploratory Factor Analysis, Components of Contentment.

Introduction

Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) articulated the need to change the focus of psychology from, “preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities,” (p. 5) and indeed, during the last two decades, a considerable shift was observed in the focus of psychological research towards pursuing happiness, positivity and optimal human flourishing (Cordaro, Brackett, Glass, & Anderson,

2016). Interestingly, however, Cordaro et al., (2016) point out that one common feature in the study of happiness and positive affective states is that most deal with high-arousal emotions, with little attention being paid to research on “positive states that are lower in arousal such as contentment, peace, tranquility, and satisfaction...” (p. 222)

This study stems from the notion that the conceptions of happiness, as they are widely regarded in psychology, may not appropriately reflect the experiences of religious priests and nuns. For religious individuals, happiness and well-being go beyond the day-to-day transitory, gratifying and positive experiences. It crosses the boundaries of emotional and mental states of the mind and is grounded on a firm conviction that they are called by God to live a life of communion, commitment, compassion and contentment (Fernandes, 2012).

Specifically, the concept of contentment has often been a key focus in spiritual, philosophical and theoretical texts, regarded as a “cornerstone to the fundamental human goal to know what it means to be well and enjoy life” as well as “a feeling of completeness...regardless of the situation” (Cordaro, Brackett, Glass, & Andersen, 2016). This differs from the secular perspective of happiness, seen and understood as something that is transient or momentary, experienced only when one encounters success or positive experiences in life, i.e. a secular view of happiness depends largely on circumstances. Contentment implies a type of deep sense of personal satisfaction, inner joy, tranquillity and fulfillment that better characterizes the experience of religious men and women.

Indeed, the concept of contentment appears in various religious traditions. In Hinduism, the word that denotes contentment is “Santhosha”, which means a sense of completeness, equanimity and unconditional acceptance of the workings of the universe. It is a way of being free from all materialistic desires and cravings and experiencing a sense of satisfaction with one’s own being and what one has (Cordaro, Brackett, Glass, & Anderson, 2016).

The Yogic guru Patanjali (1990), in his *Yoga Sutras*, affirms that a contented person enjoys the purity of mind, one-pointedness, control of the senses, and has a clear vision of self. Being content is gaining a supreme sense of wellbeing (Patanjali, 1990). In most yogic literature, contentment or Santhosha is considered as a divine state of peace, completeness, and equanimity - an indestructible and enduring sense

of well-being that cannot be shaken or disturbed even when one encounters extreme pleasure or pain.

In the Buddhist tradition, the word '*santutthi*' represents contentment. It is the ability to be happy and fulfilled in one's present state of being, of which Buddha described as the highest wealth, meaning, that when one is content he or she does not need to have or be anything, or go anywhere, to be happy (Carter, 2000). Just as in Hindu tradition, Buddhists also claim that a content person is happy with less, has a peaceful mind, does not deny the existence of pain, and accepts both the positive and negative aspects of life (Wiese, 2011).

Coming to the Christian tradition, the word contentment holds a privileged place in the Bible. "Peace" is often used as a synonym to convey the essence of this term. Strong (1995) points out that contentment (also translated into peace) is the most commonly used emotion in the Bible. In the New Testament alone there are at least sixty two instances when such reference to 'peace' is made.

Having collated a holistic understanding of the term 'contentment' from diverse religious viewpoints, one can now come to a conclusion that this term holds a cognitive appraisal of one's emotional, relational and spiritual realms. Contentment is not merely a felt emotion, which lingers and helps individuals lead a smooth life but it is a sense of fulfillment, wholeness, inner joy and consummation that one experiences from moment to moment by consciously living the aspired life.

The aim of the current study, therefore, is to add to the understanding of the concept of contentment from a religious individual's perspective, specifically those coming from the Roman Catholic church. Chittister (1995) notes that religious life is not just another way of life but it is a way of life intentionally chosen to pursue the human quest for God. It involves a total commitment (Rulla, 1989), and actualization of the total person, utilizing one's talents and potentials which ultimately results in attaining satisfaction (Greene, 2002). This study suggests that the use of existing scales of happiness and subjective well-being may not fully capture the experience of contentment among religious individuals, and thus, aims to explore the structure and the relevant features that may better define contentment among religious men and women.

Method

Participants

Twenty-nine participants (male = 48%; female = 52%) with a mean age of 36.86 years took part in the qualitative phase of this mixed methods study, while 358 participants (male = 26.5%; female = 73.5%) with a mean age of 48.64 years took part in the quantitative phase. The participants were religious men and women belonging to various congregations of the Roman Catholic Church from India, Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and China. The number of years lived as religious ranged from two to 58 years.

Of the 358 participants in the quantitative study, 198 responded to an online version of the questionnaire, while the rest answered printed survey forms distributed by the primary author to each of the participants.

Procedure

This mixed method study began with a qualitative phase wherein participants recruited by purposive sampling were interviewed about their experience of contentment. Responses from the qualitative phase allowed the researchers to identify themes that became the basis for the construction of a questionnaire. Over 100 items were developed and shown to religious individuals for their review. This review was intended to establish face validity and initially assess if items were easily comprehensible. Items were also reviewed by other researchers with experience in instrument construction to identify “double-barrelled” items or ones that may represent a language that is unfamiliar to the target population.

