Research Study

Loving Thyself with Character for Others: A Comparison of 'Type I' and 'Type II' Christians

by Derek de la Pena, 2011

Abstract

The current study considers the controversial topic of 'self-love' from Christian and secular positive psychology viewpoints. Two concepts of self-love (proper vs. improper) were compared with Christians (n = 467) who listed God as the most important factor to happiness ('proper self-love', Type I, n = 133) and a second group ('improper self-love', Type II, n = 334) who considered some other variable as more important. Dependent measures included the value of fifteen biblically-based character qualities (e.g. kindness, forgiveness, hope, to name a few) directed towards others and oneself, as well as life-satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985) and orientation to happiness (Peterson et al., 2005) measures. Several self-enhancement values (e.g., money and physical appearance) were compared as well. Results indicated that Type I participants had significantly higher character scores for a variety of character qualities as well as higher scores for meaning in life, engagement, and life-satisfaction, while Type II participants had higher scores for the value of money. It is argued that the self-love controversy is largely due to a conflating of terms related to character directed towards others/oneself and self-enhancement. A model of 'proper self-love' is suggested that consists of a 'core' (i.e., love for God and others) and self-character components, and is compared to an 'improper' model based, in part, on the warnings set forth in 2 Timothy 3.

Introduction

For many years the concept of *self-love* has been controversial from a Christian standpoint because of the warnings apparent in the New Testament. Brownback (1982) and Adams (1986) both cited 2 Timothy 3:2 as a caveat to the self-esteem movement of humanistic theorists and evangelicals who emphasize the importance of feeling-good-about-self (c. Watson, Morris, & Hood, 1989). According to the Apostle Paul, in the last days, the apparently condemned will be "lovers of their own selves" as opposed to others and God (2 TIM 3:2-4). Brownback (1982) and Adams (1986) both criticized Christian evangelicals that promote self-love as a biblical concept. Both authors convincingly argued that idea of self-love is not explicitly promoted in the New Testament, but rather has been implied by many individuals from the command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (e.g., Mathew 22:39, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27).

Although the self-love implication, from verses such as Mathew 22:39, is still currently debatable from a biblical context, there is no debate among Christians regarding the Great Command to love God first. Pope (1991) discussed Thomas Aquinas' concept of "proper self-love" as a process of love based on loving God first as opposed to "improper self-love" which is associated with "loving God as a secondary good" (p. 387). The idea of proper self-love can be likened to the process of sanctification, which considers human flourishing from a God-focused perspective as opposed to a self-focused one (e.g., Hackney, 2010; Hall, Langer, & McMartin, 2010; Murphy, 2005). The current paper attempts to distinguish between two concepts of self-love (proper vs. improper) by investigating differences in character values between Christians based, in part, on the warnings set forth in 2 Timothy 3 (New Living Translation, NLT), which clearly refers to an improper form of self-love:

You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that! (2 Timothy 3:1-5).

If a concept of proper self-love is to be operationally defined (and generally agreed upon) from a Christian standpoint, then clearly, it will be very different than the improper form of self-love suggested by 2 Timothy. More importantly, a love for God must be life's priority with proper self-love as well as the 'second and equally important' command to love others as oneself (e.g., Mathew 22:37-40, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27). The current paper is exploratory in nature and considers Christians who believe that God is the most important factor to happiness (i.e., requisite for 'proper' self-love) compared to Christians who believe some other variable (e.g., family, health, competence, etc.) other than God is more important (i.e., 'improper' self-love). The primary interest is determining whether or not these two groups of Christians differ in the degree to which character is valued and how it is directed towards others and oneself. Additionally, the degree to which these individuals might differ in orientation to happiness (i.e., meaning, engagement, and pleasure; Peterson, Park, & Seligman, 2005) and life-satisfaction are also areas of investigation.

Since the initiation of the positive psychology movement by Martin Seligman in 1998, much research has been conducted in the area of character and happiness. Peterson and Seligman (2004) developed a classification of twenty-four character strengths that are purported to be valued globally and are associated with psychological well-being (see Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006). It has been emphasized that although many of the character strengths that

Peterson and Seligman (2004) identified overlap with biblical characteristics of love (i.e., 1Corinthians 13, Hall et al., 2010), the study and interpretation of character will continue to differ with secular and Christian psychologists (Hackney, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; Murphy, 2005). For example, Nancey Murphy (2005), strongly influenced by MacIntyre's (1984) conception of ethics, emphasized the importance of distinguishing between 'ungraced' human character relative to ideal character developed through obedience to God. Although *religiousness* is listed as one of the twenty-four character strengths set forth by Peterson and Seligman (2004), the concept of graced versus ungraced human nature is certainly not a topic of the secular positive psychology movement.

