

Religious and Spiritual Struggle among Indonesian Students: Who Struggle More, Males or Females?

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Abstract— Previous studies in the West have found that gender impacts upon religiousness. However, religiousness is also affected by culture, and several studies in Indonesia found no gender effect. This study investigates whether there is a gender effect on another aspect of religion, called religious and spiritual struggle. The Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness Scale (4BDRS) and Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (RS/S) were distributed to 153 students from two Christian universities in Jakarta and Tangerang area, Indonesia. The results showed that there were no gender differences in religiousness ($p > .05$). However, there were gender differences in religious and spiritual struggle ($t(151) = 2.82, p < .01$), male students ($M = 53.65, SD = 14.41, N = 80$) reported significantly higher religious/spiritual struggles than female students ($M = 47.48, SD = 12.48, N = 73$). Thus, even though male and female students show the same degree of religiousness, male students might be struggling religiously more than their female counterparts. The specific culture of Indonesia that allows more overlapping roles between men and women might explain the absence of gender differences in the religiousness of Indonesian Christian students. However, men and women respond and cope differently with strain, which in turn causes a higher degree of R/S struggle in male students. Understanding such gender similarities and differences could be crucial in shaping the implementation of religious education in schools and universities.

Keywords: religiousness, religious and spiritual struggles, gender differences, Indonesia, Christian universities

Introduction

According to Gallup News in 2010, 99% of the population in Indonesia deemed religion as an important part of their daily life, compared to only 65% in the US, and 24% in Japan (Crabtree, 2010). There is no doubt that Indonesia is one of the most religious countries in the world. The Gallup News highlights the fact that religiousness tends to decrease with the increasing wealth of the nation. In fact, the US is an anomaly among developed countries because it still displays a rather high religiosity.

The Gallup News seems to suggest that religiousness is a coping strategy for the population in poor countries. Indeed, previous studies have shown that religiousness can have positive contributions to subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010). However, the effect of religiousness is not always positive. Religiousness can also be linked to religious and spiritual struggles (Exline & Rose, 2013). Exline et al. developed the Religious and Spiritual Struggle Scale (RS/S) that measures aspects of religious belief, practice, and experience, that can cause negative emotions and thoughts, anxiety, or conflict (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014). This current study focuses on the gender differences in the experience of religious and spiritual (R/S) struggles.

Studies in the West often found that women are more religious than men. Miller & Stark even hypothesized that gender differences in religiousness are caused by an innate risk-taking behavioral difference between males and females, that might be acquired very early, either through biological predisposition or early socialization (2002). Thus, according to Miller & Stark (2002), risk aversion can be added to other “feminine traits” that avoid risk-taking behaviors (e.g., drug-taking, delinquency, unsafe sexual practices, and business related risk-taking), which in turn predict higher religiosity in women.

However, other studies have warned that such gender differences in religiousness might not be universal. Schnabel (2015) demonstrated a variation among Christian groups in America, where women did not reveal higher religiosity in all measures. Sullins wrote that in a third of nations (World Values Survey), women are no actively religious than men (2006). Sullins went on to claim that social factors are more critical for understanding gender differences in religiousness rather than physiological or personality factors alone. Roth also demonstrated that biologically-based risk-preference theory is not a compelling explanation of women’s higher religiousness (2007). Voas et al. observed a convergence in the religious involvement of men and women, as countries become more secular and more men and women become equals in the eyes of the law (2013). Other research has demonstrated differences in religiousness between men and women in different economic situations (Hastings & Lindsay, 2013; Schnabel, 2016). Thus, it seems that social, cultural and even economic factors might play important roles in predicting gender differences in religiousness. A previous study in Indonesia found no gender differences in religiousness between Christian students (Sani, Aditya, Martoyo, & Pramono, 2018).

How does religiousness relate to religious and spiritual (R/S) struggles? Previous studies have had mixed results. Some aspects of religiousness can be beneficial, while others might become a burden (Exline, 2013). Aditya et al. showed that the multidimensionality of religion may have different effects on R/S struggles: behaving increases R/S struggles, while believing and bonding decreases R/S struggles (Aditya, Sani, Martoyo, & Pramono, 2018). It is therefore important to use multidimensional measures when studying the effects of religiousness on R/S struggles.

University students who on their way to adulthood may be prone to experience R/S struggles (Johnson & Hayes, 2003). Although R/S struggles can be the result of a life-crisis and/or stressors (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998), struggles may also result from a normal questioning of God and religion (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015; Abu-Raiya, Pargament, & Krause, 2016). This study focuses on the large portion of students who do not experience major stressors, but may nevertheless experience R/S struggles (RS/S) as a part of their emerging adulthood. College students who suffer from RS/S are prone to problems with adaptation, physical and mental health problems, and risky behaviors (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Wortmann, Park, & Edmondson, 2012).

