

Does Thinking about the Meaning of Life Make you Happy in a Religious and Globalized World? A 76-Nation Study

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Abstract

This paper reports on a multi-level study of 76 nations that tests two hypotheses, which arose from considering Tolstoy's experience of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life. The religiosity-as-buffer hypothesis predicts that religiosity buffers the negative aspects of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life. The globalization-as-exacerbator hypothesis predicts that globalization exacerbates the negative aspects of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life. The results presented here support both hypotheses. The results are explained and the implications discussed.

Keywords: meaning of life, globalization, religion, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, happiness, culture

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Introduction

Much psychological research on meaning focuses on who finds meaning or purpose *in* life, and how people without a feeling of meaning or purpose *in* life can acquire it (e.g., Baumeister & Vohs, 2002; Steger, 2009; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Philosophers, on the other hand, are often interested in whether there is a meaning or purpose *of* life (e.g., Baggini, 2005; Metz, 2007; Solomon, 1976). Philosophers have understood questions of the meaning or purpose *of* life as asking about why there is something instead of nothing or why we are here at all (Baggini, 2005; Metz, 2012). These questions concern the reasons for, and significance of, our existence. So, for example, while psychologists have focussed their investigations on different beliefs that can help individuals' find meaning and purpose *in* their lives (usually to help them understand and find significance in the events and circumstances of their daily lives), philosophers have focussed their investigations on different beliefs that can help individuals' find the meaning and purpose *of* their lives (usually to help them understand the existence and significance of life itself).

The experience of both meaning and purpose *in* life and meaning and purpose *of* life would seem to make individuals happier by reducing anxiety (Debats, van der Lubbe, & Wezeman, 1993) and increasing their sense of directedness (Ryff, 1995). There is also an important connection between meaning or purpose *in* life and meaning or purpose *of* life; it is likely that many people who cannot conceive of a plausible meaning or purpose *of* life will find it much harder to find meaning or purpose *in* life, which, in turn, decreases their happiness. This connection can be fruitfully explored through the writings of Leo Tolstoy.

In *My Confession*, Tolstoy (2000) discusses how, despite the excellent circumstances of his life, he fell into a paralysing depression because he believed that science could not provide a useful answer to questions about the meaning and purpose of life. Tolstoy was a man of the world; he was a well-travelled author who claimed to know “all which science wants... to know” (Tolstoy, 2000, p. 15). However, his extensive knowledge led him to question his life, including why he should find meaning *in* any of his actions if there is no meaning or purpose *of* life. For example, while many people would find meaning and purpose in being a famous author, Tolstoy could not see why that would really matter when, “[a]ll my affairs, no matter what they might be, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself should not exist” (Tolstoy, 2000, p. 13). Indeed, Tolstoy was adamant that science and worldly knowledge could only answer, “What will come of my life?” with “Nothing”, and “Why does everything that exists exist...?” with “Because it exists” (Tolstoy, 2000, p. 15). He thought this because, influenced by the recent Darwinian revolution, he believed that science tells us that “You are an accidentally cohering globule of something. The globule is fermenting. This fermentation the globule calls its life. The globule falls to pieces.” (Tolstoy, 2000, p. 15). In the end, despite all his worldly knowledge and disdain for organised religion—which he initially perceived as irrational and monstrous (Tolstoy, 2000, p. 16), Tolstoy turned from reason to faith, and became a Christian of sorts. Through religion, he began to believe there was a meaning and purpose of life and rose out of his depression (Weijers, forthcoming): “What real result will there be from my life?—Eternal torment or eternal bliss. What is the meaning which is not destroyed by death?—The union with infinite God, paradise.” (Tolstoy, 2000, p. 18).

