

An exploratory study of spirituality and happiness of parents living in the “City of Sadness”

(Eine explorative Studie von Spiritualität und Glück bei Eltern in der „Stadt der Traurigkeit“)

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Abstract

Tin Shui Wai is a new town in the north-western New Territories of Hong Kong. It has been known as the ‘City of Sadness’ after the occurrence of a multitude of family tragedies involving child abuse and homicide. The tragedies aroused public concern over the needs of families in Tin Shui Wai. The paper explores the relationship between daily spiritual experience and happiness of parents (n=118) living in the ‘City of Sadness’. The results of the research suggested that more daily spiritual experience could predict higher level of happiness among parents.

Keywords: Spiritual Experience, Happiness, Tin Shui Wai, City of Sadness, Parents

Tin Shui Wai is a new town developed at the north-western New Territories of Hong Kong. It has been dubbed the ‘City of Sadness’ after the occurrence of a multitude of family tragedies involving child abuse, domestic violence and homicide. Tin Shui Wai is prone to family crises because of its remote location, limited employment opportunities, and high density of public housing estates and a large number of new arrivals from the Mainland China.

Tin Shui Wai covers 4.3 km². Compared to Hong Kong as a whole, the population of Tin Shui Wai expanded rapidly from 177,813 in 2001 to 287,901 in 2011. The population expansion is concentrated mainly in Tin Shui Wai North. In general, Tin Shui Wai North is considered to have more social problems, as it is a newly developed community with a high concentration of new immigrants from the Mainland China (CUHK, 2009). A large number of new arrivals from the Mainland China with low socioeconomic status may have to adjust to living in the isolated community without sufficient social network. According to 2011 Population Census, nearly 16 percent of the residents in Tin Shui Wai have lived in Hong Kong for less than 10 years (Census and Statistics Department, 2012a).

Tin Shui Wai North was found to be a loosely integrated community in which relations with neighbours were superficial and level of community trust was low with a strong sense of self-protection, and passive community participation (HKBU, 2009).

Tin Shui Wai is densely populated with a majority living in public rental housing with a higher percentage of Comprehensive Social Security Assistance recipients who are unemployed, single parents or with low income. A typical family in the area would be a nuclear family of three. The median monthly income from main employment of working population in Tin Shui Wai and the median monthly domestic household income is just HK\$10,000 (US\$1,282) and HK\$16,000 (US\$2,051) respectively, the lowest among new towns in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department, 2012(b) & (c)).

After the occurrence of a multitude of family tragedies in Tin Shui Wai, many Legislative Council members and non-governmental organizations have called on the government to provide more social services. The public and the media have formed a stereotype of Tin Shui Wai as a City of Sadness besieged with social problems. The media blamed the inadequacy of social services, lack of employment opportunities, poor social networks of residents and remote location of the district as the causes of the so-called 'City of Sadness'. The high number of vulnerable groups in Tin Shui Wai and the issues of poverty, unemployment, family problems were 'results of the complex interaction of a number of factors'. Such factors include poor town planning, lack of private sector interest in the development of Tin Shui Wai and relocation of manufacturing processes to the Mainland China (Law et al., 2009). Studies (Rosen et al, 2003) indicate that people of low socioeconomic status tend to have inadequate social resources, low levels of self-esteem, and high levels of psychological distress.

Spirituality and Happiness

Spirituality refers to searching for an ultimate or immaterial reality (Cousins, 1992), an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of his or her being, or the deepest values and meanings by which people live (Sheldrake, 2007). Spirituality is characterized by the on-going process of searching for the sacred (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Spirituality is connected with health and well-being that is reflected in the quality of relationships that people have with themselves and with others. Some research (Mueller et al., 2001; Pargament, 1997) indicates that spirituality and religion are associated with mental health, substance abuse prevention, marital functioning, parenting, and coping. More and

more psychologists, humanist scholars or educators are concerned about the promotion of spirituality education and wellness for the new generation.

