

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, SENSE OF COHERENCE AND WELL BEING OF LITHUANIAN STUDENTS

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Summary

The present study was designed to examine the relationship between Lithuanian students' religious beliefs, sense of coherence and well being (n=132). The study revealed some significant interactions between these variables, and is consistent with works of many authors. A significant correlation was found between students' negative psychological well being and belief in punishing God. Similarly, a significant correlation was found between belief in punishing God and negative physical well being. Lithuanian students' belief in punishing God was found to be significantly negatively related to the students' sense of coherence. However, conversely to some studies, no significant correlations were found between sense of coherence and belief in personal relationship with God. A significant strong negative correlation was observed between students' negative psychological well being and sense of coherence. In the same way, a significant correlation was found between students' sense of coherence and negative physical well being.

Keywords: religious beliefs, sense of coherence, well being

Introduction

The increasing number of youth committed suicides in Lithuania (Gailienė, 1998) indicates that some part of the population has poor coping mechanisms and their well being is diminished. As the situation is continuous, inevitably, the new preventive models and effective interventions in Lithuanian health and social care systems have to be imposed. This implies a demand for a thorough investigation of various factors in youth suicide. Although many surveys have been conducted to explore the field, and they have revealed the negative influences of Lithuanian mass media (Gailienė, 2000), the role of many other significant *intra psychic* factors (e. g., religious beliefs, the qualities of well being) has not yet been explored in detail.

Since there exists a firm link between suicide and diminished subjective well being (Lester, 1997), the survey on students' well being and psychological factors that contribute to coping, could shed light on better understanding of the Lithuanian youth suicide phenomenon. As a result, some practical implications may be induced. Which psychological factors, contributing to coping, are most worthy to be analysed in this kind of survey? And what are the core points of coping?

According to Lazarus, (1977, p. 287-327), coping refers to „efforts, both action-oriented and *intra psychic*, to manage environmental and internal demands, and conflicts among them, which tax or exceed a person's resources“ (Lazarus, 1977, p. 288). In the last 10 years, a number of studies revealed the mounting evidence that *religious* beliefs can offer effective resources for dealing with stressful events and conditions (Pargament, 1997). Is this

indication valid for Lithuanian population? According to the statistical data, more than 80% of Lithuanians have pointed out that they belong to Catholic Church (Subačius, 1996, p. 15-25), however, the incidence of suicides in Lithuania is almost highest in the world. Is there any positive relationship between Lithuanians' well being and religious beliefs, likewise in other countries?

Many surveys that were conducted in U.S. and Western European countries, have revealed that religious or spiritual involvement (that includes also those who does not necessarily belong to a certain religious organization) may promote better well being by enhancing the feelings of self-esteem (Pargament, 1997), the sense of intrinsic moral self-worth and efficacy (Gartner, 1991, p. 6-25), the perceptions that one can master or have control over one's personal affairs (Levin, 1996, p. 220-225). Therefore, researchers have found *several* aspects of religious or spiritual involvement to be positive predictors of well being (McIntosh, 1995, p. 1-16; Koenig, 1997, p. 131-143; 1998a, p. 536-542, 1998b, p. 513-521, Diener, 1999, p. 276-302).

According to Pollner and Ellison, religiously involved individuals construct personal relationship with a „divine other“ in much the same way they develop relationship with concrete „social others“. By developing a close personal relationship with a potent „divine other“, they may gain a sense of self-worth and control, and they begin to interpret their situations from the point of view of the „God-role“ (e. g., what a „divine other“ might expect in the way of human conduct) (Pollner, 1989, p. 92-104; Ellison, 1991, p. 80-99). Researchers have suggested that external, behavioral indicators of religious involvement (e.g., Church attendance) can affect well-being through their impact on social integration and support, while the more personal and subjective religious variables, such as the mentioned belief in personal relationship with a „divine other“, are thought to have a more direct and powerful effect on well being (Ellison, 1991, p. 80-99). Many studies have also indicated that religious beliefs could be especially valuable in dealing with crises, serious life problems and bereavement (Idler, 1995 p. 683-704). According to Ellison, religious beliefs lead persons to reassess the meaning of problematic conditions as opportunities for spiritual growth or learning, or as part of a broader divine plan, rather than as challenges to fundamental aspects of personal identity. Therefore religious beliefs help individuals to adjust the self-concept so that various problems seems less threatening (Ellison, 2001, p. 215 - 250). This dependent variable has proved it's significance in many health and well being related studies (Zinnbauer, 1997, p. 549-564).

Could other dependent variables be helpful in research aiming at better understanding of the Lithuanian youth suicide phenomenon? Several studies have demonstrated the strong correlations between a wide variety of measures of well being and the sense of coherence (Antonovsky, 1993, p. 725-733). The concept of „sense of coherence“, proposed by A. Antonovsky, is defined as a generalized orientation toward the world, which perceives it, on a continuum, as comprehensible, manageable and meaningful.

