

IS CHRISTIAN FAITH A PREDICTOR FOR EMPATHY?

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Abstract: According to the last census, the majority of the Romanian population officially declares itself as Christian. The core value of Christianity is love and compassion towards your neighbour. The objective of this study was to see if there is a correlation between Christian faith and empathy. The study was conducted on Romanian students. We had three groups of students: Atheists/Other Religions, Nominal Christians and Christians who daily practice their faith. For the assessing of empathy we used Davis's (1980) Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), a self-report instrument and a multidimensional measure of empathy. A comparison of the IRI scores of the three student groups reveals that faith appears to be a predictor of empathy.

Keywords: faith, empathy, Christian, student

1. Introduction

In a previous study that we conducted among Romanian college students we discovered that their level of empathy is lower than that of American students [1]. Based on the last census that took place in Romania in 2011, 98% of the population declares itself as Christian [2]. Jesus taught about empathy by urging his disciples to live the following principle: “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 7:12) [3]. Knowing that one of the core teachings of the Christian faith is empathy we decided to continue exploring this subject in Romanian college students and to see if we can find a connection between Christian faith and empathy.

Over time mankind has manifested a preoccupation in discovering how a relationship with God contributes to human blooming and success. Tanya Luhrmann, anthropology professor at University of

California, San Diego, argues that: “the way you learn to experience God, and to have a relationship with God, can have a profound effect on the way in which you experience empathy and, in turn, an effect upon the way you experience people”[4]. Previous studies link religiosity and spirituality to altruism [5], higher levels of generosity [6], acts with personal costs that benefit others [7] and other prosocial behaviour [8], [9]. Several studies show a positive correlation between religiosity, as an inward faith, and empathy [10], [11] and between the image of God and empathy [12].

We are aware that there are disagreements on the definition of empathy. In this study we are defining empathy as the ability to put aside your experience and enter into someone else's experience in the attempt to understand how the other person feels, thinks and believes [13]. Empathy is a complex set of distinct abilities that work together to give a person the capacity to empathize with others [14].

2. Objective of the Study

The main goal of this study is to examine if Christian faith as a way of living is related to empathy. We are expecting to find a positive correlation between empathy and Christian faith that is practiced daily.

3. Participants

The sample includes 154 college students from the main university cities in Romania, 57 are male and 97 female, 49% are students in the field of humanities and 51% are students in the field of science. 32% of the student population are practicing Christians, 34% are nominal Christians and 34% are atheist or without faith. The practicing Christians view Christianity as a relationship between self and God. The Bible is considered absolute truth, therefore, he reads it regularly and tries to practice and obey daily what he is reading. The nominal Christian identifies with the Christian faith but is not necessary active in his faith. He knows the main teachings of the Bible, but he is not reading the Bible and is not necessarily living the truths that the Christian faith teach. The atheists do not believe in God and they view themselves as the ones who are in charge of their lives.

4. Procedures

The collection of the sample was conducted by students who are volunteers in a Christian organization that has offices in all major university cities. A link to the online questionnaire was shared via SMS and Facebook. At the beginning of the test the participants were informed that the participation is anonymous and benevolent. No reward was provided.

5. Measures

Empathy. For measuring empathy we used the Romanian version of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) developed by Davis in 1983 [15]. Davis considers empathy as a multidimensional concept with four unique but related components: empathic concern

(EC) and personal distress (PD) are related to the affective aspect of empathy; perspective taking (PT) and fantasy scale (FS) are related to the cognitive aspect of empathy. Each subscale has 7 items that can be rated using a five-point Linkert scale ranging from (0) does not describe me well to (4) describes me very well. For this study we did not take into consideration subscale personal distress. Empathic concern measures the ability to experience feelings of concern for another. Perspective taking measures the ability to adopt the viewpoint of other people, and fantasy scale measures the ability to place oneself into a real or imaginary situation.

6. Results

When the respondents answered the questionnaire they had a chance to identify themselves as: Christian actively practicing the faith, nominal Christian, or atheist / no religion / other religion. Additionally, differences between students who practice Christianity and those who do not were made based on their answer to the question if they read the Bible consistently and try to live out daily the principles and values found it in the Bible.

Correlations between religious affiliation and empathy (ET), empathic concern (EC), perspective taking (PT) and fantasy scale (FS) were calculated to examine any associations among them. Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the variables. We calculated an overall score for empathy by summing the scores for the 3 subscales that we used in this study. We discovered that the mean of empathy for practicing Christians is higher than the mean of nominal Christians and atheists. Also we found that the mean for empathic concern for practicing Christians is higher than the mean for nominal Christians and atheists. There are insignificant differences between the means for fantasy scale and perspective taking for all 3 religious affiliations.

