

Religious vs. Demographic Predictors of Depression in Religious Communities

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Background

Over 600 articles have been published on the topic of religion and depression. In general, religious beliefs and practices have been associated with lower levels of depression. However, the overall relationship between religious factors and depression appears to be relatively low (Smith, McCullough & Poll, 2003). Thus, it is possible that religious beliefs and practices are no more predictive of depression than common demographic factors and the extant literature has overemphasized the importance of religion in depressive symptomatology. We therefore sought to compare the extent to which common religious beliefs/practices and demographic variables predicted clinical levels of depression in two religious communities.

Participants & Procedure

A community-based sample of $n = 234$ Jewish and $n = 120$ Christian individuals completed an on-line questionnaire. Participants ranged in age from 18-79 years and the mean age was 36.2 ($SD = 14.2$). Females comprised 61.3% of the sample. Clinical levels of depression were detected in 26.3% ($n = 76$) of the sample.

Measures

Demographics. Seven single-items measured for participant gender, education (college degree), current employment, marital status (married or not married), age, income and number of children.

Religious Factors Five single-items assessed for belief in God, weekly or more frequent prayer, religious service attendance and religious study, and importance of religion (4-point Likert scale ranging from “Not Important at All” to “Very Important”).

Depression was measured by the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (*CES-D*; Radloff, 1977). The sample was split into depressed and non-depressed groups using a clinical cut-off of 16 on the CES-D (Nezu, Ronan, Meadows & McClure, 2000)

Results

Demographic Predictors		Religious Predictors	
Gender	$\chi^2 = 0.33, ns$	Belief	$\chi^2 = 3.98, p < .05$
College Degree	$\chi^2 = 2.84, ns$	Weekly Prayer	$\chi^2 = 7.21, p < .01$
Employment	$\chi^2 = 0.07, ns$	Weekly Services	$\chi^2 = 5.29, p < .05$
Marriage	$\chi^2 = 5.27, p < .05$	Weekly Study	$\chi^2 = 3.53, p = .06$
Age	$t = 0.99, ns$	Religion important	$t = 12.60, p < .001$
Income	$t = 0.87, ns$		
Children	$t = 1.09, ns$		

Between-group comparisons (depressed vs. non-depressed) of religious and demographic factors were conducted using a series of chi-square and *t*-tests. Surprisingly, depressed and non-depressed participants reported equivalent levels of all but one of seven demographic predictors: non-depressed participants were more likely to be unmarried than depressed participants. By contrast, depressed participants reported *lower* levels of all of the religious factors examined (belief in God, weekly prayer, weekly service attendance, and importance of religion) than non-depressed participants.

Discussion

In this study, we directly compared religious vs. demographic predictors of clinical levels of depression in two religious communities. The results of this investigation highlight the importance of religious factors in depressive symptomatology. The findings further suggest that in religious communities, common religious predictors (e.g., belief in God, importance of religion, weekly religious practices) may be of greater salience to depression than demographic factors.

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