The current study considers Murphy's (2005) three questions regarding graced versus ungraced character development: "1. What is the character of untutored and ungraced human nature, 2. (w)hat is the character of ideal human existence, (and) 3. (w)hat are the means by which the transition can be made?" (p. 56). Simply stated, it is hypothesized that individuals who do not place God as the most important factor to happiness will not value and develop character, as defined by Christian qualities of love (1 Corinthians 13), to the same degree as those who love God first. More specifically, 'God-first' Christians learn (via grace/experience) to value biblical character qualities more than Christians who although believe in God, believe some other variable is more important in the pursuit of happiness (i.e., improper self-love). Additionally, 'God-first' individuals ultimately become more 'Christ-like' in behavior towards others (e.g., patience and kindness) than their ungraced counterparts, moving them closer to ideal human existence (i.e., Murphy's second question), which would be characterized by a society that values (and behaves in line with) the virtue of serving others ahead of oneself. Conversely, it is argued that ungraced individuals are more apt to develop tendencies such as those depicted by 2

Timothy 3 (e.g., ungrateful, love pleasure, money, etc.), and would be more likely to be self-serving in nature. Touching on Murphy's (2005) third question, the beginning and/or transition towards ideal human existence must begin with the understanding that God must be the center of a person's being (i.e., first in priority); without this factor in its proper order, individuals will be limited in their ability to develop character in the way man was designed to do so.

In the current investigation, a questionnaire was developed to measure character qualities that overlap, either explicitly or implicitly, with the Apostle Paul's characterization of love (1 Corinthians 13) and many of the twenty-four character strengths identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004). An example of an explicitly overlapping character quality is kindness (e.g., 'love is kind', 1 Corinthians 13:4); however, most of the identified character strengths are more implicitly associated. For example, the opposite of "(l)ove is not….boastful or proud" (1 Corinthians 13:4) can be associated with the character strength of *humility* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Below is 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 (NLT) with parentheses included with the proposed associated character strength.

> "Love is patient (1. self-regulation) and kind (2. kindness). Love is not jealous (3. gratitude) or boastful (4. humility) or proud (humility again) or rude (kindness again). Love does not demand its own way (5. open-mindedness). Love is not irritable (self-regulation again), and it keeps no record of when it has been wronged (6. forgiveness). It is never glad about injustice (7. fairness), but rejoices whenever the truth (8. authenticity) wins out. Love never gives up (9. Persistence), never loses faith (10. religiousness), is always hopeful (11. hope), and endures (12. bravery and/or 13. resilience, and/or 14. hardiness) through every circumstance."

Twelve of the fourteen character strengths listed above are among the twenty-four identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004). *Resilience* and *hardiness* were included (in addition to *bravery*) because "endures through every circumstance" suggests a quality that implies more than just bravery. Resiliency generally refers to the process of individuals thriving in the face of

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adversity (Werner, 1982), while hardiness is more specific to finding meaning trough trials (Kobasa, 1979). It has been suggested by Christian scholars (e.g., Hackney, 2010; Hall et al., 2010) that the character taxonomy of Peterson and Seligman (2004) is limited because it does not adequately assess character qualities that are associated with life trials. Therefore, resilience and hardiness were included as measures of 'endurance.' By conceptualizing character qualities as characteristic of love, particularly as applied to loving others ahead of oneself, it becomes possible to measure character differences (and other well-being measures) between individuals that believe God must be first place, with respect to the concept of happiness, compared to those who do not.

Method

Participants

Four-hundred and sixty-seven college students (Mean Age = 24.32 yrs., SD = 7.70; Female = 76%, Male = 24%) from a public university in the state of Texas served as participants. Participant inclusion was based on a demographic question that acknowledged belief in Christianity. No distinction was made amongst Christian denominations. Participants answered an online questionnaire consisting of statements related to current level of life satisfaction (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), orientation to happiness (Peterson et al., 2005), as well as character and self-enhancement values.

Measures

Type I vs. Type II Christians - Classification Question

One open-ended question was asked that was designed to classify participants into two groups: 1) Type I, and 2) Type II participants. The question asked participants to list the most important component to happiness. Participants that made any reference to a connection with

God as the most important factor to happiness were classified as *Type I* participants (n = 133, 28.4%), while *Type II* participants (n = 336, 71.6%) listed some other factor as most important. The top five variables listed by Type II participants were: 1) Family (48%, n=159), 2) Wellness (16%, n=54), 3) Significant-other relationships (11%, n=36), 4) Financial/educational/occupational success (10%, n=33), 5) (tie) Children and Friends (5%, n=16 each).

Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS)

The SWLS (Diener et al., 1985) measures an individual's general level of life satisfaction with 5 questions: "1) In most ways my life is close to my ideal, 2) The conditions of my life are excellent, 3) I am satisfied with my life, 4) So far I have got the important things I want in life, 5) If I could live my life over I would change almost nothing" (p. 72). Each question is scored from 1 (low satisfaction) to 7 (high satisfaction), and the five questions are totaled. Means and standard deviations of the current sample (M=23.58, SD=6.69) were very similar to those established in the Diener et al. (1985) study with college students (M=23.50, SD=6.43). The psychometric properties of the SWLS have been reported to be acceptable (Diener, 1994; Diener et al., 1985). Whether or not Type I and II participants differed in perceptions of life satisfaction was explored.

