Spring 5-6-2012

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Abstract

Previous studies of religion and coping have looked at how an event can strengthen or weaken beliefs. However, few studies have explicitly examined the linkages between beliefs, coping strategies, and well-being. In an attempt to look at this more closely, the present study surveyed 193 undergraduates that believe or do not believe in God to see how they report coping with stress. The relationships between beliefs in God, worldview beliefs, different levels of life satisfaction, psychological well-being, and coping methods after a stressful event were also assessed in this study. We expected that stronger beliefs in a benevolent world, control, and God would be related to coping better with a stressful event, as evidenced by higher psychological well-being and life satisfaction. In addition, we also anticipated that those with stronger beliefs would use more positive reappraisal and religious coping with stress. Our results showed many differences between believers and non-believers. After a stressful event, believers tended to use religious coping and positive reframing more than non-believers. There were also significant differences between the two groups on their views of suffering. Although limited by some methodological factors, this study is important in demonstrating that there are relationships between coping methods, worldview beliefs, beliefs in God, and well-being.

Keywords: Religion, Coping, Stress, Well-Being

Beliefs and Coping with Life Stress among University of Connecticut Students

Positive beliefs in a benevolent and controllable world and a benign God are strongly associated with well-being (Pargament, Smith, Koenig & Perez, 1998). Many people use these beliefs as a coping tool after they have experienced a stressful event. Their beliefs can grow stronger or weaker after the event and affect the way they live. But what if a stressful event occurs in the life of people with low positive beliefs? They do not have these beliefs to use in times of stress, which can affect the way they cope with an event. Very few studies have explicitly examined the linkages between beliefs, coping strategies, and well-being.

The strength of beliefs in God can be changed after a period of stress. Studies have found that during these times of stress, religiosity is an important predictor of posttraumatic growth (Harris et al., 2010). Religious beliefs are often used to get people through difficult times. In particular, prayer and faith in God have been found to be strategies that people frequently use to cope with an event (Koenig, et al., 1988; Weigel & Weigel, 1987). Prayer is a way for a person to communicate to their God and is a tool that can get them through a stressful time.

An event that conflicts with the beliefs of an individual may lead to the beliefs being changed. If the event is very stressful, the individual may globalize their beliefs. For instance, if a person believes in a benevolent God and experiences a stressful event, he or she may alter his or her beliefs so drastically and feel that God is angry at him or her (Falsetti, Resick, & Davis, 2003). They may believe that God is able to alter the events that occur, but chooses not to do it for them. This type of thinking can cause significant distress and they may still believe in a God, but their beliefs about what God is capable of can change. Various aspects of life can be impacted as a result of this change, such as psychological well-being, levels of stress, and life satisfaction.

The event may even cause the believer to become a non-believer. Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez (1998) identified positive and negative styles of religious coping that can exist in the believer. They asserted that positive religious coping was defined by a strong relationship with God and negative religious coping was defined by a weak relationship. People with a strong relationship with God will increase the chances that the coping process will be positive.

The present study was interested in investigating how those with strong positive beliefs and those without report having coped with a highly stressful event. These people, who have different beliefs, use different methods to cope with a stressful event and this can affect their well-being. The current study measured coping styles, worldview beliefs, and beliefs in God to see they are related to different levels of life satisfaction, psychological well-being, subjective happiness, and perceived stress after a stressful event. Participants were asked if they experienced a stressful event during the semester and then responded to items regarding how they coped with the event and if they have experienced a change in their beliefs. Students who have stronger beliefs in a benevolent world, control, and God were expected to cope better with a stressful event, as evidenced by higher psychological well-being and life satisfaction, and lower levels of perceived stress. People with stronger beliefs were expected to use more positive reappraisal and religious coping with stressful events.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 193 undergraduates that elected to sign up for a study titled "Who Are You Part 1" and "Who Are You Part 2" from the University of Connecticut Participant Pool at the beginning of the fall 2011 semester. They were given one survey at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. Our study was longitudinal and

surveyed participants at two time points during the semester. In order to see if a recent stressful event had an impact on their beliefs, measuring participants a second time was necessary to determine if participants' responses changed following an event.

