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The mediating role of character virtues humility, gratitude

and compassion between relationship with God and well-being:

A path analysis

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THE MEDIATING ROLE OF CHARACTER VIRTUES HUMILITY, GRATITUDE AND

COMPASSION BETWEEN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND WELL-BEING:

A PATH ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study clarifies relationships between the variables of a Christian relationship with God, character virtues humility, gratitude and compassion, and well-being. Data was collected from a large Christian sample and utilized in path analyses of two hypothesized models. One with character virtues held equal, one with humility as a master virtue. The study hypotheses were supported by a final adjusted model that showed a close fit to the data (RMSEA = .078, CFI = .978). The model showed three key findings. First, a relationship with God impacts character virtues directly and through the virtue of humility. Second, character virtues mediate between a relationship with God and well-being. Third, a relationship with God significantly promotes well-being. Discussion includes implications for counselor educators, clinicians, and researchers, with particular attention to Christian integration and counselor development.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study investigates to what degree the character virtues of humility, gratitude, and compassion mediate between a relationship with God and well-being. These virtues have established links to a relationship with God and well-being, making them highly relevant to this study (Jazaieri et al., 2013; Lavelock et al., 2017; Rosmarin et al., 2011). Many authors suggest that a relationship with God may increase well-being by influencing one's character, engagement with the world, and sense of meaning (Greggo, 2016; Miner, 2009; Peteet, 2019; Tix et al., 2013).

Well-being has long been of interest to society, and the sciences have spent much time and effort attempting to understand and promote it. Seligman (2011) suggests that people pursue positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment to enjoy their benefit. However, the actions people take to find these five elements vary, and many appear ineffective. Economic advancement, self-interest, and personal gain do not appear to procure lasting subjective human well-being (Dittmar et al., 2014; MacDonald, 2019). Neither does the increasing use of electronic media and relating (Helliwell et al., 2019). Health experts recognize that human flourishing requires more than wealth, the absence of pathology, or simplistic pursuits (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). Sadly, the US at large has not understood this and is one of the most electronically connected and successful economies in the world, but well-being continues to decline, and rates of mental illness are concerning (Helliwell et al., 2019; Kessler et al., 2005).

There is hope as positive psychology has identified virtues as a central means to promote well-being, which has led to interventions designed to promote well-being (MacDonald, 2019).

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However, the impact of these interventions appears overstated (White et al., 2019). There has also been a return to spirituality and religion in the pursuit of well-being (Peteet, 2019; Yamanda et al., 2019). Literature has proliferated and fragmented surrounding the relationships between character virtues, religion, and mental health. Krause and Hayward (2015a) have called for studies of multiple character virtues within a theoretically warranted model to help establish the role of character virtues surrounding a relationship to God and well-being. This study responds by investigating theoretically grounded models of character virtues as mediators between a relationship with God and well-being.

Well-being

Well-being is not a simple idea, but a broad construct with differing operationalizations. Three major approaches to measuring well-being include objective measures, subjective measures, and psychological measures (Forgeard et al., 2011). Beyond the type of measure, two foundational conceptualizations of well-being have produced substantively different inquiries into developmental and social processes related to well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The hedonic perspective (often called subjective well-being) suggests that well-being consists of experiencing happiness, satisfaction, and pleasure (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2013). The second perspective, eudaimonic, espouses the fulfillment of one's true nature, and finding lasting meaning are the keys to well-being (Diener, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2013). Ryff (2013) contends that the construct of well-being must include the need for meaning-making, and the striving to become if it is to remain pertinent. Tensions between the views have decreased as research has validated both criteria, and researchers commonly integrate both into a 'dashboard' array of data on well-being (Forgeard et al., 2011; Halliwell et al., 2019; Huppert & So, 2013; Myers and Sweeney, 2008).

Positive Psychology and Character Virtues

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a return to viewing *wellness* or *optimum health* as central to counseling (Myers & Sweeney, 2008; Sweeney & Witmer, 1991). Positive psychology, widely popularized in 2000 by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), has led to significant interest in character virtues as a means of achieving *wellness*. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) invited psychology to share how people find well-being, yet recognized, "psychologists have scant knowledge of what makes life worth living" (p. 5). This pronouncement stimulated research into human strengths and virtues that might buffer people from adverse experiences and equip them to enjoy the goodness of life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The attributes one learns in relationship to others and contexts, and subsequently utilize or express to thrive in life can be considered character virtues (Bellehumeur et al., 2017; Hoyos-Valdés, 2018; Lerner, 2019). Peterson and Seligman (2004) categorized six overarching character virtues with 24 sub-strengths. Research on individual virtues and strengths has been broad, and this study investigates humility, gratitude, and compassion, due to their links to increased well-being (Demorest, 2019; McCullough et al., 2002; Van Tongeren et al., 2019).

Introduction to Humility, Gratitude, and Compassion

Humility has demonstrated a relationship to life satisfaction, stress-buffering (Krause, 2016; Krause et al., 2016), and producing prosocial benefits such as trust and empathy (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017; Wang et al., 2017). Scholars have proposed humility as a central virtue impacting behaviors and attitudes that lead to personal flourishing (Krause et al., 2016; Van Tongeren et al., 2019), possibly by acting as a master virtue that facilitates the development of other virtues (Lavelock et al., 2017). Gratitude appears somewhat differently, sometimes defined as an emotion, yet also as an attitude of benevolent acceptance rooted in indebtedness for good

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gifts (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Grateful people often focus on blessings and enjoy prosocial benefits, a sense of connection, improved sleep quality, and overall satisfaction in life (Cunha et al., 2019; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Third, compassion motivates a person to feel the extent of another's emotions, accompanied by the desire to help (Fulton, 2018; Roberts, 2017). Compassion has been shown to benefit relationships, reduce anxiety, regulate emotions, and increase positive experiences (Demorest, 2019; Engen & Singer, 2015; Lord, 2017).

Christian Relationship with God

Different religions and philosophies define a relationship with god in numerous ways. A Christian perspective on relationship with God is both a mystery and a tangible reality that includes the offer of joining in the perichoretic life of the Trinity, of which, Jesus the creator of humanity, is a part (Genesis 1; Volf, 1996). Christians believe the end goal of this union is fellowship with God that provides meaning, personal formation, and redemption (Anstey, 2017; Kaczor, 2015). Historically, many authors have used the psychological lens of attachment to explain and measure this relationship to God (not just religiosity; Leman et al., 2018; Miner, 2009).

Christianity often appears as anathema to psychology (Charry & Kosits, 2017; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, scholars argue that a Christian framework provides context for the impact of meaning-making, or character development central to positive psychology (Charry & Kosits, 2017). Positive psychology can individualize the pursuit of well-being, whereas relationship to God centralizes the role of relationship, and therefore, it also centralizes prosocial character change (Anstey, 2017; Charry & Kosits, 2017; Homan & Cavanaugh, 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It follows that attachment to God or relationship with Him develops character virtues.

Relationship with God and Well-being

Christian faith and ones resulting community noticeably contribute to well-being (e.g., Boppana & Gross, 2019; Bott et al., 2015; Diener et al., 2011; Francis & Kaldor, 2002; Leondari & Gialamas, 2009; Morris & McAdie, 2009; You & Lim, 2019). Mediators between Christian faith and well-being have been explored, with meaning in life, attendance at religious services, positive affect, and social support garnering much support (Bopanna & Gross, 2019; Bott et al., 2015; Francis & Kaldor, 2002; Tix et al., 2013; Vishkin et al., 2019). Specifically, relationship with God appears to be a central and influential tenet of Christian faith that generates a different experience of well-being, and many researchers have investigated the benefits of having a relationship with God (for example, Ellison, 1983; Miner, 2009; Strelan et al., 2009). Literature supports that secure attachment to God leads to well-being (Homan & Cavanaugh, 2013; Keefer & Brown, 2018; Leman et al., 2018; Stroope et al., 2013). In their meta-analysis, Stulp et al. (2019) found God representations (an aspect of relationship) were more strongly associated (medium effect sizes) with well-being than are standard measures of Christian faith that rely on involvement and belief strength (small effect sizes).

Relationship with God, Character Virtues, and Well-being

Studies and theoretical discussion have sought to discern how character virtues may either promote a relationship with God or arise from it, and subsequently influence well-being. Most of these discussions investigate one virtue at a time (Krause & Hayward, 2015a), and few have investigated multiple mediation effects or the interactions between virtues.

Relationship with God, Humility, Gratitude, Compassion, and Well-being

Lavelock et al. (2017) discuss humility as a master virtue in Christian thought, suggesting that all other virtue expressions (e.g., gratitude, compassion) may depend on humility. The

master virtue mechanism would be critical as many virtues relate to well-being, and well-being shows a negative correlation to low levels of humility (Jankowski et al., 2018; Paine et al., 2018). Those without accurate self-perception or ability to manage pride may struggle to procure the benefits to well-being of relating to God that stem from humility, and arise through other virtues (Jankowski et al., 2018). Evidence also suggests that humility fosters a relationship with God and may allow the application of benefits from this relationship (Jankowski et al., 2018). Regarding gratitude, Rosmarin et al. (2011) found gratitude towards God mediated between religious commitment and well-being to a higher degree than gratitude alone. Emmons and Crumpler (2000) concur, suggesting gratitude is towards a benevolent one and changes affective experience as a result. Gratitude is also related to experiencing God and producing hope (Kraus et al., 2015). The only study investigating compassion in the context of relating to God and well-being considered if compassionate attitude and behaviors mediated between intrinsic religiosity and well-being. The study found a full mediation effect for compassion (Steffen & Masters, 2005). Self-compassion also mediates the association of attachment to God and mental health (Homan, 2014; Varghese, 2015). Fulton (2018) supports this finding by showing self-compassion facilitates other-compassion, which provides benefits to well-being. Humility, gratitude, and compassion are linked to a relationship with God and well-being conceptually.

Collective Virtues and Christian Well-being

While Krause and Hayward (2015a) call for more complex designs to assess multiple virtues, interactions, and test theoretical models (for example, Hill et al., 2019), they do not start with relationship to God. However, they provide evidence that humility, gratitude, and compassion are related to a relationship with God and well-being. Sharma and Singh (2018) confirm a linear path from religiosity to well-being that includes gratitude, altruism, and

forgiveness. No other studies link more than one character virtue considered in this study to a relationship with God and well-being.

Statement of the Problem

Collective mediation and the priority of character virtues lack investigation, despite the contributions of research surrounding the mediating role of specific character virtues between a relationship with God and well-being (Krause & Hayward, 2015a). A simultaneous investigation of multiple character virtues will add to what is currently known and help determine if humility necessarily precedes gratitude and compassion (Lavelock et al., 2017). In short, the literature on character virtue, relationship with God, and well-being are disparate.

Purpose of the study

This study had two aims: first, to provide clarity regarding the mediating role of humility, gratitude, and compassion between a relationship with God and well-being amongst a general Christian population. Second, statistically test the validity of humility as master virtue by comparing two models (Figures 1 and 2 found in Chapter 2). This study offered two theoretical models and three research questions for investigation using a survey design and a convenience sample of the general Christian population.

Review of the Literature

The literature surrounding a relationship with God, well-being, and character virtues are incredibly broad. Each construct and their relationships are discussed based on theoretical grounds and prior research. First, well-being and positive psychology are reviewed, and the character virtues selected for this study introduced. Second, Christianity and relationship with God are discussed in relation to positive psychology and well-being. Next, evidence for the impact of religion and spirituality is reviewed and how it impacts a relationship with God.

Finally, studies that previously explored a relationship with God, character virtues, and well-being together are discussed to provide a framework for this study and the proposed models. In sum, the literature review lays a coherent foundation for the rationale of this study.

Well-being

The quest for well-being has a long history in philosophy from ancient thinkers such as Socrates and Plato, through to modern writers such as Kraut. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all differed in their understanding of happiness or well-being, but for all three, happiness is not separable from fulfilling one's moral profile (Capuccino, 2013). For example, Aristotle held an ideal for a personal and moral activity that would lead to *excellences* and well-being (Kraut, 1979). Conversely, current understandings of what elicits well-being are more flexible and subjective (Kraut, 1979). Whether well-being is a product of *how* one lives, rather than what one *achieves* or *feels*, continues to be questioned. Kraut (1979) suggests, "we do not have a defensible theory about which lives are ideal" despite the rise of three main approaches to defining well-being (p. 196). The three perspectives are the pursuit of pleasure (hedonism), desire fulfillment, and objective lists of life tasks to be accomplished (Alexandrova, 2017).

Ultimately how "we define well-being influences our practices of government, teaching, therapy, parenting, and preaching, as all such endeavors aim to change humans for the better" (Ryan & Deci, 2001, p. 142). Across time and culture, it was assumed material wealth provided the route to well-being, and a post-modern dependence on technology and individualism have followed suit (Diener, 2000; Dittmar et al. 2014; Helliwell et al., 2019). Dittmar et al. (2014) conducted a substantial meta-analysis that demonstrated a conclusive negative correlation between materialistic beliefs and well-being, and Helliwell et al. (2019) similarly find a negative correlation between media use and happiness. Diener and Seligman (2004) had previously

warned that economics does not merely create well-being. Kaczor (2015) similarly highlights the agreement found between positive psychological research, Aristotle, and Aquinas that wealth and materialism are a straw man in the pursuit of well-being. In short, current and popular methods of pursuing well-being are limited.