Orientation to Happiness

The Orientation to Happiness (Peterson et al., 2005) measure consists of three sub-scales (life of meaning, life of pleasure, and life of engagement) consisting of six questions each (18 total questions), with questions scored from 5 (very much like me) to 1 (very much unlike me). The three scales were designed to measure three possible orientations to happiness (Seligman, 2002), and contain content such as: "1) Regardless of what I am doing, time passes very quickly

(engagement), 2) My life serves a higher purpose (meaning), and 3) Life is too short to postpone the pleasures it can provide (pleasure)" (Peterson et al., 2005, p. 31). According to Peterson et al. (2005), the three sub-scales are correlated but distinguishable, and each scale has acceptable psychometric properties. This measure was used because it has a pleasure sub-scale (i.e., 'love of pleasure', 2 Timothy 3:4); it was hypothesized that Type II participants would score higher on the pleasure scale than their Type I counterparts. Whether or not differences between the two groups were evident with the meaning and engagement sub-scales was also of interest.

Character Statements

Forty-two Likert-scaled (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree) statements were assessed concerning twelve of the twenty-four character strengths identified by Peterson and Seligman (2004), plus resiliency (Werner, 1982) and hardiness (Kobasa, 1979). Three statements for each identified character strength, were created to measure both value and action (towards others and self) aspects of the particular character strength in question. For example, regarding the character strength of kindness, participants first responded to the question, "I value the character trait of kindness" (i.e., value). Next, they answered two experientially-worded questions, 1) "I regularly make the effort to be kind to others" (i.e., character *other-action*), and 2) "I regularly make the effort to be kind to myself" (i.e., character *self-action*). The character statements (aside from resiliency and hardiness) were based primarily on summary definitions provided by Peterson (2006). In fact, one parenthetical definition (i.e., value: hopefulness) was verbatim to Peterson's (2006) definition of hope (p. 145). On the other hand, the character strength of self-regulation was adjusted to be more representative of the biblical implication. For example, Peterson (2006) defined self-regulation as "regulating what one feels and does, being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions" (p. 144). The value statement in the current

survey was more specific to "patience" and "irritability" referred to in 1 Corinthians 13:4-5 (i.e., "i.e., the ability to regulate one's own emotions, such as not becoming easily irritated, or being patient").

Regarding character directed towards others, the majority of the character (self-regulation, kindness, gratitude, humility, open-mindedness, forgiveness, fairness, authenticity, and persistence) statements were worded in terms of expressing the particular character quality towards others (e.g., I regularly make the effort to *forgive* other people when they have hurt me). However, several of the character (hope, bravery, resilience, and hardiness) statements were difficult to word as an expression of the particular character quality towards others and therefore were worded as helping others discover their own character strength (e.g., I regularly do my best to help other people be more *hopeful*). Religiousness was the only character question that did not have an 'other-action' question, as it was challenging to word religiousness directed toward others.

The primary hypotheses of the study were as follows: 1) The Type I participants would value the character measures more than the Type II group and would 2) also have higher scores regarding character directed towards others (i.e., character *other-action*). Whether or not the groups would differ in character directed towards self (i.e., character *self-action*) was exploratory.

Self-enhancement Statements

In addition to the statements pertaining to character, several *self-enhancement* values were also addressed with statements assessing both the level of the particular value in question as well as its associated prevalence (i.e., self-action). The self-enhancement values selected purportedly benefit the individual, at least by U.S. cultural standards (i.e., TV commercials, see

Chen & Schweitzer, 1996; Gram, 2007), but have biblical warnings associated with overvaluing

them (e.g., the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, 1 Timothy 6:10). Money, material

goods, physical appearance and skill-competence were assessed, with both *value* and *self-action*

questions. For example, regarding money, the value question read, "I value money," followed by

the related self-action question, "I regularly engage in activities that increase the chances of me

having money."

Results

Life Satisfaction (SWLS) and Orientation to Happiness

T-test analyses on the SWLS (Diener et al., 1985) and Orientation to Happiness (Peterson

et al., 2005) questionnaires revealed that Type I participants had significantly higher levels of

life-satisfaction (t = 3.45, p < .01) , meaning (t = 7.24, p < .001), and engagement (t = 3.36, p <

.01) compared to the Remaining participants. Although not statistically significant, the pleasure

measure of the Orientation to Happiness questionnaire (Peterson et al., 2005) indicated a trend (p

= .11) with God-first participants scoring lower with this sub-scale (see Table 1).

Table 1

Groups	Life-Satisfaction	Meaning	Engagement	Pleasure
Type I Participants (n=133)	*25.28 (6.61)	*24.32 (4.14)	*19.05 (3.66)	19.58 (5.18)
Type II Participants (n=334)	22.96 (6.52)	21.24 (4.14)	17.86 (3.39)	~20.37 (4.61)
TOTAL Participants (n=467)	23.62 (6.62)	22.12 (4.37)	18.20 (3.51)	20.14 (4.79)
Group Comparison Means for Life-Satisfaction, Meaning, Engagement, and Pleasure Scales * = p < .01 ~ Note: p = .11 For pleasure (parentheses indicates standard deviations)				