Studies have shown that Tolstoy’s experience is not unique. It is well documented that people turn to religious belief in times of hardship (Inglehart, 2010) and that the benefits of religious belief include justifications for the way things are, including why we are here and

what the purpose of life is (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003; Frankl, 1977; Geertz, 1966; Jonas & Fischer, 2006; Schweiker, 1969). Indeed, reviewing the limited literature comparing religious systems of meaning with non-religious systems of meaning, Newton and McIntosh (2013) found that religious meaning was more complex and more coherent, that it was better than non-religious meaning at dampening the negative effects of thinking about death and meaningless (Jonas & Fischer, 2006; Norenzayan & Hansen, 2006; Van Tongeren & Green, 2010), and that religious people were more likely to report their lives as having meaning and purpose compared to non-religious people (92% to 83%; Crabtree & Pelham, 2008). Therefore, since non-religious people are less likely to have clear positive systems of justification surrounding the meaning and purpose of life, religious people who ponder the meaning and purpose of life frequently might enjoy doing so more than non-religious people, who might find it depressing like Tolstoy did.

Being a well-travelled ‘man of the world’, Tolstoy would have been one of the few people of his time to be exposed to the economic, social, and political ideas of other cultures (Christian, 1978). Tolstoy gained much knowledge on his travels, especially the latest scientific knowledge, but as mentioned he found that this knowledge only produced depressing answers to questions about the meaning and purpose of life (Tolstoy 2000). Might the globalization of modern times have a similar effect on us?

Modern times are often characterized by the ever increasing influence of the media and the internet, and accelerated international exchange via migration, tourism, and exchange studentships. These phenomena mean that an average citizen of today is much more exposed to the flow of information from almost all parts of the world. Indeed, we are now living in the era of globalization, which has been described as the “process of creating networks of connections among actors at multicontinental distances, mediated through a variety of flows including people, information and ideas, capital, and goods” (Dreher, 2006, p. 1092).

Pluralistic and multi-dimensional approaches to globalization generally posit that this variable has three dimensions: economic (i.e., flows of goods, capital, services, and market information across national boundaries), political (i.e., diffusion of government policies), and social (i.e., the spread of ideas, information, images, and people) (Dreher, 2006; Dreher et al., 2008; Keohane & Nye, 2000).

Given this description of globalization, people residing in nations that have been highly affected by globalization are likely to be exposed to an enormous and diverse set of ideas, including many ideas about what the meaning and purpose of life is. Most of these ideas about what the meaning and purpose of life is will be religious, but a few will be secular or even nihilistic—purporting that there is no meaning or purpose of life. Being exposed to a large amount of these supposed truths about the meaning and purpose of life seems likely to diminish some people’s conviction that any one of the ideas is actually true, perhaps even to the extent that belief in a particular religion, God, or secular source of the meaning and purpose of life is irrational (this is similar to the “many Gods” objection in philosophy; Saka, 2001). Therefore, people who frequently ponder the meaning and purpose of life seem likely to be less happy if they live in a nation that has been more affected by globalization than if they live in a relatively unaffected nation.

In this paper, we test two hypotheses, which arise from considering Tolstoy’s experience of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life, in a large cross-cultural sample. The religiosity-as-buffer hypothesis predicts that religiosity will buffer the negative aspects of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life. In other words, as religiosity increases, the relationship between thinking about the meaning and purpose of life and happiness will become more positive. The globalization-as-exacerbator hypothesis predicts that globalization will exacerbate the negative aspects of thinking about the meaning and

purpose of life. In other words, as globalization increases the relationship between thinking about the meaning and purpose of life and happiness will become more negative.

Testing these hypotheses is an important contribution to the psychological literature on meaning because it draws attention to the difference between the meaning and purpose *of* life and meaning and purpose *in* life. Moreover, an immense amount of data on the question “How often, if at all, do you think about the meaning and purpose of life?” has been collected over the last 30 years (through the World Values Survey and the European Values Study) but the question has never been the focus of any analysis. Furthermore, when this question has been discussed in social science research, answers to it have been interpreted fairly inexactly; for example, as providing information about religiosity (Haller & Hadler 2006), or about spiritual concerns (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Following Campbell and Curtis, we interpreted this question as asking about the extent to which respondents were thinking about “answers to ultimate questions of existence” (Campbell & Curtis, 1996, p. 266).