Spirituality can be distinguished from religiousness. Spirituality refers to a deeply personal response to God or an inner belief system which a person relies on for strength and comfort whereas religiousness is characterized by a set of particular beliefs about God or a higher power shared by a group, institutional religious rituals, practices and beliefs (Housekamp et al., 2004; Miller, 1998; NIAAA & the Fetzer Institute, 1999). In this paper, spirituality and religiousness are used interchangeably.

Happiness refers to the experience of joy, contentment or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful and worthwhile (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Studies show that the processes that influence happiness include external factors such as personal background, experience, and demographics but the influence of many of these variables is modest (Argyle, 1999). When compared with external factors, some internal factors such as personality traits (Hayes & Joseph, 2003), attributional stability (Cheng & Furnham, 2001), emotional stability (Hills & Argyle, 2001), sense of control (DeNeve & Cooper, 1998) and self-esteem (Cheng & Furham, 2003) explain more of the changes in happiness.

Spirituality and religiousness are also important internal characteristics that link to happiness. Some studies show that religious people are happier, more satisfied with their lives and cope better with crises (Oman and Reed, 1998; Koenig et al., 1997). Ellison & Levin (1998) has suggested that religious people are happier, healthier than non-religious people. The practice of religion through private prayer, spiritual pursuit, and collective worship can engender happiness-increasing feelings such as hope, love, joy and compassion. Research (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002) indicates that spiritual people are relatively happier than non-spiritual people and can cope better under hardship. In addition, people who describe themselves as spiritual report higher levels of happiness than those who do not (Watson, 2005). Studies have generally indicated modest positive correlations between spirituality and religiousness, and happiness (Argyle, 2001; Francis et al., 2000; Francis et al., 2003; French & Joseph, 1999). Francis et al. (2000) reported that overall spirituality positively correlate with happiness. Spirituality and religiousness may promote happiness by increasing social integration and support, reducing stress and improving coping strategies, providing meaning, coherence and purpose in life or by enhancing healthier lifestyle choices (Ellison, 1991).

To date, there have been few studies on Tin Shui Wai and most of the research put its focus on the adequacy of social services and community facilities,

associational life and social networks of residents in Tin Shu Wai (HKBU, 2009; HKPU, 2009; CUHK, 2009; Law et al., 2009). Hence, this paper presents new data and analysis on daily spiritual experience and happiness of parents living in the so-called “City of Sadness”. We hypothesized that more spiritual experience could predict higher levels of happiness among parents living in the low-income “City of Sadness” in Hong Kong. The research results would help to inform policymakers about how to incorporate spirituality best in social policy approaches targeting low-income parents in poor districts like Tin Shui Wai.

Method

Respondents

A cross-sectional survey was conducted to collect the views of a non-probability sample of 129 parents. Participants were low-income parents living in subsidized public housing who enrolled in a 5-session parenting course organized by a local organization in Tin Shui Wai, Hong Kong. The target group was parents with children living in Tin Shui Wai. They self-reported as having religion.

Measures

A survey was conducted to collect opinions from the sample at the beginning of the parenting course. The participants completed a self-administered questionnaire using measures of Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES) and Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ). 118 (30 male and 88 female) questionnaires were returned at the end for a response rate of 91%.

Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (DSES)

The DSES was developed by Underwood and Teresi in 2002 (Underwood, 2006). It is an instrument designed to provide researchers with a self-report measure of spiritual experiences as an important aspect of how religiousness and spirituality is expressed in people’s daily lives. The 16-items scale includes constructs such as awe, gratitude, mercy, sense of connection with the transcendent, compassionate love, and desire for closeness to God. It also includes measures of awareness of discernment, inspiration, and transcendent sense of self. This measure has been widely used in the social sciences and for examining changes in religious and spiritual experiences over time (Underwood, 2006). Internal consistency in the current sample was good ($\alpha = 0.94$). For questions 1 to 15, the response categories for the items were a 6-point Likert scale (Many times a day, Every day, Most days, Some days, Once in a while, Never or almost never). The item 16, “In

general, how close do you feel to God?” was coded differently (1 = not at all, 2 = somewhat close, 3 = very close, 4 = as close as possible).

Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ)

Hills and Argyle (2002) develop the 29-item Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ) to be an improved instrument to assess the subjective well-being. The OHQ is derived as an improved version of the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle et al., 1989). The OHQ includes 29 items, which taps into self-esteem, sense of purpose, social interest and kindness, sense of humour, and aesthetic appreciation (Todd, 2003). Internal consistency in the current sample was good ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Results

As shown in Table 1, most of the respondents are female, middle-aged, married, of high school level, and with adolescent children. Most of the participants were mothers who would like to join local parenting courses in order to enhance their parenting skills and knowledge.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Parents

Characteristic	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	30	25.0
Female	88	75.0
Total	118	100.0
Age		
Below 30	1	0.9
31-40	17	15.0
41-50	71	62.8
51-60	22	19.5
Above 60	2	1.8
Total	113	100.0
Missing	5	
Total	118	
Marital Status		
Married	101	87.0
Divorced	14	12.1

Partner Deceased	1	0.9
Total	116	100.0
Missing	2	
Total	118	
Education		
Primary or Below	15	13.1
Junior High School (S1-S3)	19	16.8
Senior High School (S4-S7/IVE)	67	59.3
College/University (Degree/Non-Degree)	10	8.9
Graduate School (Master/Doctor)	2	1.9
Total	113	100.0
Missing	5	
Total	118	
Age of Children		
Below 11	12	10.3
11-14	48	41.0
15-18	22	18.8
19-22	17	14.5
23 or above	18	15.4
Total	117	100.0
Missing	1	
Total	118	

Daily Spiritual Experience

Amongst the 16 statements in the Daily Spiritual Experience Scale (Table 2), the three most frequently reported statements were “I feel thankful for my blessings” (M = 4.81); “I desire to be closer to God or in union with the divine” (M = 4.65) and “I feel God’s love for me directly” (M = 4.42). The three least frequently reported statements were “I feel a selfless caring for others” (M = 3.50), “I accept others even when they do things I think are wrong” (M = 3.70) and “In general, how close do you feel to God?” (M = 3.84).

Table 2: Daily Spiritual Experience (in statements)

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I feel God’s presence.	4.30	1.19
2. I feel a connection to all of life.	4.04	1.15
3. During worship, or at other times when connecting with God, I feel joy which lifts me out of my daily concerns.	3.85	1.15
4. I feel strength in my religion or spirituality.	4.29	1.04
5. I feel comfort in my religion or spirituality.	4.32	0.91
6. I feel deep inner peace or harmony.	4.34	1.08
7. I ask for God’s help in the midst of daily activities.	4.36	1.08
8. I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities.	4.03	1.11
9. I feel God’s love for me directly.	4.42	1.17
10. I feel God’s love for me through others.	3.92	1.06
11. I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation.	4.05	1.09
12. I feel thankful for my blessings.	4.81	0.99
13. <i>I feel a selfless caring for others.</i>	3.50	0.94
14. <i>I accept others even when they do things I think are wrong.</i>	3.70	1.05
15. I desire to be closer to God or in union with the divine.	4.65	1.13
16. <i>In general, how close do you feel to God?</i>	3.84	1.04

The lowest score of each item is 1 and the highest score is 6. The higher the score, the more frequent spiritual experience one has.

When transforming the statements into constructs, Table 3 presents the results that more respondents experienced thankfulness and appreciation (M = 4.81), divine help (M = 4.36) and peace (M = 4.34) in their daily spirituality experience. On the other hand, they experience less with compassionate love (M = 3.6) and joy, and transcendent sense of self (M = 3.85) in daily life.