As modernist and post-modernist ideologies waned and awareness increased that economics is not the answer, psychological inquiry has shed light on the problem of well-being (Forgeard et al., 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2001). A significant change occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s with a return to viewing *wellness* as central to counseling and psychology, and that *flourishing* is a goal for all (Huppert & So., 2013; Myers & Sweeney, 2008; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sweeney & Witmer, 1991). Counselors, psychologists, and social scientists have subsequently investigated the constitution of well-being and how to promote it.

Eudaimonic and Hedonic Well-being

What emerged were the two core conceptions of well-being as hedonism and eudaimonia. Before the year 2000, research relied heavily on hedonic conceptualizations of well-being and the associated subjective measures of well-being that focus on lived experiences of positive affect, pleasure, and satisfaction with life (Diener, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2013). Given that hedonic experiences of well-being capture something essential to us all, it is not surprising that for generations, the felt sense of enjoyment and satisfaction was esteemed (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Furthermore, this hedonic approach was easy to operationalize (Ryff, 2013); it is easier to ask "how happy have you felt," than to argue for and assess deep meaning or purpose convincingly.

However, hedonic measures miss the concept of meaning, which is foundational to the eudaimonic perspective (Ryff, 2013). Eudaimonia focuses on understanding one's purpose and

living to fulfill the central task of meaning-making and subsequently focuses less on present moment fluctuations in experience (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2013). Despite difficulties operationalizing the eudaimonic approach, advocates for the value of meaning and purpose trace back to Aristotle and the Greek imperatives to know yourself, and know what you are (Diener, 2000; Ryff, 2013). Ryff (2013) argued that eudaimonic constructs of well-being capture essential features of well-being anchored in the way adults navigate the challenges of life and achieve the best within themselves. This perspective is based on developmental psychology and upheld by existentially oriented therapists, religious traditions, and researchers who assert the need for meaning as a source of strength to overcome adversity (Forgeard et al., 2011; Hoffman et al., 2015; Ryff, 2013).

Combined Conceptualizations of Well-being

The tension between the two views has lessened as research has validated the necessity of both (Forgeard., 2011). For example, Huppert and So (2013) summarize prior research that found only small to moderate correlations between multi-dimensional measures of well-being and standard life satisfaction questions. Given that people look to both eudaimonic and hedonic factors to assess their lives (Forgeard et al., 2011), Huppert and So (2013) demonstrated the utility of combining them. They successfully measured *flourishing* across Europe using the opposites of pathology, including hedonic and eudaimonic measures of competence, emotional stability, engagement, meaning, optimism, positive emotion and relationship, resilience, self-esteem, and vitality. Current research continues to advocate for a combination of hedonic and eudaimonic measures of well-being (Forgeard et al., 2011; Halliwell et al., 2019; Myers and Sweeney, 2008; Topp et al., 2015).

Gathering data regarding well-being can be completed objectively (comparing to standards), subjectively (felt experience and perception), and psychologically (psychological concerns such as anxiety and depression), (Forgeard et al., 2011). Each measurement type suffers theoretical and practical limitations. For example, objective conditions may not equally promote well-being, subjective factors may miss developmental factors and contexts, and psychological constructs constrict definitions of well-being (Forgeard et al., 2011). Forgeard et al. (2011) conclude that well-being is assessed adequately with combined objective and subjective measures. Furthermore, a singular numeric value symbolizing well-being has limited utility beyond allowing for comparisons (Forgeard et al., 2011). To fully assess well-being with practical utility Forgeard et al. (2011) recommend a well-being 'dashboard,' which uses a set of data that can function as one (numeric value) for comparative purposes, but also provides holistic and nuanced feedback that can be used practically and partially as appropriate.

Two examples of dashboard measures that utilize objective and subjective measures are helpful. Seligman's (2011) acronym PERMA, stands for positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement; these five factors of flourishing (and their parts), when measured, provide a detailed view of well-being. Secondly, many researchers create a dashboard approach by combining measures that include the following; life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, and meaning and purpose (Forgeard et al., 2011; Halliwell et al., 2019; Huppert & So, 2013; Myers and Sweeney, 2008; Topp et al., 2015). Subsequently, the discussion of how to define and measure well-being has expanded, and comparison becomes difficult amidst diversify (Forgeard et al., 2011; Huppert & So, 2013; Ryff, 2013; Topp et al., 2015).

Positive Psychology and Character Virtues

In 2000 Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) recognized the US to be at the pinnacle of economic and political leadership and subsequently said, "At this juncture, the social and behavioral sciences can play an enormously important role… They can show what actions lead to well-being, to positive individuals, and to thriving communities" (p. 5). However, they also contended that research was needed to answer this call. Subsequently, research has blossomed around human strengths and virtues that benefit well-being by buffering us from adverse experiences and equip us to enjoy the goodness of life (MacDonald, 2019; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology sees enhancing current character virtue expression as a practical route to achieving the five factors of PERMA (Seligman, 2018). Character virtue in its fullest has been defined by Lerner (2019) as "morally based actions that enable an individual and his or her social world to thrive across time and space" (p. 79); and by Newstead et al. (2018) as "the human inclination to feel, think, and act in ways that express moral excellence and contribute to the common good" (p. 446).

However, exercising character virtue is not as simple as enacting Peterson and Seligman's (2004) 24 strengths that expound their six overarching character virtues (wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence). Despite Goodman et al. (2018) correlating the previously mentioned virtues to well-being (.98), Bellehumeur et al. (2017) articulate four concerns with dividing character virtues into strengths to enact: virtues are not independent in function; focusing solely on current strengths is limiting; well-being is cultural/contextual, and virtues require imagination to implement. Hoyos-Valés (2017) and Lerner (2019) emphasize that virtue development (and expression) involves complex relational interactions that depend upon morals, insight, and emotions within specific contexts. Furthermore, Dwiwardani et al. (2014) provide evidence suggesting relational virtue growth

(such as humility and gratitude) may be partially dependent on development in the context of secure relationships. Therefore, a simple will to implement behaviors will not suffice. In short, to conceptualize character virtues as linear tasks or strengths to master individually is to miss their essence, yet a discrete understanding of each allows understanding and engagement with them (Newstead et al., 2018). For example, humility, gratitude, and compassion have all received considerable attention as specific character virtues that lead to well-being.

Humility

For thousands of years, philosophers and theologians have suggested humility is a central virtue that consists of set behaviors and attitudes that generate self-understanding and social regulation, leading to relational advantages and flourishing (Krause et al., 2016; Van Tongeren et al., 2019). However, Tangney (2000) notes that the study of humility was thin before the year 2000. Subsequently, arriving at a central understanding or measure of humility has been riddled by issues of definition, measurement, and the human propensity for self-deception (Tangney, 2019; Worthington, 2008). As a result, sub-domains of humility arise that have social and relational consequences. Tangney (2000) discusses the measurement of situational or dispositional humility. Situational measures capture transient lived expression, while dispositional measures give a representation of one's virtue structure (Tangney, 2000). Davis et al. (2010b) investigated relational humility that contextualizes humility to the lived experience between persons. McElroy et al. (2014) built on the work of Davis et al., (2011) investigating intellectual humility and its implications for maintaining dialogue and partnerships when discussing ideas, leading, or when one's limitations are exposed. Finally, spiritual humility measures humility concerning the sacred when spiritual issues such as forgiveness emerge (Davis et al., 2010a). Despite these significant sub-domains, general humility is still seen as a

valuable construct that can be measured situationally or as a trait (Van Tongeren et al., 2019). A consensus is emerging that considers general humility as both intrapersonal (accurate view of self), and interpersonal (orientation towards the needs and well-being of others) (Davis et al., 2011; Davis et al., 2013; Davis & Hook, 2014; Van Tongeren et al., 2019; Worthington 2008).

Worthington (2008) claims that general humility is a quiet virtue trait that is seen by others in prosocial behavior, altruistic motivation, and accurate self-reflection that can accomplish significant effects of healing and inspiration. Research has found the impact of humility to be broad, for example, humility has been linked with the development of relational trust through reciprocal perspective taking and action, with increases in gratitude, altruism, empathy towards others, leadership success, openness to growth, prosocial values, and less power-seeking and anxiety (Krause et al., 2016; Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017; Van Tongeren et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2017). In short, humility is linked in a sophisticated manner to well-being through the development of virtues that underpin thought, speech, and action (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017). Finally, Dwiwardani et al. (2014) suggest that the development of humility may depend on relational security that does away with the need for self-protection. When this occurs, humility may also function as a master virtue, promoting other virtues and well-being (Lavelock et al., 2017).

Gratitude

Emmons and Crumpler (2000) suggest gratitude is minimally an emotion, and in fullness, a virtue that, when cultivated, enhances well-being. Originally, philosophers provided gratitude's virtue status, not positive psychologists, and its language is one of response to benevolence, and a willingness to remain indebted and dependent to a giver (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Gratitude in this form is rooted in religion, where praise and thanks are gratitude's behavioral

response to a loving God (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Ps 30:12). Smith at el. (2017) support this approach to relational and receptive gratitude, finding that as one experiences increases in benefits from another, gratitude also increases. Smith et al. (2017) show that gratitude, social connection, co-operation, and well-being entwine. Regardless of gratitude's origin, McCullough et al. (2002) found that more grateful people experience greater well-being and prosocial behavior. A meta-analytic review of 91 studies by Ma et al. (2017) confirms McCullough et al.'s findings, stating that gratitude is a crucial factor in generating prosocial interaction.

McCullough et al. (2002) hold the position that gratitude is a disposition that allows one to experience intensity and frequency of gratitude feelings, and to consider circumstances and persons to whom one is grateful. Wood et al.'s (2010) review of the gratitude literature led them to agree with the prior conclusion, suggesting gratitude as a virtue includes a disposition for noticing and appreciating positive in the world. Wood et al. (2010) used factor analysis to show that eight domains of gratitude covered by three well know gratitude instruments all align under a higher-order factor, namely *a life orientation towards the positive*.

Research suggests that gratitude has positive impacts on well-being, momentary experience, and behavior. Emmons and McCullough (2003) found that groups asked to consistently reflect on things they were grateful for showed marked increases in well-being above a control. Across three studies, Layous et al. (2017) found that gratitude exercises focused on relationships immediately prompted socially beneficial emotional responses. These social benefits led to participants feeling grateful, uplifted, moved, and mildly uncomfortable (indebted and sometimes guilty). Therefore, even while growth in gratitude may lead to overall well-being, mixed emotions may be experienced in the journey (Layous et al., 2017).

The impact of gratitude on behavior and experience extends beyond the well-being literature. For example, in marketing, as companies promote gratitude in customers by offering services that go beyond economic gain, higher customer satisfaction results (Fazal et al., 2017). Moreover, in politics, where broad-scale policies generate constituent gratitude, this experience plays a role in voting behavior for a significant period (Bechtel & Hainmueller, 2011).

Given the established benefits of gratitude to relationships, behavior, and well-being, it is unsurprising that a wide range of interventions to develop gratitude exist. Randomized clinical trials and exploratory studies have consistently shown that focusing on blessings and appreciations improves helping behaviors, sleep quality, sense of connection, and global appraisals of life and subjective well-being (Cunha et al., 2019; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). However, Davis et al. (2016) conducted a meta-analysis of gratitude interventions and found weak evidence for their efficacy in improving gratitude or well-being levels. They conclude that gratitude interventions may not have reached their potential, and further investigation is warranted. Regardless, gratitude has gathered evidence as a virtue that positively impacts lived experience.

Compassion

Compassion is a core virtue across religions and cultures that is widely recognized as beneficial (Steffen & Masters, 2005). Compassion is usually defined in the literature as the disposition to feel the extent and intensity of emotions that a particular situation indicates, and wanting to alleviate suffering (Fulton, 2018; Roberts, 2017). Gu et al.'s (2017) empirical review of the structure of compassion support and expand the prior definition of compassion into five parts: 1) recognizing suffering, 2) understanding universality of human suffering, 3) feeling

moved for, and connected emotionally to the sufferer, 4) tolerating uncomfortable feelings to stay open to the sufferer, and 5) acting or being motivated to relieve suffering.

A Christian view of compassion appears very similar to the Greek words *splagchnizomai* and *châmal* that appear in scripture and collectively suggest a deep emotional yearning, pity, and desire to spare (Gibson, 2015). Biblically, compassion is relational openness and motivated action (see the good Samaritan, and pharaoh's daughter's response to baby Moses; Gibson, 2015). These definitions of compassion appear similar to definitions of empathy, which entails experiencing the emotions of the other, taking or seeing the perspective of the other, and voicing or mobilizing an accurately attuned response (Elliot et al. 2011). However, compassion is not readily identified with deep perspective-taking but with action. Empathy may go beyond compassions deep feeling and responding, to a continued effort to understand the experiences that shaped a person (Elliot et al., 2011), while compassion highlights the action or desire to alleviate suffering (Gibson, 2015; Roberts, 2017). Compassion is similar to empathy, yet emphasizes an active behavioral role that changes the experience of the sufferer.

