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Spirituality and Subjective Well-Being Among Southern Adventist University Students

Matthew Marlin

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine gender, ethnic, class standing, and parental marital status differences in spirituality and wellbeing among college students and to determine if spirituality and wellbeing are correlated. A sample of 63 participants from Southern Adventist University were administered the *Marlin Spirituality and Psychological Well-being Inventory (MSPWI)* which measures levels of spirituality and perceived well-being. No statistically significant differences were found for gender, ethnicity, class standing, or parental marital status. Spirituality and well-being were shown to have a significant positive correlation, with higher levels of well-being being associated with higher levels of spirituality.

Recent studies support the idea that parental involvement is more directly related to emotional well-being in adolescents than peer interactions (Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). Research shows that adolescents from stable, supportive families suffer fewer depressive symptoms and have fewer suicidal inclinations when compared to those from unstable families (e.g., Sheeber, Davis, Leve, Hops, & Tildesley, 2007; Sun & Hui, 2007). Adolescents from stable families maintain healthier peer relationships, are more active, and are better adjusted to school when compared to those from unstable families (Bohnert, Martin, & Garber, 2007; Shochet, Smyth, & Homel, 2007). Spirituality also plays a role in adolescent well-being, with higher levels of spirituality being inversely related to psychological distress (Bryant & Asttin, 2008; Burris, Brechting, Salsman, & Carlson, 2009). It is important to further explore the impact of the family and spirituality on adolescent well-being as well as the influence of additional social relationships such as peers and teachers.

The following literature review summarizes and describes the results of previous research in regards to the ways in which family relations, social interactions, and spirituality impact adolescent well-being. First, the roles of peer and teacher interactions on adolescent well-being are discussed, followed by a discussion of the impacts of the family system. Emotional and monetary support is examined in the context of its relation to adolescent well-being. An overview of spirituality as it relates to adolescents and college students is then given. In conclusion, a critique of the research literature is given and areas of controversy are discussed.

Social Relationships Outside of the Family

The term social relationships is defined in the research literature as social ties outside of the family system, such as relationships with peers and with teachers. It is widely known that

interactions with peers and teachers are strongly related to adolescent wellbeing (Hall-Lande et al., 2007; Sun & Hui, 2007).

Peer Interactions. As adolescents grow older they increasingly rely on peers for acceptance, activity involvement, a sense of identity, and emotional support (Corsano, Majorano, & Champretavy, 2006; Sun & Hui, 2007). If they do not feel accepted or do not have the support of peers adolescents may have increased risk for depression (Sabatelli & Anderson, 1991; Young, Berenson, Cohen, & Garcia, 2005). It is therefore important for adolescents to have high quality peer relationships. Hall-Lande et al. (2007) found that adolescents with close connections to peers had decreased risks of depression, poor self-esteem, and suicidal behavior. Activity involvement is also important: adolescents who experienced leisure participation and leisure satisfaction exhibited positive psychological health and had a more favorable attitude towards school (Staempfli, 2007).

Student-Teacher Interactions. Acquiring an education occupies a large portion of the lives of adolescents and as such teachers have a strong influence on adolescent wellbeing. Student-teacher relations have been positively associated with student motivation, achievement, adaptive behavior and feelings of belonging (as cited in Hall-Lande et al., 2007; Shochet et al., 2007). While most of the students in the Sun and Hui (2007) study did not readily seek emotional support from teachers, it was shown that this support was valued, particularly when family relationships were not supportive.

Impact of Family Relationships

Parents moderate a large portion of the lives of adolescents, from influencing their choices of associates amongst peers to determining the school and neighborhood environments in which they place their children. Protective influences such as these are important in promoting psychological health. In Hall-Lande et al. (2007), adolescents who felt the protective influence of a close family connection were shown to be less prone to suicide. Sun and Hui (2007) also shows that close family relations are important to adolescent psychological health not only in Western cultures but in Chinese cultures as well.