In the quantitative phase of the study, heads of congregations were contacted and briefed on the purpose of the study. Members of the congregations were then invited to participate by answering the questionnaire, which had the corresponding informed consent forms. Responses to the questionnaire were gathered either through printed or online forms (using Google forms). Whether through the printed or online form, participants were assured of anonymity. The form required participants to rate their degree of agreement to each item on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree).

Data Analysis

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was used to identify dimensions that describe contentment of religious men and women. The correlation matrix suggested that the items are moderately correlated, indicating that they can be grouped into homogeneous factors that measure the same underlying dimensions. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was found to be .961. Sharma (1996) noted that a value of .90 or higher is desired because it means that the items are homogeneous enough and therefore appropriate for factoring. Bartlett’s test of Sphericity gave a p-value $\leq .05$ level of significance, which indicated that there is redundancy between items that can be summarized into factors, and therefore factor analysis is appropriate (Sharma, 1996).

The following criteria were used for deciding the number of factors to be retained: (a) Kaiser’s criterion, that is, to retain factors with eigenvalues ≥ 1 ; (b) the Scree test which produces a plot of the eigenvalues of the Unrotated factors; (c) factors that have at least seven items with factor loading $\geq .40$; and (d) interpretability of the resulting factor structure (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum & Strahan, 1999).

Results

Initial exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with promax rotation revealed five factors with eigenvalues above 1.0. Altogether, the five factors explained 49.83% of the variance before rotation. The items that loaded into one factor, however, were deemed hardly interpretable. A 4-factor solution was deemed more appropriate, meeting all of the above criteria. Table 1 shows the eigenvalues of the four factors, as well as the variance explained by each factor.

Table 1

Eigenvalues, Variance Explained and Items Included for the Four-Factor Model

Factor	Eigenvalues	Percentage of Variance Explained		No. of Items	α
		Unrotated	Rotated		
1	38.15	21.26	20.56	36	.972
2	4.26	11.99	11.53	15	.912
3	2.93	8.09	7.24	12	.894
4	2.39	6.38	6.24	7	.746
		47.73%	45.57%	70	

The resulting four-factor solution accounted for 47.73% of the variance before rotation and a total of 45.57% of the variance after rotation. Table 1 also shows the internal consistency reliability coefficients of the four factors.

Factor 1 relates to finding a deep sense of satisfaction in discovering the meaning and purpose of one's life, through an intimate relationship with God, living out one's vows faithfully and carrying out one's responsibilities with zest and commitment. This deep sense of satisfaction also is expressed in feelings of gratitude. The items combined in Factor 1 is labeled as **Pursuing Purpose**. Religious seem to experience a state of contentment when they realize their life's purpose and find meaning in living their religious calling. Some items that capture this experience are:

- Knowing that God cares for me just as I am, sustains me.
- I believe that having a purpose in life lets me lead a focused life.
- When I review my day, I mostly feel a sense of gratitude for the work I had been able to accomplish.
- I enjoy my simple lifestyle.
- I gain satisfaction by making small and big sacrifices often in my religious life.

The items extracted in factor 2 reflect the intrapersonal dimension – how a person perceives himself or herself. It relates to the experience of genuine acceptance of self, along with one's strengths and weaknesses. This factor is labeled as **Accepting and Actualizing Self**. Contentment could be experienced through a genuine acceptance of the person one has become. Examples of items that loaded into factor 2 are the following:

- I do not carry a lot of baggage – I can forgive and let go of past hurts.
- I think I have an attractive personality.
- I am not shattered when faced with hard-hitting moments.
- I feel comfortable to voice out my views, opinions and express my feelings.

Factor 3 describes one's attitude towards one's Congregation and Community. It is related to experiencing joy and contentment with interpersonal relationships. This factor can be labeled as **Belonging in the Community**. Religious men and women seem to be content when their basic necessities and psychological needs are fulfilled, and when

they experience peace with the members of their community. Some of the items that loaded into this factor are:

- My congregation gives me a sense of security.
- I feel indebted to my congregation for giving me ample opportunities to grow.
- I have felt accepted, respected, and loved in the communities I have been to so far.
- I value my community life and its members because I always feel supported and encouraged by them
- Helping members of my community comes naturally to me.
- After a hard day's work, I find complete relaxation being with my sisters/brothers in my religious community.

Lastly, Factor 4 is associated with other's perception of them, when they receive affirmations, acknowledgment, encouragement, and appreciation from others. This factor seems to be related to one's understanding of how others see them and the validation they receive, hence this factor could be labeled as **Receiving Affirmation**. The items that loaded into this factor are as follows:

- I am at my best when people appreciate and acknowledge me.
- My designation in my congregation adds to my happiness.
- I feel I am trusted because I am entrusted with responsibilities.
- I feel contented when I am given leadership roles in my community, mission field or congregation.