Saroglou & Cohen wrote that the impact of religiousness is influenced by culture (2013). However, research on the impact of religiousness on R/S struggles in Indonesia is rare. The

present paper will fill this gap by focusing on gender differences in religiousness and R/S struggles.

According to Saroglou, religiousness consists of four dimensions: believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging (2011). Believing refers to the cognitive aspect of religiousness, while bonding represents the affective/emotional component of religiousness. Believing consists of a set of beliefs or ideas about God/Gods/ or other transcendent entity, while bonding refers to the emotional connection to external transcendence through prayer/ritual. Behaving refers to the moral action and focuses on adherence to norms, regulations, and performances, while belonging refers to cohesion with others from the same community of beliefs.

An RS/S can be classified into three groups: supernatural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Pargament, Murray-Swank, Magyar, & Ano, 2005). A supernatural struggle is caused by a belief/relationship with God or other supernatural beings, such as a personal anger toward God or the devil for bad things in life. An interpersonal struggle is caused by conflicts with religious/spiritual groups/individuals, whereas an intrapersonal struggle refers to an internal conflict in the person's thinking or behavior.

Thus, internal or external factors can trigger an RS/S. Social support from a religious community may determine the degree of RS/S. Someone with a higher degree of social support shows a lower level of RS/S than others with a lower level of social support (McConnell, Pargament, Ellison, & Flannelly, 2006). Hall and Edwards found that someone with higher extrinsic religiosity and lower intrinsic religiosity has a higher degree of RS/S (Hall & Edwards, 2002).

Based on a previous study of Christian students in Indonesia, this paper hypothesizes that there is no significant difference of religiousness between male and female students. There are currently no known studies in Indonesia on gender differences in RS/S, so the results of this study are difficult to predict. However, Milot and Ludden found that rural adolescent boys who think that religion is important in their lives report higher levels of academic self-efficacy and school bonding than those who do not think that religion is important (2009). They found that religiousness is more pronounced in boys than girls. Thus, it is possible that the effects of religiousness on RS/S is also more pronounced in male than female students.

Methods

A. Participants

The data were taken from 153 students of two Christian universities in Jakarta and Tangerang area, Indonesia. This study only focused on gender differences. The sample consisted of roughly equal male and female students (80 male and 73 female students). From the two universities, 78% and 89% of the sample were Christians, with a few students from other religions. Theoretically, the scales should apply generally across different religions and this

study focuses only on gender differences. We have reported on the investigation of specific religions elsewhere (Sani, Aditya, Martoyo, & Pramono, 2018).

B. Measures

The Four Basic Dimensions of Religiousness (4-BDRS) and the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (RS/S) were used in this study. The 4-BDRS was used to measure religiousness, which consists of four dimensions: believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging. Three items on a 7-point Likert scale are used to rate each dimension. The measured total religiousness is the sum of these four dimensions. In this study, the internal reliability of the 4-BDRS measured with Cronbach's alpha was 0.89.

Religious and spiritual struggles were measured with RS/S. The RS/S utilizes 26 items on 5-point Likert scale, which has six dimensions: divine, demonic, interpersonal, moral struggle, meaning, and doubt. This study was interested only in the total score of RS/S. The internal reliability of the RS/S measured with Cronbach's alpha was 0.91.

C. Results

TABLE I. SAMPLE DESCRIPTIVE AND T-TEST RESULTS

		M	SD	df	t	p
4BDRS	M	59.86	13.35	151	-1.53	.13
	F	63.08	12.53			
RSS	M	53.65	14.41		2.82*	.005
	F	47.48	12.48			

^a * $p < 0.01$, two-tailed

^b M=Mean. SD=Standard Deviation. df=degree of freedom.
t=result of independent sample t-test

The results showed no significant differences in the total religiousness of male and female students ($p > .05$). However, there was a significant difference in RS/S between male students and their female counterparts ($t(151) = 2.82$, $p < .01$). Male students ($M = 53.65$, $SD = 14.41$, $N = 80$) reported significantly higher religious/spiritual struggles than female students ($M = 47.48$, $SD = 12.48$, $N = 73$).