According to Young et al. (2005), poor, non-supportive relationships with parents increases the risk of depression, even if peer support is rated as being high. It is believed that this is due to an inability for peer relationships to buffer adolescents from mental health problems. This may be because teens rely on deviant peers or those with whom they share similar negative traits (Murphy, Shepard, Eisenberg, & Fabes, 2004; Young et al., 2005). For this reason, even though peer relationships become increasingly important during adolescents, parental support and guidance is still needed (Corsano, Majorano, & Champretavy, 2006).

Bohnert (2007) showed that school connectedness and activity involvement are also strongly influenced by parents. Adolescents with high quality relationships within their family are more likely to explore their environment, perceive school more favorably, have higher self-esteem, and perform better in school. This is due to the family being a source of refuge in which a person is safe to grow, as well as a source of motivation to do well academically (Bohnert,

Martin, & Garber, 2007; Shochet et al., 2007). Bohnert (2007) also showed that adolescents from families in which parental involvement was high were more involved in organized activities, which in turn allowed them to become more independent and develop a sense of self-worth.

Emotional Support. In a study by Murphy, Shepard, Eisenberg, and Fabes, adolescents who were well regulated by parents were viewed to be more emotionally stable and socially competent (2004). Well regulated adolescents in healthy families exhibit higher levels of self-esteem and are also higher achievers both socially and academically (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004; Haggerty, Sherrod, Garmezy, & Rutter, 1996). On the other hand, adolescents from less involved and more unstable families were at greater risk of depressive disorders, were more susceptible to negative influences of peers, and reported higher levels of anxiety (Haggerty et al., 1996; Sabatelli & Anderson, 1991; Sheeber, Davis, Leve, Hops, & Tildesley, 2007).

The emotional and psychological health of the parents as well as the quality of the marital relationship (if one exists) are also important factors influencing adolescent emotional well-being (Bohnert et al. 2007). According to a survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2004, nearly 32% of adolescents come from homes in which there is no marital relationship, largely because of divorce. Studies by Capuzzi and Gross (2004) as well as Haggerty et al. (1996) showed that adolescents from divorced families are known to have lower self-esteem and perceive less social support, which in turn leads to increased risk for depression as well as difficulties in forming social relationships. Parents experiencing emotional stresses or depression likewise weakened the self-esteem and perceived self-worth of their children, elevating the risk of adolescent depression (Bohnert et al. 2007).

Monetary Support. Adolescents from families with higher monthly incomes are less likely to be suspended from school, repeat a grade, change schools less often, and are more likely to be in gifted classes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). This could be due to the increased resources at their disposal: adolescents whose parents devote more resources to help them achieve the best education possible can attend superior schools, take part in a broader scope of activities such as music lessons, and are not as affected by financial pressures. Poverty conversely is stressful for both parents and adolescents and is linked to increased incidence of child abuse. Capuzzi and Gross (2004) explained that occupational stress is associated with psychological health in relation to family stresses, as both parents attempt to fulfill career roles as well as parental roles while dealing with the daily errands that result.

Capuzzi and Gross (2004) report that single-parent families have even less capability to provide monetary support. Lack of adequate monetary support contributes to lower educational attainment, less access to community resources, fewer community ties, and less parental support. This in turn leads to disadvantages not only in economic circumstances but also in mental health (Capuzzi & Gross, 2004).

Spirituality

When examining adolescents of college age and younger spirituality has also had a factor in the psychological state of the individual. In a study conducted by Bryant and Astin (2008), spirituality was found to be a common topic thought of and discussed by adolescents. Bryant and Astin (2008) also found that spirituality can be both positively or negatively associated with psychological well-being, with the direction of the association being dependent on the conflict or satisfaction experienced by the individual. According to Burris et al. (2009), spirituality, though not predictive of psychological well-being, was positively associated with psychological distress. Religiosity, however, showed the opposite results, with increasing levels resulting in lower psychological distress (Burris et al., 2009). Jeynes (2009) made another interesting discovery, finding that a positive relationship exists between Bible literacy and higher grade point averages in adolescents from both public school and religious private schools.