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the experience of contentment among religious men and women. This study hypothesized that using the existing technical scales on happiness and well-being may not capture the lived experiences of the religious in its totality. Researchers may have to take into consideration the unique lifestyle of the religious, their day-to-day experiences, and the context in which they live and work, as to comprehend the components that promote contentment. An exploratory factor analysis was conducted using responses of 358 Asian Catholic religious priests and nuns from different Congregations which generated four interpretable factors, discussed below.

Pursuing Purpose

Religious men and women seem to experience contentment when they recognize the purpose of their life and find meaning in doing the things

they do. Contentment is derived from a feeling of being in communion with God and staying faithful to their vows, which generates a strong sense of gratitude. This is encapsulated by the items that loaded into factor 1, Pursuing Purpose.

While positive psychology does, indeed, contend that happiness entails finding meaning in life and experiencing a sense of accomplishment (Seligman, 2010), for religious men and women the realization of goals and finding meaning in life flow from being connected to their source of life – God.

Accepting and Actualizing Self

The second important component that emerged in this study is related to accepting oneself, and one's strengths and weaknesses, competencies, and vulnerabilities, as reflected in statements such as:

Life in religious communities gives ample opportunities to enhance self-awareness and self-acceptance. When individuals make the the best use of these opportunities and works towards their personal growth, they climb the ladder of self-actualization and experience contentment in life. In his Apostolic Letter Pope Francis (2014) issued a strong invitation to the consecrated men and women to look to the past with gratitude, live the present with passion, and embrace the future with hope. When consecrated men and women are passionate about their life they create space for themselves to grow and enhance their being. This would enable them to be content with themselves and lead their lives with determination and dedication.

Belonging in the Community

Studies that track people's happiness over time find that individual's happiest times are when they are with others (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003). One can note that the issues regarding relationships with others are given prime importance in human being's lives, and it would be impossible to have a good understanding of human nature unless one considers how individuals relate with one another. This social foundation of human nature is universal and there is no one culture or group in which all people live as lone individuals.

When it comes to religious men and women it is the same reality. They too live in communities of like-minded people, share their dreams and aspirations, and live and work towards a common mission. The feeling

of belongingness to a community adds joy to their lives and motivates them to strive towards their common goal.

The 12 items drawn together in factor 3 speak about that same feeling of belongingness to a religious group. Being in communion with the members of the religious community, and the comfort level one feels among the members within the community and the Congregation adds to one's sense of contentment. The collated items relate to a person's feelings of being accepted, appreciated and encouraged by their superiors, which does promote well-being. This then further augments in the members a sense of belonging, which enables them to reach out wholeheartedly by extending their time, talents and energy for the service of others. Besides, when their personal and psychological needs are being met, it adds to their sense of belonging.

Seligman (2010) while revising his earlier proposed *Authentic Theory of Happiness* pointed out that 'positive relationships' as one of the major contributing components of happiness. He states that people are motivated to seek out and maintain positive relationships. Pope John Paul II (2002) in his Encyclical Letter *Vita Consecrata*, appealed to all the religious men and women, to be "experts in communion" and adopt a "spirituality of communion", to make the world a school of communion (*Vita Consecrata*, 25 March 1996). However, this type of communion is brought only through a healthy and intimate relationship with God, Self, and Others.

Receiving Affirmation/Validation

The seven items gathered in this factor are associated with how others view a particular person. Individuals seem to gain satisfaction when they hear good things about themselves from significant people. The affirmations, appreciation, and acknowledgment received seem to enhance their wellbeing.

This study suggests that the factors which contribute to the contentment of the religious men and women may not be captured fully through other existing available instruments on subjective well-being or happiness, although the factors that emerged in this study do find commonalities with other studies. For example, a study was done by Lu and Shih (2014) reported nine factors that described perceived sources of happiness, two of which are aligned with the current study: a) gratification of need for respect, comparable to factor 4 – receiving Affirmation/Validation; and, b) harmony of interpersonal relationships,

similar to factor 3 – belonging in the community. Ryff (1989) assessed six factors that identify happy and contented individuals, four of which have overlaps with the dimensions found in the current study: a) level of acceptance of self, which resembles factor 2 – accepting and actualizing self; b) the quality of relationship with others, similar to factor 3 – belonging in the community; c) a sense of autonomy and a sense of purpose, similar to factor 1 – pursuing purpose; and, d) the positive drive one embraces for personal growth and insight, also similar to factor 1 – finding purpose. Emmons and McCullough (2004) pointed out that research has suggested that some of the ingredients of contented living are gratitude, the ability to forgive, having a purpose, faith, and positive thinking, all of which can also be reflected in the items loaded into the four factors that emerged in this study.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the study shows high correlation and statistical significance in extracting factors, one of the drawbacks of this study is the sample size. Adding a larger number of participants could bring about some changes in the current results. The participants were mainly Asians from a collectivist culture, and receiving responses from participants who come from Western, individualistic context may extract a different set of factors. Adding responses of religious individuals from different nationalities may reveal other dimensions to contentment, and the findings could be generalized to a larger population. Furthermore, conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) can validate the proposed structure of contentment among religious individuals, to be used towards developing an instrument that may better measure contentment among religious individuals.

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