In other words, sense of coherence could be defined as a global construct that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive belief that one's environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected. The individual will perceive the stimuli from the external and internal environment as structured and predictable (comprehensibility), he/she will perceive that resources are available to meet the demands posed by these stimuli (manageability), and that these demands are challenges worthwhile spending his/her energy on (meaningfulness). The concept of sense of coherence is also close to concepts like optimism, will to live, self efficacy, learned resourcefulness (Wold, 1997, p. 48).

Therefore, *the aim of this research* was to evaluate the relationship between Lithuanian students' religious beliefs, sense of coherence and subjective well being. In the present study, based on a review of the literature, we hypothesized that Lithuanian students' religious beliefs would be significantly related to their sense of coherence. We also hypothesized that students' religious beliefs would be significantly related to their subjective well being. In addition, we hypothesized that student's sense of coherence would be significantly related to

their subjective well being. Finally, we hypothesized there will be some differences in results among groups of female and male students.

Methods

Participants

This research examined the relationship between students' religious beliefs, sense of coherence and subjective well being in the sample of high – school volunteers (n=132). Age of the participants ranged from 18 to 27 years. The number of female participants (n=92) was to some extent higher than that of males (n=42).

Procedure

Participants for the present study were voluntarily recruited from undergraduate psychology course. Each received a packet containing a cover sheet that explained the nature of their participation, a demographic sheet, and the research instruments: Orientation to life Questionnaire, Well Being Questionnaire, and Religious Beliefs Questionnaire. All the participants were asked to complete the questionnaires independently.

Measures

Orientation to life Questionnaire (Antonovsky, 1987) was used to identify the sense of coherence, **SOC**, of students. This questionnaire is a 13 - item self-report measure. Respondents are asked to express their agreement or disagreement with the various statements. Rating is on a 5-point Likert scale: 1= „completely untrue of me“; 2= „mostly untrue of me“; 3= „I don't know“; 4= „mostly true of me“; 5= „describes me perfectly“.

Religious Beliefs Questionnaire, which was developed on the base of the works of Larson and Ellison (Larson, 1998, p.104-128; Ellison, 2001, p. 215–250), was used to measure students' religious beliefs. This questionnaire is a 40 – item self-report measure. Factorial analysis was performed to identify religious beliefs factors. The following factors we analyze in this article:

- 1) **PR** (personal relationship) - Belief in personal relationship with God (e. g., „God takes care of me“, „God is everywhere“, „I think God loves me“, „God will take care of my future“, etc.)
- 2) **PN** (punishment) – Belief in punishing God (e. g., „God punishes for bad behavior“, „I think I am punished by God“, etc.)
- 3) **NR** (no religion) – Belief that it is not worthy to belong to any religion (e. g., „I do not belong to any religion“, etc.)

Well Being Questionnaire was prepared on the ground of the Questionnaire of the HBSC study, which is coordinated by C. Currie, Research Unit in Health and Behavioral Change, University of Edinburgh, Scotland (Research Protocol, 1997, p. 51-84). The prepared questionnaire is a 19 – item self-report measure. Factorial analysis was performed to identify subjective well being factors. The following factors we analyze in this article:

- 1) **NPsWB** (negative psychological well being) – includes regular feelings of loneliness, unhappiness, sadness, depression.
- 2) **NPhWB** (negative physical well being) – includes frequent tiredness, various aches.

Statistical analyses of the psychological data were performed with the statistical package SPSS. 10. Correlation analyses were performed to evaluate the relationship between religious beliefs, sense of coherence and subjective well being.

Results and discussion

Correlation analysis of students' well being and religious beliefs variables has not revealed strong relationship between these factors, and only slight significant tendencies were discovered. To demonstrate it, in Table 1 the results for the correlation analysis of the well being and religious beliefs variables are presented.

Table 1. **Significant Correlations between NPsWB, NPhWB, and PN; n=132; Pearson Correlation**

	Negative psychological well being	Negative physical well being
Belief in punishing God	0,212*	0,186*

* - $p < 0,05$;

Thus as shown in Table 1, a significant correlation can be observed between negative psychological well being (**NPsWB**) and belief in punishing God (**PN**) ($r = 0,212$; $p < 0,05$). Similarly, a significant correlation can be seen between belief in punishing God (**PN**) and negative physical well being (**NPhWB**) ($r = 0,186$; $p < 0,05$). However, no significant correlations were found between well being variables and other religious beliefs factors, for example, belief in personal relationship with God (**PR**) or no religion (**NR**) variables. The data seems to be controversial to some studies (Ellison, 2001, p. 215 - 250), which found a strong relation between the factor of belief in personal relationship with God and well being. Nevertheless, as it will be shown later on, our study has also confirmed some aspects of positive relationship between the mentioned religious belief and well being.

