

Bible reading and human flourishing among U.S. military families

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Sung Joon Jang and Byron R. Johnson, inspire us with their research on Bible reading and human flourishing among U.S. military families

Military service can create unique challenges for active and retired members and their families, such as frequent deployments or relocations and family separation. It also brings into their home lives the mental and physical consequences of war after tours of duty and post-combat experiences.

Prior research shows that these stressors tend to have lasting, detrimental effects on the well-being of military personnel, veterans, and their families, including mental illness, poor health, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, marital and family problems, suicide, and domestic violence.

Given these findings, it is important to identify resources that address the issues and also prevent them by promoting well-being among this segment of the population. One such resource is religious involvement and practices, or religiosity, which has been linked to a multidimensional concept of well-being, often referred to as human flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017).

Religiosity and human flourishing

The concept of human flourishing provides a comprehensive framework for examining various aspects of well-being, as it refers to a state of doing or being well in five broad domains of life:

1. Happiness and life satisfaction,
2. Mental and physical health,
3. Meaning and purpose,
4. Character and virtue, and
5. Close social relationships.

Religious community is one of four “pathways” that have sizeable effects on the domains of flourishing; the other three are family, work, and education. Thus, individual religiosity, which leads to involvement in religious communities, is expected to contribute to human flourishing, and prior research provides support for this notion.

For example, religious service attendance, faith-based volunteering, and other public expressions of religiosity were found to be related to lower levels of depression, blood pressure, and substance abuse and higher levels of life satisfaction, subjective well-being, happiness, meaning, and purpose in life, forgiveness, and physical activity.

Religiosity has also been associated with marital quality, positive parenting behavior, and parent-child relations. Among various aspects of religiosity, however, reading a sacred text has been understudied with regard to well-being. At the same time, there are several reasons to expect Bible reading to be associated with flourishing.

Bible reading and human flourishing

First, Bible reading is likely to promote psychological well-being by helping individuals develop a close relationship with a loving and caring God who engages in the lives of individuals.

Second, Bible reading may facilitate feelings of divine control that help cope with stress. Third, positive and encouraging messages in the Bible may also promote purpose in life and guidance seeking, which may also enhance flourishing. Finally, Bible reading may foster virtues by instructing readers to imitate divine-like qualities and behaviors, such as forgiveness and compassion toward other people, which in turn can foster the development of close social relationships.

To examine the possible relationship between Bible reading and human flourishing, we conducted a study to assess the effectiveness of a Bible engagement program for military families, called “Hero Squad.” This program was developed by the Armed Services Ministry of the American Bible Society to promote flourishing among children, family units, and parents/caregivers of military families (Bradshaw et al., 2023).

An empirical study

To empirically examine the Bible reading-flourishing relationship, we analyzed longitudinal data from two surveys conducted with 175 military families before (pretest) and after the program (posttest) between December 2021 and May 2022.

The survey included items about an individual (each child as well as parent/ caregiver) and family Bible reading and prayer, emotional well-being, prosocial attitudes and behaviors, family attachment and interactions, meaning and purpose, and virtues, as well as sociodemographic characteristics of the parent/caregiver who completed the survey.

The participants were 93% female, 77% white, and, on average, 33 years old.

Almost half (45%) of them lived on a military installation, with about a fifth experiencing family separation. We compared the means/proportions of key items between the two surveys.

First, the frequency of individual and, to a greater extent, family Bible reading increased between before and after the program. Next, program participation was related to an increase in the frequency of praying alone and asking God for forgiveness among children. It was also associated with an individual's happiness and other indicators of positive affect, desirable behavior, and consideration of other people. Conversely, the participation resulted in declines in sadness, anger, anxiety, and overall negative affect among children.

The program also affected family units as a whole. For example, program participation was associated with increased discussions of the Bible as a family, looking to God for strength, listening to each other's problems and fears, being happy as a family, ensuring members are not hurt, and doing fun things together.

Finally, parents/caregivers directly benefited as well. After the program, they reported increases in connections to God, curiosity to know God better, willingness to engage with one's faith, acting more loving toward other people, and drawing on the Bible when making life choices. There was also an increase in using religion to cope with military-related stressors.

Conclusion

Our research provides empirical evidence that religious involvement is a potential resource for enhancing human flourishing among U.S. military families that are particularly vulnerable to a number of stressors. We found increases in desirable outcomes and decreases in undesirable ones after completion of the Hero Squad program.

In addition, the program appears to impact participants regardless of how religious they were at the beginning of the program, as positive changes were observed among highly religious individuals as well as those who were initially not frequent Bible readers.

References

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