

Autobiographical narratives of spiritual experiences: Solitude, tragedy, and the absence of materialism

Nathaniel M. Lambert^{a*}, Tyler Stillman^b and Frank Fincham^c

^aSchool of Family Life, Brigham Young University, 2065 JFSB, Provo 84604, USA; ^bPsychology, Southern Utah University, Cedar, USA; ^cChild and Family Studies, Florida State University, Tallahassee, USA

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What are the differences between experiences that people consider spiritual and experiences that they consider enjoyable? Participants were asked to provide autobiographical narratives of either spiritual or enjoyable experiences, and the two types of narratives were compared. In Study 1 ($n=142$), the differences between the narratives was established via judge-based thematic content analysis. In Study 2 ($n=174$), differences were established by the use of linguistic analysis software. Across both studies, spiritual experiences were more likely to involve tragedy and less likely to mention social relationships or materialistic pursuits. Hence, spiritual experiences are described as triggered by tragedy, reflect greater social isolation, and less materialistic than enjoyable experiences.

Keywords: religion; spirituality; materialism

Religion is ubiquitous. It is a part of practically every known culture and has important impacts in determining how people behave, feel, and think (Sanderson & Roberts, 2008). For example, religious activities, such as prayer, are quite common. Over 95% of Americans reported believing in God (Fuller, 2001; Gallup & Lindsay, 1999; Inglehart, Basáñez, Díez-Medrano, Halman, & Luijckx, 2004). Religiosity can have a positive effect on a variety of indicators of well-being, such as decreased alcohol use (e.g. Benda, Pope, & Kelleher, 2006). Despite the widespread practice of religious and spiritual activities, social scientists have typically kept ‘their distance from religion and spirituality’ (Hill & Pargament, 2003, p. 65), limiting our understanding of the very nature of religious practices and spiritual experiences.

Indeed, spirituality extends beyond organized religion and spiritual experiences are often highly valued and sought-after even by those who are not at all religious. Of course, people also cherish experiences that they do not consider spiritual. In the current work, we sought to clarify the nature of a spiritual experience by determining the ways it might vary from events that people experience as enjoyable.

Spirituality is increasingly used to refer to the personal, subjective side of religious experience with religion being used to designate organized systems of spiritual beliefs, rituals, and cumulative traditions associated with a group (Hill et al., 2000). The most common method researchers have used to understand spiritual experiences is self-report questionnaires or surveys (e.g. Seidlitz et al., 2002; Underwood & Teresi, 2002). Such

research is valuable for gaging individual differences in spirituality. Our interest was not in gaging individual differences, but rather in understanding common elements in the events that people experience as spiritual.

There are a number of approaches one might employ to understand the themes common to spiritual experiences (such as a checklist or structured interview). In the current work, we collected autobiographical narratives – first-person accounts of experiences from participants’ lives. These accounts provide genuine, naturally occurring experiences from people’s lives and how people have interpreted them in their own thoughts and words. Such methods have been used to elucidate anger and victimization (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990), life change (Heatheron & Nichols, 1994), self-understanding (McAdams, 2006; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006), heartbreak (Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993), commitment and generativity (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997), and how free will is experienced (Stillman, Baumeister, & Mele, 2011). Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatheron (1985) argued that autobiographical narratives are especially well suited for studying phenomena that are difficult to examine in a laboratory. Hence, they seem well suited to examine spiritual experiences.

In the current research, half of the participants were instructed to write about an event that they deemed to be spiritual. Others were instructed to write about an event that they considered enjoyable. The content of these autobiographical accounts was examined by two different methods. In Study 1, we subjected the

*Corresponding author. Email: nlambert@byu.edu

narratives to the analysis of independent raters (research assistants naïve to study aims), who evaluated each account according to our expectations for how the two kinds of accounts would differ. In Study 2, we analyzed a different set of narratives using software that tracks the frequency of specific themes in language (Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count, Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2007).

We expected that the two sets of narratives would differ systematically. Specifically, we predicted that spiritual experiences would be less social, less materialistic, and more tragic than enjoyable experiences. The next sections will elaborate hypotheses and predictions about how the two sets of narratives would differ.

Solitude

Spiritual and religious leaders such as Moses, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed all devoted time to solitude, and seemingly grew spiritually as a result. Today, solitary prayer and meditation continue to be essential to many faith traditions (France, 1996), and there is evidence to suggest that time in solitude can improve mental and spiritual well-being (Burger, 1998). These observations and empirical findings led us to expect that spiritual experiences would be more closely associated with solitude than enjoyable experiences.