Discussions

This study confirms the previous study that reported no significant differences in the religiousness of male and female Christian students in Indonesia (Sani, Aditya, Martoyo, & Pramono, 2018). This finding also adds to data indicating that gender differences in religiousness might not apply universally (Sullins, 2006; Roth & Kroll, 2007; Hastings & Lindsay, 2013; Voas, McAndrew, & Storm, 2013; Schnabel, 2015; 2016). Sani et al. argued that men and women in Indonesia seem to be living in a more egalitarian way, and living in dual-earner households, with women engaging in various functions and leadership roles in the workplace (2018). This result is in accordance with the findings of Voas et al., who observed a

convergence in the religious involvement of men and women in more secular (European) countries, where men and women have equal rights in the eyes of the law (2013). Loewenthal et al. also concluded that gender differences in religiousness are culturally (sub-culture) specific, and that the common notion that women are more religious than men cannot be generalized (2002).

Research by Hofstede shed light on the masculine/feminine dimension of culture. Societies where men are thought to be assertive, tough, focused on material success, while women are expected to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life, are said to be masculine societies (2010). In other words, in a masculine culture, the roles of men and women are more sharply contrasted. If both men and women are expected to have more overlapping roles, the culture is called feminine. According to Hofstede's masculinity index, the Indonesian culture (masculinity = 42) is more feminine than the US (masculinity = 62), China (masculinity = 66), Italy (masculinity = 70), and Japan (masculinity = 95) (Hofstede Insights).

Hofstede also argued that Christianity displays a balanced tension between masculine teachings (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth), and feminine ideas (turn the other cheek). It seems that this balanced tension in Christian concepts, combined with the more feminine Indonesian culture, is manifested in similar levels of religiousness in male and female students in Indonesia.

On the other hand, our sample showed significant gender differences in R/S struggles. Male students reported higher R/S struggles than female students. Although there was no difference in the total religiousness of male and female students, each dimension of religiousness may function differently for males and females. Aditya et al. found that while the Believing (cognitive) and bonding (affective) dimensions of religiousness decrease R/S struggles, the behaving (morality) dimension increases R/S struggles. Since women, in general, are more attuned to their emotions, the bonding dimension, which helps to buffer against R/S struggles, tends to be more pronounced. However, more research is required to investigate gender differences in the different dimensions of religiousness and their effect on R/S struggles.

Based on the general strain theory (GST) proposed by Broidy & Agnew, who argued that males and females respond and cope differently to strain (1997), Joon Jang found that the same level of religiosity is more likely to help African American women avoid conflict with other people in reaction to the same level of anger and depression/anxiety than African American men (2007). Thus, women tend to internalize strain (depression and anxiety) and men tend to externalize their reactions to strain (anger, deviant behavior). This gender difference in coping strategies might explain the results of this study. Although no gender differences in total religiousness were observed, male students reported significantly higher R/S struggles than female students.

Krause et al. found that religious coping impacts more on men's alcohol use (2018). Furthermore, Maselko and Kubzansky (2006) discovered that the relationship between religious activities and health and well-being are stronger in men than in women. Hvidtjørn

wrote that men tend to use more negative coping strategies than women, such as “felt punished by God for my lack of devotion,” or “wondered what I did for God to punish me (2014).” It seems that men are more sensitive to strain, and combined with the specific image of God held by men, this leads to more R/S struggles in men than women.

This study’s results might imply that we should not treat men and women differently in terms of religious roles. Developing the feminine traits, such as (emotional) bonding (with God), might be beneficial for reducing R/S struggles in men. Aditya et al. also argued that putting a one-sided emphasis on the external behaving dimension, without intrinsic religious understanding, might increase R/S struggles (2018). This study suggests we should rethink the many ways we implement religious education in schools and universities. Generating healthy debates about religion and God might be beneficial for cultivating an intrinsic cognitive and affective religious understanding than blind authoritarian indoctrination. Imposing authoritarian rules of obedience may also inhibit authentic religious growth and create more R/S struggles than voluntary, winsome approaches.

Conclusions

Although many studies in the West have discovered that women are more religious than men, this study found no significant differences in the religiousness of male and female students in two Christian universities in Indonesia. Social and cultural explanations for this gender similarity in religiousness might be more compelling than physiological and personality theories that posit an inherent essential gender difference. The balanced masculine/feminine teachings in Christianity, combined with a culture that allows more overlapping roles for men and women, seem to explain the absence of gender differences in religiousness among Christian students in Indonesia.

On the other hand, male students reported higher R/S struggles than female students. The different ways men and women respond and cope with strain seem to explain this difference. Women are more attuned to their emotions and tend to internalize their responses to strain more than men. Thus, with the same level of religiousness, men experience more R/S struggles than women.

Religious education that is open to debate and voluntary participation might be more beneficial than an authoritarian and rigid insistence on obedience.

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