Method

Participants

We combined data from all of the waves of the World Values Survey and European Values Study from 1999 to 2010 (i.e., 1999–2004, 2005–2007, & 2008–2010). A total of 143,085 participants from 76 nations completed all measures of the study (EVS, 2011; WVS, 2009). The included countries, sample sizes, and national-level means of the variables under study are reported in Table 1.

Measures

Thinking about the meaning and purpose of life. This variable was measured with participants answers to the question “How often, if at all, do you think about the meaning and

purpose of life?” on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 = *Often* to 4 = *Never*. The responses were reverse-coded such that higher scores indicated a higher frequency of thinking. This variable was group-mean centred. At times this variable will be referred to as “thinking about meaning” for the sake of brevity.

Life satisfaction. This variable was used as the outcome in multi-level analysis. Participants answered the question “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?” on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 = *completely dissatisfied* to 10 = *completely satisfied*.

Religiosity. Religiosity was measured with participants answers to the question “How important is God in your life?” on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 = *not at all important* to 10 = *very important*. Religiosity scores were group-mean centred.

National level of globalization. We used the KOF globalization index (Dreher, 2006; Dreher et al., 2008) for the year 2010, which measures economic, social, and political aspects of globalization. The index values range between 0 and 100, with higher values indicating more globalization.

National economic prosperity. To measure the economic prosperity of the nations in the study, the economy sub-index of the 2012 Legatum Prosperity Index was used. This index measures “countries’ performance in four key areas: macroeconomic policies, economic satisfaction and expectations, foundations for growth, and financial sector efficiency” (Legatum Institute, 2012, p. 12). The economy index ranges from -6.78 to 3.33. This variable was grand-mean centred.

Results

Multi-level analyses were conducted using SPSS 19, with restricted maximum likelihood, to estimate the models. We used a random-intercepts/random slopes model. We

first tested an unconditional means model (Peugh & Enders, 2005), excluding all the predictors. An unconditional means model is identical to a one-way ANOVA with random effects. The results of this analysis reveal the proportion of variability in life satisfaction that exists at the individual and cultural levels before adding covariates. The results showed that there was statistically significant variability both at the individual ($b = 5.18$, Wald $Z = 320.759$, p (one-sided) $< .001$) and cultural ($b = 1.02$, Wald $Z = 6.106$, p (one-sided) $< .001$) levels. Therefore, it was justifiable to add predictors to the model to explain the existing unexplained variance at both levels.

In a second analysis, we added all the predictors to the model. The results showed that the slopes of personal religiosity ($b = .004$, Wald $Z = 4.617$, p (one-sided) $< .001$) and thinking about meaning ($b = .020$, Wald $Z = 4.769$, p (one-sided) $< .001$) were significantly variable across the cultures, therefore these random slopes were kept in the model. Adding all of the predictors to the model reduced the unexplained within-culture variability by ($5.18 - 5.01 = 0.17$), meaning the covariates explained about 3.5% of the variability in the individual-level scores of life satisfaction. The remaining amount of unexplained variance is still significantly different from zero ($b = 5.01$, Wald $Z = 267.249$, p (one-sided) $< .001$). Adding the predictors to the model also reduced the unexplained between-culture variability by ($1.02 - .78 = 0.24$), meaning the covariates explained about 24% of the variability in the national-level scores of life satisfaction. A significant amount of variance remains to be explained by additional covariates ($b = .78$, Wald $Z = 6.056$, p (one-sided) $< .001$).

