

# SET-POINT THEORY, AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS THEORY AND RELIGION

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## RESEARCH ISSUES...

- **Cross-sectional links – well established**  
Many previous studies have shown positive cross-sectional relationships between religious belief and practice and higher levels of life satisfaction (Myers 2008).
- **But what about change?**  
Do changes in religious belief and practice produce changes in life satisfaction? Will you become happier if you become more religious?
- **Omitted variables?**  
Could apparent links between religion and higher life satisfaction really be due to omitted variables (e.g. family background, personality traits)?
- **Implications for SET-POINT THEORY**  
If religion enhances life satisfaction, what are the implications for the main academic theory of subjective well-being, namely SET-POINT THEORY?

## THE SET-POINT THEORY OF SWB: A RESEARCH PARADIGM ON THE ROCKS?

- Set-point theory – the ‘scientific paradigm’ which has guided SWB research for over 30 years - is under threat.
- It claims that happiness is in the genes – adult SWB set-points are allegedly very stable because genetically determined.
- BUT German (SOEP) panel data show that, over 20 years, 20% of the population have changed their 5-year average LIFE SATISFACTION scores by 2 or more points on a 0-10 scale (Headey, 2008a).

## SET-POINT THEORY UNDER SIEGE?

- Life Goals: consciously chosen life goals matter for happiness. It appears that individuals with pro-social goals are happier to start with – & become steadily more happy over time – than those with just material & success goals (Headey, 2008b). This finding not ‘fit’ at all well with set-point theory.... life goals cannot really be in the genes.
- IF we find that religion enhances life satisfaction, this will also be contrary to set-point theory, as currently understood.

## RELIGION & ‘AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS’ THEORY

- The idea that religion might enhance SWB is more in line with ‘authentic happiness’ theory (Petersen & Seligman, 2004) than set-point theory. Authentic happiness theorists claim that long term happiness can only be achieved through a life characterized by **meaning & engagement**, as well as pleasure.
- Obviously, meaning & engagement might derive from religious belief & practice. Previous research (almost all cross-sectional) has shown apparent linkages between religion, life satisfaction and also longevity.

## Data & Methods

- **Life satisfaction** – measured in SOEP every year on a 0-10 scale
- **Religious belief & religious practice**: questions about ‘the importance of religion in your life’ were included in SOEP in 1994, 1998 & 1999. Questions about frequency of religious activity (church attendance etc) have been asked in 11 waves between 1990 & 2005. Both questions are asked on 4-point scales (e.g. ‘not at all important’ to ‘very important’).
- **Personality traits**: the ‘Big Five’ personality traits (NEO-AC) were measured in SOEP in 2005. Thought to be 50% hereditary & stable during adult lifetime.
- **Regression equations** showing linkages between life satisfaction & religious belief & practice, controlling for gender, age, personality traits & ethnic background.
- **Controlling for personality** is essential in order to assess the effect of religion over and above factors identified as important to SWB in set-point theory.
- Later equations deal with **change** & control for **fixed effects** omitted variables/unobserved heterogeneity.

## Results: Increased Religious Activity Seems to Make You Happier

### DOES INCREASED RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY MAKE YOU HAPPIER? CHANGE RELATIONSHIPS

SOEP replicates cross-sectional links between religion and life satisfaction found in previous work. The data here are for 1999.

Impact of Religious Belief and Behaviour on Life Satisfaction:  
OLS regressions (metric coefficients)

Explanatory variables	Life Sat. (0-10)	Life Sat. (0-10)
<b>Importance of religion</b>	<b>0.19***</b>	
<b>Religious activities (freq)</b>	-	<b>0.18***</b>
Gender	0.04	0.06
Age	-0.05***	-0.05***
Age squared/10	0.00***	0.01***
Foreign born (1-0)	-0.16**	-0.11
Extraversion	0.13***	0.14***
Neuroticism	-0.29***	-0.28***
Adj. R squared	7.1%	7.1%
N	7329	7319

\*\*\*significant at 0.001 \*\*significant at 0.01 \*significant at 0.05

Results are much the same for men & women, East & West Germans, Christians & people of other religions.

### WIDER IMPLICATIONS

#### Mechanisms

An obvious next step in this research is to ask:

What are the mechanisms through which religion enhances SWB?

Improved social networks via the church? Better coping with stress? A stronger sense of purpose & meaning in life?

#### Implications for SWB theory & for set-point theory in particular

1. The finding that religion matters to happiness does not sit easily with set-point theory
2. How best to revise SWB theory? We need a theory which makes use of insights from set-point theory & ‘authentic happiness’ theory. Genes & personality traits certainly make a big difference to happiness – but so also do conscious life goals/priorities and beliefs

SO HOW TO INTEGRATE SET-POINT THEORY WITH INSIGHTS FROM ‘AUTHENTIC HAPPINESS’ THEORY ??

### DOES INCREASED RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY MAKE YOU HAPPIER? CHANGE RELATIONSHIPS

Here we look at changes in frequency of religious activity (mainly church attendance) between 1990-94 & 2000-05

#### Impact of Long Term Change in Religious Activity on Long Term Change in Life Satisfaction: OLS regressions

Explanatory variables	Change in Life Sat. between 1990-94 & 2000-05
	<b>Model (1)</b>
<b>Change in frequency of religious activities from 1990-94 to 2000-05</b>	<b>0.14***</b>
Gender	0.11
Age	-0.00
Age squared/10	0.00
Foreign born (1-0)	-0.11
Extraversion	0.11***
Neuroticism	-0.22***
Life satisfaction 1990-94	-0.45***
Adj. R squared	20.1%
N	1816

\*\*\*significant at 0.001 \*\*significant at 0.01 \*significant at 0.05

*This change relationship perhaps holds a bit more strongly for mature age individuals (30-69) whose life satisfaction ought to be stable, according to set-point theory (B=0.18\*\*\*) than it does for the total sample (B=0.14\*\*\*).*

### BUT COULD IT ALL BE DUE TO OMITTED VARIABLES – UNOBSERVED HETEROGENEITY?

It is possible that the relationships just reported could be due to omitted variables.

The standard way to check this in panel data is to run a *fixed effects (within person) GLS regression* in which all omitted fixed factors are controlled for.

### RESULT - the relationship still holds in a fixed effects model

When annual life satisfaction scores (1990-2005) are regressed on annual figures for ‘religious activity’....

B = 0.07\*\*\*

\*\*\* significant at 0.001 level

### References

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