An analysis of how people experience solitude also indicates that solitude has a spiritual dimension. Researchers categorized reactions to solitude in three ways: loneliness, inner-directed solitude, and outer-directed solitude (Long, Seburn, Averill, & More, 2003). Negative solitary experiences were characterized as loneliness. There were two positive reactions to it, one being characterized by self-discovery (inner-directed) and the other was characterized by spirituality (outer-directed). Hence, spirituality is an important part of solitude, although not all solitude is experienced as spiritual.

We acknowledge that one might make the opposite prediction, namely, that spiritual experiences might be highly social events. This is because most faiths encourage congregating on a regular basis with fellow members of the same faith tradition. Indeed, in some faith groups (e.g. Pentecostal) spiritual experiences such as speaking in tongues can be a very public event. Thus, people might experience spiritual events when around other believers. We thought this plausible and sought to answer this question with data.

Tragedy

Spirituality may help people cope with difficult life events. Empirical studies show that religiousness is generally intensified or 'quickened' in critical situations (Pargament, 1997). Pargament also suggested that during stressful life events, common religious beliefs can be used for coping. Religion may have its greatest impact

on coping during challenging times by helping to restore beliefs that the world is safe, fair, predictable, and controllable and that a benevolent God is in charge of it all (Dull & Skokan, 1995; Pargament, 1997). For example, several scholars have stressed that the spiritual activity of prayer is important to the coping process (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Pargament, 1997; Parker & Brown, 1982). Hence, stressful and tragic events may cause individuals to turn their thoughts to a Higher Power and thereby increase the chance of having a spiritual experience.

The absence of materialism

Spiritual and religious leaders have long argued that materialistic pursuits are in conflict with spiritual pursuits. Leaders including Jesus, Buddha, Ghandi, and Thoreau urged followers to avoid materialism (McKibben, 1998). That is, some of the most influential spiritual leaders independently concluded that spirituality and materialism are at odds. Hence, we predicted that spiritual experiences would be devoid of materialism and materialistic aspirations.

Recent empirical research also supports our expectation. A cross-cultural analysis of the similarities and differences in human values found that self-enhancement values (characterized by materialistic pursuits) and self-transcendence values (characterized by religion and spirituality) are intrinsically and thoroughly in conflict. According to this analysis, self-transcendence is pursued at the cost of self-enhancement and self-enhancement is pursued at the cost of self-transcendence. As a result, we expected enjoyable experiences to include a more materialistic focus than spiritual experiences.

Study 1

Study 1 was an initial test of the hypothesis that spiritual experiences would be less social and less materialistic, but more tragic, than enjoyable experiences. It analyzed natural language use in narratives via *judge-based thematic content analysis*. Specifically, we relied on the average rating of independent coders to determine the frequency with which materialism, tragedy, and sociality were themes in the essays.

Method

Participants

Participants were 142 undergraduates (85 women) from a large Southeastern public university who participated in exchange for partial course credit. Eight participants (5%) were excluded, as some left materials blank ($n=3$) or indicated they had not had a spiritual experience ($n=5$). Thus, there were 150 participants originally.

Materials and procedure

After giving informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions by virtue of the narrative topic they were given. Participants in the spiritual-experience condition ($n = 75$) were instructed to describe

... the most spiritual moment of your life. What this means is up to you, but it may entail a closeness with God, a sense of connection to humanity, a closeness with nature, or feeling ‘at one’ with the universe.

These instructions were informed by Worthington and Aten’s (2009) observations about spirituality, and were intended to be inclusive. Participants in the control condition ($n = 67$) were asked to describe ‘the most enjoyable moment of your life.’ All participants were encouraged to describe the event as fully as possible.

A group of six trained research assistants, working independently, read the narratives and evaluated them on several dimensions. All dimensions were coded according to the same (very conservative) criteria, based on Baumeister et al. (1990). Everything was coded as 0 unless the narrative included clear evidence of the factor in question, in which case the dimension would be coded as 1. That is, if there was some ambiguity with respect to the coding of a certain narrative, the default coding was 0. Below, we describe the dimensions that were coded and the directions given to the coders.