As evident from Table 2, some stronger, than the relationship between student's belief in punishing God (**PN**) and well being, was the relationship between student's belief in punishing God (**PN**) and sense of coherence (**SOC**).

Table 2. **Significant Correlations between SOC and PN; n=132; Pearson Correlation**

	Sense of Coherence
Belief in punishing God	- 0,426**

** - $p < 0,01$

As it can be observed, student's belief in punishing God (**PN**) is significantly negatively related to the student's sense of coherence (**SOC**) ($r = -0,426$; $p < 0,01$). The data is consistent with some studies which found that distorted religious beliefs may contribute to pathological outcomes (Pargament, 1997).

In Table 3, the results for the correlation analysis of the well being and sense of coherence variables are presented. As it is evident, a significant strong negative correlation can be observed between negative psychological well being (**NPsWB**) and sense of coherence (**SOC**) ($r = -0,577$; $p < 0,01$). In the same way, a significant correlation can be seen between sense of coherence (**SOC**) and negative physical well being (**NPhWB**) ($r = -0,188$; $p < 0,05$). Nevertheless, the attention should be paid to the fact that relationship between sense of coherence and psychological well being is much stronger than relationship between sense of coherence and physical well being. The data is consistent with some studies which found sense of coherence to be in stronger relationship with psychological, than physical, well being (Blomberg, 1999, p. 937 – 949).

Table 3. Significant Correlations between NPsWB, NPhWB, and SOC; n=132; Pearson Correlation

	SENSE OF COHERENCE
Negative psychological well being	- 0,577**
Negative physical well being	- 0,188*

* - $p < 0,05$; ** - $p < 0,01$

As shown in Table 4, correlation analysis of students' several religious beliefs and well being revealed significant negative correlation between negative psychological well being (NPsWB) and belief that one has a personal relationship with God ($r = -0,226$; $p < 0,01$), belief that God takes care of one's life ($r = -0,213$; $p < 0,05$), and belief that there is a divine plan, which could explain crises in one's life ($r = -0,217$; $p < 0,05$). However, no strong significant correlations were found between separate religious beliefs and physical well being in this study.

Table 4. Significant Correlations between NPsWB, and Several Religious Beliefs; n=132; Pearson Correlation

	Negative psychological well being
I believe I have a personal relationship with God	- 0,226**
I believe God takes care of me	- 0,213*
In crises I try to see a divine plan	- 0,217*

* - $p < 0,05$; ** - $p < 0,01$

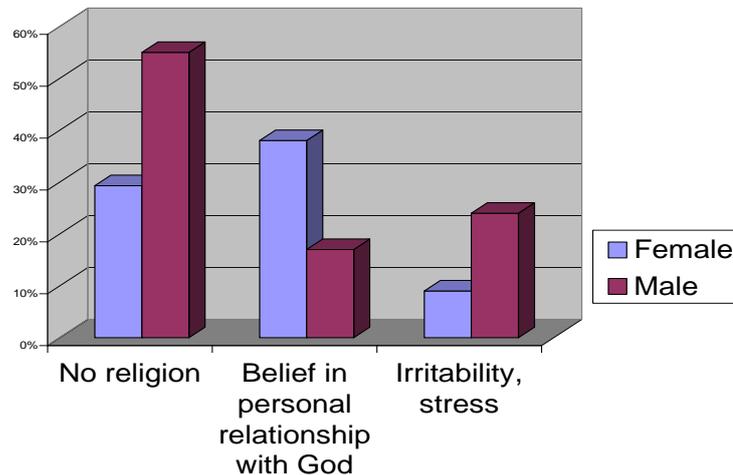
Briefly, in an effort to advance the growing understanding of youth well being aspects, we have presented a survey examining the relationship between students' religious beliefs, sense of coherence, and well being. The results support our hypothesis that there exists a significant relationship between students' religious beliefs and their sense of coherence. The results have also supported hypothesis that students' religious beliefs are significantly related to their subjective well being. Finally, the results supports hypothesis that students' sense of coherence is significantly related to their well being. These findings are consistent with some researches (Fabricatore, 2000, p. 221-229), and they suggest that young adults who experience more connection with and direction from God in their daily lives, and who use that relationship to deal with life's difficulties, feel less lonely, sad, depressed, and they have less health problems.

How many Lithuanian students believe they have a personal relationship with God? How many of them believe it is not worthy to belong to any religion? Is there any difference between females and males in religious beliefs and well being? Differences (%) between females and males in some religious beliefs and some aspects of negative psychological well being are presented in Figure 1.