Before they took the first survey, participants were given a four item screening questionnaire in order to determine their eligibility for the study. The first question was a modified version of item five from Rohrbaugh and Jessor's (1975) Religiosity scale, which stated "Which of the following statements comes closest to your belief about God?" Responses to this question were not used to exclude anyone from this study. The second question stated "Have you experienced any major negative event in the past 5 years that caused you significant stress and affected your psychological or physical well-being, such as an injury or death in the family?" Those who responded "no" to this question were excluded from the study. There were 1867 students that took the screening questionnaire and 713 were eligible to participate in our study.

Participants who confirmed a stressful event were given two other questions which asked what age they were when the event occurred and then if they experienced a change in their religious beliefs as a result of the event. They used a 7-point Likert scale to respond to this item that ranged from "religious beliefs became much stronger" to religious beliefs became much weaker.

Measures

Religious Denomination. Participants were given a list of 41 different religious denominations and an "other" option in which they could specify any denomination that was not listed.

Religiosity. Beliefs in God were measured using a religiosity scale (Rohrbaugh & Jessor, 1975). Participants' responses to item 5 ("Which of the following statements comes closest to your belief about God?") were coded to split participants into groups of believers and non-believers. If participants responded with: "I am sure that God really exists and the He is active in my life", "Although I sometimes question His existence, I do believe in God and believe He knows of me as a person", or "I don't know if there is a personal God, but I do believe in a higher power of some kind", they were coded as believers. Participants who selected "I don't know if there is a personal God or a higher power of some kind and I don't know if I will ever know" or "I don't believe in a personal God or in a higher power" were coded as non-believers.

Attitudes towards God. Feelings about God were assessed with the Attitudes toward God Scale (Wood et al., 2010). This is a 9-item scale that measured feelings of anger toward God as well as feelings of comfort associated with God.

Worldview Beliefs. We used three different scales to look at these beliefs. The Views of Suffering Scale or VOSS (Hale-Smith, Park, & Edmondson, in press) assessed individuals' beliefs about the nature of divine involvement in suffering. The subscales of Providence, Limited Knowledge, Divine Responsibility, Random, and Retribution scales were used for this study, a total of 15 items. The World Assumptions Scale (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) was used to assess how people view the world. It measured perceived benevolence of the world, meaningfulness of the world, and worthiness of the self. The Park Views Scale (Park, Mills, & Edmondson, in press) was also used to look at worldview beliefs. It asked participants for their feelings before and after a stressful event and how the event interfered with certain aspects of their lives (i.e. physical health, spirituality).

Life Satisfaction. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985) is a 5-item questionnaire that measured participant's evaluation of the stressfulness of the situations in the past month of their lives. Participants used a 7-point Likert scale to state to which degree they agree or disagree with statements such as "I am satisfied with my life" and "The conditions of my life are excellent". The measure has shown high internal reliability (α=.78).

Happiness. The Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1997) was used to assess participants' satisfaction with their lives. Two items asked how happy participants consider themselves and how happy they are in relation to their peers. The other items gave descriptions of people (generally happy vs. generally unhappy) and participants are asked to respond with how much these characterizations apply to them. The measure has shown test-retest reliability and also has high internal reliability.

S*tressful Event.* Participants were asked to disclose their most stressful experience, how long ago it occurred and how stressful the event is for them now. At time 1, they were asked to give the most stressful experience of their lives and at time 2 they asked to write about their most stressful experience of the semester.

Coping. The Brief RCOPE (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998) was used to measure religious coping in response to the stressful event mentioned in prescreening. Also, the Brief COPE was used to measure how well people are coping with their event (Carver, 1989).

Depression, Anxiety, Stress. Levels of depression, anxiety, and, stress were measured with the Depression Anxiety Stress Scale (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). A 21-item version of this scale was used to measure negative emotional states. Participants rated how much each statement applied to them over the past week.

Meaning. A 5-item version of The Meaning in Life scale (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kahler, 2006) measured the participants for the presence of meaning in their lives.