Solitude and sociality

The variable *Positive Social Impact* was coded dichotomously, such that narratives in which the writer created new social bonds or forged stronger social bonds were coded as 1. All other narratives were rated as 0. Reliability was high for *Positive Social Impact*, as measured by intra-class correlation coefficient, ($ICC = 0.80$) and by the average of inter-rater correlations (mean $r = 0.42$). We also coded for a specific kind of social connectedness, namely romance. *Romance* was also coded with 0 indicating no romantic activity and 1 signaling the presence

of romantic or sexual activity. Reliability was high ($ICC = 0.91$; mean $r = 0.65$).

Tragedy

Research assistants coded for the presence of *Sadness*. Narratives that evoked a sense of sadness were coded 1, whereas others were coded as 0 ($ICC = 0.90$; mean $r = 0.61$). Research assistants also coded the narratives for *Tragedy* explicitly, such that essays in which a tragic event was mentioned were coded 1 ($ICC = 0.93$; mean $r = 0.69$).

Materialism

We assessed the presence of *Money Gain* in the narratives, such that all were coded 0 unless the writer reported having gained money. There was marginal reliability in judging this dimension, $ICC = 0.49$; mean $r = 0.40$. We also assessed *Material Possessions*; narratives that included expensive material goods (e.g. boats, fine clothing) were coded as 1 ($ICC = 0.87$; mean $r = 0.53$).

Results

We averaged rater codings for each rated dimension, such that the highest rating possible for a given dimension would be 1 (assuming perfect agreement among coders, and all essays in a given condition were found to contain the variable of interest). The results are summarized in Table 1, and indicate that participants in the spiritual-experience condition wrote accounts that differed in a reliable and systematic manner from those in the enjoyable-experience condition. Spiritual-experience narratives described events that were low in sociality, high in tragedy, and low in materialism (see Table 1).

Narratives of spiritual experiences involved markedly less Positive Social Impact ($M = 0.18$) than did narratives of enjoyable experiences ($M = 0.48$). There was a very high frequency of Positive Social Impact mentioned among those in the enjoyable-experiences condition

Table 1. Independent evaluations of narratives as a function of condition.

	Spiritual experience		Enjoyable experience		$t(139)$	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
<i>Sociality</i>						
Positive social impact	0.18	(0.25)	0.48	(0.30)	6.29	<0.001
Romance	0.03	(0.11)	0.09	(0.25)	1.84	0.07
<i>Tragedy</i>						
Sadness	0.23	(0.34)	0.04	(0.14)	4.45	<0.001
Tragic events	0.23	(0.37)	0.04	(0.14)	4.09	<0.001
<i>Materialism</i>						
Money acquisition	0.02	(0.09)	0.05	(0.09)	2.07	0.04
Material possessions	0.03	(0.11)	0.13	(0.27)	2.83	0.005

Note: Mean values were averaged across coders for each dimension. Possible mean values range from 0 to 1.

(assuming perfect coder agreement, nearly half the narratives mentioned Positive Social Impact). In comparison, spiritual experiences were relatively solitary. Somewhat to our surprise, romance was very rarely mentioned as one's most enjoyable experience ($M=0.09$), but it was even less frequently mentioned as a spiritual experience ($M=0.03$). (However, this effect was only marginally significant). Hence, spiritual experiences are not only solitary relative to enjoyable experiences, but in absolute terms as well.

Tragedy was more common among spiritual experiences ($M=0.23$) than enjoyable experiences ($M=0.04$). Similarly, sadness was relatively common among those describing spiritual experiences ($M=0.23$), but very rare among those recounting an enjoyable experience ($M=0.04$). Enjoyable-experience narratives were almost completely free of tragedy and sadness, but spiritual experiences were not.

The acquisition of money was very rarely mentioned in the enjoyable-experiences narratives ($M=0.05$), but it was even rarer in the spiritual-experiences narratives ($M=0.02$). Likewise, spiritual experiences very infrequently involved material possessions ($M=0.03$), and material possessions were more common in enjoyable experiences ($M=0.13$). In general, materialism was not an essential aspect of enjoyable experiences, but there was almost a total absence of materialism in spiritual-experience narratives.

We note that variance was high for all dimensions. This is a consequence of assessing natural language (Pennebaker, Chung, Ireland, Gonzales, & Booth, 2007). Still, spiritual-experience narratives and enjoyable-experience narratives were sufficiently different to produce a number of significant effects. Results were consistent with expectations, such that spiritual experiences were less social, less materialistic, and more tragic than enjoyable experiences.

Study 2

Study 2 sought to build on Study 1, again using autobiographical narratives of enjoyable and spiritual experiences. Instead of establishing the content of the narratives by the consensus of independent raters, the essays were analyzed using a word count strategy. Specifically, we used text analysis software that searched for over 2300 words or word stems within the narratives, thus providing a completely objective analysis of the content.