As evident from Figure 1, the male students are more likely to believe it is not worthy to belong to any religion (55%) than females (29%). Furthermore, a higher number of females indicated they believe they have a personal relationship with God (38%), while the number of male individuals who expressed their belief in personal relationship with God was considerably lower (17%). Correspondingly, more male students pointed out they often feel irritable and stressed (24%), whereas a number of female students who often feel irritability

and tense, was observed to be notably lower (9%). These findings are consistent with some studies which indicate that quite many females are prone to believe in personal relationship with God, and this could have a positive influence on their well being (Thoresen, 1999, p. 291-300).

Figure 1. Differences (%) between females and males in some religious beliefs and some aspects of negative psychological well being; (n=132).



What practical implications may be induced on the base of this study? Firstly, as socio-economic situation in Lithuania is rather difficult for some young people, the all possible reliable ways that would help students' manage with life are to be proposed by relevant institutions. For the reason that students' belief in punishing God was found to be related to negative subjective well being and weaker sense of coherence, the more positive aspects in concept of God should be stressed in the relevant education. Moreover, since belief in personal relationship with God was found to be a predictor of better subjective well being, the tutors in charge should encourage individuals to develop beliefs in a more personal way.

Conclusions

The present study was designed to examine the relationship between Lithuanian students' religious beliefs, sense of coherence and well being. The study revealed some significant interactions between these variables, and is consistent with works of many authors (Ellison, 1998, p. 692 – 695; 2001; Brendt, 1997; Sloan, 1999, p. 664-668; Fabricatore, 2000, p. 221-229). The following conclusions can be drawn from the above-presented results of the study:

1. There exists a relationship between Lithuanian students' religious beliefs and well being. A significant correlation was found between students' negative psychological well being and belief in punishing God. Similarly, a significant correlation was found between belief in punishing God and negative physical well being. However, no significant correlations were found between well being variables and other religious beliefs factors, with the exception of several religious beliefs like belief that one has a personal relationship with God, belief that God takes care of one's life, and belief that there is a divine plan, which could explain crises in one's life. These beliefs were found to be significantly negatively related to the negative psychological well being.

2. There exists a relationship between Lithuanian students' religious beliefs and their sense of coherence. Lithuanian students' belief in punishing God was found to be significantly negatively related to the students' sense of coherence. However, conversely to

some studies, no significant correlations were found between sense of coherence and belief in personal relationship with God.

3. There exists a relationship between Lithuanian students' well being and their sense of coherence. A significant strong negative correlation was observed between students' negative psychological well being and sense of coherence. In the same way, a significant correlation was found between students' sense of coherence and negative physical well being. The relationship between sense of coherence and psychological well being was found to be much stronger than relationship between sense of coherence and physical well being.

4. The male students are more likely, than females, to believe it is not worthy to belong to any religion. A number of individuals who expressed their belief in personal relationship with God was considerably lower in males group. More male than female students pointed out they often feel irritable and stressed.

5. The following practical implications could be suggested on the base of this study. As socio-economic situation in Lithuania is difficult for some part of youth population, the all possible reliable ways that would help students' manage with their life are to be proposed by relevant institutions. For the reason that students' belief in punishing God was found to be related to negative subjective well being and weaker sense of coherence, the more positive aspects in concept of God should be stressed in the relevant education. Since belief in personal relationship with God was found to be a predictor of better subjective well being, the tutors in charge should encourage individuals to develop beliefs in a more personal way.

To sum up, the present study provides some insight into the relationship between Lithuanian students' religious beliefs, sense of coherence, and well being. Future research would need to examine more accurately the effects of religious beliefs on well being, and the effects of well being on religious beliefs.

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LIETUVOS STUDENTŲ RELIGINGUMAS, VIDINĖ DARNA IR SAVIJAUTA

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojamas religingumo, vidinės darnos ir savijautos ryšys, naujausios tyrimų tendencijos visuomenės sveikatos ir religijos psichologijoje, aptariami Lietuvos studentų (n = 132) tyrimo rezultatai. Šis tyrimas parodė, kad tikėjimas baudžiančiu, griežtu Dievu yra statistiškai reikšmingai neigiamai susijęs su studentų vidine darna, psichologine bei fizine savijauta, ir priešingai, tikėjimas Dievo rūpestingumu reikšmingai teigiamai susijęs su psichologine savijauta, nors nenustatyta jo statistiškai reikšminga koreliacija su vidine darna. Šiuo tyrimu taip pat nustatytas statistiškai reikšmingas teigiamas psichologinės bei fizinės savijautos ir vidinės darnos ryšys, nors ryšys su psichologine savijauta pasirodė esąs statistiškai reikšmingesnis nei ryšys su fizine savijauta. Tyrimo duomenų pagrindu straipsnyje pateikiamos praktinės rekomendacijos, formuluojami naujų tyrimų klausimai.

Pagrindinės sąvokos: religiniai įsitikinimai, vidinė darna, savijauta