Life Events. At time 2, participants were given the College Students Life Events Scale (Sarason, Johnson, & Siegel, 1978) which measured the experience of another stressful event since time 1. This scale consisted of 83 statements that described events that may or may not have occurred within the participant's lives. Participants were asked to rate the impact of the event on a scale from extremely negative to extremely positive.

Procedure

Participants responded to every measure except for the Life Events Scale (Sarason, et al., 1978) at time 1. After selecting their religious denomination, they were given questions about their religiosity, attitudes towards God, views of suffering, world assumptions, life satisfaction, and subjective happiness. It was at this point that participants wrote about their most stressful event and then answered questions about how it affected them. After explaining their event, participants were given the Park Views scale (Park, Mills, & Edmondson, in press) and items about religious coping, coping, depression, anxiety, stress, and presence of meaning in their lives.

At time 2, participants were given the same survey in the same order, but with a couple of adjustments and one addition. The first item of the religiosity scale was altered to ask "How often have you attended religious services during the past semester?" Also, the stressful event question was modified to ask them about their most stressful experience during the semester. They also answered questions about life events that may have occurred during the semester at the end of time 2.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Tables 1 and 2 show the distribution of religious denominations for both time points. At time 1, there were 51 (26.4%) reported non-believers (atheists and agnostics) and 69 (35.8%) were reported Roman Catholics. At time 2, there were 15 fewer participants due to attrition, which left 178 participants. The number of non-believers did not drop, but there were only 62 (32.1%) Roman Catholics at time 2.

The researchers decided to code participants as believers and non-believers according to their answers to item 5 of the religiosity scale (Rohrbaugh & Jessor, 1975). The item stated: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your belief about God?" and participants were given five choices: "I am sure that God really exists and the He is active in my life", "Although I sometimes question His existence, I do believe in God and believe He knows of me as a person", "I don't know if there is a personal God, but I do believe in a higher power of some kind", "I don't know if there is a personal God or a higher power of some kind, and I don't know if I will ever know", and "I don't believe in a personal God or in a higher power." Participants who responded with one of the first three selections were deemed "believers" and those who did not were "non-believers." At time 1, there were 135 believers and 58 non-believers and at time 2 there were 118 believers and 60 non-believers.

Participants also reported different types of stressful events at both time points. Numbers were assigned to each response based on the type of event reported. There were 15 categories that included: death or bereavement, divorce/separation, breaking up with a significant other/ relationship turmoil, personal injury/illness, health change in friend or family member (including hospitalization), abuse (psychological and physical), school related issues (exams, transferring,

failing, moving to college), change in residence/ moving from family, minor law violations,

change in financial state of self or parent/ job loss, interpersonal issues (including roommate

conflicts), pregnancy, family conflicts/ arguments, self-conflict and a multiple events category.

Tables 4 and 5 show the distribution of different events reported. At time 1, the most frequent

events reported were death (24.4%) and school related issues (17.1%). Time 2 showed a sharp

increase in school related issues (56.5%) with participants writing about their most stressful

event during the semester.

Correlations

Correlations between responses to the belief in God item of the religiosity scale

(Rohrbaugh & Jessor, 1975) were compared to all the variables. At time 1, there were significant

and positive correlations between belief in God and positive items of the brief RCOPE (r=.690;

p<.01), positive items of the Attitudes Towards God Scale (r=.857; p<.01), belief in world

benevolence (r=.142; p<.05) and world meaning (r=.225; p<.01), presence items of the Meaning

in Life Questionnaire (r=.204; p<.01). Correlations were also present between God beliefs and

the positive reframing (r=.244; p<.01), planning (r=.205; p<.01), and religion (r=.590; p<.01)

items of the Brief COPE, as well as subjective happiness (r=.175; p<.05). At time 2, these

relationships were also shown. There was a significant correlation found at time 1 between God

beliefs and subjective happiness (r=.175; p<.05). However, this relationship was not found at

time 2. Also, there were no correlations found between life satisfaction, depression, anxiety,

stress and beliefs in God at either time point (all p>.05).