Research on self-compassion is more prolific than on compassion. Results suggest self-compassion (compassion turned inward) substantially mediates between awareness and compassion for others, leading to prosocial behaviors implicated in well-being and health-promoting behaviors (Fulton, 2018; Sirois et al., 2015; Tix et al., 2013). In short, other-compassion results from self-compassion. The benefits of compassion's behaviors are wide-reaching: couples practicing and utilizing compassion benefited personally and relationally (Lord, 2017), compassion reduced experiences of anxiety (Demorest, 2019), and regulated emotions when witnessing distress by raising subjective positive affect (Engen & Singer, 2015). Finally, neuroendocrine and neuroimaging studies show that compassion meditation reduces

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stress and increases brain capacity to read the emotions of others (Hofmann et al., 2011).

Broadly, research concludes that compassion positively impacts factors of well-being.

Christian Well-being, Positive Psychology and Well-being

Christian theology and psychology have often been seen as irreconcilable since psychology often advances rigorous science, individualism, and evolutionary perspectives, while lacking a moral and social framework that is central to Christian life and faith (Charry & Kosits, 2017; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Charry and Kosits (2017) suggest the dimensions of flourishing, meaning, and happiness central to positive psychology are rendered intelligible by a Christian framework that is larger than self and cultivates moral self-awareness and social well-being. Grundmann (2014) suggests that health in the Christian's framework is "meant to serve the purpose of life, which is to glorify God" (p. 560). Furthermore, Lewis (2002) contends that utter satisfaction in heaven awaits humans, "if you will let God have His good way" (p. 152). The Christian view expands the simpler *personal* and *now* orientation of positive psychology.

Many scholars have contributed to a full understanding of how well-being relates to Christian faith. Grundmann (2014) asserts that the Bible situates health and well-being as a byproduct of working towards abundant life for all by showing justice and compassion in response to God's justice and compassion. Charry and Kosits (2017) similarly contend that a Christian understanding of well-being starts with joy in God and for God, and subsequently, relational and reciprocal well-being occurs. Homan and Cavanaugh (2013) discuss the goal of *Shalom* (or *peace*), which refers to wholeness, and flourishing that goes beyond the absence of problems. Anstey (2017) posits that the purpose of human well-being is to grow a friendship with God, and is a product of God's well-being. He continues that the project of human well-being is a gift to us, that results from actions inspired by a relationship with God. Finally, from a

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theologically sophisticated position, Volf (1996) espouses the necessity of having our identity one with Christ and learning to make space for another, so that embrace, mutual impact, and release are possible. These scholars contribute towards a rich tapestry, and what emerges is a Christian understanding of well-being as a God-focused, social, and interactive experience.

However, how does one achieve this well-being tapestry? Charry and Kosits (2017) suggest that living to the joy and glory of God can be done by embracing love, enjoyment, achievement, and positive personal growth. Faull (2013) suggests religious coping-mechanisms that arise in Christian communities support social engagement, self-awareness, and, therefore, well-being. These Christian behaviors, along with self-control, accepting the benefits of positive and negative emotions, and communal life are all empirically found to aid us in participating fully in life and contributing to the well-being of others (Charry & Kosits, 2017; Grundmann, 2014). These behaviors have theological and empirical support for promoting well-being.

How Christians behave is central to well-being. Behavior includes modeling life after Jesus (Grundmann, 2014), but behavior and well-being ultimately relate to God's design of humans as His image-bearers (*imago Dei*). Humans resemble God (Jesus) himself (Volf, 1996), and well-being corresponds with living accordingly. Anstey (2017) outlines the actions of God in Genesis 1 that are to be echoed by the *imago Dei* for well-being. These actions closely align with Seligman's (2011) acronym PERMA that captures a scientific idea of what is required for human well-being (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Alignment between PERMA and God's actions/intentions in Genesis*

Seligman (2011) PERMA	Anstey (2017) God's Actions/Intentions
Positive Emotions	Sees the good seven times and declares it
Engagement	Speaks to, and gives life to people and creation
Relationship	Relates to His creation and gives them all things

| Meaning | Names, blesses and commands His people |
| Achievement | Invites thriving and dominion after doing it himself |

The actions of God that are to be echoed by Christians align with scientific understandings of promoting well-being. Here, the gap between positive psychology and Christianity is small. However, as explored above, the central thrust of Christian well-being is other-centered. While positive psychology does not lack this perspective, it is often underemphasized (Anstey, 2017; Charry & Kosits, 2017; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Critically, the Christian call to other-centered well-being is dependent upon a relationship with God. Volf (1996) argues that a changed identity and sense of self through union with Christ gives rise to well-being eliciting behaviors. Anstey (2017) exposes a cyclical process suggesting human well-being is "derived from the divine well-being" (p. 63) and is a vehicle for increased experiences of well-being, prosocial behavior, and ultimately deepening communion with God. Anstey's (2017) concluding remarks are poignant [*authors formatting included*]:

> The scriptures abound with this notion of God as the ground of human wellbeing.
> "Be holy, because I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2 NSRV).
> "We love, because God first loved us" (1 John 4:19 NSRV).
> Or, in modern parlance, "We flourish, because God flourishes." (p. 63-64)

In sum, Christian well-being may not differ substantially from generic conceptualizations of well-being in subjective or objective measures, but the ontological and philosophical underpinnings of Christianity ground well-being in relationship with God, and bring coherence and purpose to well-being that extends beyond one's self (Anstey, 2017; Charry & Kosits, 2017; Kaczor, 2015). Simply stated, the outward expression of well-being may look similar across Christian and non-Christian inquiry, but the foundation of well-being is different. This possibly explains why literature investigating Christianity and well-being has used measures of well-being that align with non-religious or positive psychology research. For example, Freeze and

DiTommaso (2015) investigated attachment to God and well-being and used the Positive Affect and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale SWLS. The PANAS and SWLS are both cited by Dittmar et al. (2014) as representative examples of the measures of well-being found in the 151 studies included in their meta-analysis studying materialism and personal well-being. Diener (2000) illuminates the ubiquity of these measures, recommending that measures of "pleasant affect, unpleasant affect, life satisfaction fulfillment, and more specific states" be included in a national index for subjective well-being (p. 40).

Limited accommodations to a Christian view of well-being appear for two possible reasons. First, the expression of Christian well-being closely aligns with expressions in positive psychology, and more importantly, alternative measures of well-being would significantly limit comparative analysis. However, differing conceptualizations of well-being remain a hurdle to study comparisons given scholars conceptual divisions (Diener, 2000; Ryff, 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Topp et al., 2015). Nonetheless, there is common ground from which to measure well-being.

Christian Relationship with God

Relationship with God is discussed as a central tenant of the Christian faith, followed by a consideration of how this relationship impacts well-being. For centuries, scholars have sought to describe and explain a Christian relationship with God. Lewis (2002) has described the goal of relationship with God as becoming maximally distinct as a self so that a reunion with Christ takes a higher order, and subsequently, reciprocal love and self-giving become normative. Volf (1996) suggests this occurs in response to God's divine self-donation, where He protects, provides, makes justice, and shares in identity with His people. Relationship with God starts with God's initiation and revelation of himself (Volf, 1996; Williams, 2005).

A central theme of relating with God is joining with the Trinity to sample the relational harmony and acceptance described as the perichoresis of God (Genesis 1; Romans; Lewis, 2002; Volf, 1996). Perichoresis occurs for all who believe in God's work on their behalf through unification with Christ as a result of Christ's death, resurrection, and atonement for their sin (Volf, 1996; Williams, 2005). Union with Christ and the call to be disciples invites men and women to separately know themselves in all their sinful and sanctified states (John 8:12; Kaczor, 2015) while remembering their status in Christ as His image-bearers (Williams, 2005). This rich and complex identity calls and empowers people to bind themselves willingly to Christ and to a community to love and serve (Acts 2:41-42; Hebrews 10:25; Volf, 1996). The end goal of the Christian life is to rejoice in Christ, to have a deep friendship with Him, and find happiness and sustenance in Him (Anstey, 2017; Kaczor, 2015).

Relationship with God creates well-being as a byproduct of change. As seen above, Anstey (2017) uses the creation narrative to witness God's activity, and suggests the human project in life is to "pursue a way of living in which our speech and activity and rest intertwine in a flawless integrity… we come to participate in 'let others be fruitful,' 'let others flourish'" (p. 60). This behavioral action is responsive to a relationship with God. Strawn (2004) emphasizes that this occurs through shaped moral-affections of the heart, Greggo (2016) speaks of formed convictions, and Roberts (1997) speaks of formed Christian *traits*, which include humility, gratitude, and compassion. Exploration of a relationship with God returns the focus to the topic of Christian well-being. Relationship with God is not only personal and experiential but formative and pro-socially oriented through the strengthening and use of what might be commonly labeled character virtues. Simply, this identity shift and behavioral change is possible

as one recognizes a continued need for Jesus (humility), is grateful for the work and relationship of Jesus (gratitude), and loves and serves others (compassion) (Galatians 5:13).

Religiosity, Spirituality and Well-being

There has been a plethora of research on the relationship between religiosity and spirituality (R/S) with physical health, mental health and well-being. Religion and spirituality entail a search for the sacred in life with profound emotional experience (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Religion is formalized around doctrines and traditions, while spirituality is both universal and simultaneously an individual expression (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). Koenig (2015) states that between 2000 and 2010 over 1700 studies were published on R/S. Due to the breadth of the literature, a synopsis of the overall relationship between R/S and well-being is provided through a review of meta-analytic studies, followed by a review of Christian faith and attachment to God in relation to well-being.

R/S and Physical Well-being

Physical health provides a significant contribution to personal well-being due to the unity of human functioning (Schore, 2014). For example, the World Health Organization developed a well-being index to measure well-being in medical patients that has been translated into 30 languages and used across the world (Topp et al., 2015). Beyond this, Shattuck and Muehlenbein (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of 87 research studies involving R/S and physiological markers of health, and concluded that R/S has a significant, yet small positive impact, particularly on the cardiovascular and inflammatory systems of the body. These findings were supported by an analysis conducted on studies before 2010 by Koenig (2015) who reports R/S is positively associated with cardiac health, lower risk of developing cancer or having a better prognosis, and increased longevity of life. Chida et al. (2009) also found a positive association

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between R/S and reduced mortality in 69 studies on healthy populations. The hypothesized mechanisms for R/S improving physical well-being include, reducing harmful behaviors, minimizing disruption from stress and depression on inflammation, and regulating the nervous, endocrine and immune systems, in part due to increases in mental well-being (Chida et al., 2009; Koenig, 2015; Shattuck & Muehlenbein, 2018). Cautions surround the strength of conclusions; however, R/S is regarded to benefit physical well-being.

R/S and Mental Well-being

Interest in R/S impacts on mental health are long standing. Ellison and Levin (1998) review earlier literature finding benefits to life satisfaction, happiness, reduced depression, meaning, and general reports of well-being. At that time Ellison and Levin (1998) proposed explanatory mechanisms for the benefits of R/S, including regulation of lifestyle, social resources, promotion of positive self-perception, positive emotions and positive beliefs. Since that time much research has occurred and meta-analyses and data from large national studies have shown a fairly consistent positive relationship between R/S and well-being in the US. Summarizing the 3300 studies in the *Handbook of Religion and Health*, Koenig (2015) states that the evidence strongly supports that religious involvement is related to better mental health. These findings have been consistent over the last few decades. For example, Hackney and Sanders (2003) analyzed 34 studies with 264 effect sizes, and found a significant positive relationship between mental health and R/S ($r = .1$). In 326 Koenig (2015) found that of 326 studies examining the relationship between R/S and well-being, 79% found positive associations, and less than 1% reported a significant inverse relationship.

The complexity of the relationship between R/S and well-being is exposed by Bosco-Ruggiero (2020) who analyzed the 2016 general social survey (GSS) findings and reports a web

of results. Those who said they were more R/S had less days of poor mental health, however increased prayer was associated with worse mental health, but this relationship was fully mediated by worse physical health. Second, belief that God is not real associated to lower depression scores, yet attending religious services was positively related to lower depression. Third, those reporting higher spirituality had lower depression scores overall. Fourth, the odds of reporting happiness increased with service attendance and spirituality. These findings by Busco-Ruggiero (2020) testify to the complex interaction of R/S and well-being previously found.