Character and Self-Enhancement Statements

Statistically significant differences existed between Type I and Type II participants with a

number of the character statements; in fact, several revealed statistical significance for each of

the of the character measures (value, other-action, and self-action). Again, *value* represented the degree to which the character strength in question was valued, while *other-action* measured character directed towards other people. Finally, *self-action* concerned character directed towards oneself. T-test analyses revealed higher values for God-first participants for each of the three character measures for humility (value: t = 4.63, p <001, other-action: t = 4.35, p < .001, self-action: t = 4.23, p. < .001), forgiveness (value: t = 3.86, p < .001, other-action: t = 5.83, p < .001, self-action: t = 3.67, p < .001), gratitude (value: t = 2.90, p < .01, other-action: t = 2.10, p < .05, self-action: t = 4.71, p < .001), hardiness (value: t = 3.98, p < .001, other-action: t = 2.71, p < .01, self-action: t = 2.19, p < .05), and resilience (value: t = 2.14, p < .05, other-action: t = 3.87, p < .001, self-action: t = 3.01, p < .01, see Table 2).

Table 2

Character Values	Degree of Character Value		Action of Character Towards Others		Action of Character Towards Self	
	Type I	Type II	Type I	Type II	Type I	Type II
Humility	**6.27	5.78	**6.01	5.49	**5.93	5.42
	(.95)	(1.20)	(1.08)	(1.30)	(1.14)	(1.19)
Forgiveness	**6.17	5.73	**5.86	5.13	**5.45	4.87
	(1.02)	(1.29)	(1.08)	(1.52)	(1.43)	(1.61)
Gratitude	**6.47	6.23	*6.39	6.17	**5.87	5.35
	(.74)	(.83)	(.98)	(1.06)	(1.21)	(1.44)
Hardiness	**6.20	5.79	**5.99	5.69	*5.59	5.28
	(.93)	(1.15)	(1.07)	(1.12)	(1.38)	(1.37)
Resilience	*6.19	5.97	** 6.05	5.65	**5.75	5.37
	(.96)	(.97)	(.94)	(1.16)	(1.10)	(1.26)
Religiousness	**6.65	5.90	N/A	N/A	**5.94	4.45
	(.71)	(1.13)			(1.24)	(1.60)
Hope	**6.36	6.17	**6.20	5.77	6.24	6.03
	(.87)	(.91)	(8.33)	(1.18)	(1.00)	(1.09)
Self-Regulation	5.89	5.75	*5.93	5.61	5.62	5.52
	(1.17)	(1.18)	(1.14)	(1.27)	(1.39)	(1.27)
Authenticity	6.33	6.17	6.12	5.95	*6.24	5.97
	(.78)	(.89)	(.99)	(1.03)	(1.02)	(1.03)
Non-significant Means						
Persistence	~6.19	5.99	5.86	5.76	~6.16	5.94
	(.95)	(1.00)	(1.21)	(1.12)	(.98)	(1.14)

Kindness	6.34 (.88)	6.30 (.85)	6.26 (.82)	6.20 (.85)	5.85 (1.29)	5.72 (1.22)
Fairness	6.23 (.96)	6.15 (.87)	~6.23 (.81)	6.06 (.89)	5.29 (1.48)	5.10 (1.53)
Open-mindedness	5.92 (1.22)	6.09 (.91)	5.86 (1.17)	5.90 (1.14)	5.81 (1.18)	5.81 (1.20)
Bravery	5.92 (1.02)	5.87 (1.04)	5.65 (1.12)	5.46 (1.21)	5.60 (1.09)	5.47 (1.17)
** = p < .01 * = p < .05 ~ = p > .05 < .10 (parentheses indicates standard deviations) Comparisons are between God-first (n=133) and Remaining (n=334) participants.							

Additionally, Type I participants scored higher with measures of religiousness for value ($t = 8.72$, $p < .001$) and self-action ($t = 10.72$, $p < .001$), and hope for value ($t = 2.07$, $p < .05$) and other-action ($t = 4.47$, $p < .001$). Type I participants also scored higher for other-action with self-regulation ($t = 2.54$, $p < .05$) and self-action with authenticity ($t = 2.59$, $p < .05$). Interestingly however, regarding the self-enhancement questions, Type I participants had significantly lower values for money ($t = 4.02$, $p < .001$) and a trending lower value for material goods ($t = 1.88$, $p = .06$, see Table 3).

Table 3

	Money		Material Goods		Physical Appearance		Skill-Competence	
Group	Value	Action	Value	Action	Value	Action	Value	Action
Type I Participants	5.18 (1.50)	5.05 (1.61)	5.62 (1.25)	4.94 (1.74)	5.72 (1.23)	4.98 (1.57)	6.26 (.83)	5.65 (1.35)
Type II Participants	*5.77 (1.26)	5.24 (1.47)	~5.85 (1.16)	5.21 (1.68)	5.65 (1.25)	4.93 (1.50)	6.25 (.84)	5.64 (1.18)
Group Comparison Means for Money, Material Goods, Physical Appearance and Skill-Competence * = p < .001 ~ p = .06 (parentheses indicates standard deviations)								

