

EXPLORING TYPES OF PRAYER AND QUALITY OF LIFE: A RESEARCH NOTE¹

Margaret M. Poloma and Brian F. Pendleton

The University of Akron

Review of Religious Research, Vol. 31, No. 1 (September, 1989)

A review of social science literature reveals that, although most Americans claim to pray, little interest has been shown by researchers in the relationship between types of prayer and quality of life. Survey data that focus on subjective perceptions of quality of life and items measuring the frequency of prayer and forms of religiosity are used to investigate the influence of types of prayer on five quality of life indices. Four distinct types of prayer were revealed through a factor analysis of fifteen prayer activity items, each of which relate differently to the five quality of life measures. Prayer, like its parent concept of religiosity, is clearly multidimensional and contributes to profiling quality of life.

Despite the prevalence of prayer in the American population, few sociologists or psychologists have explored the topic. Social science texts on religion reflect the dearth of empirical research on prayer. Leading social science and religion books make either no mention of prayer (c.f. Batson and Ventis, 1982; Johnstone, 1988; McGuire, 1987; Roberts, 1984) or present only a passing mention of some aspect of prayer (c.f., Chalfant, et al., 1987; Spilka, et al., 1985). Of the popular texts reviewed, only Meadow and Kahoe (1984) devote part of a chapter to prayer.

Whether it is lack of interest, confusing or inconsistent results, or fear of touching a sacrosanct subject, we concur with Finney and Malony (1985) who stated: "the subject is of such importance that prayer research should proceed" (p. 113). It is the intent of this note to move prayer toward its place among the regularly measured dimensions of religion.

METHOD

The annual Akron Area Survey includes quality of life domains in terms of satisfaction with each of the following: living in Akron, employment status, work at home, religion, education, friends, household members, marital status, standard of living, schooling and health. The survey has an additional substantive focus each year and was determined in 1985, by the senior author, to involve a variety of religious and subjective well-being dimensions in response to the dearth of research on religiosity in quality of life research.

Respondents were randomly selected for the telephone interviews from households chosen by random digit dialing. Trained undergraduate and graduate students conducted the telephone interviews from a centralized telephone laboratory at The University of Akron (McClendon and O'Brien, 1984) incorporating a CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system. The 1985 AAS netted 560 completed interviews, representing a response rate of eighty-nine percent of all households who started this very long survey. A rather intricate screening process is

employed at the beginning of the survey to identify the sex and head-of-household status needed for the respondent so certain households contacted were not interviewed. Even when these are included in an overall response rate, fifty-four percent of all households initially contacted completed all or part of the survey, surpassing the fifty percent overall response rate needed to establish generalizability (Babbie, 1986).

Variable Measurements

Four semantic differential scales with values ranging from one to seven were used to measure the respondent's subjective satisfaction with each of the eleven quality of life domains noted above. The questions in each domain asked the respondent to evaluate how disappointing/rewarding, miserable/enjoyable, boring/interesting, and dissatisfying/satisfying he or she found each domain. A single quality of life measure is created for each domain by averaging the responses to the four items within each set.

This same semantic differential was used to allow the respondent to describe his or her life in general, resulting in a composite life satisfaction indicator. In addition to life satisfaction, three other measures of well-being were constructed: negative affect, existential well-being, and a single-item question on happiness. For all scales except negative affect, a higher number coincides with positive descriptions of life (enjoyable, interesting, rewarding or satisfying). A larger value on the negative affect scale reflects greater sadness, loneliness, tenseness and fearfulness. (Appendix A lists factor loadings, reliabilities, and scale items).

The religiosity measures include both subjective perceptions and objective indicators. The subjective measures include two indexes, one of religious experiences in prayer (prayer experiences) and one measuring satisfaction with the respondent's state of religiosity (religious satisfaction). Recognizing that prayer is an ambiguous and poorly-defined phenomenon, fifteen questions tapping private prayer activities also were included in the survey. (Appendix A describes the religiosity measures).

Measures of types of prayer are included because researchers have paid surprisingly little attention to measuring what it is people do when they pray. Following work by Heiler (1958) and Pratt (1930) (see also Meadow and Kahoe, 1984), fifteen prayer activity items from the AAS 85 were factor analyzed using oblimin and varimax rotation with principal components to extract the factors. As may be seen in Table 1, prayer takes four distinct forms.

