

Religious Identity and Psychological Well-being: Gender Differences Among Muslim Adolescents

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The objective of the research was to explore the impact of religious identity on the psychological well-being of Muslim adolescents, as well as examine the effect of gender difference on their religious identity. The sample was from Karachi, Pakistan, and was comprised of 250 individuals (146 women; 104 men) between the ages of 16 to 19 years. The Religious Identity Scale (Ayub, In Press) and Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989) were used. The findings revealed the impact of religious identity on the psychological well-being among Muslim adolescents ($R^2 = .416$, $F(176, 836) = 13.298$, $p < .000$). The results further suggested gender differences in religious identity ($t = -5.318$, $df = 248$, $p \leq .05$), environmental mastery ($t = -8.727$, $df = 248$, $p \leq .05$), positive relationship with others ($t = -12.375$, $df = 248$, $p \leq .05$), autonomy ($t = -3.749$, $df = 248$, $p \leq .05$), personal growth ($t = -4.572$, $df = 248$, $p \leq .05$), self-acceptance ($t = -5.466$, $df = 248$, $p \leq .05$), and purpose in life ($t = -9.687$, $df = 248$, $p \leq .05$). This study is therefore significant in demonstrating the contribution of religious identity to well-being. Finally, the findings of this study may be useful for policy makers, researchers, psychologists, and educational institutes in promoting clarity in concept about religious identity, which may ultimately improve the psychological well-being of adolescents.

Keywords. Adolescents, psychological well-being, religious identity, gender difference

Religious identity is an important construct of social identity, with it having vast implications from being used as a coping

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mechanisms for illness and stressful life events (Koenig, 2012) to impacting certain lifestyle habits such as smoking, diet, alcohol usage, and sexual behaviours (Idler, 2008). However, research conducted on social identity in the west focuses mainly on gender and ethnic identity, neglecting the role that religion may also play. For example, most of the researches on social identity in the US have focused on gender and ethnicity, both of which are important social categories through which varying opportunities, stereotypes, and resources are disseminated (Fuligni, 2007). Religious identity is commonly conceptualized as a part of social identity that is rooted in a set of guiding beliefs, and may be a strong contributor to psychological and social processes (Abu-Rayya & Abu-Rayya, 2009; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010).

In spite of the significance of religious identity, inadequate research has been conducted on how adolescents' identity formation is affected by their religious beliefs, with most research existing on adult samples. Further, there are limited studies on the development and progression of religious participation and religious identity in the adolescent years. The time of young adulthood is a crucial one - while in the process of finding ones' place in the world at this stage, one goes through various identity-related processes which peak and wane, such as rumination, exploration and commitment-making (Luyckx, Klimstra, Schwartz, & Duriez, 2013). Accordingly, an investigation into the role of religion in and as a part of adolescent identity development would be imperative to study.

It is often believed that emerging adult identity, a process every individual goes through, is rarely impacted by religion, specifically in the case of those who have attended college. However, recent research suggests that religion may, in fact, play a larger role in the identity formation of adolescents that have attended college. For instance, one research reported that 48% of college students expressed stability in religious beliefs, and 38% of college students reported an increase in religious identification (Lee, 2002).

This then brings us to the exploration of the possible psychological and social benefits religious identity would have. In their work with older working adults and retirees, Keyes and Reitzes (2007) found that those with increased religious identity reported better psychological wellbeing in the form of higher self-esteem and fewer depressive symptoms. Further, Day and Maltby (2003) found that positive mental health outcomes were correlated with intrinsic religious orientation, and alternatively a negative correlation between mental wellbeing and extrinsic religious orientation. This is in line with theoretical frameworks that suggest a reliance on religion and

having religious attitudes contribute positively to appraisal and coping mechanisms in the face of stressful life events. This, in turn, sheds further light on the relationship between psychological wellbeing and the construct of religion.

Another aspect of psychological wellbeing relates to feelings of purpose and meaning. Religious identity is widely associated with a sense of having a purpose and meaning in life, which suggests that individuals associated with strong religious identity continue their quest for understanding the meaning of life, as they widen the application of their religious beliefs (Galeek et. al., 2015; Park & Edmondson, 2012). Consequently, one can strongly link the meaning of their life and its outcome with their religious identity, as well as their continuous active search for the meaning in life. Embodying an intrinsic orientation to religion, which is when religion is seen as the major guide and purpose-driver in life, has been found to be positively correlated with positive aspects of mental health (Dezutter, Soenens, & Hutsebaut, 2006). Similarly, research by Tanzeel and Malik (2017) and Ellison and Fan (2008) discovered that while there was no clear link between religious practices and psychological well-being, there was a positive relationship between regular spiritual experiences and psychological well-being. A further link was found between religious involvement and lower chances of depressive illnesses, highlighting the strong connection between religion and mental wellbeing (Aranda, 2008).