Critique of Research Literature

Most of the research literature on the topic of spirituality and psychological wellbeing in adolescents is based on self-report questionnaires and structured interviews. Although these tests of measurement were carefully created to control the variables as much as possible, the degree to which many of these studies are accurate is based on the truthfulness of the participants. With the exceptions of the U.S. Census Bureau data, Hall-Lande et al. (2007), and Forti, Katz, Afifi, and Cox (2006), most of the research literature has relatively small samples taken from the locality of the study. Sun and Hui (2007) in particular had a very small sample ($N = 13$) and may not be generalized to a larger population, but nevertheless provided valuable information to researchers. There is also some concern as to the accuracy of the spirituality measures used for adolescents; in a study by Rubin, Desai, Graham-Pole, Dodd, and Pollock (2009), adolescents and their parents indicated that current scales, while useful for adults, do not adequately reflect levels of spirituality for the younger and less spirituality developed adolescent population.

Two inconsistencies in the research literature were found. In Field, Diego, and Sanders (2002) there was no evidence of influences of peer relationships on parent relationships and vice versa. Instead, sibling relationships, which went unexplored in the other literature, were found to explain significant variance in parent and peer relationships. Findings in Fotti et al. (2006), while agreeing with the research literature suggesting that parental relationships are more strongly associated with suicidality than peer relationships, focused primarily on depression as the strongest factor influencing suicidality. Fotti et al. (2006) treated depression as a separate unit from parent and peer influences entirely.

Little empirical data exists as to whether other factors such as spirituality have an impact on well-being. Because the body of research in this area is lacking, new research needs to be performed. There is little current research as to the impact of spirituality on well-being in college students, and because of the nature of this study this population was the main focus.

The purpose of this study was to examine differences in spirituality and well-being among college students and to determine if spirituality and well-being are correlated. This study determined if there are differences in the levels of spirituality and subjective well-being in relation to gender, parental marital status of participants, ethnicity, and class standing of students attending Southern Adventist University and if there are any correlations between spirituality and well-being.

Definition of Terms

In this study, the following two terms were operationally defined:

1. The term spirituality refers to an acknowledgment of the supernatural in one's thoughts and actions. Spirituality was operationally defined as such behaviors as prayer, religious service attendance, participating in religious work, Bible study, and integrating spiritual discussions into one's life. Spirituality was measured by the *Marlin Spirituality Scale*.
2. The term well-being refers to the ability of a human to cope with stressors and to the overall mood and life satisfaction they are experiencing. Subjective wellbeing was operationally defined as being in control of thoughts and emotions, maintaining stress, having satisfaction with life, and being free of physiological and psychological ailments. Well-being was measured by the *General Well-being Scale*.

Hypotheses

Null hypotheses. Two hypotheses were tested in this study:

1. There are no differences in the levels of spirituality in participants from divorced or single parent families as compared to participants from intact families.
2. There are no differences in the levels of subjective well-being in participants from divorced or single parent families as compared to participants from intact families.

Research hypotheses. This study was guided by two research hypotheses:

1. There are differences in the levels of spirituality in participants from divorced or single parent families as compared to participants from intact families.
2. There are differences in the levels of subjective well-being in participants from divorced or single parent families as compared to participants from intact families.

Research Questions

This study was guided by seven research questions:

1. Is there a gender difference in the levels of spirituality?

2. Is there a gender difference in the levels of subjective well-being?
3. Are there ethnic differences in levels of spirituality?
4. Are there ethnic differences in levels of subjective well-being?
5. Are there academic standing differences in levels of spirituality?
6. Are there academic standing differences in the levels of subjective well-being?
7. Is there a relationship between spirituality and well-being?