None of the fifteen items was multidimensional across two or more factors. Only ritual prayer has a borderline reliability coefficient while the other three types of prayer demonstrate strong internal reliability. As theorized by Heiler (1958) and Pratt (1930), and reiterated by Meadow and Kahoe (1984), the meditative prayer index includes components of intimacy and personal relationship with the divine like "being in the presence of God," "thinking about God," and "adoring, reflecting and communicating." The other three types of prayer (ritual, colloquial, and petitionary) all refer to more active, verbal, or intercessional forms of prayer. Ritual prayer attempts to measure the recitation of prepared prayers available through reading or from memory. Petitionary prayer taps requests to meet specific material needs of self and friends. Colloquial prayer incorporates within its conversational style petitionary elements of a less concrete and specific form than those

Table 1
TYPES OF PRAYER

	Factor Loading (Varimax Rotation)
<u>Factor 1: Meditative Prayer</u>	
How often do you spend time just "feeling" or being in the presence of God?	.71
How often do you spend time just quietly thinking about God?	.71
Spend time worshipping or adoring God?	.55
Spend time reflecting on the Bible?	.52
Ask God to speak and then listen for his answer?	.45
	(Cronbach's alpha=.81)
<u>Factor 2: Ritualist Prayer</u>	
How often do you read from a book of prayers?	.72
How often do you recite prayers that you have memorized?	.51
	(Cronbach's alpha=.59)
<u>Factor 3: Petitionary Prayer</u>	
How often do you ask God for material things you may need?	.86
Ask for material things your friends or relatives may need?	.70
	(Cronbach's alpha=.78)
<u>Factor 4: Colloquial Prayer</u>	
How often do you ask God to provide guidance in making decisions?	.67
Thank God for his blessings	.66
Ask God to forgive you your sins?	.65
Talk with God in your own words?	.57
Ask God to lessen world suffering?	.55
Spend time telling God how much you love him?	.52
	(Cronbach's alpha=.85)

found in petitionary prayer. These include asking for God's guidance, blessings, forgiveness, and lessening of the world's suffering. It also includes conversational prayers of thanksgiving and love.

The factor analysis provides strong empirical support for the theorized nature of meditative prayer and also clearly demonstrates the multidimensionality of "verbal" prayer by empirically forming three types of verbal prayer. The nature of prayer obviously cannot be captured by the dichotomous descriptions found previously in the literature. The conterminous effects of types of prayer, two other measures of religiosity and sociodemographic variables on quality of life measures are explored next.

Types of Prayer and Quality of Life

Each of the five types of quality of life were regressed on six prayer measures, including the four types of prayer, the frequency of prayer, and prayer experiences to determine whether patterns of absolute or relative differences exists. It is acknowledged, given the exploratory nature of this note, that these relationships may be non-recursive. Results of these regressions are shown in Table 2.

Although prayer experiences generally are better predictors of quality of life than any one of the four types of prayer, a close reading of Table 2 reveals some important information about the relationships among types of prayer and quality of life. Meditative prayer, the data indicate, is moderately (although significantly) related with the existential dimension of quality of life ($B = .13$) and religious satisfaction ($B = .34$), but none of the verbal types of prayer affect these two measures of quality of life. Ritual prayer alone demonstrates a positive relationship with negative affect ($B = .14$), suggesting that those who engage solely in this type

Table 2
MEASURES OF QUALITY OF LIFE REGRESSED ON TYPES OF PRAYER[©]

Types of Prayer	Dependent Measures of Quality of Life									
	Life Satisfaction		Existential Well-Being		Happiness		Negative Affect		Religious Satisfaction	
	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.	Beta	Sig.
Meditative	-.01	.94	.13	.05*	-.01	.87	.02	.83	.34	.001*
Ritualist	-.00	.96	.04	.35	-.03	.47	.14	.004*	.03	.41
Petitionary	.00	.99	-.04	.42	-.03	.60	.09	.06	-.03	.38
Colloquial	.10	.14	.10	.12	.15	.02*	-.00	.96	.06	.25
Freqpray	-.07	.22	.01	.92	-.14	.02*	.04	.56	.13	.01*
Prayexp	.18	.01*	.16	.01*	.20	.002*	-.07	.26	.16	.002*
R	.21		.35		.24		.17		.60	
Adj.R ²	.03 _c		.11 _c		.04 _c		.02 _c		.36 _c	
Types of Prayer and Sociodemographics										
Meditative	.05	.54	.16	.03*	.05	.48	-.02	.79	.33	.001*
Ritualist	-.01	.91	.04	.36	-.03	.48	.14	.003*	.03	.51
Petitionary	.02	.75	-.03	.50	-.01	.96	-.05	.28	-.04	.33
Colloquial	.08	.27	.09	.17	.14	.04*	-.04	.62	.05	.39
Freqpray	-.09	.16	.01	.85	-.05	.31	-.06	.23	-.06	.14
Prayexp	.19	.003*	.16	.01*	.05	.29	.14	.003*	.04	.34
Education	-.12	.02*	-.05	.34	.02	.67	-.05	.27	.06	.10
Sex [†]	.09	.05*	.01	.81	.24	.001*	-.23	.001*	-.01	.73
Race [†]	.06	.19	-.06	.15	.02	.60	-.14	.002*	.08	.03*
Income	.25	.001*	.17	.001*	-.14	.02*	.02	.72	.12	.02*
Age	.02	.66	-.01	.84	.21	.001*	-.06	.32	.16	.003*
R	.32		.38		.32		.35		.62	
Adj.R	.08 _c		.13 _c		.08 _c		.10 _c		.37 _c	

*Astericks are included to help identify the significant coefficients.