In spite of that religion has been linked to overall psychological well-being, research has established that this association may be dependent upon factors such as societal categorizations and the resulting circumstances that arise from such categorizations (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011). Studies have suggested that communities with fewer material resources are more likely to have a more religiously-inclined, where religion might appear to be addressing and compensating for any feelings of deprivation (Beit-Hallahmi, 2014). Further, in challenging circumstances such as where people face discrimination, people who identify as more religious are likely to exhibit higher levels of subjective well-being, as compared to those that identify as less religious, whether it has to do with the belief system itself or the social aspect of religious institutions (Hoverd & Sibley, 2013).

One's religious identity structure is also impacted by gender. Commonly, females are more predisposed towards religious services, as well as religious attitude and articulate that religion is an integral part of their lives (McCullough, Tsang, & Brion, 2003). This gender difference has been captured by various studies through observations

and analyses, one such being a longitudinal study conducted on religious involvement of adolescents which reinforced that females tend to view themselves as more religious, and are also more involved in religious activities as compared to their male counterparts (King & Boyatzis, 2004; McCullough et al., 2003).

This pattern may be the result of the gender differences found in discrimination, where women are generally more likely to face discrimination than men, and therefore are likely to seek out religion as a coping mechanism. At the same time, it is interesting to note the effect of gender differences in religion's impact on psychological well-being. A research by Jung (2014) found that, while religious attendance was positively correlated with lower levels of stress and higher levels of happiness, this appeared to be true for just women, potentially because of the social tendencies of women at such gatherings. Another study by Mirola (1999) showed that while religious involvement, especially in the form of prayer, decreased the levels of depression in women, it did not have a similar impact in men. Further, some other studies have discovered that females are typically more likely to receive higher levels of emotional support from church members as compared to men, which is a factor that has been positively associated with better mental health outcomes (McFarland, 2009).

To summarize, this study investigates the impact that religious identity has on psychological well-being specifically for university students, since this population has been under-studied under this topic. In addition, it looks at whether there are gender differences on the variables of religious identity and psychological well-being. For this study, we look at these predictors amongst adolescents, specifically college students, keeping in mind that religion has been shown to have an important bearing on college students' psychological well-being (Burris, Brechting, Salsman, & Carlson, 2009).

Method

Sample

Sample comprised 250 participants recruited for online survey. Participants were 146 women and 104 men, studying in different postgraduate Colleges of Karachi. The participants were aged between 16 and 19, with a mean age of 18 years.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants (N = 250)

Variables	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Men	104	41.6%
Women	146	58.4%
Age		
16-19 years	250	100%
Ethnic Background		
Sindhi	45	18%
Punjabi	40	16%
Pathan	14	5.6%
Balochi	4	1.6%
Urdu Speaking	144	57.6%
Others	3	1.2%

Instruments

Demographic Information form includes gender, sect, ethnic background, academic qualification, age, and religious affiliation.

Religious Identity Scale (Ayub, In Press) consists of seven items rated on a five-point Likert scale. The response category ranges from strongly agree = 7 to strongly disagree = 1. The internal reliability of the original scale was .76 and in this sample was .86.

Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989). In this study the original scale was used. The scale comprised 89 items with six subscales i.e. autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. The response category is 6 point Likert-scale which ranges from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The internal consistency of the scale in the current sample was .75.

Procedure

Permission was taken before surveys from the colleges of Karachi, Pakistan. Students were informed about the study at the start of the survey. Information sheet was provided to the participants about the nature of the study and consent forms to participate in this study. Consent was sought from students before the administration of the survey. They have indicated their consent by ticking a yes/no box before they begin the survey. Participants were being fully debriefed.

Results

Table 2

Regression Analysis Summary for Religious Identity Predicting Psychological Well-being Among Adolescents

Predictors	B	SE	β	t	p	R ²	Adj R ²	95%CL	
								UL	LL
Constant	28.48	5.75		4.95	.000				
RI	.50	.03	.64	13.29	.000	.416	.414	.24	.45

Note. CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower Limit; UL = Upper Limit; RI = Religious Identity.

Table 2 suggests the impact of religious identity on the psychological well-being amongst Muslim adolescents.