It was also of interest to determine which of all of the character and self-enhancement questions correlated most strongly with life-satisfaction. It should be emphasized that the strongest correlations were with character questions for the self-action measure. The top five correlations were: 1) Gratitude, self-action: $r = .37$, $p < .01$ (other-action: $r = .29$, $p < .01$, value: $r = .21$, $p < .01$), 2) Kindness, self-action: $r = .34$, $p < .01$ (other-action: $r = .12$, $p < .01$, value: $r =$

.13, p < .01), 3) Hope, self-action: r = .32, p < .01 (other-action: r = .10, p > .05, value: r = .11, p > .05), 4) Self-Regulation, self-action: r = .29, p < .01 (other-action: r = .13, p < .01, value: r = .13, p < .01), and 5) Forgiveness, self-action: r = .28 , p < .01 (other-action: r = .19, p < .01, value: r = .11, p > .05). Regarding the self-enhancement statements, the correlations were as follows: 1) Physical Appearance, self-action: r = .20, p < .01 (value: r = .13, p < .01), 2) Skill-Competence, self-action: r = .17, p < .01 (value: r = .06, p > .05), 3) Material Goods, self-action: r = .01, p > .05 (value: r = .05, p > .05), and 4) Money, self-action: r = .01, p > .05 (value: r = -.06, p > .05).

Potential Moderating Variable: Age

Because Type I (age: M = 25.77, SD = 8.64) participants were significantly (t = 2.46, p < .05) older than Type II (age: M = 23.82, SD = 7.35) participants, age was considered a potential moderating variable to the aforementioned results. The character and self-enhancement statements were re-evaluated with age as a covariate; however, no changes in the initial statistically significant findings were demonstrated. Therefore, potential within group differences with age as an independent variable was investigated for both of the Type I and Type II groups. For each group, approximately a fifth of the participants (central to the mean age of each respective group) were removed in order to better establish two separate homogenous groups. Type I participants aged 22, 23, and 24 years-old were removed (21% of total Type I participants) resulting in statistically significant (t = -11.02, p < .001) differences between the younger (n = 52, age: M = 19.48, SD = 1.09) and older (n = 54, age: M = 33.30, SD = 9.15) Type I participants. Regarding the Type II group, participants aged 20, 21, and 22 years-old were removed (23% of total Remaining participants) resulting in statistically significant (t = -17.86, p

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< .001) differences between the younger (n = 122, age: M = 18.48, SD = .52) and older (n = 136, age: M = 30.5, SD = 7.83) participants of the Type II group.

Concerning the Type I group, statistically-significant within-group differences were demonstrated with several of the character measures; older participants had greater scores for each of the three measures for resilience (value: t = -2.61, p < .05, other-action: t = -2.14, p < .05, self-action: t = -2.54, p < .05) and hardiness (value: t = -2.42, p < .05, other-action: t = -2.83, p < .01, self-action: t = -3.24, p < .01), for two of the measures for open-mindedness (value: t = -2.67, p < .01, other-action: t = -2.41, p < .05), and for one of the measures for emotional-regulation (other-action: t = -2.02, p < .05) and fairness (other-action: t = -2.11, p < .05). Statistical significance for the self-enhancement questions was only found with the skill-competence question (action: t = -2.33, p < .01), with older Type I participants demonstrating higher scores than their younger counterparts. No statistically significant within group differences were found with Type I participants for measures of life satisfaction (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), nor with any of the three Orientation to Happiness (Peterson et al., 2005) measures.

Several statistically-significant within-group differences were also found for several of the character questions for the Type II group; older participants had greater scores for each of the three measures for gratitude (value: t = -2.81, p < .01, other-action: t = -2.16, p < .05, self-action: t = -3.94, p < .001), for two of the measures for resilience (value: t = -2.68, p < .01, self-action: t = -3.38, p < .01), and for one of the forgiveness (value: t = -2.17, p < .05) and hardiness (value: t = -1.98, p < .05) measures. No statistically significant differences were found within the Type II group for any of the self-enhancement questions, measures of life satisfaction (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), nor with the meaning and engagement sub-scales of the Orientation to Happiness (Peterson et al., 2005) measures. However, the pleasure sub-scale demonstrated statistically

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significant results (t = 4.52, p < .001) with the Type II participants scoring higher (M = 21.66, SD = 4.20) than their older (M = 19.13, SD = 4.75) counterparts.

Discussion

The results of this study clearly demonstrate character differences between 'Type I' and 'Type II' Christians. Again, Type I Christians stated that God must be kept first place in order to be happy, while Type II Christians listed some other variable as more important. Type I participants valued the character qualities of humility, gratitude, forgiveness, hardiness, and resilience more than the Type II group, and also demonstrated more action towards others (and self) with each of them. Additionally, Type I participants valued religiousness and hope more, and were more apt to make the effort to effectively regulate their emotions directed towards others. They were also more likely to be true to themselves (i.e., self-authenticity) and encourage others to be hopeful. In addition to the differences in character, Type I participants also had more meaning in their lives, more engagement, and greater life-satisfaction. Interestingly, the only statistically difference between the participants, in which the Type II group had larger numbers, was with the value of money. It is also important to note that the Type II group also had greater trending means for the value of material goods and an orientation towards pleasure.