Method

Participants

The participants were 63 students (32 males, 31 females) at Southern Adventist University. The sample was one of convenience, acquired from the cafeteria and Student Center of the university. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 27 ($M = 20.52$, $SD = 1.822$). Various ethnic groups were represented with the following percentages: 56% White, 27% Black, 8% Hispanic, 6% Asian, and 2% other (see Figure 1). All four undergraduate class standings were represented as well as graduate students, with $n = 12$ freshmen, $n = 23$ sophomores, $n = 16$ juniors, $n = 10$ seniors, and $n = 2$ graduate students. While some participants lived off campus (14%) or within the campus community (6%), the vast majority (79%) lived in the dormitories. Of the 63 respondents, 48 said they came from intact families, 13 from divorced homes, and 2 had a deceased parent. The majority of the participants were of the Seventh-day Adventist religion. All participants were treated in accordance with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (American Psychological Association, 2002).

Materials

A 34-item paper-and-pencil survey was used in this study. This survey, entitled the Marlin Spirituality and Psychological Well-being Inventory (MSPWI) is a combination of two instruments: the Marlin Spirituality Scale (MSS) and a version of the General Well-being Schedule (GWBS, Fazio, 1977). Questions pertaining to demographics are also included. The survey takes about 10 minutes to complete.

The MSS is a 10 item scale which uses six Likert-type and four analog scale questions to measure levels of spirituality. Items one through six on this scale contain questions pertaining to some religious behavior that the participant must indicate from five options how frequently they practice that behavior. Items seven through 10 contain questions asking participants to rate on a 0-5 scale how important religious elements are to their lives. Scoring is done by placing scores from 0 to 44 into various levels of spirituality as follows: Scores from zero to 10 indicate no spirituality, 11 to 22 indicates low spirituality, 23-29 indicates casual spirituality, 30-36 indicates moderate spirituality, and 37-44 indicates high spirituality. This study constitutes a pilot for the MSS instrument. Reliability and validity information are not yet available.

The GWBS is an 18 item scale measuring levels of psychological and physiological well-being. Items one to fourteen are Likert-type questions asking participants to check which of six possible responses most closely reflects the participants' levels of stress, mood, life satisfaction,

and emotional state. Items 15 through 18 are analog-scale questions asking participants to indicate on a scale of 0-5 subjective levels of stress, mood, and concern for health. This scale is scored by placing scores from 0 to 110 into the following groups: Scores from 0-25 are labeled as "Severe," 26-40 indicates "Serious," 41-55 indicates "Distress," 56-70 is labeled as a "Stress problem," 71-75 is "Marginal," 76-80 indicates "Low positive," and scores from 81 to 110 indicate "Positive well-being." Since the scale has been changed from the original validity and reliability information is not yet available.

Design and Procedure

This study was a non-experimental descriptive/ comparative design. Participation in this study was on a voluntary basis. Would-be participants were approached in the cafeteria and student center of the school from March 31, 2008 to April 4, 2008 during supper hours (6:00 pm-7:00 pm). These participants were asked to assist in a research study, with no incentive except for helping out a friend. On April 2, 2008 additional participants were acquired from Professor Gary Jones's Intro to Social Work class (which meets from 2:00 pm to 3:15 pm) with the permission of the instructor. Students of this class were offered one hour (out of 25 hours) of their required service learning hours as incentive for their involvement. All participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form as well as provide contact information for a copy of the results if they so desired. The MSPWI was then administered. Upon completion, participants returned the survey face down and were thanked for their participation.

Data Analysis

The results of the MSPWI were scored and coded into SPSS, and the following statistical analyses were conducted: independent-samples t-tests, one-way ANOVAs, and Pearson's test of correlation coefficients. All statistical tests were two-tailed with an alpha level of .05.

Results

The major variables of this study were spirituality and well-being. Participant means were 30.40 (SD = 8.81) for spirituality and 65.75 (SD = 18.09) for well-being. For spirituality means for each variable see Table 1. For well-being means for each variable see Table 2. The research question as to whether there is a relationship between spirituality and well-being was analyzed using the Pearson product-moment correlation. A statistically significant relationship was found ($r_s = .43$, $p < 0.01$, $r_s^2 = .18$, see Figure 2). As spirituality scores increased, well-being increased as well, with 18% of the variation in well-being scores explained by the level of spirituality. In other words, the higher the reported levels of spirituality of participants, the higher the reported levels of well-being of participants. No other statistically significant correlations were found.