Method

Participants

There were 175 participants originally, but one gave incomplete data. Thus, participants were 174 undergraduates (125 women) who participated in exchange for partial course credit.

Materials and procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to write an essay about either an enjoyable experience or a spiritual experience. Instructions were identical to those described in Study 1, and we assessed the narratives by using text analysis software, namely the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count, or LIWC (Pennebaker, Francis, et al., 2007). This software computes the percentage with which words/stems appear in text, according to several psychological and linguistic categories described below.

Solitude and sociality

One important measure of sociality is the frequency of *Social Processes* words. These include all nonfirst-person-singular personal pronouns, as well as verbs such as 'talking' and 'sharing', as such verbs convey sociality. *First-Person-Singular pronouns* (e.g. I, me, mine) reflect an emphasis on the individual and a de-emphasis on the group, indicating low sociality. *First-Person-Plural Pronouns* (e.g. we, our, us) suggest that the writer is taking a collective perspective, rather than a solitary perspective. Words indicating that one has a *Family-Focus* (e.g. daughter, husband, aunt) or a *Friend-Focus* (e.g. buddy, friend, neighbor) also suggest high sociality.

Tragedy

Words describing *Death* (e.g. bury, coffin, die) are good indicators of tragedy. One would also expect that tragedy would involve infrequent use of words conveying *Positive Emotion* (e.g. love, nice, sweet) and frequent use of words indicating *Negative Emotion* (e.g. hurt, ugly, devastated). A specific subset of negative emotions, namely words denoting *Sadness* (e.g. crying, grief, sad), are also reliable markers of tragic events.

Materialism

Words that emphasize a focus on *Money* (e.g. cash, owe, dollar) suggest that one has a materialistic orientation. Words that denote *Achievement-Focus* (e.g. earn, win, excel) indicate a desire to get ahead of others. Similarly, words describing *Work-Focus* (e.g. job, boss, employer) also indicate an emphasis on the world of paid work.

Results

Results were consistent with those obtained in Study 1, namely that spiritual experience were less social, less materialistic, and more tragic than enjoyable experiences. The LIWC calculates the percentage of words in a text that meet the specific criteria, so that differences are not attributable to differences in narrative length. Thus, the mean values listed below represent the percentage of

Table 2. Linguistic analysis of narratives as a function of condition.

	Spiritual experience		Enjoyable experience		<i>t</i> (172)	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
<i>Sociality</i>						
Social process	6.92	5.97	8.75	6.95	1.87	0.06
First-person singular	10.55	4.39	8.03	4.46	3.72	<0.001
First-person plural	0.83	1.52	1.91	2.41	3.63	<0.001
Family-focus	1.05	1.65	2.38	6.09	2.08	0.04
Friend-focus	0.19	0.60	0.81	1.33	4.11	<0.001
<i>Tragedy</i>						
Death	0.36	0.98	0.05	0.22	2.68	<0.001
Positive emotions	2.98	2.65	4.98	3.19	4.51	<0.001
Negative emotions	1.15	1.59	0.53	0.97	2.98	0.003
Sadness	0.33	0.72	0.11	0.48	2.42	0.03
<i>Materialism</i>						
Money	0.21	0.66	0.73	1.43	3.24	0.001
Work-focus	0.67	1.03	1.77	2.87	3.53	0.001
Achievement-focus	1.08	1.55	2.14	2.45	3.50	0.001

words fitting the category for both conditions (see Table 2).

The LIWC output indicated that spiritual experiences were less social than enjoyable experiences, as there were marginally more occurrences of social process words in the enjoyable-experience condition (*M* = 8.75) than the spiritual experiences (*M* = 6.92). Instances of the first-person singular were frequent for spiritual experiences (*M* = 10.55) relative to enjoyable experiences (*M* = 8.03), whereas the first-person plural was infrequent for spiritual experiences (*M* = 0.83) relative to enjoyable experiences (*M* = 1.91). There was also more frequent mention of family in enjoyable-experience narratives (*M* = 2.38) relative to spiritual-experience narratives (*M* = 1.05), and friends were more often mentioned in the enjoyable-experience condition (*M* = 0.81) than the spiritual-experience condition (*M* = 0.19). The overall pattern of results is consistent with sociality being a much more important part of enjoyable experiences than of spiritual experiences (Table 3).