The estimates are shown in Table 2. While thinking about the meaning and purpose of life was not a significant predictor, religiosity and national globalization were both significant positive predictors. The interaction of thinking about meaning and religiosity was significant, indicating that personal religiosity moderates the relationship between thinking about meaning and life satisfaction. This interaction is schematically shown in Figure 1. Consistent

with our prediction, the figure indicates that for individuals scoring lowly on religiosity, thinking about the meaning of life is negatively correlated with life satisfaction. For moderately and highly religious people, however, this relationship is positive. The interaction of thinking about meaning and national globalization was also significant. This interaction is shown in Figure 2. Consistent with our prediction, for individuals living in more globalized nations, thinking about the meaning of life is negatively correlated with life satisfaction. For individuals living in less globalized nations, however, this relationship is positive.

Finally, in order to examine if the moderation effects would hold after controlling for economic prosperity, we repeated the multi-level analysis including national economic prosperity. We found that national economic prosperity was a significant positive predictor of life satisfaction ($b = .38, SE = .06, t = 6.41, p < .001$). However, the interaction term of thinking about meaning and religiosity ($b = .006, SE = .003, t = 2.038, p < .05$), and that of thinking about meaning and national globalization ($b = -.007, SE = .001, t = -6.024, p < .001$) remained significant. This indicates that these interactions cannot be explained by differences in nations' economic prosperity.

Discussion

Very little research has been done on the relationship between globalization and subjective well-being. Using micro data from 15 European nations, Hessami (2011) found the relationship to be positive and significant, especially for right-wing voters, high-skilled workers, and high-income earners. Using national-level data from 70 nations, Bjørnskov, Dreher, and Fischer (2008) found that the (positive) relationship between globalization and subjective well-being was only significant for right-wing voters. The significant positive relationship between globalization and life satisfaction found in this study fits better with Hessami's results. The differences in the results cannot be explained by the globalization

measure used, since it was the same in each analysis; rather, the number of nations included and the structure and breadth of the data used are likely to have led to these different results.

Replicating previous findings, religiosity was a significant predictor of life satisfaction (e.g., Barro & Mitchell, 2004; Joshanloo & Weijers, 2013; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2007). Personal religiosity is thought to promote mental health and subjective well-being in a variety of ways (for a review see: Schieman, Bierman, & Ellison, 2013), including through providing a purpose in life (Chamberlain & Zika, 1988).

Also replicating previous findings (e.g., Haller and Hadler, 2006), thinking about the meaning and purpose of life was not a significant predictor of life satisfaction. This result is probably best explained by the highly different beliefs about the meaning or purpose of life that people hold. Some people believe that there is no meaning or purpose of life or that they will never know for sure what the meaning or purpose of life is which probably makes them less satisfied with their lives when they think about the meaning or purpose of life. In contrast, other people firmly believe that there is a meaning or purpose of life which probably makes them feel more satisfied with their lives when they think about the meaning or purpose of life. Indeed, this interpretation was consistent with the results for the interaction terms discussed below.

Contrary to the interpretations of the “How often, if at all, do you think about the meaning and purpose of life?” question as a measure of religiosity (Haller and Hadler, 2006), or of spiritual concerns (Inglehart & Baker, 2000), the result for this measure was markedly different from the (highly significant) result for religiosity. This marked difference indicates that the “How often, if at all, do you think about the meaning and purpose of life?” question should probably be interpreted much more literally, and not as an activity that only the religiously or spiritually inclined undertake.

The interaction of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life with religiosity was a significant predictor of life satisfaction. This result is consistent with the religiosity-as-buffer hypothesis. Also in support of the religiosity-as-buffer hypothesis, Figure 1 shows that the relationship between thinking about meaning and life satisfaction is negative for the least religious group and positive for the moderately and highly religious groups. The idea that religion is the dominant source of positive answers to existential questions about the meaning and purpose of life fits well with these results. If there were common non-religious sources of positive answers to existential questions about the meaning and purpose of life, then it would be unlikely to observe the much more negative relationship between thinking about meaning and life satisfaction in the least religious group compared to the more religious groups. Furthermore, the relationship between thinking about meaning and life satisfaction in the more religious groups is positive, indicating that thinking about the meaning and purpose of life is probably quite satisfying for people with religious beliefs.