In addition, when controlling for responses to the belief in God item at time 1,

correlations were found between belief responses at time 2 and positive items of the RCOPE

(r=.314; p<.01) and positive items of the Attitudes towards God scale (r=.519; p<.01).

Significant correlations were also found with many subscales of the VOSS including: Consequential religiosity (r=.386; p<.01), Theological religiosity (r=.788; p<.01), Experiential religiosity (r=.476; p<.01), Providence (r=.380; p<.01), and Divine responsibility (r=.336; p<.01).

The subscales of the World Assumptions Scale (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) were also found to be related to subjective happiness, life satisfaction and beliefs in God. At time 1, world benevolence was positively correlated with subjective happiness (r=.175, p< .01) and life satisfaction (r=.482, p<.01). Worthiness of self was also correlated with happiness (r=.392, p<.01) and life satisfaction (r=.511, p<.01). At time 1, world meaning was found to only be correlated with life satisfaction (r=.146, p<.05). At time 2, many of the same relationships were found. Benevolence was positively related to happiness (r=.403, p<.01) and life satisfaction (r=.472, p<.01). Time 2 showed stronger correlations between worthiness of self and happiness (r=.467, p<.01), as well as life satisfaction (r=.642, p<.01). As with time 1, world meaning was only moderately correlated with life satisfaction at time 2 (r=.191, p<.05) (Table 3).

Different coping methods as measured by the brief COPE (Carver, 1989) also showed some significant relationships with the world assumptions subscales as well as beliefs in God. A few correlations were significant across time points. God beliefs were related to active coping (r=.180, p<.05), positive reframing (r=.244, p<.01), planning (r=.205, p<.01) and religion (r=.590, p<.01). World benevolence was positively correlated with active coping (r=.220, p<.01) and acceptance (r=.180, p<.05) and negatively correlated with substance use (r = ⁻.168, p<.05). Self-worth was positively related to self-distraction (r=.151, p<.05), active coping (r=.235, p<.01), positive reframing (r=.169, p<.05), and acceptance (r=.307, p<.01) and negatively related to substance use (r= -.197, p<.01). At time1, the only variable that had a significant relationship

with meaningfulness of the world was religion (r=.216, p<.01). All of these relationships were also found at time 2 (Tables 7 and 8).

Discussion

The present study combined many different measures to look at coping with stress in believers and non-believers and the impacts their methods have on their psychological well-being. Our results show that believers and non-believers may use different methods to cope with a stressful event. Believing in a God or higher power can be a useful tool for some and allow them to reduce the impact that an event has on them. There were relationships shown between a higher response on the belief items and positive and negative religious coping, positive reframing, and the use of religion to cope. Stronger beliefs were also shown to be related to more positive feelings towards God. In addition, these groups did not differ significantly on items such as subjective happiness or life satisfaction. Even though believers tended to be higher on these items, the differences were not significant.

Our results indicate that a stronger belief in God is related to more use of positive reframing and religious coping with stressful events. This suggests that after a stressful event, believers are more likely to use their religion to cope and are more likely to reframe the event positively. This is consistent with past results that believers in a God or higher power turn to their deity in times of trouble (Koenig, et al., 1988; Weigel & Weigel, 1987).

Also, beliefs in God and their relationships with worldview beliefs yielded some interesting results. In our study, we found that people who have strong convictions about a divine being tend to look upon that being more favorably than those who do not believe. The relationships between beliefs, world meaning and world benevolence suggest that believers tend

to agree that the world has meaning and is full of generally good people. This may come from the ideas they were taught from their religions.

Even though we did not find certain correlations between variables, we still had some interesting results. There were no significant differences found on responses to subjective happiness or life satisfaction items. One possible explanation is that believers and non-believers as we defined them do not differ much on how happy of satisfied they feel with their lives. It has been found that having a love or positive feeling towards God is linked to higher self-worth (Crocker, et al., 2003). However, our study did not find a relationship between feelings or beliefs in God and psychological well-being, which has been found to influence self-worth (Croker & Wolfe, 2001).

