

Light at the end of the tunnel? Light Triad, religiosity and well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract: Well-being has always been indispensable for humans and was proved to be more difficult to achieve in times of crisis, hence the need to identify the traits strongly connected to it. The present research examined the relationship between the light triad traits, intrinsic religiosity and well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic in Romania. A cross-sectional survey on 308 participants was conducted online during the third wave in Romania. The results show that both the light triad traits and intrinsic religiosity significantly predict a higher level of psychological well-being and the trait intrinsic religiosity mediates the relation between the light triad traits and well-being. This finding proved the need to enhance one's humanistic traits in order to achieve well-being, even under pandemic circumstances.

Keywords: Light Triad, intrinsic religiosity, well-being, humanism, faith in humanity, Kantianism, Covid-19

Introduction

"By giving others [...] faith, light, trust, hope - you will also acquire them" (Steinhardt, 2008)

No matter how it is defined, well-being is, without a doubt, the central concern of the human being, regardless of whether the individual is a hedonist or an ascetic, whether he seeks physical or moral comfort. *Eudaimonia* - the Greek concept for well-being - occupies an important place in the work of Aristotle, who notes that, although it is the most valuable good for the individual, it does not have the same form for all people (Ross, 1956). *Ikigai*, the Japanese for *Eudaimonia*, defines an entire culture and is translated by a variety of

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expressions and phrases, including "the happiness of being always busy", "the joy of living", "that thing worth living for" (Miralles & Garcia, 2019).

Well-being is described by the APA Dictionary as a state of happiness and contentment, based on an overall good physical and mental health, or, shortly, good quality of life (VandenBos, 2015). Starting with this concept, a new psychology branch has been developed, the so-called "positive psychology", which studies the determinants of individual and societal well-being. Probably the most famous theory in this field is that of Seligman (2011), bearing the acronym PERMA. The acronym is based on the following well-being elements: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and purpose, Accomplishments.

According to the WHO definition (World Health Organisation, 2022), well-being includes mental, physical and social states, not just the absence of infirmity or disease. Further, well-being can be objective, based on social and economic factors, or subjective, described as "being satisfied with your life". The latter is usually the subject of psychological research and is considered by positive psychology to be, in turn, either hedonic or eudaimonic (Lindert et al., 2015)

Numerous studies have proved a decrease in the well-being levels after the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak (Anglim & Horwood, 2021; Widha et al., 2021), while the very concepts of coronaphobia (Asmundson & Taylor, 2020) and obsession with Covid-19 (Lee, 2020) come to complete this general image.

Research has revealed a positive correlation between the Light Triad traits and the traits inner harmony and ethical sensitivity (Krok et al., 2023). Similarly, Fehring et al. (1997) discover a positive correlation between religiosity, well-being, hope and other positive states. Singh and Bano (2017) find intrinsic religiosity significantly connected to self-acceptance, which is part of psychological well-being. Thus, previous studies have found significant associations between factors like light triad traits, religiosity and well-being.

However, intrinsic religiosity has not yet been proposed as a mechanism explaining the association between the light factor and well-being during the Covid-19 pandemic and this is what the present study aims at. Also, as far as we have checked, this is the first research to use this model on a Romanian sample. The purpose of the study was to verify if a higher level of light triad traits and intrinsic religiosity predict a higher level of well-being during the COVID 19 pandemic.

Light triad and well-being

The concept of the Light Triad appears for the first time - the specialized literature shows- in a dissertation thesis (Johnson, 2018). Inspired by the Dark Triad, the new triad consisted of empathy, compassion, and altruism, and Kaufmann et al. (2019) proposed a new formula, composed of the traits faith in humanity, humanism and Kantianism. Kaufmann's Triad traits correlated strongly positively with Johnson's Triad traits.

As the very authors of the scale (Kaufmann et al., 2019) state it, Kantianism is treating people as ends in themselves, not merely as means, humanism refers to respecting the dignity of any individual and faith in humanity means to believe that humans are, fundamentally, good.