The interaction of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life with national globalization was a significant predictor of life satisfaction. This result is consistent with the globalization-as-exacerbator hypothesis. Also in support of the globalization-as-exacerbator hypothesis, Figure 2 shows that the relationship between thinking about the meaning and purpose of life and life satisfaction is positive for the group of nations with the lowest globalization scores, less positive for the group of nations with the moderate globalization scores, and negative for the group of nations with the highest globalization scores—the relationship essentially becomes increasingly negative as globalization increases. The idea that globalization is a source of multiple perspectives on answers to existential questions about the meaning and purpose of life, and thereby of uncertainty about the truth of any particular positive set of answers to those questions, fits well with these results. People living in nations with the lowest levels of globalization are likely to be exposed to far less criticism

of the culturally dominant beliefs, including religious beliefs and other belief systems that attempt to answer existential questions. Therefore, they are more likely to have higher credence in belief systems that positively answer questions about the meaning and purpose of life. Furthermore, thinking about the meaning and purpose of life seems like it would be a satisfying experience for individuals' who firmly believed in positive answers to those existential questions, and less satisfying or perhaps even unsatisfying for individuals' who did not firmly believe in (or disbelieved) any positive answers. Following this train of thought, and given the results of this study, it seems plausible that national globalization makes thinking about the meaning and purpose of life less satisfying because the influx of ideas that globalization brings weakens people's credence in belief systems that provide positive answers to existential questions.

If this finding about the negative effect of globalization on people who think frequently about the meaning and purpose of life is correct, it has important implications. The majority of the world is still undergoing the process of globalization. Most importantly, more and more of the world's people are being exposed to many new ideas about how existential questions about the meaning and purpose of life should be answered. This increased exposure to these new ideas seems inevitable and, if the finding above is correct, so too is a decrease in subjective well-being for those who frequently ponder the meaning and purpose of life. Exacerbating this looming problem is the fact that people in the most industrialized nations (which also tend to be the most globalized) are starting to think about the meaning and purpose of life more frequently (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). If this trend continues, then as the economic aspects of globalization promote industrialization around the world, an increasing number of people might be thinking more and more about the meaning and purpose of life while believing less and less in any system of beliefs that provides positive answers to these existential questions. A surprise consequence of globalization, then, might be an epidemic of

existential angst and a widespread downward pressure on life satisfaction that might offset any positive effects globalization could have on life satisfaction in developing and undeveloped nations.

Conclusion

In this paper we reported on a multi-level analysis study of 76 nations testing two hypotheses that arose from considering Tolstoy's experience of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life. The religiosity-as-buffer hypothesis predicted that religiosity buffers the negative aspects of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life. The results presented here support this hypothesis. We argued that thinking about the meaning and purpose of life was unpleasant for people without high credence in a system of beliefs that provided positive answers to existential questions, such as 'why are we here?', and that religion provides such a system of beliefs. The globalization-as-exacerbator hypothesis predicted that globalization exacerbates the negative aspects of thinking about the meaning and purpose of life. The results presented here support this hypothesis. We argued that the influx of ideas that comes with globalization weakens people's credence in any system of beliefs that provide answers to existential questions about the meaning and purpose of life, which makes thinking about the meaning and purpose of life more worrisome.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1