Hodapp and Zwingmann (2019) confirm similar findings from 67 studies in highly secular German-speaking countries, finding a weighted average correlation between R/S and mental well-being of .03. This association increases to .06 when negative measures of R/S are excluded, but this still represents a very small effect size. Ellison and Fan (2008) utilized data from the GSS between 1998 and 2004 and found daily spiritual experiences were significantly associated with psychological well-being. Spiritual experiences acted as a stress buffer, but did not mediate between religion and well-being. They did find religious attendance and happiness were strongly related. In sum, despite some confusing findings, benefits of R/S on well-being are recorded across each of the following areas: positive emotional experience, coping, subjective happiness, hope, optimism, self-esteem, depression, anxiety, suicide prevention, parent and child well-being, and reduced substance us (Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Kim-Prieto & Miller, 2018; Koenig, 2015). Despite the scope of impact, the overall relationships reported between R/S and well-being remain modest, ranging from r = .03 to r = .3.

Scholars have attempted to explain these findings and suggest the following. Hackney & Sanders (2003) concluded that the definition (and subsequent measure) of religiosity significantly impacts findings, noting that institutional religiosity produced the weakest

correlations to mental well-being, with ideological religion "producing stronger effects, and personal devotion producing the correlations of greatest magnitude" (Hackney & Sanders, 2003, p. 51). They conclude that the positive relationship between religion and mental well-being grows according to the degree that individuals internalize motivation, and act according to their values, which is also supported by Hodapp & Zwingmann (2019). Bosco-Ruggiero (2020) suggest, those who don't believe in God are not able to feel disappointed or frustrated with God (lower depression), and those praying more regularly do so because of higher psychological need. Collectively, challenges that appear to lead to negative associations between religiosity and mental well-being have commonly been understood as extrinsic forms of religion that are imposed or experienced as restrictive, and when participants have a negative personal representation of God as punishing or uncaring (Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Hodapp & Zwingmann, 2019; Koenig, 2015; Stulp et al., 2019; You & Lim, 2019). Ellison and Lee (2010) remind us that for a small set of the population R/S experiences are not positive. Ellison and Lee (2010) build on work by Pargament (2002) and suggest that troubled relationships with god, negative social encounters in religious settings, and chronic religious doubt are independent R/S experiences that create psychological distress that is far from trivial.

Given the general positive relationships found between R/S and well-being researchers have explored mediators of this relationship. First, the concept of meaning has drawn much attention. Paloutzian (2017) suggests the heart and soul of all R/S is the process of making meaning from ambiguous information, and it is a part of our basic psychological need to have meaning structures to organize our interaction in the world. It follows that research has found meaning generated by R/S to be beneficial. For example, You and Lim (2019) built on the work of prior authors to test the mediation of meaning between religion and well-being, and conclude

that "intrinsic religious orientation has a significant indirect relationship with well-being via meaning in life" (p. 40). Diener et al. (2011) analyzed The Gallop World Poll data from 2005 to 2009 ($n = 455,104$) across 154 nations and meaning was a significant mediator of the positive relationship between R/S and well-being. Emmons (2005) has convincingly summarized the literature on strivings and goals to lend credence to the value of meaning embedded in the spiritual domain of life. However, meaning is not solely a religious experience; Galen and Kloet (2011) studied secular humanists and Christians and found that confident believe in a worldview system (religious or non-religious) was positively associated with well-being in a curvilinear relationship. Commitment to non-religious worldview systems can provide for well-being and value internalization in a similar manner as a religious worldview system. This finding helps makes sense of why religious persons in distress or with a poor God image/relationship may be less likely to show a link between R/S and well-being, as both of these factors may undermine one's confidence in their worldview and value system.

Social support is a second mediator that has received attention. Diener et al. (2011) found social support was a significant mediator between individual R/S and well-being, and Salsman et al. (2005) conducted two studies, providing strong evidence for the mediation of social support. Further, social support is described at length by Pargament (2002) throughout his theoretical evaluation of the benefits of religiousness, with many instances of social benefit, and Galen and Kloet (2011) confirm the discussion, finding that social support and frequency of social contact predicted emotional stability in both religious and non-religious persons.

Positive emotions are central to conceptions of well-being, and consistent with prior literature (Francis & Kaldor, 2002; Kim-Prieto & Miller, 2018; Van Cappellen et al., 2016) Vishkin et al. (2019) found that R/S was positively correlated with positive affect and negatively

correlated with negative affect in 277 Jewish and Christian Americans. They suggest positive

emotions are generated by cognitive reappraisal based on R/S beliefs, experiences, and values.

This evidence leads back toward the shaping impact of R/S on meaning and values. Greggo

(2016) has argued that formation of internal convictions is critical for Christian mental health

professionals to achieve alignment with their field, Emmons (2005) finds shaped beliefs and

values as central to a well-being process, and Anstey (2017) suggests formation is a central goal

of Christian life. The unifying function of R/S can focus one's life, promote a unified approach

to growth, and alter convictions in a unitary direction, which together mitigate the stress of

fragmentation or belief insecurity (Emmons 2005; Galen & Kloet, 2011; Greggo, 2016).

Finally, Diener et al., (2011) note that one's context is instrumental, finding that in

countries where life is rated as more benign and less threatening, non-religious persons can

achieve similar levels of well-being to religious persons. However, without religious guidance

well-being contained lower levels of meaning and purpose in life (Diener et al., 2011). In sum,

there is much evidence in support of R/S leading to well-being through the mechanisms of

meaning in life, personal change, social support, religious activity, intrinsic religiosity, and the

generation of positive emotion (Bosco-Ruggiero, 2020; Diener et al., 2011; Ellison & Levin,

1998; Kim-Prieto & Miller, 2018; Stulp et al., 2019; Vishkin et al., 2019; You & Lim, 2019).

Christian Faith and Well-being

Beyond global evidence for the impact of R/S on well-being, scholars have sought to

understand the specific impact of Christian faith on well-being. Benefits have been found across

cultures and well-being has been connected to meaning in life, affective experience, religious

service attendance and social support. A seminal work in this area by Ellison (1983) collates

results from studies using the spiritual well-being scale (SWBS) created by Paloutzian and

Ellison. The SWBS measures religious well-being and existential well-being, and Ellison (1983) reports findings that have subsequently been expanded upon by others (Bufford et al., 1991). Key findings in Christian populations were: spiritual well-being is positively correlated with self-esteem, intrinsic religiosity, grounding a positive self-evaluation in God's acceptance, and belief practices that value the believer; spiritual well-being is negatively correlated with individualism, success, and personal freedom; and Christians stating Jesus is their Lord and Savior have more positive spiritual, religious and existential well-being than other Christians (Ellison, 1983).

Other findings between Christian faith and well-being are similar to the R/S literature. First, as seen above, creating coherent meaning and life style choices are critical to well-being (Paloutzian, 2017). Tix et al. (2013) analyzed the impact of meaning within the Church. They surveyed 327 university students and found religious commitment predicted greater well-being for Evangelical Protestants and Catholics, but not Mainline Protestants who can generally be understood to have lower levels of religious commitment and conviction. They suggest high religious commitment may lead to thoughts of *knowing truth* that subsequently solidifies a meaning in life, around which social support is then built, which leads to well-being.

The benefits of Christian meaning on well-being is found for both working and retired Christians. Bott et al. (2015) surveyed 283 employed Christians in America to discern the impact of *calling*. They found that living a sense of calling, which gives meaning to life, was associated to intrinsic religiosity and well-being. However, for those who were more fundamentalist in belief, living a calling showed less relationship to well-being. The authors suggest more fundamentalist beliefs stem from greater intrinsic religiosity and provide increased meaning, reducing the need to find meaning in living a calling (Bott et al., 2015). The work of Rainville and Mehegan (2019) with retired Americans supports Bott et al. (2015); the authors studied

1,525 participants over the age of 40 to discover their personal opinion on what created a sense of purpose in their lives. The only sense of purpose that significantly correlated to well-being was having relationship with God in those over 60, and this relationship was significantly operationalized through prayer. The authors suggest prayer was an active religious behavior that can be conceptualized as communing with God, which creates felt meaning and purpose.

Across cultures, internalizing meaning shows benefit to Christians' well-being. You and Lim (2019) studied 579 Korean students, and found that intrinsic religious orientation correlated positively to well-being and was significantly mediated by meaning in life. However, an extrinsic religious orientation had a negative effect on meaning in life. The authors link this to literature supporting the notion of religious pressure, guilt and shame. You and Lim (2019) conclude religion requires personal adoption to avoid negative associations to well-being in Koreans. Similarly, Morris and McAdie (2009) found English Christians experienced a sense of meaning beyond non-Christians that buffered the fear of death and led to well-being.

The evidence for the impact of Christian meaning on well-being is strong. So too is evidence for the impact of attending religious services on well-being. Boppanna and Gross (2019) studied 277 self-identified LGBTQ Christians to discern if the relationship between religiosity and eudaimonic well-being was mediated by internalized homonegativity, accepting or rejecting churches, and attendance. Only attendance moderated this relationship. The authors conclude that LGBTQ Christians may significantly benefit from the social support aspects of a Christian faith that comes via attendance. In a further example, Leondari and Gialamas (2009) studied the relationship between religiosity and well-being in 363 Greek Orthodox Christians in Greece. They found participant well-being increased as religiosity increased, but not significantly. Further investigation revealed church attendance significantly increased life

satisfaction across all participants. This evidence aligns with the general research on R/S and well-being, suggesting attendance is effective in promoting well-being.

Finally, strong support is found for positive affect increasing with Christian faith (Francis & Kaldor, 2002; Vishkin et al., 2019), potentially as a product of meaning making that teaches Christians to reappraise circumstances through a new perspective (Vishkin et al., 2019). For example, Francis and Kaldor (2002) studied the relationship between Christianity and well-being in 989 Australian adults to discern how affect related to prayer, belief in God and service attendance. They found positive affect was positively correlated with each measure of Christianity, yet negative affect operated independently. The authors conclude the Christian actions of prayer, belief in God, and service attendance predict positive affect. Importantly, Van Cappellen et al. (2016) nuance this understanding of positive affect in their study of 548 European Catholics. They found that transcendent positive emotions (awe, gratitude, love and peace) significantly mediated between religiousness and well-being, while finding other positive emotions did not. However, the religious context was specific and respondents completed surveys immediately after mass. Given the positive affective impact of prayer, it is interesting to consider that Leondari and Gialamas (2009) found those who prayed more were more anxious. Christian prayer demonstrates the same relationship to anxiety as prayer for multiple religious groups, where it is hypothesized that people turn to prayer more frequently when in distress (Bosco-Ruggiero, 2020). Leondari and Gialamas (2009) agree with this conclusion that increased prayer may relate to increased distress because it is being used as a buffer, and therefore it may also lead to increased positive affect and subsequent well-being (Van Cappellen et al., 2016). Ellison et al. (2014) investigated prayer and found it related to God attachment (which is discussed shortly), but not to psychiatric symptoms. They found those securely attached to God

found increased prayer to have health benefits, while those who perceive God as distant or unresponsive experience anxiety symptoms as a result of prayer.

In sum, the literature strongly supports the assertion that R/S supports well-being, and that Christian faith in particular supports well-being. The particular mechanisms of note are internalized meaning (as opposed to extrinsic religiosity), service attendance, positive affect, prayer, and social support. It is logical to notice how these elements of a religious life are intertwined and begin with relationship with God. What is not clear, is if internalized meaning and the other mediators discussed are related to character virtues and their expression.

Attachment to God and Well-being

In 1992 Kirkpatrick (1992) responded to the notion that religion had not been integrated into mainstream psychology by solidifying the concept of God attachment. He attempted this integration utilizing the work of Bowlby and Ainsworth to suggest the "fundamental dynamic underlying Christianity" is "the availability and responsiveness of an attachment figure, who serves alternately as a haven and as a secure base", with Jesus or God serving as that figure (p. 6). Attachment theory is the product of Bowlby and Ainsworth's collaboration starting in the 1950's, yet theologians had already begun discussing a rich relational theology that placed human connection as a product of God interacting with his people and imaging God (Counted & Watts, 2017; Johnson, 2017). Theologians such as Moltmann, Barth, Grenz and Gunton express the beneficial impact and importance of God's personal investment and relationship in a way that is analogous to attachment (Counted & Watts, 2017; Johnson, 2017). Kirkpatrick (1992) had a solid theoretical and theological base for his proposal, which has subsequently been built upon by others such as Knabb and Emerson (2013).