Although differences in coping between believers and non-believers do occur, our study is limited by a few factors. By using self- report questionnaires, responses given are subject to the biases of the responders, which must always be taken into account when interpreting the results. Participants may alter their answers based on what they think will happen with their data. This can also influence the participant to not respond truthfully. Self-report studies also must take into account that the participants' mood at the time of the survey can affect their responses. Another limitation to this study is the sample we selected. Participants were undergraduates and their results cannot be applied to the general population. However, the sample does a good job at reflecting how undergraduates enrolled in introductory psychology courses at the University of Connecticut deal with stressful events and how they view the world.

Even with those limitations, we feel that future studies should attempt to get a bigger, more diverse sample that can be generalized to a larger population. The researchers feel that

experiments in this area are important to how people deal with stress and the role religion plays in people's lives. Unfortunately, time constraints prohibited us from looking at our sample over a long period. Interested researchers should conduct similar studies that can look at groups over a long time and can track different stressful events that occur and how people cope with them.

Also, future studies may want to see how different types of events (death, illness, etc.) effect beliefs and if they lead to change in beliefs. Religion is an institution that is a large part of American culture and a higher power offers comfort to many during tough times. It is important to really get at how strong a person believes or does not believe to see what occurs at the extremes. Is there a group that is more prone to switching beliefs and what event(s) is the most likely to cause a switch? Is it multiple events over time? Any study that investigates these questions would help to further understand the nature of religion and just what it means to humans.

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Table 1

Religious Denomination Distribution at Time 1

Religious Denomination Time 1	Frequency	%
No Religion (Includes atheist, agnostic)	51	26.4
Jewish, Reform	9	4.7
Jewish, Conservative	3	1.6
Islamic/Muslim	1	.5
Hindu	3	1.6
Buddhist	3	1.6
Christian Scientist	1	.5
Roman Catholic	69	35.8
Orthodox	1	.5
Christian Protestant Denominations	10	5.2
Episcopal, Anglican	5	2.6
Methodist, United Methodist	1	.5
Presbyterian, PCUSA	1	.5
Presbyterian	5	2.6
United Church of Christ	5	2.6
Congregational Church (CCCC)	2	1.0
Baptist, other	4	2.1
Evangelical Free Church	1	.5
Bible Church	2	1.0
Christian Church	3	1.6
Assemblies of God	1	.5
Other	12	6.2
Total	193	100

Table 2

Religious Denomination Distribution at Time 2

Religious Denomination Time 2	Frequency	%	Valid %
No Religion (includes atheist, agnostic)	51	26.4	28.7
Jewish, Reform	8	4.1	4.5
Jewish, Conservative	4	2.1	2.2
Islamic/Muslim	1	.5	.6
Hindu	2	1.0	1.1
Buddhist	3	1.6	1.7
Christian Scientist	1	.5	.6
Roman Catholic	62	32.1	34.8
Christian Protestant	4	2.1	2.2
Episcopal, Anglican	4	2.1	2.2
Methodist, United Methodist	3	1.6	1.7
Presbyterian	4	2.1	2.2
United Church of Christ	7	3.6	3.9
Congregational Church (CCCC)	1	.5	.6
Baptist, Southern Baptist Convention	1	.5	.6
Baptist, other	3	1.6	1.7
Evangelical Free Church	2	1.0	1.1
Christian Church	7	3.6	3.9
Assemblies of God	2	1.0	1.1
Other	8	4.1	4.5
Total	178	92.2	100
Missing	15	7.8	

Table 3

Types of Stressful Events at Time 1

Coded Event Time 1	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
None	3	1.6	1.6
Death/ Bereavement	47	24.4	24.5
Divorce/ Separation	11	5.7	5.7
Break-up/ Relationship turmoil	16	8.3	8.3
Personal injury or illness	19	9.8	9.9
Health change in family member or friend (including hospitalization)	28	14.5	14.6
Abuse (physical or psychological)	5	2.6	2.6
School related issues (exams, transfer, etc.)	33	17.1	17.2
Change in residence/ Moving from family	7	3.6	3.6
Minor law violations (self or other)	2	1.0	1.0
Change in financial state of self or parent/ Job loss	3	1.6	1.6
Interpersonal issues (roommate conflicts)	3	1.6	1.6
Pregnancy/ Sexual difficulties	0	0	0
Family conflicts/ arguments	4	2.1	2.1
Self-conflict	5	2.6	2.6
Multiple events	6	3.1	3.1
Missing	1	.5	
Total	193	99.5	100