These findings can be considered in light of Nancey Murphy's (2005) questions (influenced by MacIntyre, 1984) concerning character development as well as the warnings set forth in 2 Timothy 3. Regarding Murphy's question concerning the nature of 'ungraced' human nature, a life lacking (or at the very least limited) in character directed towards others is a good starting point. First, consider two normal distributions of Christians, graced versus ungraced, that are representative of the participants in the current study (i.e., Type I vs. Type II, respectively). In extreme cases of 'bad' character (i.e., tail end of the distribution), these ungraced individuals

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would be blatantly self-serving, unforgiving, ungrateful, would love money and pleasure, etc. (i.e., 2 Timothy 3), more than their better-than-average ungraced counterparts, and even more so relative to 'graced' individuals. Individuals with this 2 Timothy 3 profile are primarily concerned with themselves; however, without God's full grace, they would be 'loving' themselves ineffectively (i.e, severe condition of improper self-love). These types individuals might even think they are living the 'good-life' but in reality, would be living in 'darkness'(i.e., Mathew 6:23; Luke 11:35). The mindset and behaviors of such individuals could be likened to the condition of maladaptive narcissism, characterized by a myriad of self-serving tendencies (see Watson et al., 1989; Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). Although generally, the Type II participants in the current study would surely not be representative of the severe condition of improper self-love, they could still be considered ungraced to some degree, as they were less loving towards others (i.e., less humility, gratitude, forgiveness, hope, hardiness, resilience, and self-regulation) relative to the Type II participants. Recall that 2 Timothy 3:5 indicates that the apparently condemned may "act religious," but "will reject the power that could make them holy"; this scripture suggests a percentage of people that may even claim to believe in God, but nevertheless, are living life ineffectively (i.e., improper self-love).

Contrary to the 'improper self-love' implications of the Type II results, the data of the Type I participants can be considered within the concept of 'proper self-love' as well as from the context of Murphy's (2005) second question: "What is the character of ideal human existence?" (p. 56). From a Christian standpoint, any concept of proper self-love and/or ideal human existence must be based on the two great commandments (i.e., 1. to love God, and 2. to love others, i.e., Mathew 22:37-40, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27). Simply stated, if an individual believes in salvation and Jesus Christ as savior, then it is in his/her best interest to value and

focus on God and others as the top priorities in life. It could be argued that individuals who effectively implement the two great commandments as life's dual priority are actually loving themselves, irrespective of the prevalence of outcomes related to self-enhancement areas (e.g., competence, money, etc.), positive emotions, life satisfaction, etc. (e.g., Mother Teresa might be considered by some as an extreme positive example). The more one sacrifices her own self-interests for the sake of God and others, the more society benefits, and paradoxically, the more she gains for herself (e.g., Mathew 10:39, 16:35; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24, 17:33). From a biblical perspective, it shouldn't be too surprising that generally speaking, Type I participants not only valued character more (relative to Type II participants), but also were more likely to 'love' (i.e., forgive, be kind, etc.) others; additionally, they had higher levels of meaning and engagement in life as well as life-satisfaction.

As has been recently argued, a Christian positive psychology will be very different from mainstream positive psychology (e.g., Hackney, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; Murphy, 2005). Murphy (2005) contended that the "hard core" of any Christian research program should be based on "non-negotiable theories" of human "telos" (purpose/goals) that are biblically based. I suspect that there would not be very much disagreement (if at all) amongst Christian circles regarding the imperative necessity of life's primary telos to 1) love God first, and 2) to love others as self (e.g., Mathew 22:39, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27). These two great commandments should be the 'core' of any Christian definition of 'proper self-love.' What is less clear concerns how character directed towards self is conceptualized, and operationally connected to the self-love core. For example, the act of forgiving oneself has been a topic of research (e.g., see McConahay & Hough, 1973; Tangney, Boone, & Dearing, 2005; Toussaint & Williams, 2008; Watson et al., 1989; Wohl, DeShea, & Wahkinney, 2008) for a number of years; however, whether or not self-

forgiveness should be considered virtuous from a Christian standpoint could be considered debatable. Interestingly, in the current study, self-forgiveness was more strongly correlated with life-satisfaction than forgiveness directed towards others. In fact, the strongest correlations with life satisfaction were with the character measures (kindness, gratitude, hope, self-regulation, and forgiveness) directed towards self. I suspect that from a secular positive psychology perspective, these findings might be interpreted from the viewpoint that being kind to oneself, forgiving oneself, etc. is necessary to facilitate happiness and perhaps requisite for maximizing the potential to love others. However, I contend that self-character should be considered a tertiary component to proper self-love, and with its degree of value contingent on the core of self-love.