Attachment theory in psychology developed from multiple influences. According to Bretherton (1992) Bowlby noted the benefits of empathetically exploring an adult patient's childhood experiences as a way to help in the present as early as the 1940s. Intergenerational transmission was also discussed by object-relations theorists such as Fairbairn and Winnicott from the late 1940s (Bretherton, 1992; Fishman, 2003; Padel, 2014). Winnicott had placed development into a social context that required interaction between an infant and caregiver, leading him to suggest a good enough mother created an environment that provided for and adapted to a child (Fishman, 2003). Winnicott believed a holding environment is required to help a child mature from dependence to independence (Fishman, 2003). Conversely a developmental environment that failed to hold or attend to the child led to insecurity (Fishman, 2003). Similarly, Fairbairn discussed transitional objects used in development, and said splitting occurred at developmental stages where the parent-child partnership was insufficient (Padel, 2014). Both theorists were influenced by Freud and discuss defenses and reactions to internalized parent ideals and self-concepts (Fishman, 2003; Padel, 2014). Bowlby similarly emerged from a Freudian language, stating in 1951 that the mother acted as the child's ego and super-ego until they developed, and he began to speak of the impact of relational deprivation (Bretherton, 1992). All three theorists suggest a child needs a level of safety within key relationships to feel secure in the world and develop fully. Bowlby (1951) builds from Winnicott and others in his paper *The nature of the child's tie to his mother*, and subsequently collaborated with Ainsworth who provided the term *secure base* for a responsive and attuned caregiver (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby and Ainsworth forged a theory where security allows exploration and development of adequate working models of self and other. Internal working models and the security of attachments have been seen to last into adulthood and impact relationships and behavior (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

It was Kirkpatrick's (1992) assertion that these concepts also apply to relationship with God. In sum, much like the bond a child has with a mother, the bond with God operates as a gauge of safety and responsivity that leads to a growing sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Kirkpatrick, 1992; Leman et al., 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2001). This assertion has subsequently been investigated and Davis et al. (2013) affirm that experiences in relationship with human attachment figures lead to the development of implicit relational knowing about how to perceive and respond to others. Corresponding implicit models of relating are developed for divine attachments, and are activated by certain intrapersonal and situational cues (Davis et al., 2013; Moriarty et al., 2006). Ultimately, a positive attachment to God consists of a perceived emotional bond that provides the safety needed for pro-social behavior and the ability to resist harmful self-soothing (Kaczor, 2015; Leman et al., 2018).

Prior to God attachment is the concept of God *image*. How one *pictures* or *images* God (as loving, hostile, etc.) is a metaphor of how one expects God to relate and therefore informs attachment to God (Davis, 2013; Moriarty et al., 2006; Stroope et al., 2013). Moriarty et al. (2006) discuss complex relationship models seeking to explain how God image relates to parental attachment, context, culture and development. Despite God images being complex, Moriarty et al. (2006) suggest it is warranted to initially assume a close parallel between one's presenting attachment style and God image, and that this impacts God attachment. Lehman et al. (2018) found that attachment to God was more predictive of psychological health and well-being than God image in two studies from the 2010 Baylor Religion Survey. This finding held true when controlling for known correlates of well-being, including sex, age, race, income, frequency of prayer, and attendance at religious services. When both avoidant and anxious God attachment decreased, well-being rose, and Leman et al. (2018) concludes: "The security of an emotional

bond could be more formative than thoughts or cognitions about what God is like… an individual's perceived relationship with God is important to understanding his or her psychological health" (p. 170).

Many researchers have investigated the benefits of attachment and relationship to God (for example, Freeze & DiTommaso, 2014; Leman et al., 2018; Miner, 2009; Strelan et al., 2009). First, Miner (2009) recognized the vast literature supporting parental attachment and well-being and investigated if well-being is similarly impacted by attachment to God after controlling for past parental attachment. In a sample of 116 Australians, the security of one's attachment to God had a small but significant association with well-being after controlling for parental attachment. The study demonstrated that a meaningful and personal relationship with God was related to well-being, finding that an intrinsic orientation to religion (internalized meaning) mediated the relationship between God attachment and existential well-being. Supporting this finding, Keefer and Brown (2018) conducted two studies with 394 American adults and 265 undergraduate students respectively, to investigate how attachment to God influenced well-being beyond current interpersonal attachments. Both studies indicated that attachment to God was associated with well-being beyond the impact of interpersonal attachments. Specifically, attachment anxiety towards God predicted lower feelings of autonomy and higher stress, while avoidance towards God predicted lower feelings of competence and a lower sense of meaning in life. Freeze and DiTommaso (2014) also attempted to discern the impact of parental attachment and church family attachment on well-being. They found these variables were not significant in 185 Baptist participants, but did find secure attachment to God predicted higher general R/S and lower personal distress. The authors suggest prayer, intrinsic motivation and a sense of universality likely mediated this impact. Taken together, Miner (2009), Keefer and Brown

(2018), and Freeze and DiTommaso (2014) find attachment to God has a broad and significant impact on well-being beyond human attachments and behaviors resulting from relating to God. In short, attachment to God is empirically linked to well-being, theoretically supported as a way to view relationship to God, and an effective measure to assess the impact of relationship with God.

Measuring Relationship with God and Well-being

Greggo (2019) exposes the considerable range of constructs used to measure spirituality, religious engagement, attachment to God, and relationship with God, listing 22 measures and noting there are more. Conceptually, measures of spirituality vary widely from measures seeking to examine one's relationship with God, or attachment to God, because the construct of spirituality does not need to define how one relates to a particular being (Ellison, 1983). Stulp et al. (2019) agree, asserting that to measure religiosity or Christian commitment to God is not conceptually the same as measuring relationship with God. They explain that religiosity often refers to rituals and shared communal beliefs, and spirituality often refers to private beliefs or rituals, with both ultimately focused on beliefs and behaviors. Stulp et al. (2019) and Davis et al. (2013) argue that monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) espouse a personal god with whom one relates, and therefore relationship with god measures internalized images or representations of god that include prior attachment schemas, personally held beliefs, emotions and experiences with god. These dimensions are more accurately measured using attachment or god image (Stulp et al. 2019). This is supported by the earlier review of Christian relationship with God which is intensely personal and experiential (Anstey, 2017; Kaczor, 2015; Lewis, 2002; Volf, 1996).

From Greggo's (2019) list of measures and an extensive search of the literature, seven measures specifically focus on *relationship* with God: The Faith Maturity Scale (FMS), Attachment to God Inventory (AGI), Attitudes Toward God Scale-9 (ATG-9), Spiritual Assessment Inventory (SAI), two unnamed attachment to God measures by Sim and Loh (2003) and Rowatt and Kirkpatrick (2002), and the Communion with God Scale (CGS). A full discussion of each measure is beyond the present scope, yet needless to say, each measure has limitations regarding its conceptualization of relating with God.

A central and uniform concern for all measures except the CGS is that they are designed with an etic (or "outsider") perspective that imposes a psychological framework on the measure (Knabb & Wang, 2019). From an existential-phenomenological perspective, Hoffman (2012) suggests religious relationships can be found meaningful if their impact and form is discovered rather than imposed. Therefore, despite support for using attachment as a helpful measurement of relationship with God, attachment is vulnerable to the etic and existential-phenomenological critiques because attachment theory stems from the psychological literature. Conversely, the CGS was designed from an emic (or "insider") Christian perspective to avoid imposing psychological constructs or meaning onto the measure that may not align with Christian experiences of relating with God (Knabb & Wang, 2019). Knabb and Wang (2019) utilized scripture and a broad overview of puritan literature to increase content validity; the puritans were selected due to their perception that a dynamic relationship with God shapes emotion, mind, and engages the soul (Knabb & Wang, 2019). The CGS items present God as available for relationship, participatory, communing, and with the potential for relational harmony (Knabb & Wang, 2019). This emic perspective closely aligns with the earlier theoretical discussion and

recognizes relationship with God affects humans in a manner that forms convictions (Greggo, 2016), or character virtues, and internal working models for living (Davis et al., 2013).

Knabb and Wang (2019) recognize attachment underlies the relationship components measured by the CGS, yet they found the CGS provided incremental validity beyond the AGI in predicting daily spiritual experiences and subjective well-being for both anxious and avoidant attachment. Knabb and Wang, (2019) suggest this is because the written texture of the CGS items accord more accurately with a common Christian vernacular and experience, and more accurately measure relationship with God. Given the correlations between CGS, spiritual experiences (large effect size), and well-being (medium effect size), Knabb and Wang's (2019) conclusion warrants repetition: "fellowshipping with God as a distinctly Christian construct offers explanatory power, beyond God attachment, in influencing salient daily experiences (e.g., a feeling of optimism, usefulness, relaxation, clarity in thinking, closeness in human relationships; Stewart-Brown et al., 2009)" (p. 12). The CGS serves to isolate the construct of Christian relationship with God.

Relationship with God, Character Virtues, and Well-being

As discussed, a central function of the Christian life is well-being that occurs as a product (such as meaning and social support) of relationship with God, and is underpinned by personal formation (character virtues). Positive psychology and Christianity agree that developing traits, or virtues, is a primary way to influence both activity and felt well-being. It is possible to trace this process beginning with Van Cappellen et al. (2016) who found self-transcendent emotions mediated between religiosity and well-being. Given Van Cappellen et al.'s (2016) argument citing Fredrickson (2013, p. 3), that positive emotions are "brief, multisystemic responses to some change in the way people interpret—or appraise—their current circumstances" (p. 487), it

follows that positive emotions come from an interpretive event or condition. The original

condition is relationship with God, starting with union with Him, and experiencing acceptance

(or security) which generates positive emotions (Dwiwardani et al., 2014; Lewis, 2002; Volf,

1996). As these emotions continue in the context of intrinsic religious commitment and

relationship to God, convictions are formed that underpin character virtue (Greggo, 2016;

Loosemore & Fidler, 2019). Developed character virtues then form a disposition to life and

further generate positive appraisals and emotions that contribute to well-being (Greggo, 2016;

Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Van Cappellen et al., 2016). For example, acceptance is

something for which one is grateful, and felt gratitude develops the virtue of gratitude, which

then promotes an awareness of good things and subsequent feelings of gratitude, and

subsequently satisfaction with one's standing in life and actions that accord with this appraisal

(Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Van Cappellen et al., 2016).

Studies have begun to investigate these connections more thoroughly, often looking for

evidence of mediation. Krause and Hayward (2015a) note that virtues are often investigated one

at a time and few studies consider multiple mediation effects simultaneously. Studies that

investigate single virtues in regards to relationship with God and well-being are discussed,

followed by a discussion of studies that have sought to combine mediators, and then humility is

discussed as a master virtue.

Relationship with God, Humility and Well-being

Lavelock et al. (2017) discuss humility as a master virtue in Christian thought on which

all other virtue expression may depend. The authors reference Augustine and others who suggest

the point of humility in secular and religious communities is to transcend a focus and concern for

self. Lavelock et al., (2017) found that focusing on developing humility promoted more

simultaneous virtue growth compared to a focus on any other virtue. Paine et al. (2018) found that moderate or high humility mediated between R/S salience and psychosocial functioning, but those with low humility showed a negative correlation between R/S salience and psychosocial functioning. Whilst, Jankowski et al. (2018) found security with God and differentiation of self, mediated between humility and well-being, and conclude those without accurate self-perception or the ability to manage pride struggle to procure the benefits of relating to God that stem from humility. Finally, Mollidor et al. (2015) studied Australian Christians and found that the level of volunteering (humble other focused actions) mediated the relationship between religiosity and well-being. This critical evidence suggests humility both fosters relationship with God, and allows the application and experience of benefits from this relationship.

Relationship with God, Gratitude and Well-being

The relationship between gratitude and R/S has received much attention and led Emmons (2005; cited by Rosmarin et al., 2011) to suggest gratitude may be a sacred or spiritual emotion. However, gratitude has received no direct attention as a mediator between a Christian relationship with God and well-being. Nonetheless, the literature offers insight. As discussed above, Emmons and Crumpler (2000) argued that gratitude is both an emotion and a virtue that develop in response to benevolence and an attitude of willing indebtedness. Building on Emmons and Crumpler (2000), Rosmarin et al. (2011) investigated how relationship with god (not specifically Christian) may enhance gratitude through religious gratitude. They found both general and religious gratitude were correlated to religious commitment, yet religious gratitude completely mediated general gratitude. This finding held for both Jewish and Christian participants, and religious commitment and religious gratitude explained 47% of variance in general gratitude. The authors found general gratitude significantly predicted well-being, but the

interaction between religious gratitude and general gratitude explained additional variance for happiness, affect and physical/mental health. In sum, the authors conclude religious commitment is highly salient to gratitude which has a positive effect on well-being, and religious gratitude further adds to well-being. It follows that gratitude would mediate between relationship with God and well-being.

Further indirect evidence for this conclusion is provided by Krause et al. (2015) who investigated the relationship between image of God, gratitude, hope and physical health in 1774 adults who took the Landmark Spirituality and Health Survey. In this broadly Christian sample, Krause et al. (2015) found those with a benevolent view of God were more likely to feel grateful to God, and subsequently gratitude to God was associated to increased hope about the future, and in turn, hope is associated with favorable health. Given gratitude's established relationship with well-being and strong links to religiosity, it appears that gratitude may mediate between relationship with God and well-being.

Relationship with God, Compassion and Well-being

Compassion has theoretical links to well-being in the Christian tradition, where service and care for others is promoted (Volf, 1996). Only one study has investigated the link between God and well-being mediated by compassion (Steffen & Masters, 2005), whilst two others focused on self-compassion (Homan, 2014; Varghese, 2015). In two studies with college students and the local community Steffen and Masters (2005) found combined compassionate attitudes and behaviors mediated between intrinsic religiosity and well-being. Controlling for gender, age, and the impact of social support, compassionate attitude had a consistent positive impact on well-being across both studies by reducing depression and perceived stress, but compassionate behavior did not significantly add to prediction or mediation.

