

Spirituality and Positive Psychology: Are they Related?

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ABSTRACT

The present paper reflects on the concepts such as faith, hope, belief, gratitude, forgiveness and humanity one witness being connected to God or some higher power. None of us has survived without these above stated notions in one's life; therefore it would be right to say that positive psychology has existed in one form or the other since time immemorial. It can be traced back to our ancient epic Bhagavad Gita which embodies the finest principles of positive psychology for people of all ages. Thus, it can be said that spirituality maps similarity with positive psychology. Since there are many parallels between positive psychology and spirituality that leads to compare the two and explore what can be imbibed from one another which can eventually aid to deal with plethora of upcoming issues.

Keywords: Spirituality positive psychology, gratitude, forgiveness

The message Christ taught, i.e. "the Kingdom of Heaven is within you", referring to the spirituality that exists in us all, the oneness, the connection to a higher purpose.

The notion about the concept of God or Almighty exists since time immemorial. When confronted with the term God, immediately an impression about spirituality and religion comes to one's mind. Thus, the present paper examines an in-depth analysis that gives an insight that how being spiritual or belief in God maps similarity to the newly christened approach of positive psychology.

The understanding of spirituality could mean different things to different people. The main difference between religion and spirituality is that there is no set of rules or guidelines one must observe to be spiritual. Spirituality is completely individual, it is found deep within oneself. It can be the knowing and understanding that there is a higher reality. It may be harmony, wisdom, compassion and a divine presence in every moment in life. Spirituality can be fostered through quiet meditation, maintaining a tranquil lifestyle, practising a life of contemplation or bringing forth a gentle awareness to one's life. It is getting to know our true self, understanding the nature of

consciousness, and transcending the physical world as we know it. Spirituality is defined as:

- ❑ According to Coles, (1990), "The search for meaning in life events and a yearning for connectedness to the universe".
- ❑ As opined by Mohr, (2006), Spirituality is "a person's experience of, or a belief in, a power apart from his or her own existence".

The study of human life and the pursuit of happiness has been a source of fascination throughout centuries. Leaders in many religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam have contributed substantially on the sense of meaning in life that is required to achieve true happiness (McMahon, 2006). Happiness is a central criterion that has been associated with numerous tangible benefits, such as enhanced physical health, reduced psychopathology, superior coping skills and even longer life (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005). Considering happiness within the framework of good and evil, right or wrong, it is seen that what is evil or wrong is only undesirable because it

diminishes the happiness of an individual or group, and that what is good and right is only so because it increases the happiness of an individual or group as suggested by Narula in her book *Happiness Quotient*, (2016). Happiness is defined as:

- According to Carr (2004), happiness is defined as “a positive psychological state characterized by a high level of satisfaction with life, a high level of positive affect and a low level of negative affect”.
- White (2013), defined happiness as “a mental or emotional state of well-being characterized by positive or pleasant emotions ranging from contentment to intense joy.”

Within the vicinity of Spirituality and Positive psychology, interest lies in building a fulfilling life firstly by fostering *Gratitude or Thanks Giving*. It is a virtue that is being extolled in all the world religions ranging from Judaism, Christianity, and Hinduism to Islam (Dumas, Johnson & Lynch, 2002). All the Eastern philosophies, namely the Confucian school of thought, did uphold gratitude as a virtue. Pastors, priests, parents and grandparents have long extolled the virtues of gratitude. Gratitude crosses religious and cultural boundaries. It is both a theological and social virtue. For this reason, it is one of the most common emotions that religions aim to provoke and maintain in followers and is regarded as a universal religious sentiment (Emmons & Kneezel, 2005). Also, it is vital to mention here that the Great Epic Bhagwad Gita narrates an incident posing a question, what is the greatest sin on earth? The answer to it as suggested in Bhagwad Gita is “ingratitude”.

Secondly, the concept of *forgiveness* has existed for millennia. It is upheld as a virtue in nearly every major world religion and has been discussed and written about in literary works from the Bible to Greek philosophy to classic Western literature (Macaskill, 2005; McCullough & Worthington, 1999). Forgiveness has a broad and timeless appeal, one that is seen in the Indian sect of Jains (Svetambara) who follow the teachings of Mahaveera, observe a week every year as the forgiveness week where they go around asking people to forgive them for any mistake that they might have committed during the year. Its significance is assured in Mahabharata too, Udyoga Parva Section, (translated

by Sri Mohan Ganguli) ‘Righteousness is the one highest good; and forgiveness is the one supreme peace; knowledge is one supreme contentment; and benevolence, one sole happiness’.

Thirdly, *Hope* has been identified as character strength which falls under the virtue of Transcendence and the common theme running through transcendence is that it each allows individuals to forge connections to the larger universe and thereby provide meaning to their lives (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Emmons (1999) has associated hope to “ultimate concerns” and *Cognitive Hope Theory* is particularly important for performance (Snyder, Rand & Sigmon, 2002). According to this theory, hope is comprised of two aspects i.e. ‘waypower’ and ‘willpower.’ The ‘waypower’ is a process that involves identifying goals, and finding ways to achieve goals despite obstacles. ‘Willpower’ involves a general belief in one’s own ability to achieve goals (i.e., ‘agency beliefs;’ Snyder *et al.*, 1991). Hope inhibits handicapping and self-deprecatory thoughts, as well as negative emotions.