An independent-samples t-test was

conducted to compare empathy (ET) in practicing Christians and nominal Christians. There was a significant difference in the scores for practicing Christians (M=57.28, SD=10.597) and nominal Christians (M=52.53, SD=9.918)

conditions; $t(101)=2.351$, $p=0.02$, with a medium effect size $d=0.46$. Our results suggest that practicing Christians are more empathic than nominal Christians.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics Variables

Religious Affiliation	N	Empathy(ET)		Fantasy Scale (FS)		Perspective Taking (PT)		Empathy Concern (EC)	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Practicing Christian	50	57.28	10.597	18.36	4.989	17.80	4.375	21.12	4.139
Nominal Christian	53	52.53	9.918	16.98	5.559	16.70	4.431	18.85	4.007
Atheist/No religion/Other religion	51	50.96	13.253	16.80	5.848	17.20	5.517	16.96	5.404

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare empathy in practicing Christians and atheists / no religion / other religion. There was a significant difference in the scores for practicing Christians (M=57.28, SD=10.597) and atheists/no religion/other religion (M=50.96, SD=13.253) conditions; $t(99)=2.643$, $p=0.010$, with a medium effect size $d=0.52$.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare empathy in nominal Christians and atheists / no religion / other religions that showed no significant differences, $p=0.495$.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare fantasy scale between practicing Christians and nominal Christians, and we found that there are no significant differences in the scores, $p=0.189$. Also, there are no significant differences in scores of fantasy scale between practicing Christians and atheists / no religion / other religions, $p=0.154$, and between nominal Christians and atheists/no religion/other religions, $p=0.874$.

Table 2 p-value

	Nominal Christian	Atheist
Practicing Christian	0.207	0.544
Nominal Christian		0.612

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare perspective taking between the three religious affiliations and we discovered no significant differences in scores.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare empathic concern in practicing Christians and nominal Christians. There were significant differences in the scores of practicing Christians (M=21.12, SD=4.139) and nominal Christians (M=18.85, SD=4.007) conditions; $t(101)=2.829$, $p=0.006$, with a medium size effect $d=0.55$.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare empathic concern in practicing Christians and atheists / no religion / other religions. There were significant differences in the scores of practicing Christians (M=21.12, SD=4.139) and atheists / no religion / other religions (M=16.80, SD=5.848)

conditions; $t(99)=4.337$, $p=0.000$, with a large effect size $d=0.86$.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare empathic concern in nominal Christians and atheists / no religion / other religions. There were significant differences in the scores of nominal Christians ($M=18.85$, $SD=4.007$) and atheists / no religion / other religions ($M=16.96$, $SD=5.404$) conditions; $t(102)=2.030$, $p=0.045$, with a small effect size $d=0.39$.

7. Discussions

The current study analyses if daily practice of the Christian faith plays a part in developing empathy. As hypothesized, students who practice their Christian faith have a higher level of empathy than nominal Christians and atheists / no religion / other religions. Christian love and compassion are the main teachings that appear often in the pages of the Bible. The study suggests that it is not enough to know the teaching intellectually, rather it is important to strive to apply them in your life daily. Reading, meditating and applying the teachings of the Bible increase your level of empathy. The findings of this study are in alignment with the findings of other studies [16], [17]. We found that there are no statistical differences between the level of empathy

in nominal Christians, students who identify themselves as Christian but do not practice the daily disciplines of the faith, and atheists / no religion / other religions.

The study revealed that the cognitive aspect of empathy (fantasy and perspective taking) is not different between the three religious affiliations.

Empathic concern is the aspect that makes a difference when it comes to empathy. Genuine Christian faith raises the level of empathic concern in students and raises their level of empathy. This study can be a clarification of the dilemma of why if 98% of the Romanian population declares itself as Christian, Romania still has a high rate of abortion, crime, and child molestation. It is not enough for someone to declare himself a Christian and not practice the teachings daily.

A limitation of this study is the sample that is used. The sample who was involved in the study is relatively small, 154 participants. It will be beneficial if this study can be made at a larger scale. There were more respondents to the questionnaire but, we excluded the ones who declared themselves practicing Christians but did not read the Bible consistently and apply it to their lives and the ones who declared themselves nominal Christians and read the Bible consistently.

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