Spirituality

An independent-samples t-test was performed to evaluate the research question as to whether there are gender differences in levels of spirituality. Male participants reported slightly higher but not statistically significant levels of spirituality than female participants, $t(61) = .29$, $p = .77$. An additional independent-samples t-test was performed to test the hypothesis that participants from divorced or single parent families will have no difference in spirituality when compared to those from intact families. There was no statistically significant difference in spirituality for participants from divorced or single parent families when compared to those from intact families, $t(61) = .57$, $p = .57$. Thus, levels of spirituality were inconclusive for gender and parental marital status.

A one-way ANOVA was performed to evaluate the research question as to whether there are ethnic differences in spirituality. No statistically significant difference was found for ethnicity, $F(4, 57) = .80$, $p = .53$. Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Other had equal levels of spirituality. An additional one-way ANOVA was performed to evaluate the research question as to whether there are class standing differences in spirituality. No statistically significant difference was found for class standing, $F(4, 58) = 1.13$, $p = .35$. Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors, Seniors, and Graduate students all had similar levels of spirituality.

Well-Being

An independent-samples t-test was performed to evaluate the research question as to whether there are gender differences in levels of well-being. Male participants reported higher levels of well-being than female participants, with the results approaching significance, $t(61) = 1.8$, $p = .08$. In other words, men reported slightly higher levels of subjective well-being than women but the difference was not significant. An additional independent-samples t-test was performed to test the hypothesis that participants from divorced or single parent families will have no difference in well-being when compared to those from intact families. There was no statistically significant difference in wellbeing for participants from divorced or single parent families versus those from intact families, $t(61) = -.43$, $p = .67$. Thus, the levels of well-being were similar regardless of parental marital status.

A one-way ANOVA was performed to evaluate the research question as to whether there are ethnic differences in well-being. No statistically significant difference was found for ethnicity, $F(4, 57) = .63$, $p = .65$. Whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and Other had equal levels of well-being. An additional one-way ANOVA was performed to evaluate the research question as to whether there are class standing differences in wellbeing. No statistically significant difference was found for class standing, $F(4, 58) = .55$, $p = .70$. Freshmen, Sophomores, Juniors, Seniors, and Graduate students all had similar levels of well-being.

Other Interesting Findings

One-way ANOVAs were used to evaluate whether there were statistically significant differences in the levels of spirituality and the levels of well-being for Dormitory, Southern

Village, and Off-campus residents. No statistically significant differences between the various residential types were found for either spirituality ($F(2, 60) = .25, p = .78$) or well-being ($F(2, 60) = .32, p = .73$). In other words, Dormitory, Southern Village, and Off-campus residents have similar levels of spirituality and well-being.

An LSD post hoc test revealed a difference approaching statistical significance between sophomores and seniors for spirituality with a significance of $p = .08$. In other words, sophomores and seniors had slightly different levels of spirituality, but the difference was not enough to be significant.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine differences in spirituality and well-being among college students and determine if spirituality and well-being were correlated. No significant differences were found for gender, ethnicity, or class standing in either spirituality or well-being. The null hypotheses predicting no differences in levels of spirituality and well-being depending on the marital status of participants' parents were not rejected, as no significant differences were found. A relationship was determined between spirituality and well-being, with 18% of the variation in well-being accounted for by spirituality.

There were no differences in the levels of spirituality for any variable. This similarity could be due at least in part to Southern Adventist University being a conservative Christian school with a majority of Seventh-day Adventist students. This school requires a certain amount of religious worship attendance for all dormitory students, and since the instrument used to measure spirituality looked at worship attendance as an influencing factor this could have been reflected in spirituality scores.