Faith in humanity: Philosopher Preston-Roedder (2013) translates faith in humanity as a tendency to believe though not blindly, in “the good in people”. In other words, people with high levels of faith in humanity expect good behavior and, at the same time, are cautious enough for their own and for other people’s protection. Should this trait have been proposed as an opposite for subclinical psychopathy, one can only refer to the prosocial versus antisocial behavior characterizing the two traits.

Humanism: Humanism is characterized by valuing the worth and human dignity of each person. According to the Light Triad Scale (Kaufman et al., 2019), individuals that have a high score on humanism tend to admire other people, applaud the success of those be happy and, most of all, treat then as worthy, regardless of their origin or social status. If any correspondent available among the Dark Triad traits, narcissism could be the one, as it absolutely places one’s importance in the center of the world.

Kantianism: According to philosopher Immanuel Kant, one should “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (Gregor, 1997, p. 38). In other words, one should be aware of the fact that anyone else has the same rights, mainly to survive and make own decisions, as themselves. This statement can be regarded as an opposite to the infamous Machiavellian view about purpose and means (Machiavelli, 1968).

Research conducted by Kaufman et al. (2019) found a significant negative correlation between the light triad traits and anxiety/depression, which may point at a certain protective value of the former. A possible interpretation is that a person who has trust in human quality may perceive less danger coming from their kindred. There is, however, also a maladaptive side of the Light Triad, as related to greater interpersonal guilt, which may lead to limiting one’s ambitions, in the context of less success of other people (Kaufman et al., 2019).

While the very notion of the light triad is too recent for a rich specialized literature, there are many studies relevant to the hypothesis that humanistic

values like empathy and altruism can represent important coping factors. Nowadays, the empathy concept refers to the capacity to share another's emotion or to understand their perspective (Davis, 1983). The other concept involved here, "altruism", implies the concern for the well-being of the other people (Steinberg, 2010).

A study performed in Japan has shown that empathy correlates negatively with distress (Noda et al., 2018). Two other teams of researchers have found complementary results: teenage participants with low levels of cognitive and affective empathy revealed an unproductive, self-oriented coping style (Moreno-Manso et al., 2018), while older adults with higher levels of empathy presented more constructive coping strategies than less empathic participants (Huo et al., 2021). In the same line, it has been shown that people with a higher level of empathy use more adaptive coping strategies than those with a lower level of empathy, people that tend towards maladaptive coping. The study also considers the biological basis of the relationship between empathy and coping (Sun et al., 2019). Altruism was found to be a protective factor in healthcare workers involved in the fight with pandemics, also in the research conducted by Schneider et al. (2022). Similarly, Kornilaki's research (2021) reveals an inverse relationship between altruism and depression, respectively anxiety and stress, during the Covid-19 quarantine, in a sample of young adults.

At the time of the study, the state of alert was established in Romania, which required, first of all, the wearing of a protective mask, with the proper coverage of the nose and mouth, in public spaces, public transport, in commercial spaces and on the workplace. It was also forbidden to organize and hold meetings in closed and open, private and public spaces. The pandemic time has been an opportunity for many people to pay more attention to social matters they hadn't been interested in, so we believe it is highly possible for the humanistic traits to have come to light in individuals who were not even aware of them. Buchanan et al. (2021) found out that, while seeking out online information, people were positively impacted by COVID-related kind acts and even became more capable of maintaining their well-being by helping others. Aknin et al. (2012) found a so-called positive loop between prosocial spending of money and well-being, which could be rephrased as following: good deeds lead to happiness, which leads back to good deeds.

Lyons et al. (1998) talk about communal coping against the shared stressor, while Zaki (2020) coins the phrase "catastrophe compassion" for people's altruistic behaviour as a response to large-scale disasters.

Considering the research mentioned above, it can be concluded that people with high levels of light triad traits report a higher level of empathy and altruism; in turn, these prosocial traits can lead to an increase in well-being.