Pursuant to the previous statement, consider the concept of *proper self-love* within the context of value/motive systems pertaining to the importance of: 1) God, 2) other-character, and 3) self-character (in this order). Regarding self-character, and from a Christian standpoint, whether or not the particular character quality is valuable/virtuous depends on how it lines up with the core of proper self-love – again, the priority to love 1) God and 2) others. For example, consider the Apostle Paul's 'self-hope' in the often quoted scriptural quote, "I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13, NLT). Here, he has belief in self, but the character quality is virtuous because it is connected to the core; therefore, in this case, self-hope could be considered a tertiary component of 'proper self-love,' a necessary trait for him to fulfill his specific purpose (i.e., spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles). However, consider the individual whose primary goal in life is to make a lot of money and be the best at some particular area of competence. For argument sake, let's assume this person achieves his goal and exhibits exceptionally high self-hope and commensurate levels of perceived life-satisfaction, self-esteem, etc. However, suppose this individual is very indifferent to loving

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others, in spite of his claim to be a Christian. In this case, his self-character strength (hope) is obviously not ideal (i.e., is related to improper self-love) because it is connected primarily to self-enhancement as opposed to the core; this person has deviated from his 'telos.' A model of *improper of self-love* could be conceptualized as a value/motive system that prioritizes as follows: 1) self-enhancement, 2) self-character, 3) other-character, and maybe 4) God.

In line with Hackney's (2010) sentiments regarding character, conceptualizing the role of self-character and its role in the flourishing life should be unique from a Christian positive psychology perspective. I suspect that secular perspectives will continue to be influenced by Aristotelian concepts of eudaimonia/human-excellence and definitions of self-love, based on the notion that "human beings strive for their own good and perfection," will continue to be forthcoming (e.g., see Rocha & Ghoshal, 2006, p.585). However, Christian models of self-love should be other-oriented, in line with Murphy's (2005) contention that "(h)umans reach their highest goal in developing the capacity to renounce their own lesser goods for the sake of others" (p. 59). Perhaps the role of self-character is best understood based on its connection to the 'core' of proper self-love (or not). Self-character should be considered as potentially part of proper self-love or improper self-love, depending on its relationship to the motive system. From Murphy's perspective, any model of human flourishing that leaves out God's role in carrying out a love for others fosters 'ungraced' lives, irrespective of how self-character may influence human excellence.

From a Christian standpoint, it could be argued that the transition from living an 'ungraced' life towards a more ideal one (i.e., Murphy/MacIntre's third question) begins with an understanding that God must be kept first place in one's conceptualization of happiness. The more a person fosters a relationship with Jesus Christ (i.e., while keeping Him first place) and

grows in spiritual maturity, the more he/she becomes convinced (via grace/experience) that service to others is more virtuous than any form of self-enhancement. The findings of the current study lend support to both of these propositions as Type I participants, in addition to their higher character scores, were older on average than the Type II group. Interestingly, older participants in both groups had significantly higher within group averages with a variety of character measures relative to their younger counterparts. Additionally, a noteworthy statistically significant difference was found for the Type II group with one of the orientation to happiness measures (Peterson et al., 2005), pleasure. Younger participants in the Type II group had significantly higher pleasure scores relative to in-group older participants. It is possible that younger Christians, who believe some variable other than God is most important to happiness, may be more at-risk to developing a '2 Timothy 3' character profile (i.e., improper self-love). In fact, one participant in the study, who had a very high pleasure score (and scored low with meaning and engagement), believed that money was the most important variable to happiness. Additionally, her self-enhancement means were each higher than her character averages. Sadly, but not too surprisingly, this nineteen year-old scored very low on the life-satisfaction measure. Future research with Christians (and other populations) should continue to investigate age, orientation to pleasure, self-enhancement values, and other potential moderating variables in order to better understand the nature of change from living an 'ungraced' life to a more ideal one (i.e., MacIntyre, 1984; Murphy, 2005).

Regarding self-enhancement aspects of life (e.g., competence, money, appearance, etc.), this area will undoubtedly be the most controversial topic related to self-love discourse, particularly since the 'prosperity movement' within evangelical churches has become so popular in Western culture. An adequate discussion of this controversy is beyond the purview of the

current study, but simply stated, the historical backdrop of the controversy is likely due, in large part, to a conflating of concepts related to the notion of self-love. For example, self-love was the same as narcissism for Calvin (1928), a severe state of selfishness, and he suggested dropping the term (c. Fromm, 1956). Fromm disagreed and believed that self-love was actually the opposite of selfishness and stated that "my own self must be as much an object of my love as another person" and if a person "can love only others, he cannot love at all" (p. 50). Of course for Fromm, God was not the priority in his ideas concerning self-love (but where would Mother Theresa fit in his thinking?). I suggest conceptualizing self-love as a 'heart/soul/mind' value and action priority for 1) God, 2) other-character, and 3) self-character (with 1 & 2 as the core to self-love), based on the notion of being obedient to God through the sanctification process (see Hackney, 2010). Perhaps it is best to consider other- and self-character as reciprocally related and byproducts of grace (more than effort), as opposed to thinking that one must come before the other and are products of effort (more than grace). Self-love defined within these parameters should be kept separate from desires related to self-enhancement (and self-esteem), which often gets tied into Christian evangelical discourse on self-love as discussed by Brownback (1982) and Adams (1986).