Table 4

Types of Stressful Events at Time 2

Coded Event Time 2	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
None	4	2.1	2.2
Death/ Bereavement	10	5.2	5.6
Divorce/ Separation	2	1.0	1.1
Break-up/ Relationship turmoil	15	7.8	8.4
Personal injury or illness	3	1.6	1.7
Health change in family member or friend (including hospitalization)	7	3.6	3.9
Abuse (physical or psychological)	1	.5	.6
School related issues (exams, transfer, etc.)	109	56.5	61.2
Change in residence/ Moving from family	3	1.6	1.7
Minor law violations (self or other)	4	2.1	2.2
Change in financial state of self or parent/ Job loss	4	2.1	2.2
Interpersonal issues (roommate conflicts)	11	5.7	6.2
Pregnancy/ Sexual difficulties	2	1.0	1.1
Family conflicts/ arguments	0	0	0
Self-conflict	2	1.0	1.1
Multiple events	1	.5	.6
Missing	15	7.8	
Total	178	100	

Table 5

Correlations between God Beliefs, World Assumptions and Psychological Well-Being at Time 1

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1	God beliefs						
2	Benevolence	.142*					
3	World Meaning	.225**	.160*				
4	Worthiness of Self	.132	.454**	.204**			
5	Subjective Happiness	.175*	.382**	.093	.392**		
6	Life Satisfaction	.085	.482**	.146*	.511**	.574**	

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01

Table 6

Correlations between God Beliefs, World Assumptions and Psychological Well-Being at Time 2

		1	2	3	4	5	6
1	God beliefs						
2	Benevolence	.171*					
3	World Meaning	.213**	.204**				
4	Worthiness of Self	.097	.579**	.185*			
5	Subjective Happiness	.101	.403**	.132	.467**		
6	Life Satisfaction	.069	.472**	.191*	.642**	.64`**	

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01

Table 7

Correlations between God Beliefs, World Assumptions, and Coping Variables at Time 1

Time 1 Coping Variables	God Beliefs	Benevolence	World Meaning	Worthiness of Self
Self-Distraction	.131	.032	.109	.151*
Active Coping	.180*	.220**	.165*	.235**
Denial	.061	-.028	-.051	-.124
Substance Use	-.057	-.168*	-.040	-.197**
Use of Emotional Support	.012	.230**	.015	.174*
Use of Instrumental Support	.017	.145*	.069	.137
Behavioral Disengagement	-.010	-.182*	-.006	-.144*
Venting	-.035	-.023	.013	-.008
Positive Reframing	.244**	.176*	.085	.169*
Planning	.205**	.110	.055	.132
Humor	-.067	.096	.035	.047
Acceptance	.081	.180*	.107	.307**
Religion	.590**	.199**	.216**	.067
Self-Blame	.035	-.132	.105	-.113

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01

Table 8

Correlations between God Beliefs, World Assumptions, and Coping Variables at Time 2

Time 2 Coping Variables	God Beliefs	Benevolence	World Meaning	Worthiness of Self
Self-Distraction	.133	.058	.074	.156*
Active Coping	.219**	.191*	.143	.207**
Denial	-.007	-.151*	.059	-.148*
Substance Use	-.105	-.245*	.095	-.191*
Use of Emotional Support	.091	.030	.057	.138
Use of Instrumental Support	.133	.102	.080	.221**
Behavioral Disengagement	.049	-.143	.150*	-.112
Venting	.062	-.046	.122	.087
Positive Reframing	.212**	.130	.139	.203**
Planning	.282**	.126	.201**	.206**
Humor	.121	.052	.028	.080
Acceptance	.203**	.194*	.134	.283**
Religion	.391**	.099	.260**	-.050
Self-Blame	.178	.002	.126	-.129

Note. *p<.05, **p<.01