Religiosity and well-being

Religiosity cannot be easily defined and there are quite a few meanings of it, especially since it has several dimensions, moral, cultural, intellectual, even doctrinal one included. People often mistake faith as a rigorous fulfilment of certain rites for the spiritual, even moral, side of faith. An approach based on three religious components (belief, commitment and behaviour) is the one developed by Cornwall et al. (1986). For the current study, the term “intrinsic religiosity”, as opposed to “extrinsic religiosity”, according to Roff et al. (2002), was chosen. The tenth item of the *Hoge Intrinsic Religiosity Scale*: "It does not matter so much what I believe, as long as I lead a moral life.", meaning that religious principles are, from this perspective, more important in their essence than in their appearance, is relevant for intrinsic religiosity. Laurencelle et al. (2002), who present intrinsic religiosity not as an agreement with a doctrine, but as belief in a supreme power. With this statement we already reach the area of the ‘spirituality’ concept. Houtman and Aupers (2007) propose the ‘post-Christian spirituality’ phrase. Considering the above-mentioned insights, religiosity is related, to a greater or lesser extent, to an institution (the church, the mosque, the synagogue) and to the norms imposed by it. The code of norms imposed by religion is rigid and impervious to external influences; more importantly, the individual is called to follow a range of moral principles, with no deflections and no shades. Spirituality is independent and universal, integrating religious principles from any denomination, as well as scientific principles; the individual is called to reflect upon his own calling and upon the consequences of his actions.

Some studies approach religiosity in a dichotomous form: positive religious coping (PRC) and negative religious coping (NRC). It is not surprising to find PRC in a negative correlation with stress, anxiety and depression, and NRC in a positive correlation with the same variables in the pandemic context (Pirutinsky et al., 2020; Counted et al., 2020; Fekih-Romdhane & Cheour, 2021; Habib et al., 2020; Mahamid & Bdier, 2021).

Umucu and Lee (2020) found a significant association between religious coping and well-being during the pandemic. It was also found that religiosity is part of the biopsychosocial triad that renders meaning and relief to life; thus in the hospital environment, it could encourage both patients and their caregivers (Suzini, 2021). An important connection between religiosity, with its promised rewards, and altruistic behaviour, as the latter mostly interacts with the dopamine reward system (Bouyaed et al., 2021). A positive correlation between spirituality and altruism, as well as a negative correlation between altruism and perceived stress, was also found by de Lima et al. (2020). Religious coping during the Covid-19 pandemic has also been confirmed in a Muslim population, indicating the significant impact of religiosity on mental comfort, in

hypochondria conditions (Mahmood et al., 2021; Salman et al., 2020). A group of ultra-Orthodox Jewish believers - Haredi - revealed more nuanced facets. Thus, Haredi participants revealed lower levels of anxiety and higher levels of control about pandemic, compared to non-religious participants. The pandemic seems to have been perceived as a message or punishment from the divinity for an individual or collective guilt, and such calamities might also be stopped by the divine will, as a result of prayers and exemplary behaviour (Serfaty et al., 2021).

However, Bergin (1980) finds the studies that correlate religiosity and mental state sometimes contradictory; as such, reanalysis of the positive and negative components would be necessary. Another signal comes from Lavrič and Flere (2008), who conclude that the cultural context must be taken into account in the relationship between religiosity and well-being.

Light triad, intrinsic religiosity and well-being

Research conducted by Kaufman et al. (2019) revealed a positive association between the Light Triad traits and religiosity / spirituality. Based on previous studies (Noda et al., 2018; Moreno-Manso et al., 2018; Huo et al., 2021; Schneider et al., 2022; Kornilaki, 2021; Umucu & Lee, 2020; Mahmood et al., 2021; Salman et al., 2020; Serfaty et al., 2021), we hypothesized that 1) a high level of the light triad traits predicts a high level of the well-being, 2) a high level of the intrinsic religiosity predicts a high level of the well-being and 3) intrinsic religiosity mediates the association between light triad traits and well-being

Method

Participants

The sample included 308 participants ($Mage = 22.59$, $SD = 5.39$, range 18-59 years) volunteers in various fields of activity such as BA and MA programs in Biology, Chemistry, Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, Geography, Geology, History, Letters, Mathematics, Psychology and Educational Sciences. From the total sample, 276 were woman (89.6 %). In terms of confession, 80.5 % ($N = 248$) of the participants were Orthodox Christian, 9.1 % ($N = 28$) were Catholic Christian, 5.8% ($N = 18$) were Agnostic/atheist and 4.5 % ($N = 14$) reported being of other religious confession.

