Personality Roots of Well-Being, Religiosity, and Its Handmaiden—Virtue

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ABSTRACT: Intensive and comprehensive personality studies of healthily developing men and women reveal that well-being's component physical and mental health and happiness are highly intercorrelated. Health and happiness are reliably related to success and fulfillment in an adult's various roles. However, traditional measures of religiosity are related neither to well-being nor to measures of adults' success and fulfillment in their principal roles. When religion is defined in terms of ethical values, then it powerfully predicts success and well-being. Androgyny, especially stereotypic feminine interpersonal strengths, and psychological maturity are the most powerful predictors of an adult's well-being, success, and virtue.

Thirty-two years ago, the Journal was founded on faith in the “indivisibility of human well-being: physical, emotional, and spiritual.” Have the subsequent years of research on the relation of health and religion validated well-being’s “indivisibility”? The Journal's uncluttered statement of faith provokes numerous complicated queries not readily empirically verifiable. Just what do “well-being” and health, especially “emotional” or mental health, mean? Many have speculated about and induced from their experience the core attributes of mental health, but what do scientific studies tell us they are? Do physical and mental health go together? Similarly, which meanings of “spirituality” are intended, such as its extrinsic or intrinsic ones that Gordon Allport distinguished? For example, are religious beliefs and practices indispensable to be healthy? Or conversely, are more mentally healthy persons more spiritual than less healthy ones? How is spirituality manifested in behavior? Presumably more religious persons are more virtuous than less religious ones. But are they? Can one be virtuous without being religious?

Or how valid is a statement of faith that makes no ethnic, social-class, age,
gender, or cultural qualifications? Does not the Journal's faith imply what the sociologist Alex Inkeles claims, that there is an "actual psychic unity of mankind in a structural sense...the nature of the human personality, its inner 'rules' of organization, is evidently basically similar everywhere"?!

Such questions are not new to the Journal's readers. They were the focus of the Journal's parent's (the former Academy of Religion and Mental Health) research conferences. Since those conferences, I have grappled empirically with these issues, especially the meaning of mental health and its predictive role in adult behavior. In agreement with the Journal's holistic assumptions about personality organization, I have intensively studied at one time or for many years varied groups of adolescents and adults using numerous diverse established and novel self-report measures, projective and psychometric tests of varied levels of personality, focused interviews, behavioral tests, and judge-rated measures of their health and personalities.

I have continuously sought to clarify the meaning of mental health by grounding it on a developmental model of psychological maturing and have argued that mental health and psychological maturity are equivalent ideas. I first tested if judge-identified more and less sound, well-functioning, and healthy adolescent males differed reliably and similarly in their personalities. They did. Then I tested if such differences would hold across five diverse cultural settings, irrespective of their religious identification as American Jews and Protestants, Sicilian or northern Italian Catholics, and Anatolian or western Moslem Turks. They did, so lending some confirmation to the Journal's assumption of cultural and religious generality. I also asked if adolescents growing healthily from ninth to twelfth grade or from their college freshman to senior years or adults maturing from early adulthood into middle age grew similarly. They did, so confirming the dimensional continuity of healthy growth from seventeen to forty-five years of age. The adult study I now report also examined if males and females grow healthily in similar ways. They do, when freed of the social constraints of their gender roles, so suggesting that we don't need a separate developmental psychology or definition of health for either. To date, I have no evidence to disconfirm the Journal's and Inkeles's assumptions about the "psychic unity" of human beings and the similarity of inner rules of personality organization for everyone.

Grounded on these studies, the longitudinal study I now report offers evidence for evaluating the empirical merit of the Journal's faith about health and religion. More detailed discussion of the study's participants, technical measures, and its findings can be found in Fulfilling Lives: Paths to Maturity and Competence and its associated materials.

An overview of the study of adult maturing

The participants. In the sixties, judge-identified exemplars of outstanding and poor self-organization and effectiveness, including a randomly selected