Sample sizes and mean scores for all variables of the study

Nation	Sample size	Thinking about meaning	Life satisfaction	Religiosity	Globalization index
New Zealand	954	2.63	7.89	5.35	78.22
China	3015	2.78	6.68	3.58	59.43
Saudi Arabia	1502	2.78	7.28	9.78	67.49
Spain	5109	2.78	7.18	5.74	84.21
Great Britain	3602	2.86	7.51	5.10	85.39
Germany	6175	2.88	7.04	4.32	81.08
India	4003	2.92	5.47	8.01	51.57
Malaysia	1201	2.93	6.84	8.07	78.23
Poland	3605	2.96	6.85	8.28	79.10
Slovenia	3409	2.98	7.35	5.22	76.85
Serbia	1220	2.99	6.01	7.12	64.90
Uruguay	1000	3.00	7.46	7.32	65.28
Norway	2115	3.00	8.03	4.20	81.99
Sweden	3205	3.02	7.69	4.00	87.63
Luxembourg	2821	3.06	7.85	5.07	85.15
Netherlands	3607	3.08	7.87	4.90	91.33
Japan	2458	3.08	6.71	5.01	63.73
Belarus	2500	3.09	5.59	6.26	54.98
Denmark	2530	3.09	8.31	4.07	88.12
Argentina	2282	3.11	7.48	8.41	58.30
Austria	3032	3.12	7.79	6.20	89.48
Estonia	2523	3.12	6.35	4.38	79.72
Bulgaria	3501	3.13	5.52	5.61	71.73
Chile	2200	3.15	7.18	8.71	72.91
Lithuania	2518	3.15	5.91	6.46	72.79
Cyprus	2050	3.17	7.31	8.57	86.08
Croatia	2528	3.17	6.93	7.22	75.36
Pakistan	2000	3.17	4.85	10.00	51.68
France	4117	3.18	6.99	4.43	83.86
Peru	3001	3.18	6.73	9.08	64.30
Russian Federation	6037	3.19	5.62	5.86	67.78
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2712	3.20	6.49	7.79	62.31
Finland	3186	3.20	7.79	5.65	84.85
Switzerland	2513	3.22	7.96	6.13	86.28
Australia	1421	3.22	7.30	6.09	81.59
Iraq	5026	3.23	4.82	9.84	40.10
Singapore	1512	3.23	7.24	8.23	88.89
Ukraine	3702	3.24	5.49	6.95	67.78
Zambia	1500	3.24	6.06	9.18	55.62

Mexico	3095	3.24	8.19	9.41	59.25
Canada	4095	3.30	7.79	7.43	85.38
United States	2449	3.30	7.46	8.39	74.76
South Korea	2400	3.30	6.30	5.56	62.31
Iran	5199	3.32	6.40	9.49	40.24
Italy	4531	3.33	7.10	7.44	81.01
Thailand	1534	3.33	7.21	7.98	63.64
Macedonia	2555	3.33	6.13	7.65	60.10
Bangladesh	1500	3.34	5.78	9.66	40.65
Romania	4411	3.34	5.96	8.88	72.53
Egypt	6051	3.35	5.57	9.77	58.10
Albania	2534	3.35	5.88	7.12	58.32
Turkey	8337	3.37	6.17	9.26	69.02
Algeria	1282	3.37	5.67	9.81	52.37
South Africa	5988	3.38	6.76	9.14	64.39
Uganda	1002	3.43	5.65	9.26	46.18
Mali	1534	3.44	6.09	9.17	46.87
Ghana	1534	3.45	6.12	9.78	54.55
Brazil	1500	3.46	7.64	9.63	59.21
Guatemala	1000	3.46	7.95	9.72	59.67
Philippines	1200	3.47	6.65	9.56	56.12
Moldova	3605	3.47	5.67	8.15	63.49
Indonesia	3019	3.48	6.93	9.70	55.20
Viet Nam	2495	3.48	6.86	4.99	47.02
Jordan	2423	3.48	6.40	9.93	70.10
Colombia	3025	3.49	8.31	9.67	52.40
Burkina Faso	1534	3.49	5.57	9.11	44.35
Nigeria	2022	3.49	6.87	9.62	61.20
Venezuela	1200	3.52	7.52	9.53	49.44
Morocco	3464	3.60	5.78	9.83	61.38
Zimbabwe	1002	3.62	3.95	9.61	50.70
Kyrgyzstan	1043	3.64	6.48	7.80	56.12
Ethiopia	1500	3.64	4.99	9.21	37.46
Georgia	3000	3.67	5.21	9.10	61.56
Tanzania	1171	3.74	3.87	9.61	39.12
Trinidad and Tobago	1002	3.77	7.26	9.67	57.97
Rwanda	1507	3.85	4.97	9.45	42.24