Survey

The present survey targeted on a total of ninety (young adults, middle aged and old age) for the study where they were asked about their views and opinions on spirituality. The inclusion criterion for the sample of the study was as follows:

- Age would range from 18-22 years for young adults, 40-45 years for middle aged and 60-65 years for old age.
- Sample from intact families and urban middle class were included.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It was seen that young adults and middle aged chose spirituality over religiosity as they were not guided by force and external guidelines rather believed in the innermost path and ultimate reality. The findings of the present study were unanticipated from young adults as they strongly felt that being spiritual meant finding true happiness and peace in head and heart both. Further, they narrated that when they pray, generally touch God’s image or sculpture and then in a similar way we do get hold of those hands onto our head and heart, thereby implying that the dimension of spirituality paves way towards hope,

honesty, love, gratitude, forgiveness, perseverance and fairness – all the character strengths as opined by Peterson and Seligman, (2004). It is spirituality that let their inner values to guide how to interact with people and the community.

The researcher attempts to draw parallels between spirituality and positive psychology. One, thriving empirical literature has emerged in the last fifteen years on these two constructs. Two, each is acknowledged to have a rich history. Three, both describe processes that are ascribed a central role in social life. Four, they orient the person away from their own selfish interests to the interests of others. A fifth parallel emphasizes that both are considered to point to another feature i.e. focus on the individual.

Also, the recent findings from positive psychology point to the enormous psychological and even physical benefits of gratitude. Giving thanks leads to increased energy, generosity, enthusiasm, sociability, health and resiliency in the face of stress. Gratitude is an empirically proven path to a longer, happier life (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Forgiveness contributes to happiness and well-being mainly from its potential to help people repair and preserve supportive and close relationships (Karremans, Van Lange, Ouwerkerk, & Kluwer, 2003). People who are being hopeful tend to be happier than those who are not hopeful and this notion is supported by Park & Peterson, (2009b) research which highlights that love, zest, and hope are associated with happiness starting at a very young age.

A number of explanations from research studies can be offered as to how being spiritual can effect happiness (in relation to positive psychology). The survey results highlighted that the practice of faith and belief in supreme power found in young adults and middle aged reported greater happiness and well being in life. Further, it was seen that old aged were restricted in old beliefs, traditions and practiced the concept of religion over spirituality.

One of the first studies which worked on the relationship between religious/spiritual beliefs, life satisfaction, and personal happiness was conducted by Ellison's in 1991.

Mark *et al.* (2010), conducted research on relationship between spirituality and happiness. Three hundred and twenty children between the ages of 8 to

12 were surveyed. The authors found that those children who said they were more spiritual were happier. In particular, the personal (i.e. meaning and value in one's own life) and communal (i.e. quality and depth of inter-personal relationships) aspects of spirituality were strong predictors of children's happiness. Spirituality explained up to 27 percent of the differences in happiness levels amongst children. Further, according to the authors, "enhancing personal meaning may be a key factor in the relation between spirituality and happiness." They suggest some strategies aimed at increasing personal meaning in children. These include recording acts of kindness by writing them down. Other acts of altruism and volunteering – may help to make children happier.

According to Koeing, (2012) review of more than 326 peer-reviewed studies of mainly adult populations found that out of those 326 studies, 256 (79%) found only significant positive associations between religiosity/spirituality and well-being. The positive influence of religion or spirituality on well-being can be explained through a few key mechanisms, such as religion's role as a coping strategy and as a support system for prosocial behaviors. Further, Ivtzan, *et al.* (2012), research was selected as a key study because it uniquely distinguishes between the roles of religious involvement and spirituality in investigating how each influences psychological well-being, in terms of self-actualization and life meaningfulness.

Van Cappellen (2017) proposes that self-transcendent positive emotions (STPEs) are the affective foundation of multiple religious and spiritual traditions. STPEs serve the purpose of transcending the self in order to achieve a sense of connectedness with the world and/or with God and to serve the greater good. She reviews experimental work on awe, gratitude, elevation, admiration, love, compassion, peacefulness, and joy. Van Cappellen also explores how general positive emotions are constructed in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament and discusses potential ways through which the knowledge accrued from that study can inform future empirical research on STPEs and their relation to religion. This work is reminiscent of the provocative claim made by George Vaillant (2013) that spirituality is simply another name for positive emotions and social connection

CONCLUSION

An important fact to catch from this survey is that how the concepts and approach of positive psychology combined with spirituality become a protective factor that acts not just as a psychotherapeutic change but also have the capacity to orient oneself to a positive future and personal value. Therefore, it would help in living life with greater life satisfaction, happiness and would experience fewer psychological problems in the wake of inevitable difficulties.

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