[†]Sex is coded 1=male and 2=female. Race is coded 1=white and 2=nonwhite.

^cThe F value associated with each equation is significant at $p \leq .001$ except for the negative affect equation in the top half of the table. Here $p \leq .01$

[©]Decimals are left out to enhance readability.

of prayer are more likely to be sad, lonely, depressed and tense. Only colloquial prayer is a predictor of happiness ($B = .15$).

The same measures of prayer experiences and prayer types retain their statistical significance with all five measures of quality of life even after the sociodemographic variables are controlled. When the sociodemographics are added, however, a more accurate profile is provided of those with higher scores on quality of life measures. People with high general life satisfaction, for example, tend to have lower levels of education, relatively higher income, and higher frequencies of prayer experiences. Persons with a higher income who have prayer experiences and who engage in meditative prayer are more likely to score higher on the existential quality of life scale. In other words, those with higher incomes and more frequent prayer experiences, who engage in meditative prayer, believe they have a meaning, purpose, and sense of direction in life. Those who said they were most happy with their lives, taking all things together, had high incomes, engaged in the colloquial form of prayer, often have prayer experiences, but paradoxically pray less frequently. Those who score highly on negative affect (reflecting sadness, loneliness, tenseness and fearfulness), tend to be younger females with lower incomes who engage in ritual forms of prayer. Those who scored higher on religious satisfaction were those who were older, prayed more frequently, had prayer experiences, and engaged in meditative prayer.

Conclusions

Certain conclusions may be drawn from these findings. First, frequency of prayer (the item used when prayer is measured) appears to be a weak predictor of quality of life and is not without ambiguity. Its negative relationship with happiness and positive relationship with religious satisfaction (the two equations in which frequency of prayer was statistically significant) suggests that those who report higher happiness scores do not pray as frequently as those who have lower happiness scores. When they do pray, they are more likely to use a conversational, verbal prayer style than any other form. The bivariate relationship between frequency of prayer and happiness is positive and nonsignificant; it becomes negative and significant when controls are introduced, reflecting some ambiguity in its effect on happiness. It may be that when a person is unhappy, he or she may turn to prayer—but saying prayers without corresponding prayer experiences is not likely to alleviate the unhappy feelings. On the other hand, those who pray frequently and who do have prayer experiences are more likely to score highly on religious satisfaction. They also are likely to rely on meditative prayer forms rather than verbal ones.

What appears to be more important than the frequency of prayer is what one actually does during prayer (meditative, ritualist, petitionary, or colloquial) and what happens when one prays (prayer experience). Having prayer experiences is consistently related to the five measures of quality of life, failing to demonstrate significance only for negative affect. Meditative prayer, by itself, is related to two measures of quality of life: existential well-being and religious satisfaction, while petitionary prayer relates to none. Colloquial prayer, however, is the only prayer form that effects happiness, and ritual prayer is the lone type of prayer effecting negative affect.

It is interesting to note that, with the exception of life satisfaction, each of the

QOL measures is influenced by only one type of prayer; none are effected by two or more. Existential quality of life is effected by meditative prayer, negative affect by ritual prayer, happiness by colloquial prayer, and religious satisfaction by, again, meditative prayer.

The influence of meditative prayer on the existential dimension is predicted by theories on the function of religion. It would be expected that the “meaning of life” component of the existential dimension should be influenced by the contemplative nature of meditative prayer. When one scores highly on negative affect (reflecting sadness, loneliness, tenseness) one engages in the only kind of prayer they know—ritual. If one is “feeling down” you tend to engage in the routine of ritual prayer, not in the more demanding forms of verbal or meditative prayer which require skills previously developed by the person praying. Happiness is not really a religious issue; there is no promise of earthly happiness among the major religions represented in this sample (“eternal” happiness is not earthly happiness). Thus, the effect of colloquial prayer on happiness may reflect more of a disposition toward an active, expressive personality.

The different dimensions of quality of life tapped in this study show differing relationships with forms of prayer but a consistent and positive relationship with prayer experience. While these findings on types of prayer are important, we make the call for additional research on the relationship between prayer and well-being. With cross-sectional data such as these, causality is difficult to unravel. Our model has assumed that various forms of prayer have “caused” changes in perceptions in well-being. It could be convincingly argued that perceptions of QOL lead people to pray—and to pray in a certain fashion. In other words, the model may be non-recursive. Longitudinal data are needed to unravel this relationship. In addition, it is necessary to explore further the relationship between alternative measures of religiosity and QOL. The impact of types of prayer as a devotional measure, prayer experience as an experiential measure, and ritual as public prayer (Wimberly, 1978) might be especially relevant topics to pursue.

