Spiritual Struggles: What Do They Add to a Christian Positive Psychology?

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Our host:
Dr. Martin Seligman

Our conference center

Our views
But is it possible to be **too** positive?
Relentless positivity…

can feel forced, inauthentic, or disconnected
Uniform positivity…

can’t capture the beauty of light and shadow
What’s the right amount of ‘light’ to represent our human reality?
Heroic Journeys

have their share of trials...
Heroic Journeys

usually have storms…
And can heroes exist without their villains?
What might a Christian Positive Psychology look like?
We could just add the “Happy Christian” layer...

- forgiveness
- Heaven
- God’s love
- prosperity
But wait! The Bible doesn’t stay cheerful for long...

SIN

DEATH
Abraham: A ‘Reasonable’ Request from God?
Biblical Trials of the Israelites

Oppression

Confusion and Idolatry

Temptation and Sin

Exile
New Testament:
Suffering and Death of Christ
Persecution of Early Christians

- Stoning of Stephen
- Paul in chains
- Crucifixion of Peter
The Bible doesn’t shy away from struggle!
But we must have seeds of hope...
Is Struggle Worth It?

The Israelites did suffer in the wilderness…
But they were on a great journey to the promised land!
God Uses Our Struggles with Sin

- to help us become “as silver refined”

- or diamonds, formed under pressure.
For Jesus, the cross was not the end!
And in the end, what awaits **us**?
OK, back to this world…

Religious/Spiritual (R/S) Struggle from a Psychological Perspective
Our Early Attempts to Study R/S Struggle

- Religious Comfort & Strain Scale (Exline, Yali, & Sanderson, 2000)
- Review chapters/articles (Exline & Rose, 2005; Exline, in press)
- My main focus: anger toward God
Assessment of R/S Struggle

• Ken Pargament and colleagues
  – Religious coping in response to negative life events
  – Can be positive or negative
  – R/S struggle = negative religious coping
  – Widely used measures
    • RCOPE (Pargament, Koenig, & Perez, 2000).
    • Brief RCOPE (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998).
Empirically, What Do We Know about R/S Struggle?
What’s Pretty Clear?

• R/S struggles correlate with emotional distress.
• many cross-sectional studies (see Exline, in press, for a review)

• In longitudinal studies, r/s struggles predict:
  – higher mortality rates (Pargament, Koenig, Tarakeshwar, & Hahn, 2001)
  – more depression (Pirutinsky, Rosmarin, Pargament, & Midlarsky, 2011)

• Chronic struggles show stronger links with emotional distress than short-term struggles (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey., 2011; Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006).
Does R/S Struggle Lead to Growth?

- Still UNCLEAR!
- Mixed findings (Pargament et al., 2006)
- Growth is challenging to measure:
  - Character? Faith? Self-perceived growth?
- Is it the **struggle**, or the **response** to it, that → growth?
Types of Religious and Spiritual Struggle

• Categories are based on a measure now being developed (Religious & Spiritual Struggle Scale; Exline, Pargament, Yali, & Grubbs, in preparation).

• Divine (struggles with God)

• Intrapersonal (within the person)
  – Guilt
  – Crises of life meaning
  – Doubts/questions

• Interpersonal

• Demonic
Anger at God

- **Common form of divine struggle** (Exline, Park, Smyth, & Carey, 2011)

- **Often seen as morally wrong** (Exline, Kaplan, & Grubbs, 2012)

- **Sample items:**
  - Felt angry at God
  - Felt as though God had abandoned me
Anger at God: Can It Foster Growth?

- Honest disclosure may increase intimacy with God. (Exline, Kaplan, & Grubbs 2012; Hall & Edwards, 2002)

- Challenge old or simplistic ideas about God
Intrapersonal I: Guilt

• Struggle to follow moral or spiritual principles

• Examples:
  – worried that my actions were morally or spiritually wrong
  – felt guilty for not living up to my moral standards
Guilt: What Good Is It?

• Reality-based awareness of sin
• Can encourage repentance, reconciliation with God & others
Intrapersonal II: Crises of Life Meaning

- Spirituality often involves a sense of deeper meaning in life
- Struggle as absence of meaning
- Sample items:
  - felt as though my life had no deeper meaning
  - questioned whether life really matters
Crises of Life Meaning: Where’s the Hope?

• see the emptiness of the world’s values (e.g., materialism; social climbing)
• seek God’s deeper purpose for your life
Intrapersonal III: Doubt and Confusion

- doubts/questions about beliefs
- implies distress (confusion, worry)
- sample items:
  - worried about whether my beliefs about religion/spirituality were correct
  - felt confused about my religious/spiritual beliefs
Doubt and Confusion: Possible Benefits?

• Cultivate critical thinking
• Clarify what we truly believe vs. what we’ve simply been told
Interpersonal

- Discord with other people or institutions re: religious issues

- Sample items:
  - had conflicts with other people about religious/spiritual matters
  - felt hurt, mistreated, or offended by religious/spiritual people
Interpersonal Struggles with Religion: How Can They Help Us?

• Learn power of love, courage, patience, humility, forgiveness…we may all need this “sandpaper.”

• When religious systems become corrupt, you may be called to be part of the solution.
Demonic/Supernatural Evil

• Belief that devil or evil spirits are attacking us or causing negative events
• Understudied (despite RCOPE subscale)
• Sample items:
  – worried that the problems I was facing were the work of the devil or evil spirits
  – felt attacked by the devil or by evil spirits
Demonic Appraisals: What Purpose Might They Serve?

• If Satan is indeed active in the world, isn’t it better to be aware of it?
• Practice spiritual warfare
Conclusion

If struggle is indeed a catalyst for growth…

or an important part of life’s journey…
…then it has a place in Christian positive psychology.

Empirical work is still in the early stages.