Procedure

The data was collected online, via Google Forms. The participants received information, in summary, about the objectives of the study. They were informed that participation was voluntary, anonymous and could be interrupted

at any time without repercussions. Sociodemographic data such as gender, age, confession, background were collected. The agreement of the Ethics Committee of the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași (1946 bis/09.11.2020) was obtained.

Measures

In order to measure the humanistic traits level, the *Light Triad Scale*, developed by Kaufman et al. (2020), was used. It consists of 12 items, divided into three subscales: faith in humanity (faith in the goodness of people), humanism (respect for people's dignity) and Kantianism (treating people the way you want to be treated). The response scale is a Likert type, from 1 (strong disagreement) to 5 (strong agreement). Examples of items: "I tend to trust that other people will deal fairly with me" (faith in humanity), "I tend to admire others" (humanism), "I don't feel comfortable overtly manipulating people to do something I want" (Kantianism). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .73. for the whole scale, while subscales revealed values of .65 (faith in humanity), .74 (humanism) and .59 (Kantianism). Pektaş and Durmuş (2022) suggest the total scale score can also be used.

The instrument chosen for measuring intrinsic religiosity is the *Hoge Intrinsic Religiosity Scale*, developed by R. Hoge in 1972. The scale is composed of ten items (including three inverted items) representing statements about the participant's religiosity. The response scale is a Likert type, from 1 (strong disagreement) to 5 (strong agreement). Example: "My faith sometimes restricts my actions". In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .67.

WHO-5 was developed by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization. Regional Office for Europe, 1998) and has been translated into more than 30 languages. A systematic review conducted by Topp et al. (2015) revealed the use of the scale in over 200 articles from many fields of research. The five items are meant to determine the level of well-being. The response scale is a Likert type, from 5 (all the time) to 0 (never). Example: "I woke up feeling fresh and rested". In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .90.

Statistical analysis

The descriptive statistics and the correlation analyses were computed using IBM SPSS 22 and the mediation analyses were performed using the Sobel test.

Pearson correlations were conducted between the variables included in the research, the independent samples T-tests were performed to verify the gender differences, and the One-Way ANOVA analysis was used for the differences based on confession.

Results

Preliminary analyses

For preliminary, correlation and regression analyses, the statistical program IBM SPSS 22 was used. We examined the level of light triad traits, intrinsic religiosity and well-being in our sample (see Table 1). We performed Pearson correlations between the variables included in the research and independent samples T-tests to check on gender differences. Finally, we used mediation through multiple linear regression via Process v3.5 (Hayes, 2013), in order to check whether light triad traits and intrinsic religiosity predict well-being.

We found a significant difference between the distribution in our sample and the normal distribution; therefore, we used the two-step procedure in order to normalize the distribution. On step 1, we transformed the variable into a percentile rank, which will result in uniformly distributed probabilities. Step 2 was to apply the inverse-normal transformation to the results of the first step to form a variable consisting of normally distributed z-scores (Templeton, 2011).

Correlation analyses highlighted significant associations between light triad traits and intrinsic religiosity ($p < .001$, $r = .27$), between light triad traits and well-being ($p < .001$, $r = .30$) and between intrinsic religiosity and well-being levels ($p < .001$, $r = .21$) (see Table 2).

The independent samples T-test revealed significant gender differences ($p = .001$) for the level of intrinsic religiosity ($t = -2.16$, $p = 0.001$, M females = 31, M males = 27).

