

Exploring the Relationship Between Spirituality and Compassion

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between spirituality and compassion. Undergraduate students (n=228) answered three sets of questions that served to generate scores on two axis: level of spirituality and level of compassion. These scores were used to determine correlates between spirituality and compassion using statistical analysis. For participants that have had a spiritual experience (n=35), another set of questions were answered. This extra set of questions were qualitative in nature and allowed participants to describe in detail their spiritual experience. We predicted that spirituality and compassion would be positively correlated and that those who have had a spiritual experience would likely have a higher compassion score than those who have not had a spiritual experience. We found that spirituality and compassion are positively correlated, $r = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$ and those who have had a spiritual experience score higher on compassion (108.5, sem = 3.2, n = 34) compared to those who have not had a spiritual experience (94.6, sem = 1.5, n=192) [$F(1,224)=13.1$, $p < 0.001$]. This data would suggest that those who have had a spiritual experience are more compassionate than those who have not.

Keywords: spirituality, compassion, spiritual experience

Exploring the Relationship Between Spirituality and Compassion

The Dalai Lama wrote in his book, *The Art of Happiness* (1998) that “love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.” Compassion may be defined as “sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it” (Merriam-Webster, 2015). This sympathetic consciousness called compassion is an element of human nature that is often overlooked in the field of psychology, and as a result of the overlook, there is a sincere lack of research in the area of compassion. The purpose of this paper is to investigate a proposed driving force of compassion: spiritual experience.

Spirituality is a concept that is seemingly simple to define, until one decides to contemplate the definition. For the purpose of this paper, spirituality may be defined as a the process by which an individual undergoes transformation that can not be defined, or limited by physical existence. A spiritual experience may be described as any moment in time during one's life in which the individual felt a connection to something greater than themselves. Research has shown that spiritual practices lead to greater compassion in individuals.

There have been many religious scholars and sociologists who have gained an understanding of religious and spiritual practices as part of fostering positive qualities in people. In an article by Azayem and Hedayat-Diba (1994), the authors delineated the five tenets of Islam and decompacted the ideals and practices of Islam. In the article, the authors spoke about the importance of fasting. During Ramadan, Muslims refrain from food, drink, sex and smoking. This practice is known to generate maturity and promotes spiritual discipline early. In addition, the religious practice of fasting is said to increase compassion for those in the world without food. This type of descriptive writing has led researchers to investigate spiritual practices and compassion.

In one study by Jean L. Kristeller and Thomas Johnson (2005), researchers examined the effects of meditation on compassion. What Kristeller and Johnson found was that not only did meditation have a positive effect on compassion, but they proposed a reason as to why. This study was used to develop a two-stage model as to why meditation caused increased compassion. The first stage is disconnection from daily routine filled with self-indulgence. The second stage is contemplation about life and loving-kindness.

This aspect of contemplation as a means to increased compassion is a theme that is recurring in the literature. In a study conducted by Morris, Shakespeare-Finch, and Scott (2012), researchers investigated posttraumatic growth of cancer survivors. The purpose of the study was to critique and assess the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PGI). The researchers noted that the PGI does not take into account life changes that happen as a result of surviving cancer and noted that this is an important factor in determining posttraumatic growth. What was found during the study was that contemplation and active appreciation of life was the biggest factor in positive life change. In addition, this contemplation often led to increased sense of compassion for others. Although the previous study did not define their research as spiritual in nature, the contemplation of life in a grand sense may be considered spiritual by those who define themselves as spiritual. What has yet to be found and what this study asks is what is it about a spiritual experience that allows an individual to transcend their own biases, desires and self-indulgence and leap into a compassionate state of being that breaks down walls and builds bridges between people?

Methods

Participants

This study was advertised to students in PS 268 “Drugs and Behaviour” and PS 263 “Biopsychology” at Wilfrid Laurier University. These students in Dr. McKay’s classes are

approximately half second year students, one-quarter third year students, and one quarter fourth year students, who are enrolled in a variety of Laurier degree programs (more than half are Psychology majors or minors). The students are approximately 70% female, between the ages of 18-23, and are mostly Caucasian. Students within these classes are presumed to be typical of Laurier undergraduate students in general. The number of participants was 228, out of that total population, the number of participants who had a spiritual experience was 35.