Summary and Discussion

This paper has empirically identified four types of prayer, (one meditative and three verbal), providing partial support for conceptual schemes developed previously. An important finding is that each prayer type, except petitional prayer, provides a unique contribution to four of the five measures of quality of life.

It is apparent that the often used item “frequency of prayer” glosses over the important questions of “What do you do when you pray” or “How do you pray,” as opposed to “How often do you pray?” Prayer, like religiosity and well-being, is multidimensional. There now is empirical support for such a contention.

Prayer, the focus of this paper, has been omitted in most research, including quality of life research. This paper identifies not only the multidimensional nature of prayer but also its importance to profiling quality of life. It can be said that religiosity and prayer, without question, contribute to one’s quality of life and perceptions of quality of life.

NOTES

1. The authors would like to thank the editor and anonymous reviewers for a number of useful suggestions.

REFERENCES

- Babbie, Earl
1986 The Practice of Social Research. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Pub. Co.
- Batson, C. Daniel and W. Larry Ventis
1982 The Religious Experience. Oxford University Press. New York.
- Chalfant, H. Paul, Robert E. Beckley and C. Eddie Palmer
1987 Religion in Contemporary Society. Mayfield Publishing Co. Palo Alto, CA.
- Finney, John R., and H. Newton Maloney, Jr.
1985 Empirical studies of Christian prayer: A review of the literature. Journal of Psychology and Theology. Vol. IV No. 2:104-115.
- Heiler, Fredreich
1958 Prayer (S. McComb., Ed. and Trans.) Galaxy Books/Oxford University Press. New York. (Original work published in 1932.)
- Johnstone, Ronald L.
1988 Religion in Society. A Sociology of Religion. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.
- McClendon, McKee J. and David J. O'Brien
1984 The Subjective Quality of Life in the Akron Area, 1982-83. The University of Akron. Akron, Ohio 44325.
- McGuire, Meredith B.
1987 Religion: The Social Context. Wadsworth Publishing Company. Belmont, CA.
- Meadow, Mary Jo and Richard D. Kahoe
1984 Psychology of Religion. Harper & Row. New York.
- Pratt, James B.
1930 The Religious Consciousness. MacMillan. New York.
- Roberts, Keith A.
1984 Religion in Sociological Perspective. The Dorsey Press. Homewood, IL.
- Spilka, Bernard, Ralph W. Hood, and Richard L. Gorsuch
1985 The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach. Prentice Hall. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.
- Wimberley, Ronald C.
1978 Dimensions of Commitment: Generalizing From Religion to Politics. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion. Vol. 17, No. 3:225-240.

APPENDIX A

<u>Quality of Life Measures</u>	
<u>Factor 1: General Satisfaction with Life</u>	<u>Factor Loading</u> (Oblimin Rotation)
Which number from 1-7 best describes how miserable or enjoyable your life is these days?	.899
Which number describes how disappoint or rewarding your life is these days?	.871
How dissatisfied or satisfied you are with your life?	.801
How boring or interesting is it?	.777
(Cronbach's Alpha = .910)	

Factor 2: Negative Affect

On a scale from 1-7, with 1 being never, 4 being half the time and 7 being all of the time, please tell me how frequently during the past year you have felt depressed. .811

How frequently have you felt sad? .771

How frequently have you felt lonely? .629

How frequently have you felt tense? .558

How frequently have you felt fearful? .514

(Cronbach's Alpha = .804)

Factor 3: Existential Well-Being

Would you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with the statement: "I feel a sense of well-being about the direction my life is headed?" .670

I believe there is some real purpose for my life. .635

(Cronbach's Alpha = .642)

Single-Term Measure of Happiness

Taking all things together, how would you say things are these days--would you say you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?

Index of Religious SatisfactionCronbach's Alpha

Which number from 1-7 best describes how miserable or enjoyable your religious life is?

Which number best describes how disappointing or rewarding your religious life is?

How boring or interesting is it?

How dissatisfied or satisfied are you with it? .906

Religiosity IndexIndex of Prayer Experience

How often during the past year have you felt divinely inspired or "led by God" to perform some specific action as a result of prayer--never, once or twice, monthly, weekly, or daily?

Received what you believed to be a deeper insight into a spiritual or biblical truth?

Received what you regarded as a definite answer to a specific prayer request?

Felt a strong presence of God during prayer?

Experienced a deep sense of peace and well-being during prayer? .874

Single-Item Measure of ReligiosityFrequency of Prayer

On the average, how often would you say that you prayed during the past year, other than during a church (synagogue) service or grace before meals--never, less than monthly, at least monthly, at least weekly, several times a week, once a day, several times a day.