The One-Way Anova test revealed a significantly ($p < .001$, $F = 29.33$) higher level of intrinsic religiosity in participants belonging to minority Christian confessions (M other confession = 39), than in Orthodox Christians (M Orthodox rite = 31) or Christians of Catholic rite (M Catholic rite = 31).

Similar results were found in the level of well-being during the pandemic, significantly ($p = .003$, $F = 4.70$) higher in participants belonging to minority Christian confessions (M other confession = 18), than in Orthodox Christians (M Orthodox rite = 14) or in Catholic Christians (M Catholic rite = 13).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Min</i>	<i>Max</i>	<i>Skewness (SE)</i>	<i>Kurtosis (SE)</i>
Light Triad	46.28	5.13	31	60	-.17 (.13)	.18 (.27)
Intrinsic religiosity	25.48	4.10	10	48	-.25 (.13)	-.71 (.27)
Well-being	14.34	5.33	3	25	-.10 (.13)	-.82 (.27)

Note: $N = 308$; for the well-being scale, the mean and standard deviation were computed using the non-normal variable and the regression analysis was computed using the normalized variable.

Mediation testing

In the mediation analysis, light triad traits were the predictor, well-being was the outcome, and intrinsic religiosity was introduced as a mediator.

Table 2. Correlations between variables

	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>
Light Triad	-		
Intrinsic religiosity	.27**	-	
Well-being	.30**	.21**	-

Note: $N = 308$; *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; for the well-being scale, the mean and standard deviation were computed using the non-normal variable and the regression analysis was computed using the normalized variable.

Light triad traits had a significant total effect on well-being ($b = .32$, $SE = .05$, $t = 5.67$, $p < .001$). After introducing the mediator, the direct effect of light triad traits on well-being remained significant ($b = .27$, $SE = .05$, $t = 4.80$, $p < .001$).

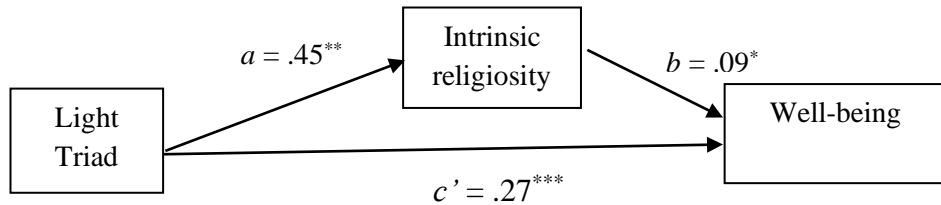
Linear regression via Process v3.5 with bootstrapping was used and a significant indirect effect of light triad traits on well-being, through intrinsic religiosity, was found ($b = .04$, $CI\ 95\% = [.01; .07]$).

Thus, mediation was supported. Light triad traits have a positive effect on well-being through high levels of intrinsic religiosity.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to verify if a higher level of light triad traits and intrinsic religiosity predict a higher level of well-being during the COVID 19 pandemics. The results show that both the light triad traits and intrinsic religiosity significantly predict a higher level of psychological well-being and the trait intrinsic religiosity mediates the relation between the light triad traits and well-being. Also, significant correlation was found between light

triad (also faith in humanity and humanism, individually) and intrinsic religiosity.



Note. The proposed theoretical model of the relationship between light triad traits and well-being mediated by intrinsic religiosity. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Figure 2. The final model and the standardized coefficients of the proposed mediation model.

The general results are in line with the findings that have shown that virtues (character strengths) can raise the level of features that strengthen the connections with the world around and give a meaning to life (Niemiec & McGrath, 2019, apud Rashid & McGrath, 2020). Mature defence mechanisms such as altruism and sublimation increase resilience in times of crisis and that stress mocking can lead to mental relaxation, unlike immature mechanisms - hypochondria and projection (Marčinko et al., 2020). Character strengths were proved to be predictors for well-being, however a slight difference between Western, rich countries and Asian countries, as the effects of kindness on happiness seem to be weaker in the latter cultures (Datu & Bernardo, 2020, Layous et al., 2013). The same role can be attributed to the light triad traits, strongly connected to empathy (Pfattheicher et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2020; Díaz & Cova, 2020).