Table 3

Gender Differences on Religious Identity and Subscales of Psychological Well-being

Variables	Male		Female		t	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	(N=104)		(N=146)				LL	UL	
	M	SD	M	SD					
RI	10.97	4.44	14.13	4.75	5.31	.00	0.88	-9.65	-0.42
EM	9.91	4.22	14.75	4.39	8.72	.00	-1.50	10.67	-0.46
PRO	8.85	6.07	17.14	4.51	12.37	.00	-14.561	17.039	-0.71
Au	12.35	4.83	14.53	4.33	3.74	.00	-0.03	-0.92	-0.48
PG	11.42	5.75	14.42	4.60	4.57	.00	.4024	3.5976	0.840
SA	13.69	6.26	16.97	3.44	5.46	.00	.3528	3.6472	2.078
PL	12.61	5.49	18.86	3.99	9.68	.00	0.89	-9.78	-0.43

Note. Religious Identity=RI; Environmental Mastery EM; Positive Relationship with Others=PRO; Autonomy=Au; Personal Growth=PG; Self-acceptance=SA; Purpose in Life PL.

The above Table 3 shows gender differences on the variables of religious identity, environmental mastery, positive relationship with others, autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, and purpose in life.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the impact of religious identity on the psychological well-being of Muslim adolescents, as well as examine the effect of gender difference on their religious identity and psychological well-being.

The results of the first hypothesis confirmed that religious identity has an impact on psychological well-being. The finding is similar to previous research that states that religious identity is related to psychological well-being (Chan, Tsai, & Fuligni, 2015; Dezutter et al., 2006; Keyes & Reitzes, 2007). This may be because religious identity functions as an influential factor to shape social and psychological developments. Seligman (2012) claimed that well-being includes meaning in life, social connections, and the success of individual goals. Religious identity is strongly linked with involvement in religious activity. Maselko and Kubansky (2006) study shows that religious activity in public was positively correlated with better well-being and health. Religious activity in social gathering provides opportunity for connectedness with the customs and traditions. Lee (2007), suggests that adolescents continue a stable sense of connection and significance linked to their religious background due to the determined role of religion in consenting adolescents to keep links with their traditional values.

The finding of the second hypothesis also established gender differences in religious identity. According to the results, females score higher on religious identity than males. Pargament (1997) suggests that gender differences are distinctive in the field of the psychology of religion. Previous Pakistani researches have also confirmed gender differences in religious identity (Khan et al., 2015; Khan, Sultana, & Watson, 2009). Researches in the US (Ghaffari & Çiftçi, 2010), and in the UK (Loewenthal, MacLeod, & Cinnirella, 2002) have found Muslim males to identify as more religious compared to females. In contrast, the findings of a study conducted in Iran suggest that females identify as more religious compared to males (Ghorbani et al., 2000). This consistency in gender differences suggests deep-rooted variances in the ways we may have been socialized and the societal norms we may have internalized.

Gender differences were also found on measures of psychological well-being. Akhter (2015) reported females to be higher on psychological well-being. This finding also supports research by Perez-Felkner, McDonald, Schneider, and Grogan, (2012) which postulated that gender differences are present with regards to factors of autonomy, positive relationships, and purpose in life. Joanne and Ferlis (2014) also found significant gender differences for the positive aspects of social relationships and autonomy.

Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations of the study. First, the sample was collected from one city of Pakistan, Karachi, thereby limiting the

generalizability of results. Further work should try to gather data from other cities of Pakistan for it to be more representative of the whole country. Second, the study was conducted on college students; it would be interesting to conduct a similar study on a general adolescents group. Lastly, the use of self-report measures could potentially limit the validity of the result. It would be important to investigate more in-depth through the interview method by using a qualitative approach.

Implications

The findings of the study have a number of implications. This study exemplifies one of the few efforts to date to address the topic of the impact of religious identity on the psychological well-being amongst adolescents especially in a Pakistani context. Future research might investigate religious identity with other psychological variables such as self-esteem, self-concept, and personal growth initiative. The research results also have implications for clinical psychologists and mental health workers working with adolescents by providing clarity about religious identity. However, as the research suggests, because both male and female religious identities and their impacts vary, gender-based strategies are required for intervention. Similarly, it is important that religious scholars, counsellors, psychologists, and even parents, know of the possible relationship and significance among religious identity and psychological well-being in adolescents, so that they can best facilitate the future generations in their development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results reveal that religious identity does indeed have an impact on the psychological well-being of Muslim adolescents. Additionally, the findings suggest the presence of gender differences in religious identity, and, thus, subsequent psychological wellbeing. This study is important in demonstrating the importance of religious identity in regards to well-being, which is especially vital considering the religious context of Pakistani society. The findings of the study may be useful for policy makers, researchers, psychologists, and educational institutes to promote clarity in concept about religious identity to adolescents, which may ultimately improve and strengthen their psychological well-being, thereby assisting them to become more well-functioning members of society.

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