Table 2

Hierarchical Linear Modelling Predicting Life Satisfaction

	<i>b</i>	St. Error	<i>t</i>	Sig.
Intercept	6.63	.103	64.400	.000
Thinking about meaning	.007	.018	.404	.687
Religiosity	.056	.008	6.587	.000
National globalization	.043	.007	6.177	.000
Thinking about meaning × religiosity	.006	.003	2.041	.041
Thinking about meaning × national globalization	-.007	.001	-6.024	.000

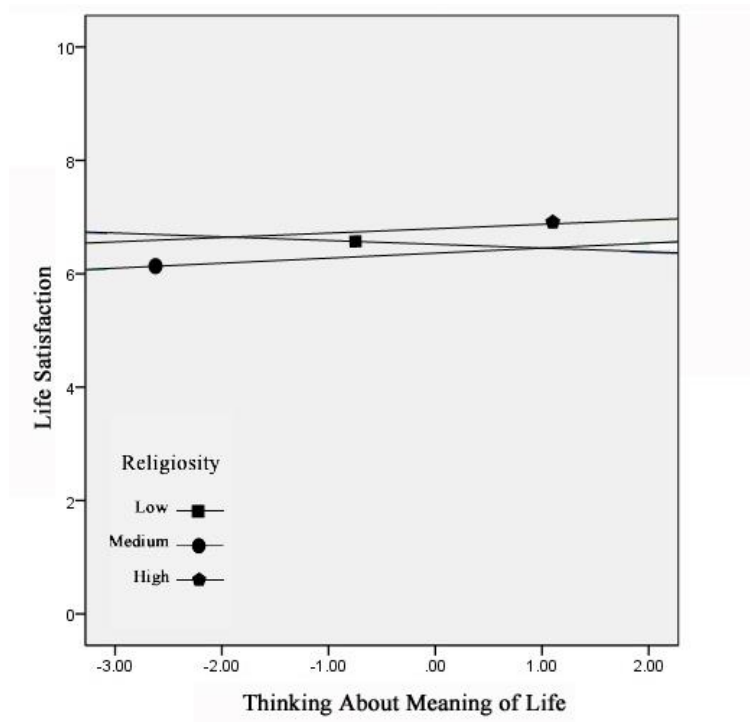


Figure 1

The relationship between thinking about meaning and life satisfaction as moderated by religiosity

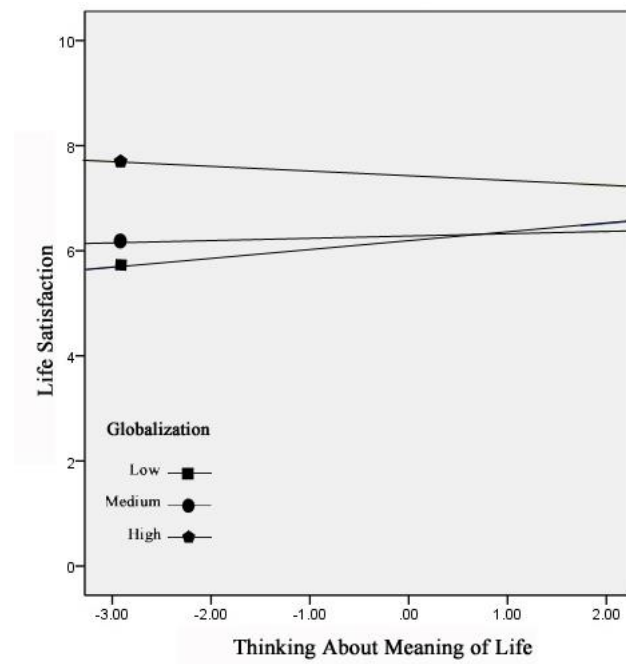


Figure 2

The relationship between thinking about meaning and life satisfaction as moderated by national globalization