Contrary to the expectations of the researcher, no differences were found in the levels of spirituality or the levels of well-being of participants from divorced or single parent homes versus those from intact families. Based on the review of the literature it was expected that the perceived well-being of participants from divorced or single parent homes would be significantly lower than that of participants from intact families. While not expected, it was thought that a possible correlation with well-being might result in spirituality levels being lower in participants from divorced or single parent homes. However, no statistically significant difference was found in either variable. This could be due to the recency of the loss of a parent either by death or divorce and the degree to which the participant has recovered. It would be expected that a recent loss would represent lower well-being and possibly lower spirituality while a loss in the distant past would not reflect as great a difference. However, this study did not examine recency.

The correlation between spirituality and well-being was expected. This correlation is thought to be explained in part to elements of spirituality such as belief in a power greater than ones' self and having a positive attitude towards self and towards life experiences contributing to increased psychological well-being. Other factors may be the positive regard for members within the social structure of religious systems and the support provided to these members.

Limitations that existed in this study were that participants were acquired in a matter of convenience and may not be representative of the population from which they were drawn. Also, this study is neither a comprehensive or exhaustive treatment of the topic of spirituality and well-being. In addition, the instrument used in this study was a pilot and requires the honesty of the self-report of the participants. Due to the conservative Christian atmosphere of the university and the nature of the instrument used to measure spirituality the researcher suspects that evaluator apprehension may have also affected the scores.

The current findings of this study do not fully resemble the expected results as seen in the review of the literature. In particular, the loss of a parent due to divorce or death does not appear to lower well-being when compared to intact families. While this may be due to the element of spirituality, this variable was not found upon examination of the literature. Cultural and gender differences were not found in the present study as expected from the review of the literature. However, due to the relatively small sample size of this study, significant results may not have been detected.

This study provides new and current information to the existing body of research on the topic of spirituality and well-being in college students. This study determined that there are no statistically significant gender, ethnic, class standing, or parental marital status differences in spirituality and in well-being. However, this study did determine that there is a relationship between spirituality and well-being. In addition, new and current information was gained regarding the levels of spirituality and well-being of students attending Southern Adventist University.

Future research is needed to determine if the recency of the loss of a parent by death or divorce plays a role in the level of spirituality and perceived well-being. Additional research in the area of spirituality and well-being is needed to establish the reliability and validity of the instrument used in this study. This research should also be performed on other Seventh-day Adventist campuses as well as public campuses to see if differences exist.

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Appendix

Table 1
Mean Spirituality Scores of Southern Adventist University Students

Variable	N	M	SD
Gender			
Male	32	30.72	9.33
Female	31	30.06	8.38
Parent's Marital Status			
Divorce/ Single	15	31.53	9.46
Intact	48	30.04	8.67
Ethnicity			
White	35	28.74	10.51
Black	17	30.94	5.94
Hispanic	5	35.00	5.10
Asian	4	33.25	2.87
Other	1	34.00	
Class Standing			
Freshmen	12	30.92	5.23
Sophomore	23	27.70	10.00
Junior	16	31.19	9.15
Senior	10	33.60	8.06
Graduate	2	36.00	11.31

Note. Maximum score = 44.

Table 1
 Mean Well-Being Scores of Southern Adventist University Students

Variable	N	M	SD
Gender			
Male	32	69.66	17.37
Female	31	61.71	18.21
Parent's Marital Status			
Divorce/ Single	15	64.00	20.03
Intact	48	66.29	17.63
Ethnicity			
White	35	65.29	17.52
Black	17	65.88	16.76
Hispanic	5	57.40	29.96
Asian	4	14.43	7.22
Other	1	86.00	
Class Standing			
Freshmen	12	62.67	20.97
Sophomore	23	65.30	17.58
Junior	16	64.63	19.88
Senior	10	73.20	12.83
Graduate	2	61.00	22.63

Note. Maximum score = 110.