It has already been found that performing kindness tasks - or prosocial actions - can satisfy the psychological need for autonomy and competence, increasing the positive emotions level (Datu et al., 2021). Similarly, affective empathy was proved to be an effective protective behaviour during the pandemic (Petrocchi et al., 2021). Further studies found benefits in prosocial behavior both for so-called Givers and for Receivers, in short-term and in long-term, also mentioning the possible contagiousness of kindness (Chancellor et al., 2018). It has been found that in calamity conditions it is possible to return to religion on short term even in the context of secularization (Molteni et al., 2021), and this was confirmed in the Covid-19 pandemic (Enea et al., 2021). Temporary or permanent, intrinsic religiosity is of interest here as a coping mechanism under circumstances of collective stress.

Kaufman et al. (2019), the very authors of the LT concept and scale, find a significant association between light triad traits and religiosity. Given the fact

that light triad characteristics count as traits, whereas religiosity is a learned factor, one may expect the former to raise the level of the latter, thus leading to a higher level of well-being.

This study suggests the usefulness of a guide to moral values, since the beneficiaries are also those who help, not only those who receive help. These moral values can be according to the religious denomination to which one belongs or, for atheists and agnostics, according to general ethics. The ethics taught in schools and promoted in the community, as well as the introduction of model characters, may prove to have an important efficiency.

Under extreme circumstances or, simply, when there are no witnesses, the true human nature comes to the surface. Perhaps the ancestral instincts will drive the individual to rescue another human being, because it is easier to survive as a group, even small one. But the same instincts might tell the individual that the resources are too few for two. Therefore, only empathy (inborn) and helping behaviour (learned) can talk for the better.

It is an obvious fact that light triad traits and intrinsic religiosity share one thing: high moral values. This finding suggests that it can be useful to stimulate people enhance their moral values, according to any religion they belong to, or, if atheists/ agnostics, simply and valuably according to general ethics. The beneficiaries of this approach will be not only the helped, but even the helpers themselves. Hence the necessity of teaching ethics on a stronger basis in schools; this could be done both by learning the theory and by putting this in practice.

Role models may be of highest importance, so history could offer the best support. The reputable statistician and writer Matthew White's message below is that being kind to other people is most always a choice and we do not have to follow the negative role model. "Whenever you start spattering a personality from the past, they tell you the time was like that. Everyone did the same. [...] Should this be true? [...] In 1206 - the very year the Mongol tribes awarded Temujin the rank of Genghis Khan², a twenty-three-year-old ascetic arrived in Rome. [...] St. Francis of Assisi³ embodies the best of Christianity" (White, 2012, p. 168).

It is not intended here to make out of humanistic values a heal-all for the psyche and we are fully aware of the fact that, under some circumstances, those traits can even be a vulnerability. Rodríguez et al. (2021) have found no positive

² Gengis Khan (1162- 1227) - The founder of the Mongol Empire; he was responsible for the death of 40 million people, thus the second major massacre in history, after the Second World War (White, 2012).

³ St. Francis of Assisi (1181/1182 - 1226) - A saint of the Catholic Church; according to many authors, he is the second in popularity among Christian believers, after Jesus Christ (White, 2012).

link between light triad traits and anxiety or depression in healthcare personnel during the first year of Covid-19 pandemics. But we believe this was due to the fact that healthcare workers constantly have to face sufferance and death, which can enhance emotional difficulties in the more empathic of our peers. However, our participants represent general population and we conclude that light triad traits can still work as a protective factor, as long as the individual is not exposed to the extreme or permanent sufferance of his kindred.

While interpreting the results of this study, we have to consider certain factors. The findings refer to a compact group of volunteers, not randomly selected participants. Self-reporting scales do not allow eliminating the variance due to the common method (Conway & Lance, 2010). In other words, the questionnaire (common method) influences the answers and thus greater correlations appear between the variables involved.

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