Further evidence for the mediating role of compassion is available. Homan (2014) studied self-compassion's mediating role between anxious and avoidant attachment to God and mental well-being in MTurk and undergraduate participants. Self-compassion demonstrated a significant mediation effect for anxiety, depression and life satisfaction. This finding for self-compassion was supported by Varghese (2015) who found self-compassion mediated between anxious and avoidant attachments to God and overall well-being amongst university students. Finally, Fulton (2018) found that self-compassion fully mediated between mindfulness and other focused compassion. Collectively these findings support Steffen and Masters (2005) conclusions, and suggest that compassion may mediate between relationship with God and well-being.

Collective Character Virtues and Christian Well-being

Despite interest in the mediating role of specific character virtues between relationship with God and well-being, no studies have investigated more than one virtue at a time in this arrangement. What has occurred is the development and analysis of a few theoretically rich models that investigate the relationships between various character virtues, and concepts related to relationship with God. Krause and Hayward (2015a) and Sharma and Singh (2018) studied models that approximate relationship with God through religious activity, beliefs, and commitment, and study multiple character virtues. Despite the aforementioned argument by Stulp et al (2019) that measuring religiosity or Christian commitment to God is not conceptually the same as measuring relationship with God itself, these two studies provide useful models to focus the current discussion.

Krause and Hayward (2015a) provided a strong rationale for their model based on prior literature, beginning their model with church attendance and religious commitment, and ending with gratitude to God. They suggested a progressive model that traversed through humility,

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compassion, emotional support giving, experiencing religious meaning, and feeling gratitude towards God. They found support for their model using correlation coefficients in a sample of 1,535 nationally sampled Christian and atheist Americans. Results showed, those more committed to their faith appear more humble, and church attendance and religious commitment are associated with gratitude towards God. They also found those who are humble may be more grateful to God, and considering the findings of Rosmarin et al. (2011) above, these people may subsequently be more grateful in general. Therefore, Krause and Hayward (2015a) provide evidence to warrant a possible causal connection as follows: Christian religion increasing humility, which in turn increases gratitude. Examining mediation effects between these variables may provide further evidence of causal relationships. However, remembering Stulp's (2019) assertion that measures of religiosity or commitment do not equate to relationship with God, caution is warranted in concluding that Krause and Hayward's (2015a) study also provides evidence that relationship with God may be associated to character virtues in the same way as Christian religion. Krause and Hayward (2015a) also conclude, "virtues do not exist in isolation and that more than one virtue may be needed to maximize the benefits of one's behavior [or relationship with God]" (p. 201), validating the need for further study.

Sharma and Singh (2018) investigated the mediating role of spirituality, gratitude, altruism, and forgiveness on the association between religion and well-being, analyzing two models with either altruism or forgiveness following spirituality and gratitude in a path. In a sample of 220 adults from 6 major religions in India (predominantly Hindus, 82%) religiosity was significantly correlated to spirituality, spirituality to gratitude, and gratitude to well-being. Further, when either altruism or forgiveness were inserted in the model, they were significant mediators between gratitude and well-being. These results support gratitude as a mediator

between relationship with God and well-being. The study also demonstrates the pro-social impact of gratitude, as gratitude promoted forgiveness and altruism, which have both been linked to well-being (Sharma & Singh, 2018). Due to cultural and religious differences between India and America these findings must be interpreted with caution. Despite each study's limitations, both studies support the premise of investigating multiple character virtues to determine their mediation between relationship with God and well-being.

Humility as a Master Virtue

Davis and Hook's (2014) review of the humility literature led them to suggest humility is intricately linked to the experience of religion and spirituality in a complex manner. Lavelock et al. (2017) proposed that humility may act as a master virtue that unlocks the growth of other character virtues. They point to Christian theology, scriptural support for the virtue of humility, and psychological theorizing, to provide a rational for two studies that sought to train students in humility. The studies tested the impact of training one character virtue on the formation of other character virtues. The first study utilized a control condition, and a workbook focusing on one of the following virtues; humility, forgiveness, patience, self-control, or positivity. Over five weeks the humility, forgiveness, patience and positivity workbook groups demonstrated significant growth in the central virtue and additional growth in another virtue. However, only the humility workbook group grew in humility, while also seeing benefits in forgivingness, patience, and trait negativity. The humility workbook group showed the greatest additional virtue growth. The second study utilized an improved humility workbook, and the same constellation of virtue growth was observed. In study 2 the effect sizes for character virtue change were notable. Lavelock et al. (2017) state a solidly supported conclusion; "humility may be a higher-order virtue that helps facilitate the development of other virtues" (p. 300). The studies by Lavelock et

al. (2017) warrant caution, given small, and contextually bound samples. Furthermore, only a select few virtues were investigated. Humility may not have the same impact on other virtues.

However, the designation of *master virtue* warrants caution when studies are considered together. Krause and Hayward (2015a) found those more committed to their faith appear more humble, and subsequently more grateful. And Lavelock et al. (2017) support this conclusion. Yet, a second study by Krause and Hayward (2015b) considered practical wisdom rather than humility as a *master virtue*. They conclude, factor loadings suggested character virtues find *expression,* or are *applied* towards others through the single factor of practical wisdom. Krause and Hayward (2015b) finish with a call for more research "on underlying factors that motivate virtues" (p. 753). In short, humility may be essential in *promoting* character virtue development, and practical wisdom may be essential in *applying* character virtues into actions that impact well-being. This study attends to the first contention.

Rationale for the Study

Well-being has long been central to the Christian religion, and well-being has similarly become a core focus of psychology and counseling (Charry & Kosits, 2017; Myers & Sweeney, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Many mediators of well-being have been explored (Halliwell et al., 2019; Koenig, 2015), and scholars consistently found support that Christian religion mediates well-being (for example, Tix et al., 2013; You and Lim, 2019). Foundational to Christian religion is a unique and personal relationship with God (Knabb & Wang, 2019), and this relationship is intended to promote character change (Greggo, 2016). While many studies have focused on religiosity in general, Hackney & Sanders (2003) said, "measures of religiosity that focus on institutional participation are focusing on the least existentially relevant aspects of

religion, with personal devotion producing the greatest existential satisfaction" (p. 51). Subsequently, this study focused directly on relationship with God to close a gap in the literature.

Scholarly literature on character virtues, Christian faith and well-being has attempted to understand the mediating role of character virtues between relationship with God and well-being (for example, Homan, 2014; Krause et al. 2015). Despite progress showing that humility, gratitude, and compassion are highly likely to mediate between relationship with God and well-being (for example, Jankowski et al., 2018; Krause et al., 2015; Steffens & Masters, 2005), only a few studies investigate multiple character virtues simultaneously (Krause & Hayward, 2015a; Krause & Hayward, 2015b; Sharma & Singh, 2018). Krause and Hayward (2015a) called for further investigation of multiple character virtues within a theoretically sound model to discern each virtue's contribution. Krause and Hayward (2015a) contend that it is not enough to link religion to an outcome, rather, one must ask why people involved in religion want to help others in the first place. They contend that "the answer lies in the virtues that are promoted by religion" (p. 193). Further, Davis and Hook's (2014) call for investigations into promoting humility, and Lavelock et al. (2017) call for investigation of humility as a master virtue, given that it may underpin the formation of other virtues.

Tracing the current discussion, (that well-being in America is in decline (Halliwell et al., 2019); interest in religion is blossoming, and may provide a pathway to well-being (Koenig, 2015); Christian relationship with God is conceptually intended to shape character and promote growth (Greggo, 2016); character virtues are linked to both Christianity, well-being and relationship security (Dwiwardani et al., 2014; Krause & Hayward, 2015a); this knowledge is without cohesion and clarity); responding to the call of both Krause and Hayward (2015a) and Lavelock et al. (2017) to provide cohesion and clarity was timely and pertinent. A direct

response to these gaps in the literature required investigation of theoretically based mediation models (offered in Figures 1 and 2) with samples drawn from the general adult Christian population.

A full investigation of the following research questions and proposed models contributes to knowledge of the relationships between relationships with God, character virtues, well-being, and the role of humility as a master virtue. This knowledge has the potential to contribute to one of counseling's central missions: to help people experience well-being. Further, it highlights the benefit of relationship with God, and provides further evidence for the formation and expression of character virtues. Finally, this study cannot answer a question of causality, but it has validated a helpful theoretical model that can be subsequently investigated.

CHAPTER II

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This chapter explains the methods and procedures of this study and begins with definitions of key terms. Second, the study research questions, hypotheses, and theoretical models are presented. Third, under the heading research design, the overarching approach of the study is given under the research design heading. Fourth, the population and sampling method outline who the study specifically studies. Fifth, the data collection procedure explains data collection, use, and confidentiality. Sixth, the study variables and the measures to assess them are discussed. Seventh, the proposed statistical analyses used to examine the research questions are explained.

Definition of terms

The research utilizes the following constructs, which are defined.

Active Christian

One who attests to a belief in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior.

Character Virtue/s

Character virtues are discrete dispositions (such as humility) that contribute to the expression of moral excellence in thought, feeling or act, and contribute to the common good (Newstead et al., 2018).

Compassion

Compassion as a character virtue entails having tender or compassionate feelings towards suffers, finding meaning in responding to suffering, and acting on behalf of sufferers above one's interests (Hwang et al. 2008).

Eudaimonic Well-being

Eudaimonic well-being is the felt sense of optimism and usefulness in life, clarity in life and decision making, and feeling close to others.

Gratitude

Gratitude as a character virtue is the experience of feeling grateful or thankful for many things, gratitude to others, appreciating the ordinary things in life, and the absence of long periods without gratitude.

Humility

Humility as a character virtue includes the qualities of humility, modesty, respect, other-focus, tolerance, and open-mindedness.

Affective experience

Affective experience is the felt balance of unpleasurable and pleasurable experiences currently in one's life.

Relationship with God

Relationship with God is the felt experiences of being loved, connected with and valued by God, and reporting prayer, reading the Bible, and reciprocally relating to God (Knabb & Wang, 2019).

Satisfaction with Life

Satisfaction with life includes the felt sense of approving of and enjoying the current state of one's life, not wishing to change one's life, and stating one has the most important things in life.

Well-being

Well-being is a broad construct that combines the felt sense of optimism, usefulness in life, clarity in life and decision making, feeling close to others, affective experience, feeling

meaningful and purposeful in life, approving of and enjoying the current state of one's life, not wishing to change one's life, and stating one has the most important things in life.

Research Questions

RQ1. Do character virtues, humility, gratitude, and compassion mediate between a relationship with God and self-reported well-being?

RQ2. If the character virtues mediate between a relationship with God and self-reported well-being, what are the effects among the variables?

RQ3. Does a model with humility preceding gratitude and compassion provide a better fit to the sample data than the original mediation model?

Hypotheses

H1. Character virtues, humility, gratitude, and compassion statistically significantly mediate between a relationship with God and self-reported well-being.

H3. A model with humility preceding gratitude and compassion provides a better fit to the sample data.

Figures 1 and 2 (below) describe the two hypothesized models investigated via path analysis in this study. Particular focus is given to the mediating role of humility, gratitude, and compassion between a relationship with God and well-being. The hypothesized directions of the path coefficients in each model are indicated.

Figure 1 – Hypothesized Path Model 1 (with Equal Character Virtues)
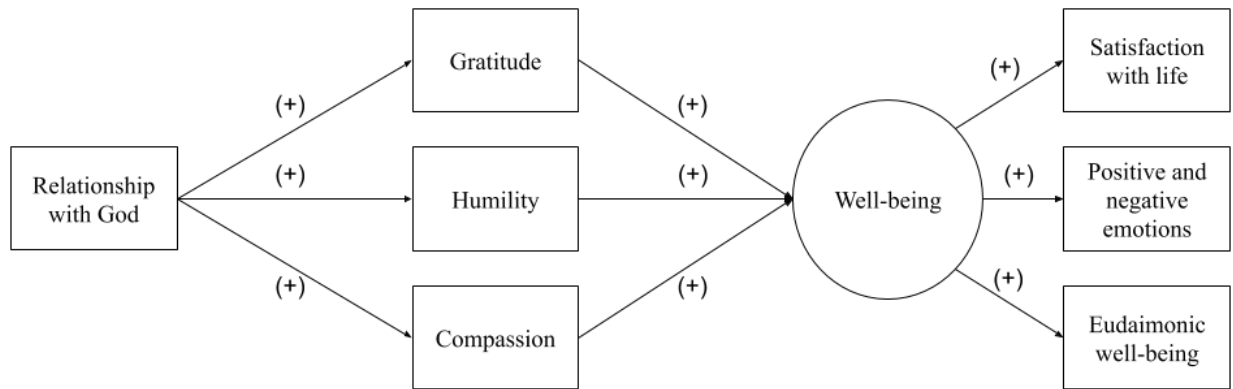
Figure 2 – Hypothesized Path Model 2 (with Humility as Master Virtue)
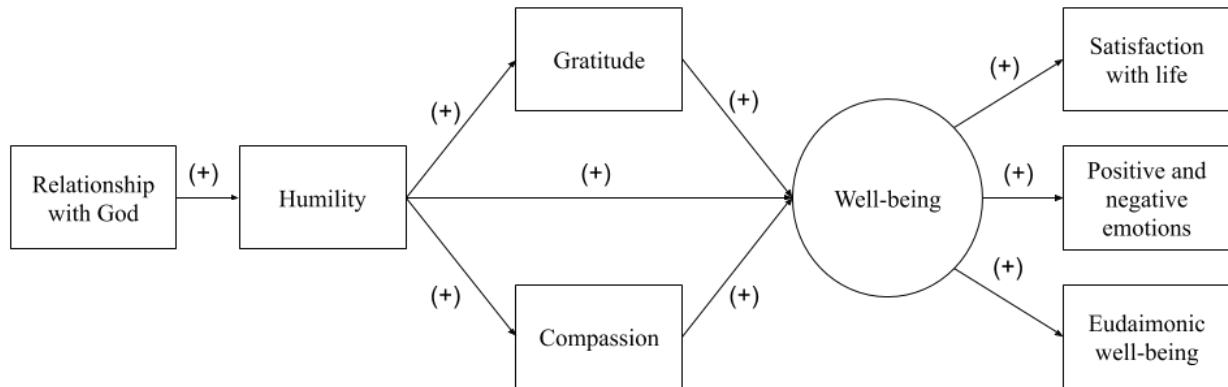
Research Design

This study utilized a correlational design to describe the relationships found amongst the variables. Path analysis was used to investigate the above hypotheses to gain a clearer understanding of how relating to God contributes to well-being through the development and use of character virtues, humility, gratitude, and compassion. An internet-based survey was used to collect the necessary data.

