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A short research report

Mystical experience and emotional wellbeing: A study among Australian church leaders

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Abstract

The psychological and pathological correlates of mystical experience have been debated since the early days of the psychology of religion. In the present study the association between mystical experience and emotional wellbeing was tested among 1,266 Australian church leaders who completed the Eysenck Neuroticism Scale alongside the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale. No significant correlation was reported between the two variables.

Keywords: Mysticism, emotional wellbeing, neuroticism, psychology of religion, clergy

Introduction

Since the pioneering work of William James (1902/1982), mysticism has been a topic of theoretical interest and empirical concern within the psychology of religion. A question of particular interest has concerned the psychological and pathological correlates of mystical experience. This question has been opened to quantitative investigation through the development of well calibrated instruments like the Hood Mysticism (M) Scale (Hood, 1975) and the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale (MOS; Francis & Louden, 2000), from which were subsequently derived the Short Index of Mystical Orientation (SIMO; Francis & Louden, 2004), and the Abbreviated Mystical Orientation Scale (MOS-A; Francis, Village, & Powell, 2016).

Hood (1975) constructed his Mysticism (M) Scale drawing on the conceptual model of mysticism proposed by Stace (1960). Stace maintained that mysticism can be addressed in terms of an introvertive experience of unity (according to which the individual experiences a unity that involves the dissolution of the empirical self) and an extrovertive experience of unity (according to which the individual perceives a unity of all things). According to Stace, both forms of mysticism embrace a core of five characteristics in common, although not all characteristics are present in every case. These five characteristics are: a sense of objectivity or reality; feelings of blessedness, joy, peace, satisfaction, happiness; feeling that what is apprehended is holy, sacred, or divine; paradoxicality (for example, God is closer than the air you breathe and farther away than the most distant planet); and the experience is ineffable (it cannot be adequately put into words).

Francis and Louden (2000) constructed their Mystical Orientation Scale (MOS) drawing on the conceptual model of mysticism proposed by Happold (1963). Happold's model adopted the four characteristics of mysticism identified originally by James (1902/1982), and to these he added a further three. Happold's model embraced the following seven characteristics: ineffability, the private or incommunicable quality of the experience;

noesis, the sense that the experience conveys insight into levels of truth inaccessible to the discursive intellect; transiency, the brief, inconstant, and intermittent nature of the experience; passivity, the sense of the undeserved, gratuitous nature of the experience controlled by a superior power; unity, the consciousness of the oneness of everything; timelessness, the timeless quality of the experience that transcends established notions of past, present, and future; and true ego, the sense that the experience links with the real self beyond and above the normal recognition of ego.

Employing Hood's Mysticism (M) Scale, Caird (1987) proposed testing the psychological and pathological correlates of mystical experience by means of the established model of personality proposed by Hans Eysenck. The particular strength of Eysenck's model of personality for this purpose rests on Eysenck's claim that major psychological pathologies are not discontinuous from, but continuous with, individual differences in normal personality. In the Eysenck Personality Inventory, Eysenck and Eysenck (1964) defined and operationalised two orthogonal dimensions of personality characterised by their high scoring poles as extraversion and neuroticism. In the subsequent Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, Eysenck and Eysenck (1975) extended the model to embrace a third orthogonal dimension of personality characterised by the high scoring pole as psychoticism. Low scores on the Eysenck Neuroticism Scale reflect emotional stability, and low scores on the Eysenck Psychoticism Scale reflect a gentle or non-aggressive predisposition.

Following Caird's formulation of the research question, a series of six studies have now explored the correlation between scores recorded on the Hood Mysticism Scale or the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale and either one of the Eysenckian neuroticism scales or the neuroticism scale of the NEO-PI (Costa & McCrae, 1992). These studies have drawn data from 115 students (Caird, 1987), 124 students (Spanos & Moretti, 1988), 222 Anglican clergy (Francis & Thomas, 1996), 1,468 Catholic priests (Francis & Loudon, 2000),

214 diverse adults (Edwards & Lowis, 2008), and 232 Anglican clergy (Francis & Littler, 2012). Two further recent studies have extended this research tradition among 14- to 19-year-old school students employing a brief three-item measure of mystic experience (Francis & Robbins, 2014; Francis, Ziebertz, Robbins, & Reindl, 2015). Overall those eight studies fail to generate convincing evidence to associate mystical experience with either higher levels of neuroticism or higher levels of emotional wellbeing. What does emerge from these studies, however, is a more consistent pattern linking mystical experience with higher extraversion scores.

The aim of the present study is to build on this research tradition by testing the association between mystical experience and neuroticism among a sample of Australian church leaders, drawing on data made available from the 2011 Australian National Church Life Survey.

Method

Procedure

In 2011, 3,100 local churches from 23 denominations took part in the National Church Life Survey, which represents 25% of the estimated number of local churches in Australia (not including Orthodox, independent and house churches). In 2011 form two of the Leadership Survey included a set of questions relating to religious experience.

Participants

This analysis is based on 1,265 church leaders who provided data in respect of the relevant variables. Of these 1,265 leaders, 55% were Mainstream Protestant, 26% Other Protestant, 55% Roman Catholic, and 6% Pentecostal. Their average age was 52.0 years; 64% were male and 36% female.

Instruments

Mystical orientation was assessed by the seven-item abbreviated Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale (MOS-A; Francis, Village, & Powell, 2016). This abbreviated instrument comprises one item representative of each of the seven defining characteristics of mysticism identified by Happold (1963): ineffability, noesis, transiency, passivity, oneness, timelessness, and true ego

Neuroticism was assessed by the six-item abbreviated form of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised proposed by Francis, Brown, and Philipchalk (1992).

Extraversion was assessed by the ten-item measure proposed by the Francis Psychological Type Scales (Francis, 2005).

Analysis

The data were analysed by SPSS employing the correlation and partial correlation routines.

Results

The seven-item mystical orientation scale recorded an alpha coefficient of .92, the six-item neuroticism scale recorded an alpha coefficient of .69, and the ten-item extraversion scale recorded an alpha coefficient of .80. Table 1 presents the bivariate correlation coefficients between sex, mystical orientation, extraversion and neuroticism. Given the sample size and the simultaneous testing of six correlations the probability level was set at one percent. According to this criterion no significant association emerged between mystical experience and neuroticism scores. Partial correlation, controlling for sex confirmed this finding ($r = .05$, ns). There was, however, a significant positive association between mystical experience and extraversion scores.

- insert table 1 about here -

Conclusion

The present study set out to build on a series of earlier studies designed to test the association between mystical experience and emotional wellbeing as reflected by the absence of neurotic tendencies. The likelihood of such an association was hypothesised by Caird (1987) citing the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (1976) as regarding neurotic and psychotic sufferers to be especially susceptible to such experiences. Caird proposed testing this hypothesis by means of the Eysenckian neuroticism scale. The present study tested this association among 1,266 Australian church leaders who completed an Eysenckian neuroticism scale alongside the abbreviated form of the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale. The data found no evidence of association between openness to mystical experience and either the presence or absence of neurotic tendencies. In so doing, the present study gave further weight to the consensus emerging from the previous eight studies reported by Caird (1987), Spanos and Moretti (1988), Francis and Thomas (1996), Francis and Louden (2000), Edwards and Lewis (2008), Francis and Littler (2012), Francis and Robbins (2014), and Francis, Ziebertz, Robbins, and Reindl (2014) among diverse samples.

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Table 1

Correlation matrix

	MOS	N	E
Sex	.14***	.03	.10***
Extraversion	.13***	-.15***	
Neuroticism	.06		

Note: *** $p < .001$