Procedure

An email was sent out to all of Dr. Bruce McKay's students that included the consent form and a link to the online questionnaire. Once the participant had given consent, they were redirected to the online questionnaire. The online questionnaire utilized three scales: Hood's Mysticism Scale, Delaney's Spirituality Scale and Compassionate Love for Humanity Scale. All three scales were given to all participants to fill out. In addition to the aforementioned scales, an additional open-ended answer questionnaire was utilized to allow those who have had a spiritual experience to share their testimony. For confidentiality purposes, the participants did not include their names, and each participant was assigned a code (i.e. A1, A2 etc).

Results

The Relationship Between Spirituality and Compassion

It was hypothesized that spirituality and compassion are positively correlated. To test this hypothesis, all of the scores from Hood's Mysticism Scale and Delaney's Spirituality Scale were examined against the scores from the Compassionate Love for Humanity Scale. Consistent with

the proposed hypothesis, we found that spirituality and compassion are positively correlated, $r = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$.

Furthermore, covariate analysis was used to determine if spirituality and mysticism drive compassion or if compassion drives mysticism and spirituality. We concluded that spirituality scores are higher for those with spiritual experiences when controlling for compassion. Spirituality scores are higher for those with spiritual experiences when controlling for mysticism. Mysticism scores are still higher in those with spiritual experience when controlling for spirituality. Mysticism scores are still higher in those with spiritual experiences when controlling for compassion. Compassion scores are no longer higher in those with spiritual experiences ($p = 0.054$) when controlling for spirituality; nor are they higher any longer when controlling for mysticism. This would suggest that spirituality and mysticism are driving compassion scores, not the other way around.

The Relationship Between Religion and Compassion

Although there was no formal hypothesis regarding the relationship between religion and compassion, the results that were found are noteworthy. It may seem intuitive that if spirituality is correlated with compassion, then religion must. According to the data, this may not seem to be the case. From both statistical analysis and the qualitative data, it was found that religion does not play a major role in determining compassion. It was found that those who had a spiritual experience are higher in compassion than those who have not. In addition, it was also found that those who have had a spiritual experience are higher in spirituality than those who have not. What was found through the qualitative analysis was that many of the individuals who have had a spiritual experience, were not religious. In one example from the qualitative data, one participant notes:

I think you can be "spiritual" without even being religious. I honestly think it is just about how in tune you are with yourself and your surroundings. Your sense of self, what you feel your purpose is, etc. You don't need to believe in a higher being for this to occur. As for qualities such as being compassionate, humble, caring for others, this also does not need to be affiliated with religion. Personally my sense of compassion and other values that I have. I hold these values because of my moral compass and what I believe is right, not because of a belief in Jesus for example.

In addition to the qualitative analysis, we found that there was no difference in compassion score for those who were raised in a religious household and those who were not. This finding suggests that there is something unique about spirituality aside from organized religion that creates greater levels of compassion in individuals.

The Relationship Between Spiritual Experiences and Compassion

It was hypothesized that those who have had a spiritual experience would score higher on the Compassionate Love For Humanity Scale. Consistent with the hypothesis, we found that those who have had a spiritual experience score higher on compassion (108.5, sem = 3.2, n = 34) compared to those who have not had a spiritual experience (94.6, sem = 1.5, n=192) [F(1,224)=13.1, p<0.001]. In addition, 23 out of 35 people who have had a spiritual experience claimed that it had a positive impact on how compassionate they are. One individual who had a spiritual experience stated that “ I realized that love, honesty and trust are most important to yourself and others and if you treat others well, good things will come to you, hardships are to build character and mental toughness” Another individual who also had a spiritual experience said that “The experience makes me pray for those who suffer around the world and pray that

they end up somewhere good when they die.” These quotes demonstrate the degree to which the spiritual experience affected the individuals.

Discussion

Congruous with the hypothesis that spirituality and compassion are positively correlated, the data would suggest that individuals who are highly spiritual, are also more compassionate than those who are religious or non-spiritual. Further, those who have had a spiritual experience exhibit the highest levels of compassion. As to why this may be the case, the qualitative data may speak to the answer. One of the questions was regarding lasting impacts of the experience they had. What was found was depending on the type of experience the participant had, the lasting impact was different. Those who had a spiritual experience by contemplation about life (n=12), the lasting impact was typically more profound and demonstrated an increase in compassion. This finding is not surprising considering the literature about how contemplation leads to compassionate states. Further research is warranted for the purpose of testing whether the act of contemplation leads to higher compassion for the general population or only for those who consider themselves spiritual. In addition, learning more about the brain state while contemplating would serve to be beneficial because there may be opportunity to move individuals into that particular brain state for therapeutic purposes. If research continues in the area of compassion, marriage counseling, programs to reform spousal abusers and the general well-being of people may be benefited.

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