Table 3: Daily Spiritual Experience (in category analysis)

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Connection	4.17	1.10
<i>Joy, transcendent sense of self</i>	3.85	1.15
Strength and comfort	4.30	0.94
Peace	4.34	1.08
Divine help	4.36	1.08
Divine guidance	4.03	1.11
Perceptions of divine love	4.17	1.01
Awe	4.05	1.09
Thankfulness, appreciation	4.81	0.99
<i>Compassionate love</i>	3.60	0.79
Union and closeness	4.25	0.88

N=118, the lowest score of each item is 1 and the highest score is 6. The higher the score, the more frequent spiritual experience of that type.

Note: The conceptual category: Connection refers to questionnaire item 1, 2; Joy, Transcendent sense of self refers to questionnaire item 3; Strength and comfort refers to questionnaire item 4, 5; Peace refers to questionnaire item 6; Divine help refers to questionnaire item 7; Divine guidance refers to questionnaire item 8; Perceptions of divine love refers to questionnaire item 9, 10; Awe refers to questionnaire item 11; Thankfulness, appreciation refers to questionnaire item 12; Compassionate love refers to questionnaire item 13, 14; Union and closeness refers to questionnaire item 15, 16.

Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ)

Amongst the 29 statements in the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (Table 4), the three most frequently reported statements were ‘Life is good’ (M = 4.99), ‘I find beauty in some things’ (M = 4.90), ‘I am always committed and involved’ (M = 4.58). The three least frequently reported statements were ‘I feel that I am not especially in control of my life’ (M = 2.97), ‘I don’t find it easy to make decisions’ (M = 3.40) and ‘I feel fully mentally alert’ (M = 3.41).

Table 4: Happiness

<i>Item</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I don't feel particularly pleased with the way I am. (R)	4.51	1.484
I am intensely interested in other people.	4.00	1.191
I feel that life is very rewarding.	4.38	1.358
I have very warm feelings towards almost everyone.	4.14	1.124
I rarely wake up feeling rested. (R)	4.42	1.290
I am not particularly optimistic about the future. (R)	4.50	1.357
I find most things amusing.	4.21	1.204
I am always committed and involved.	4.58	1.120
Life is good.	4.99	1.223
I do not think that the world is a good place. (R)	3.73	1.331
I laugh a lot.	4.02	1.147
I am well satisfied about everything in my life.	4.02	1.198
I don't think I look attractive. (R)	3.53	1.545
There is a gap between what I would like to do and what I have done. (R)	3.53	1.331
I am very happy.	4.45	1.133
I find beauty in some things.	4.90	0.959
I always have a cheerful effect on others.	4.27	0.962
I can fit in (find time for) everything I want to.	4.20	0.967
<i>I feel that I am not especially in control of my life. (R)</i>	2.97	1.573
I feel able to take anything on.	3.61	1.252
<i>I feel fully mentally alert.</i>	3.41	1.088
I often experience joy and elation.	3.94	1.109
<i>I don't find it easy to make decisions. (R)</i>	3.40	1.294

I don't have a particular sense of meaning and purpose in my life. (R)	4.46	1.399
I feel I have a great deal of energy.	3.79	1.202
I usually have a good influence on events.	3.94	1.053
I don't have fun with other people. (R)	4.48	1.222
I don't feel particularly healthy. (R)	3.70	1.410
I don't have particularly happy memories of the past. (R)	4.38	1.437

N=118. The lowest score of each item is 1 and the highest score is 6. The higher the score, the higher the level of happiness one has.

Summary Statistics for Variables Used in the Analysis

Table 5 summarizes the results of the two variables used in the analysis. The respondents could generally get higher scores in daily spiritual experience and happiness.

Table 5: Summary Statistics for Variables Used in the Analysis

<i>Scale</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Daily Spiritual Experience	4.14	0.77
Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ)	4.07	0.70

N=118, DSE (the lowest score is 1 and the highest score is 6. The higher the score, the more frequent spiritual experience of that type). OHQ (the lowest score is 1 and the highest score is 6. The higher the score, the higher the level of happiness one has).