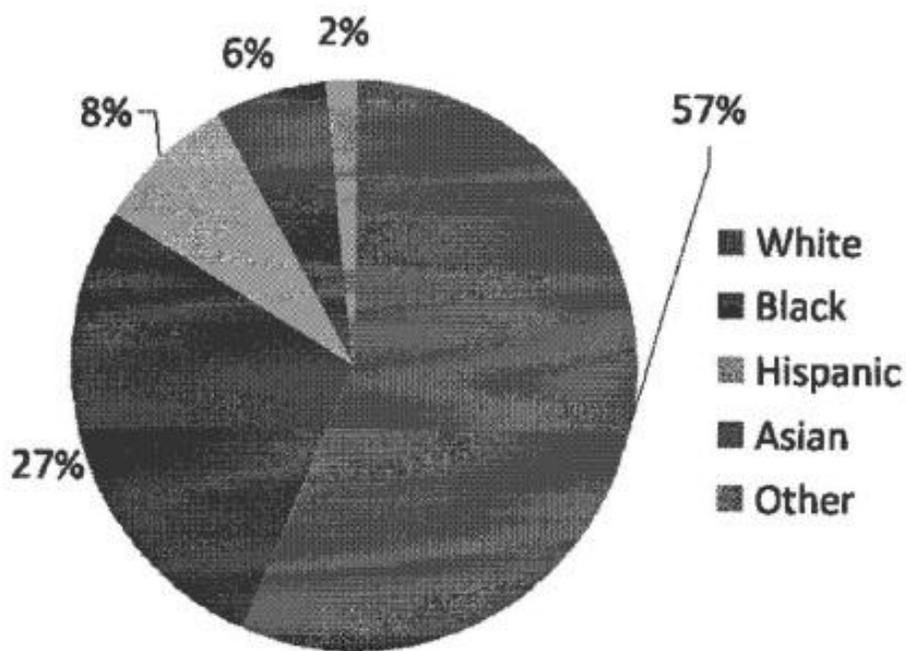


Figure 1. Pie chart of the ethnicity of participants.

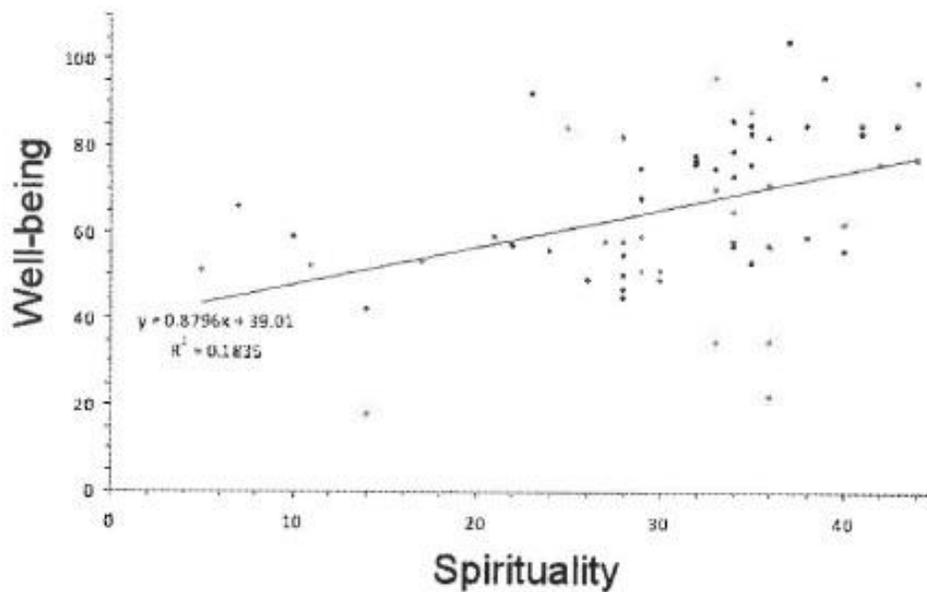


Figure 2. Scatter plot with trend line showing the relationship between spirituality and well-being.