

# Objective and Subjective Fit with Congregational Norms as Predictors of Life Satisfaction

R. David Hayward & Marta Elliott  
University of Nevada, Reno

## Introduction

There are numerous studies demonstrating the positive relationship between religious group membership and measures of psychological well-being such as life satisfaction. However, the social and cognitive mechanisms that mediate this relationship have so far been less fully articulated. While several specific aspects of religion (e.g. spirituality, orthodoxy, existential certainty, social support, and group participation) have been shown to have a close relationship with the well-being that appears to arise as a result of one's religion, in each case there are general findings that are contradicted in studies with certain minority religious groups. Moreover, there is little existing research or theory addressing the question of how these individual factors are related to one another, and whether any of them can be subsumed under more general social or psychological processes.

The present study seeks to help address this gap by testing a social psychological model of religion and well-being that integrates existing approaches. The basis of this approach is to focus on small groups of regularly-interacting individuals as an important avenue by which religious phenomena shape and influence people's experiences. For many, the religious experience is defined very centrally by interaction within a local religious community or congregation, which have a profound impact on the beliefs, attitudes, and values that are adopted and expressed. All too often, the impact of this type of group or community has been overlooked, in favor of a view of religion that is mainly cognitive or organizational. But viewed from this perspective, it is only natural that general group dynamics processes should be at work in the religious context, and thus that outcomes including well-being might be viewed partly as the result of interactions at the interface of the group and its members.

In this study, social attraction (Hogg & Hardie, 1991) within the religious congregation is proposed as a mechanism that could help to bring together the diverse elements of existing research in the area of religion and well-being. The social attraction hypothesis, which is grounded in broader theories of social identity and self-categorization (Turner, Hogg, Reicher, Oakes & Wetherell, 1987), deals with the impact of fitting in with the prototypical values and behavior of the ideal group member. It is proposed that the level of fit between the individual and the congregation, in terms of certain key religious domains that are prototypical within the group, is an important predictor of the well-being that one gets out of the congregation. Highly prototypical individuals get more out of the group as a result of having higher status in the eyes of others, and because of the intrinsic benefits of expressing group ideals, and hence they have better outcomes.

This helps to integrate diverse approaches, because the effects of spirituality, orthodoxy, existential certainty, social support, and group participation can be at least partly reconceived in terms of being important elements of the ideals of religious groups. Thus, fitting in on these dimensions has well-being benefits, no matter what the specific group norm is. Some key empirical contradictions can be explained in these terms; being orthodox is helpful where orthodoxy is normative, but not where group ideals are defined by other factors. This group-centered approach also reflects Durkheim's (1912/2001) classical view that a community's religion reflects an abstraction of its members' values. There is a connection between being a good follower of the community's religious principles, and fitting in with its values and ideals.

## Hypotheses

The present analysis focuses on the utility added to a model of individual religious characteristics and life satisfaction by two measures of individual-group fit (objective fit and subjective fit).

Hypothesis 1: Congruent with previous research, individual religious characteristics are related to life satisfaction. (E.g., more spiritually-inclined individuals tend to be more satisfied with their lives).

Hypothesis 2: Controlling for other demographic and religious factors, subjective fit with one's religious group is predictive of life satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: Controlling for subjective fit, objective fit with the group norm is predictive of life satisfaction.

## Method

A purposive sample of three religious congregations in Reno, Nevada was taken, and a survey was conducted within each to obtain data regarding individual religiosity, subjective fit, and life satisfaction (N = 177). Key measures in the present analysis include: Spirituality: Measured using the Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale. Subjective Fit: Respondents answered a set of open-ended items eliciting their concept of their group's prototypical member. Subjective fit was measured by an item asking them to rate the extent to which they resembled this description.

Objective Fit with Spirituality: The absolute deviation of the individual's DSES score from the group mean DSES within the same congregation.

## Conclusions

This study produced support for the social attraction model of religion and well-being. Subjective individual-group fit, along with objective individual-group fit within a number of specific domains, were associated with well-being and added explanatory power to the individual effects model of life satisfaction. However, questions still remain with respect to the group level factors that may determine which domains of prototype fit are important in a given group.

Overall, these results suggest that a group dynamics approach to the study of religion and well-being, focusing on the social psychological unit of analysis at the level of individual-group fit, will be productive in future research. The results of this study, along with the methodological insights gained while conducting it, provide a basic model upon which future work can build. By focusing the analytical lens on interaction within the congregation as a basic element of the experience of religion, it is hoped that this project will help to integrate a variety of existing approaches and finally put the "group" back in our understanding of how religious group membership influences physical and psychological well-being.

Mixed-Level Model of Satisfaction with Life

	Model 1 B (SE)	Model 2 B (SE)
Intercept	3.89*** (0.11)	4.13*** (0.15)
<i>Demographics</i>		
Female	-0.08 (0.17)	-0.09 (0.16)
Married/Partnered	0.32* (0.15)	0.35* (0.15)
Age	0.003 (0.005)	0.003 (0.005)
Education	0.04 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
<i>Individual Factors</i>		
Daily Spiritual Experiences	0.25* (0.10)	0.16† (0.10)
<i>Fit Factors</i>		
Subjective Fit		0.16* (0.07)
Objective Spirituality Fit		0.38* (0.15)
BIC		444.75
		439.52

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ , †  $p < .10$

Spirituality has a positive association with life satisfaction

The effect of spirituality is diminished when fit effects are added to the model

Both subjective fit with the group prototype and objective fit with the congregation mean level of spirituality have a positive association with life satisfaction