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected using an online survey hosted by SurveyMonkey containing the study instruments, demographic questions, and informed consent. The survey was distributed by the

researcher and co-operating institutions with an accompanying script requesting participation. Participants were encouraged to initiate snowballing by forwarding the survey to other Christian adults. Each institution granted approval, and data collection remained open until the necessary number of participants were attained. Collected data was held anonymously and securely on a locked server and computer for statistical analysis.

Population and Sampling

The study selected a representative sample from the adult Christian population, and those who chose to fill out an explicitly Christian survey. Recruitment used convenience sampling from Christian organizations (a non-denominational mid-west Christian radio station, and a Presbyterian Seminary and two Churches), as well as through snowballing. Data collection included demographic data regarding participants' age, gender, faith orientation, length of Christian faith, and theological tradition. Screening questions include age and Christian faith.

The initial sample consisted of 2,621 participants. Initial screening found five participants reporting their age as under 18 and these cases were removed. The decision was made to remove another 22 cases that had three (5.6%+) or more missing responses on the study variables, leaving 2,594 cases where females significantly outnumbered males (18.7% male, n = 484; 81% female, n = 2101; .3% other or unknown, n = 9). The participants reported themselves to be 18-30 years old (n = 131, 5.1%), 31- 40 years old (n = 292, 11.3%), 41-50 years old (n = 460, 17.7%), 51-60 years old (n = 788, 30.4%), 61-70 years old (n = 526, 20.3%), 71-80 years old (n = 121, 4.7%), 81+ years old (n = 4, .2%), and 272 (10.5%) did not answer this question. A large majority of participants reported their ethnicity as White (n = 2432, 93.8%), followed by African American (n = 72, 2.8%), Hispanic (n = 32, 1.2%), Mixed (n = 27, 1%), Asian (n = 14, .5%), with others and non-specified completing the sample (n = 17, .6%). The sample was racial biased

and also geographically biased. The majority of participants indicated they lived in the United States (n = 2546, 98.1%) with a handful of other locations filling out the sample (Columbia, UAE, United Kingdom, Australia, Asia and unspecified; n = 48, 1.7%). Participant Christian denomination was fairly well distributed despite our limitations in the sample. See Table 2 for a summary of participant denomination data.

Table 2.

Participant Denominations

Denomination	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Adventist	8	.3	.3
Baptist	472	18.2	18.5
Catholic	339	13.1	31.6
Methodist	151	5.8	37.4
Episcopal/Anglican	23	.9	38.3
Lutheran	213	8.2	46.5
Pentecostal	159	6.1	52.6
Reformed/Presbyterian	179	6.9	59.5
Evangelical	29	1.1	60.6
Nazarene	13	.5	61.1
Restorationist	6	.2	61.3
Nondenominational	911	35.1	96.4
Other	80	3.1	99.5
None Specified	11	.4	99.9*
Total	2594	100	100

*Not 100% due to rounding

Finally, cases who answered that they were not Christians or left this demographic item blank were retained provided they answered questions about their relationship with God on the Communion with God Scale (discussed below) in a non-random, and complete manner. This inclusion provided breadth and diversity within the data to analyze the models (Christian n = 2540, 97.9%; Non-Christians n = 36, 1.4%; Not specified n = 18, .7%). Participants that indicated they were not Christians had a significantly ($p < .001$) lower relationship with God (M = 40.4 on the CGS) than Christians (M = 49.9). Participants reported how long they have been a Christian with most falling between 31 and 60 years. See Table 3 for more detail.

Table 3.

Participant Years as a Christian

Years	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0-10	148	5.7	5.7
11-20	260	10	15.7
21-30	369	14.2	30
31-40	483	18.6	48.6
41-50	584	22.5	71.1
51-60	492	19	90.1
61-70	220	8.5	98.5
71+	38	1.5	100
Total	2594	100	100

Research Variable Description

Relationship with God is the only exogenous variables included in this study and was measured using the Communion with God Scale (Knabb & Wang, 2019). The endogenous variables include the character virtues of humility, compassion and gratitude, and self-reported

well-being. Humility was measured using the Brief State Humility Scale (Krause et al., 2017); gratitude, was measured by the Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough et al., 2002); and compassion was measured using the Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (Hwang et al., 2008). Well-being includes hedonic and eudaimonic factors that combine to represent global well-being. Hedonic factors of well-being were measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) and the Scale for Positive and Negative Experiences (Diener et al., 2009). Eudaimonic factors were measured using the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (Stewart-Brown et al., 2009).

Instrumentation

Demographic Information

This study utilized specific demographic items to achieve its' purpose—the first two items screened participants. Participants were required to be 18 years of age or older, and state if they consider themselves active Christians. The first item asks for age in years. The second asked participants to answer 'Yes' or 'No' in response to the prompt, "Do you consider yourself an active Christian?" Further demographic items included gender, race/ethnicity, years as a Christian, and theological tradition. However, the researcher made the decision to retain participant responses even when they indicated they were not a Christian as discussed above.

Communion with God Scale

The Communion with God Scale (CGS) measured participant relationship with God. This instrument utilizes an emic (or "insider") construction methodology to avoid imposing psychological constructs and allows the 12 items to adhere closely to common Christian experiences of perceived relating to God (Knabb & Wang, 2019). Items include "God draws me closer in our relationship" and "I feel a deep sense of connection with God," measured on a five-

point scale from "never true for me," to "always true for me" (Knabb & Wang, 2019). The emic perspective of the CGS aligns with a central assumption of this study that a participatory relationship with God affects human minds and expressions through relational, emotional, and behavioral factors (Knabb & Wang, 2019).

Introduced in the year 2019, the CGS has no validation studies available beyond the author's work. The authors conducted a series of factor analyses to confirm a good fit between the 12 items and the single factor communion with God (Knabb & Wang, 2019). Internal consistency reliabilities for the CGS were high with Cronbach's alphas of .95 for both samples tested (Knabb & Wang, 2019). Construct validity for the CGS was established by examining correlations with other instruments. Moderate to strong correlations exist between the CGS and measures of daily spiritual experiences and mental well-being, as were strongly negative correlations with avoidant God attachment (Knabb & Wang, 2019). Weak positive correlations between the CGS and anxious God attachment, depression and anxiety, experiential avoidance, intolerance of uncertainty, and perseverative thinking make sense in the context of Christians' psychological vulnerabilities causing them to walk closely with God (Knabb & Wang, 2019). The CGS was also positively correlated with activity typically understood to represent a relationship with God; church attendance ($r = .18$); hours of Bible reading per month ($r = .09$); hours of prayer per month ($r = .17$); and hours of serving in the church per month ($r = .12$) (Knabb & Wang, 2019). Finally, the CGS has incremental validity beyond the Attachment to God Inventory (AGI), found using hierarchical regression (Knabb & Wang, 2019). The CGS explained 66% and 51% of the variance in predicting daily spiritual experiences over and above AGI anxiety and avoidance subscales, respectively (Knabb & Wang, 2019). The CGS explained 17% and 19% of the variance in predicting mental well-being over and above AGI anxiety and

avoidance subscales, respectively (Knabb & Wang, 2019). Knabb and Wang (2019) conclude, "results provide support for the incremental validity of the CGS, an *emic* measure grounded in the Christian tradition, above and beyond the AGI" (p. 10).

Humility Semantic Differentials

Humility was measured using Rowatt et al.'s (2006) Humility Semantic Differentials (HSD). Rowatt et al. (2006) initially used the HSD to validate the Humility Implicit Association Test. The HSD uses seven pairs of words, and participants rate themselves on a seven-point scale placed between each pair of words (for example, "humble/arrogant" and "modest/immodest"). Rowatt et al. (2006) asked participants to list people who knew them well and contacted at least one acquaintance to rate the participant using the same differentials, and correlations for self-other agreement ranged from .36 to .4, while Cronbach alpha's ranged from .72 to .79. The HDS demonstrates good convergent and divergent validity; correlating positively with a single item "humility thermometer" (.54), VIA-IS humility-modesty subscale (.53), NEO-PI-R modesty subscale (.44), impression management (.3); and negatively with exhibitionism (-.35), vanity (-.31), and neuroticism (-.52) (Rowatt et al., 2006).

McElroy-Heltzel et al. (2019) reviewed the psychometric properties of twenty-two measures of humility, consistently citing psychometric concerns, and the HDS is the only brief measure of general humility they support. McElroy-Heltzel et al. (2019) suggest the HDS suffices "as a brief measure of humility" (p. 397), given its pattern of correlations and items that assess openness, global humility, modesty, and other-orientedness. The Brief State Humility Scale (BSHS) by Krause et al. (2017), another low burden instrument was eliminated from consideration because state humility may change moment-to-moment based on contextual factors

making it inappropriate for this study that is concerned with a stable perspective of character

virtues (McElroy-Heltzel et al., 2019).

The Gratitude Questionnaire

The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) created by McCullough and Emmons (2002) was

used to measure gratitude. The six items include three positively worded items such as, "I have

so much in life to be thankful for" and three negatively worded items such as, "When I look at

the world, I don't see much to be grateful for." Items are sc on a seven-point scale from "strongly

disagree" to "strongly agree." The authors conducted four studies with 1,622 total participants to

develop the instrument, and asses construct validity, convergent and divergent validity, and

factor loadings (McCullough & Emmons, 2002). Study 1 used thirty-nine positively and

negatively worded items to collect data, and factor analysis extracted six items that loaded on a

single construct and assessed unique aspects of gratitude (McCullough & Emmons, 2002).

Internal consistency reliability was .82, and structural equation modeling showed a significant

chi-square (30.34) with a CFI of .95, indicating a one-factor model of gratitude fit the data

(McCullough & Emmons, 2002). These results were replicated in a second study finding a

significant chi-square of 55.41 with CFI of .94 (McCullough & Emmons, 2002). Study 1

established convergent validity through positive correlations with life satisfaction (.53), vitality

(.46), subjective happiness (.50), optimism (.51), positive emotions (.31); and established

divergent validity through negative correlations with negative emotions (-.31), anxiety (-.20),

and depression (-.30) (McCullough & Emmons, 2002). Study 2 corroborated these findings

(McCullough & Emmons, 2002). Study 3 affirmed gratitude was divergent to envy and

materialism, and study 4 found that controlling for extraversion/positive affectivity,

neuroticism/negative affectivity, agreeableness, and social desirability did not significantly alter

general conclusions about correlates with gratitude. McCullough and Emmons (2002) conclude, "The GQ-6 has excellent psychometric properties, including a robust one-factor structure and high internal consistency, especially in light of its brevity" (p. 124). Furthermore, the GQ-6 has been successfully adapted into other languages (e.g., Spanish, Italian), and validation studies add to the strength of the GQ-6 and its translations. This particularly true regarding internal consistency and convergent validity with subjective happiness (Caputo et al., 2016; Langer et al., 2016).

The Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale

Hwang et al. (2008) developed The Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (SCBCS) from Sprecher and Fehr's valid and reliable 21-item Compassionate Love Scale. Two hundred twenty-three undergraduates completed the Compassionate Love Scale, and five items were selected to form a brief scale based on moderate means, high standard deviations, and item-to-total correlations higher than .75 (Hwang et al., 2008). The five items include "I tend to feel compassion for people, even though I do not know them" and "I often have tender feelings toward people (strangers) when they seem to be in need," rated on a seven-point scale from "Not at all true of me" to "Very true of me." Factor analysis of the five items extracted one factor that explained 71% of the variance, and correlations between items ranged from .51 to .74, and .7 to .82 between each item and the factor (Hwang et al., 2008). Therefore, each of the five items gives breadth to the construct of compassion measured. Compassion and compassionate love were highly correlated (.95), and compassion is correlated to both religious faith (.27) and empathy (.65) (Hwang et al., 2008).