Words indicating the tragedy were more common among those writing about a spiritual experience. In particular, death was more commonly mentioned in spiritual-experience narratives (*M* = 0.36) than enjoyable-experience narratives (*M* = 0.05). Emotions are also consistent with the expectation that tragedy is more common to spiritual experiences than enjoyable experiences. Positive-emotion words were more common for enjoyable experiences (*M* = 4.98) than spiritual experiences (*M* = 2.98). Negative-emotion words were more common for spiritual experiences (*M* = 1.15) than enjoyable experiences (*M* = 0.53); and in particular, words indicating sadness were more common in the spiritual-experience condition (*M* = 0.33) relative to the enjoyable-experience condition (*M* = 0.11).

Materialism was found to be a more common theme among those describing an enjoyable experience than a spiritual experience. Money was mentioned with greater

Table 3. Summary of Study 1 and Study 2.

Measure	Method	Spiritual experience	Enjoyable experience
<i>Sociality</i>			
Positive social impact	Coded	Low frequency	High frequency
Romance	Coded	Low frequency	High frequency
Social process	Word Count	Low frequency	High frequency
First-person singular	Word Count	High frequency	Low frequency
First-person plural	Word Count	Low frequency	High frequency
Family	Word Count	Low frequency	High frequency
Friends	Word Count	Low frequency	High frequency
<i>Tragedy</i>			
Tragic events	Coded	High frequency	Low frequency
Sadness	Coded	High frequency	Low frequency
Death	Word Count	High frequency	Low frequency
Positive emotions	Word Count	Low frequency	High frequency
Negative emotions	Word Count	High frequency	Low frequency
Sadness	Word Count	High frequency	Low frequency
<i>Materialism</i>			
Money acquisition	Coded	Low frequency	High frequency
Material possessions	Coded	Low frequency	High frequency
Money	Word Count	Low frequency	High frequency
Work-focus	Word Count	Low frequency	High frequency
Achievement-focus	Word Count	Low frequency	High frequency

frequency in the enjoyable-experience condition ($M=0.73$) as compared to the spiritual-experience condition ($M=0.21$). Getting ahead of others was part of enjoyable experiences, but not spiritual experiences; Participants writing about enjoyable experiences were more likely to use work-focused words ($M=1.77$) than were participants writing about spiritual experiences ($M=0.67$). Likewise, enjoyable experiences had a greater emphasis on achievement ($M=2.14$) than spiritual experiences ($M=1.08$).

General discussion

When people experience something important and memorable, what determines whether it is considered a spiritual experience, an enjoyable experience, both, or something else? The current work addressed this question by asking laypersons to report on their spiritual or enjoyable experiences, using their own words. Results indicated that narratives of spiritual and enjoyable experiences varied in consistent ways: spiritual experiences are more likely to involve tragedy and are less likely to include social relationships or materialistic pursuits. These findings are important because they elucidate the nature of a spiritual experience, which is a common phenomenon among individuals.

Study 1 used the consensus of trained, independent coders to evaluate the content of the narratives. A limitation of this method is that the use of coders as cultural informants as was done here could yield coding results that are idiosyncratic and specific to the subculture from which coders are drawn. To address this concern, Study 2 used an entirely different means of quantifying the difference between the two experiences, namely text analysis software. A potential limitation of this method is that it rests on the assumption that everyday word use conveys psychological information over and above the literal meaning of the words and the semantic context in which they appear – for example, this method could not detect sarcasm. Despite their respective and quite different limitations, the findings from the two studies yielded consistent results; both studies provided evidence that spiritual experiences were more tragic, less social, and less materialistic than enjoyable experiences.

Baumeister et al., (1985) proposed that autobiographical narratives are especially useful for understanding variables that do not lend themselves to experimentation. The results of the current studies have a high degree of external validity, because participants are reporting their own experiences and their interpretation thereof.

Frequently, research on spirituality or religiosity focus on ways in which people differ, either as a function of denomination or level of religiosity. Certainly, a number of individual difference variables, including religiosity, might have impacted how people interpreted the important events they described. In the current work,

we sought to find commonalities in the ways people experience spirituality.

It was not possible to consider every possible way in which spiritual experiences differ from enjoyable experiences. Hence, our investigation centered on three empirically derived variables: solitude, materialism, and tragedy. In addition, other differences that were not assessed are possible, and indeed plausible. Future research aimed at understanding the nature of spiritual experiences should consider further variables that we did not include in the current investigation.

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