Relationship Between Daily Spiritual Experience and Gender, Age, Education

Table 6 presents the results of Linear Regression for the relationship between daily spiritual experience and some demographic variables including gender, age of respondent, education and age of the respondents' children. The results show that daily spirituality experience did not have any significant relationship with most of the variables except gender. It reflects daily spirituality experience has a

positive relationship with gender (at .01 sig. level). Changes in gender account for 6.3% of the variation in daily spiritual experience.

Table 6: Regression results for relationship between daily spiritual experience and gender, age, education

	<i>Regression Coefficient</i>	<i>t-statistic</i>	<i>Standardized Regression Coefficient</i>
Gender	.338	2.186*	.213
Age of Parents	.005864	-.393	.695
Age of Children	.001164	.144	.019
Education	.006009	-.940	-.096
Intercept	4.241	9.805	

R² = .063, N = 118, *p < .01

Relationship between Happiness and Daily Spiritual Experience

Table 7 shows the result of standardized regression coefficients between happiness and daily spiritual experience. There is a statistically significant relationship between the two variables. The higher the score in daily spirituality experience the respondents have, the more the happiness they will obtain (at .01 sig. level). The effect of daily spiritual experience on happiness is moderate (r = .452). Changes in daily spirituality experience account for 20.5% of the variation in happiness.

Table 7: Regression result for relationship between happiness and daily spiritual experience

	<i>Regression Coefficient</i>	<i>t-statistic</i>	<i>Standardized Regression Coefficient</i>
Happiness	.414	5.366*	.452
Intercept	2.353	7.257	

R² = .205, N = 118, *p < .01

Discussion

In this article, we examine the association between parents' daily spiritual experience and the happiness level of parents. The results suggest that higher scores in daily spiritual experience among subjects could predict higher level of happiness. It corresponds to the studies conducted by Ellison & Levin (1998); Koenig et al. (1997); Myers (2000); Oman and Reed (1998); Pargament & Mahoney (2002) and Watson (2005) that being religious and spiritual is one of the most consistent components to happiness. Spiritual involvement of the local people and parents may increase their level of happiness. As such, apart from traditional counselling and family social services, religion and spirituality can be regarded as one of the intervention strategies to enhance psychological well-being. If greater spirituality helps to buffer negative experiences of the deprived living environment by promoting better coping mechanisms for stress, it is possible that programs that consider or address spirituality could be more effective than those that do not (Monsma & Soper, 2006).

In light of the occurrence of a number of family tragedies and great public concern, the Hong Kong Government has strengthened the provision of family services and community resources in Tin Shui Wai, such as the construction of Tin Shui Wai Hospital, the creation of open bazaar, and the building of the second biggest public library. All the measures aim at improving the delivery of social services, provision of medical facilities, and the employment opportunities in the remote "City of Sadness". However, spiritual development, which is linked with well-being and happiness level, is often neglected. Social welfare agencies and religious organizations can play a more active role in the local community and conduct different kinds of spiritual activities such as mindfulness-based stress reduction programme, meditation class, prayer support groups, Tai Chi class etc.

Limitation to the study

The present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. More generally, we of course recognize that the internal validity of cross-sectional survey research is typically weak. Thus, we do not claim to establish some definitive relationship between daily spiritual experiences and level of happiness. In this regard, the cross-sectional research design produces associations rather than causal inferences between variables. Similarly, external validity of the survey design was weak as our non-random method of sampling does not allow generalization. Furthermore, the scales are originally developed in the Western con-

text and may fail to consider some indigenous items. Translation problems may have had an effect on the results.

Given these known limitations to our survey method, it is still the case that the survey offers notable insights into the values of this sample in the “City of Sadness”. Understanding the differences that exist in spirituality between different socioeconomic groups will enhance the ability of policymakers and practitioners to deliver programmes that serve the needs of the low-income group such as those living in Tin Shui Wai. While the consideration of spirituality in solving social problems may sound appealing, more research is needed to explore how best to incorporate spirituality in the policy formulations for low-income parents.

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