The self-enhancement data of current study should be considered at least briefly within the context of the previous statements. As discussed earlier, the value of money was the only statistically significant finding between the Type I and Type II participants, which should raise some concern. Of course, all of the participants valued (and pursued) each of the self-enhancement areas to some degree; however, collectively speaking, these measures were not as high as the character means, suggesting that self-enhancement was not overvalued. Interestingly, the only self-enhancement areas that were positively correlated with life-satisfaction were self-

action measures for physical appearance and skill-competence, but the correlations were smaller than the majority of self-character measures. Although self-enhancement may increase life-satisfaction (and self-esteem, positive emotions, etc.), I propose that self-enhancement aspects of life should be kept separate on some level from Christian definitions of self-love, lest sending messages that may promote (directly or indirectly) the overvaluing of self-enhancement outcomes. Obviously, self-character as it relates to outcomes associated with areas such as one's job, hobbies, etc. (i.e., competence and money) plays a large role in society, and understanding how biblical principles can be applied to self-enhancement areas are certainly welcomed endeavors (e.g., see de la Peña, 2004, for a sporting example). However, from a biblical context, the 'big' areas of life have to with loving God and others, and therefore, self-enhancement values should be kept in proper perspective.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge that there are a number of factors that limit the generalizabilty of the current study. The biggest shortcoming concerns the assumptions and definitions associated with the character measures. Each character measure had only three statements per measure - one statement that addressed the value, one for character directed towards others, and one for character directed towards self. Additionally, although the study was exploratory in nature, it is important to emphasize that psychometric properties of the derived statements (both character and self-enhancement) were not established. Moreover, creating representative definitions was difficult, particularly regarding how to word the statements for the character qualities directed towards others. For example, having hope for others and encouraging others to have more hope are two different ways hope can be directed towards others. The majority of the other directed statements concerned the former method; however, others (i.e.,

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hope, bravery, resilience, and hardiness) were worded in a manner similar to the latter approach. For example, I am not sure if is possible to 'be hardy' towards someone, whereas encouraging someone to exercise hardiness certainly can be done. Additionally, probably too much attention was focused on using character measures that overlapped with established character strengths established in the positive psychology literature and scripture. Perhaps more attention should have been devoted to establishing character measures that are biblically based (irrespective of the secular literature). For example, religiousness was used a measure of faith, but faith from a Christian standpoint is more than just "belief in a higher power, having regular practices of spirituality" as it was defined in the current study (from Peterson, 2006).

Another limitation concerns the lack of a measure of 'penitence' (Hackney, 2010), which may be one of the (and perhaps the) most important character strengths a Christian can possess, particularly with respect to human error. Hackney (2010) defined pentinence as "a dispositional tendency to feel sorrow when one has sinned, to turn again toward God, and to seek atonement and make reparation, a tendency that individuals can possess at lower or higher levels" (p. 202). As Hackney (2010) asserted, there are no virtues in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) *Character Strengths and Virtues* that consider "guilt-proneness" as part of human flourishing (nor is suffering in general, Hall et al., 2010). Perhaps pentinence is the key character strength that distinguishes a person living a life with proper self-love, compared to an improper self-loving path. A measure of pentinence would have certainly added value to the current study.

Finally, it would have been nice to have included a more precise variable concerning current level of spiritual growth, such as the four levels (1. Exploring Christ, 2. Growing in Christ, 3. Close to Christ, and 4. Christ Centered) researched with the REVEAL studies (Hawkins & Parkinson, 2011). I must confess that I was not aware of these studies when I

designed and collected data for the current study. Clearly, a person may understand that God needs to be first place in one's life in order to be happy but not actually keep God first as much as the next person who also declares God first place. It would have nice to have been able to further differentiate Type I participants based on whether or not they were truly 'Christ Centered.' Factors such as time spent studying scripture, beliefs as they pertain to salvation by grace, and identity in Christ, are just a few of the REVEAL variables that could have shed light on the character measures assessed in the current study.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the limitations of current investigation, the results clearly demonstrate character differences between Christians who consider God as the most important factor to happiness (i.e., Type I group) compared to those who view some other variable as more crucial (i.e., Type II group). In addition to higher character scores directed towards others and self, Type I participants also had higher life-satisfaction as well as more meaning and engagement in life. The degree of variance between the two groups could be considered within the context of differing value/motive systems pertaining to the conceptualization of God's role with happiness. Although the idea of self-love as it relates to happiness has generally had negative connotations associated with it, the current paper defines the concept based on a dual-priority for God and others with the value and utility of self-character contingent on the self-love core (i.e., God and others). It is likely that the controversy surrounding the concept of self-love concerns a conflating of terms that have to do with self-character (as defined in this paper) and self-enhancement outcomes. For example, self-forgiveness related to errors (i.e., skill-competence) committed at the workplace is very different from self-forgiveness as it concerns hurting another person. Differentiating the concept of self-love from self-character and self-enhancement may

facilitate the understanding of a variety of approaches to the 'good life' influenced by secular tradition, theology, and/or a combination of the two. As research in mainstream positive psychology continues to investigate virtue ethics from Aristotelian/eudaimonic standpoints, with newer versions of 'self-love' likely forthcoming, I contend that a Christian positive psychology should offer its version(s) based on a biblical interpretation of human telos (Hackney, 2010; Hall et al., 2010; Murphy, 2005). If a concept of 'positive' self-love is ever to be adopted into Christian academic vernacular, then simply stated, it must be based around the imperative dual-priority of keeping God first place and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

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