Plante and Mejia (2016) surveyed 6,763 students with the SCBCS, founding high internal consistency for both seniors (Cronbach's alpha = .89) and freshman (.90), and high split-half

reliability for seniors (Guttman coefficient = .85) and for freshman (.84). Test-retest reliability between freshman and senior year was significant ($r = .50$) (Plante & Mejia, 2016). Strong convergent and divergent validity were confirmed by positive correlations with attending racial/cultural awareness training (.23), wanting to help others in difficulty (.54), wanting to work for social change (.50), and a negative correlation with working for high-income potential (-.12) (Plante & Mejia, 2016). Finally, Plante and Mejia (2016) conducted a factor analysis and confirmed a one-factor instrument that explained 77% of the variance for freshman and 80% for seniors, and conclude "our results show promise that the compassion scale is both a reliable and valid instrument measuring one variable" (p. 514).

Well-being Instruments

Well-being was measured using three independent instruments. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE), and the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (SWEMWBS).

The Satisfaction with Life Scale

Diener et al. (1985) developed the SWLS and showed high internal consistency (.87) and temporal reliability (.82) amongst undergraduate students and elderly adults. The five items include, "In most ways my life is close to my ideal" and "The conditions of my life are excellent," measured using a seven-point scale of agreement.

Pavot et al., (1991) conducted two studies to validate the SWLS further, finding Cronbach alphas between .8 and .9, convergence with the Life Satisfaction Index (.81) and the Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale Scale (.65), and significant correlations to peer-rated life satisfaction ($r = .54$). In a comprehensive review of SWLS studies, Pavot and Diener (2008) conclude the SWLS has "proven to be a reliable and valid measure of the life satisfaction

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component of [subjective well-being]" (p. 148). More recently, Homan (2014) states the SWLS has been widely utilized and recognized in research on well-being and reported Cronbach's alpha of .9 in a US sample of 181 adults who reported an attachment to God. In short, the SWLS serves a critical component of overall well-being.

The Scale of Positive and Negative Experience

Diener et al. (2010) constructed the twelve-item SPANE to assess subjective feelings of well-being and ill-being. The SPANE is divided the instrument into positive and negative subscales (Diener et al., 2010). The instrument uses both generic feelings (e.g., "pleasant" and "negative") and specific feelings (e.g., "joyful" and "sad") to reflect a comprehensive range of human emotion in few items, and assesses both high and low arousal emotions (Diener et al., 2010). Participants indicate how much they experience each item on a five-point scale from "Very rarely or never" to "Very often or always."

Initially validated with 689 participants, the SPANE showed Cronbach alpha of .89 and temporal stability of .68 on the combined scales (Diener et al., 2010). The SPANE correlated positively with previous instruments measuring feelings; a correlation of .76 with the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), .58 with the Subjective Happiness Scale, and .57 with Fordyce's single-item measure of happiness (Diener et al., 2010). The SPANE also shows a moderate correlation (.57) with the SWLS (Diener et al., 2010).

Jovanović (2015) found the SPANE subscales correlated with those of the PANAS, yet showed incremental validity beyond the PANAS subscales for predicting well-being. The SPANE-P explained an additional 17% of the variance in well-being over the PANAS-PA, and the SPANE-N explained an additional 8% of the variance in well-being over the PANAS-NA (Jovanović, 2015). Jovanović (2015) suggests the SPANE's higher level of abstraction of a

generally positive or negative experience is helpful to assess general well-being but cautions that participants may find these items vague. Rahm et al. (2017) confirmed the factor structure of the SPANE with a German population, and confirm the good psychometric properties found in previous studies. Rahm et al. (2017) found internal consistency for the SPANE-P and SPANE-N subscales to be .88 and .82, respectively, and test-retest for overall scores to be .8. These studies support the SPANE as a valid measure of affect related to well-being.

Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale

 The seven-item SWEMWBS scored on a five-point scale, was developed to enhance the psychometric properties of the original 14 item Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS), which sought to capture positive mental health using positively worded items (Tennant et al., 2007). The original WEMWBS is psychometrically solid, yet item redundancy may exist as internal consistency does not fall below .8 until at least six items are removed (Tennant et al., 2007). Stewart-Brown et al. (2009) suggest Cronbach's alphas and factor analysis alone are not appropriate to address unidimensionality in ordinal scales such as the WEMWBS and conducted a more appropriate Rasch Measurement Model. With 779 WEMWBS respondents, several items showed significant misfit to model expectations and were deleted, resulting in the seven-item SWEMWBS (Stewart-Brown et al., 2009). In this sample, internal consistency fell from .9 with the 14 item WEMWBS to .845 with seven-item SWEMWBS, yet the Spearman correlation between them was .954 (Stewart-Brown et al., 2009). Ng Fat et al. (2017) later found the SWEMWBS was able to distinguish well-being amongst subgroups similarly to the WEMWBS but with less sensitivity to gender differences. Finally, Ng Fat et al. (2017) suggest the SWEMWBS creates low participant burden, and provide scoring norms from 27,169 English adult participants. Stewart-Brown et al. (2009) suggest the final SWEMWBS

items each add to measures of well-being, and measure psychological and eudaimonic well-being rather than a more holistic sense of well-being. The SWEMWBS is, therefore, a useful, validated, and brief compliment to the well-being measures above.

Statistical Analyses

Path analyses were conducted on the two proposed models to examine the causal effects of the variables and to discern which model (humility as master virtue, or in line with other virtues) shows the best fit with the data. The utility and conclusions of path analysis are highly dependent on theoretical models that closely approximate reality because path analysis is a confirmatory approach that analyzes previously specified relationships between variables (Byrne, 2000; Streiner, 2005). Each hypothesized model restricts the sample data so that the degree of fit and resulting differentials (residuals) between the model and data are observed (Byrne, 2000). Subsequently, model fits can be compared statistically, for example, by using a Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Karadag, 2012). Model confirmation and any subsequent suggestion of causality is a product of statistically estimating the direct and indirect causal effects of each variable in the model upon the endogenous variables (Streiner, 2005).

Missing data possess severe threats to statistical analyses, and a systematic and statistically sound method is required to handle this concern (Byrne, 2000). In the present study no item was missing data for more than .5% (n = 13) of cases, and the well-being scales had total missing variables as follows; the SWEMWBS 34 cases (.18%), the SWLS 12 cases (.09%), the SPANE 64 cases (.2%). The character virtues scales had missing variables for 27 cases for the HSD (.14%), 15 cases for the GQ-6 (.09%), and 10 for the SCBCS (.07%). The CGS had 54 missing cases (.17%), leading to total missing cases across all scales at a minimal .94%. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) utilizes a maximum likelihood (ML) procedure to

estimate missing data and is highly recommended (Byrne, 2000). This study utilized ML

estimation to impute missing data.

Summary

This study examined the mediating role of character virtues humility, gratitude, and

compassion between a relationship with God and self-reported well-being by analyzing two

models. One model with humility as a master virtue placed ahead of gratitude and compassion in

the path. One model with humility placed equally in the path with gratitude and compassion. A

new adjusted model that best fit the data is recommended for further study, and the relative

contributions of each character virtue on well-being are discussed.

An online survey was distributed to the audience of a Christian radio station and two

churches to collect the necessary data. The churches were encouraged to respond through a short,

personal explanation of the research purpose, and snowballing was encouraged. The survey

included items related to demographics and the specific variables within the study. Path analyses

was used to determine which model best fits the data and the relationships between variables in

the model.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

The present study examined the variables of relationship with God and well-being, and the mediating role of character virtues humility, compassion, and gratitude. Table 4 provides a list of descriptive statistics for each measure used to observe a variable. The measures included are, Communion with God Scale (CGS), Humility Semantic Differentials (HSD), The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6), Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (SCBCS), the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Well-being Scale (SWEMBS), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), and the Scale of Positive and Negative Experiences (SPANE).

The internal consistency of each measure is displayed using Cronbach's alpha. Cronbach's alpha for each instrument is sufficient and suggests the instruments are acting reliably. Specifically, Cronbach's alpha for the CGS was .922, which is very similar to the .95 found by Knabb and Wang (2019). This study provides further support for the reliability of the new CGS measure. Results for each instrument appear in Table 4 with a comparison to prior studies. Exploratory factor analyses further confirmed that the original instruments performed adequately for this study. The results appear in Table 5. These analyses suggest that removing one item from the SWLS (item 5) creates one factor that accounts for increased variance, but this simultaneously reduces the content validity of the instrument. Removing two items on both the GQ-6 and HSD (items 3 and 6 on the GQ-6 and items 6 and 7 on the HSD) reduces the measures from two factors to one. However, this reduces the scope of these instruments for modest gains, given that each instrument performed well in the initial analysis with satisfactory loadings. Therefore, the study utilized the original instruments given their empirical support, the ability to make direct comparisons, and the reality that character virtues are multi-dimensional constructs

within which two factors are common. For example, gratitude consists of both pleasant experience and the willingness to apprehend that for which one is grateful.

Means and standard deviations within this study were similar to prior studies utilizing the CGS, HSD, GQ-6, SWEMWBS, and SWLS. For the CGS Knabb and Wang (2019) report M = 45, SD = 10.2 and this study found a similar M = 49.82, SD = 7.22. For the HSD items Rowatt et al. (2006) found M = 5.47, SD = 0.72 and this study found M = 5.6, with a moderately higher SD = 1.13. For the GQ-6 Rosmarin et al. (2011) found M = 36.83, SD = 5.24 and this study found a similar mean (M = 37.73) and a slightly reduced standard deviation (SD = 4.1). For the SWEMBS, Knabb and Wang (2019) report M = 25.98, SD = 5.39, and this study found a similar mean (M = 26.71), with a somewhat lower standard deviation (SD = 3.78). For the SWLS Rosmarin et al. (2011) found M = 25, SD = 6.43 and this study found a highly comparable M = 25.46, SD = 6.054. However, this study found higher scores on both the SPANE and SCBCS than previously reported. For the SPANE Diener et al. (2010) report M = 6.69, SD = 6.88 and this study found a significantly higher M = 9.17, SD = 7.4. For the SCBCS Hwang et al. (2008) report M = 4.88, SD = 1.04 and this study found M = 5.79, SD = 1.14. This finding indicates the current Christian sample is higher in the character virtue compassion and overall positive emotional experience than the participants in the studies by Hwang et al. (2008) and Diener et al. (2010), respectively.

Table 4.

Descriptive Statistics for Instruments

Variable	M	SD	Possible Range	Cronbach's Alpha ($\propto$)	Previous Cronbach's Alpha ($\propto$)
CGS	49.82	7.22	12-60	.922	.95 (Knabb & Wang, 2019)
HSD	39.25	5.48	7-49	.816	.72-.79 (Rowatt et al., 2006)

GQ-6	37.73	4.1	6-42	.719	.82 (McCullough & Emmons, 2002)
SCBCS	28.9	4.72	5-35	.883	.89 (Plante & Mejia, 2016)
SWEMBS	26.71	3.78	7-35	.806	.845 (Stewart-Brown et al., 2009)
SWLS	25.46	6.05	7-35	.858	.87 (Diener et al., 1985)
SPANE	9.17	7.4	-24-24	.96	.89 (Diener et al., 2010)

Table 5.

Factor Analysis Results for Instruments

Instrument	Chi-square (Bartlett's)	Sig. (p)	Eigen Value 1	% of Variance	Eigen Value 2	% of Variance
SWEMWBS	4713	< .001	3.298	47%		
SWLS	6360	< .001	3.302	66.04%		
SPANE	19766	< .001	6.88	57.4%	1.11	9.3%
HSD	5626	< .001	3.363	48.05%	1.007	14.38%
GQ-6	3443	< .001	2.65	44.23%	1.043	17.4%
SCBCS	8420	< .001	3.439	68.77%		
CGS	17729	< .001	6.67	55.85%		

Note: Only Eigen values of 1 or more considered as factors

Multiple items in the data set demonstrated skewness; item three of the SWLS (-1.4), item three of the HSD (-1.74), and item 11 of the CGS (-1.79). Several items were also kurtotic; item four of the SWLS (1.97), item three of the HSD (4.5), and items seven and 11 of the CGS (1.99 and 3.54). The GQ-6 showed noted skewness (up to -4.5) and kurtosis (up to 25.1) on each item. Item 11 of the CGS states, "I am aware that I have a relationship with God because I am united to Christ," and therefore, a predominantly Christian sample will highly endorse this item. Secondly, item seven on the CGS states, "Having a relationship with God brings me pleasure," and negative skew on this item may make sense of negatively skewed gratitude scores on the

GQ-6. High gratitude in a Christian sample is also expected (Krause et al., 2015). The elevated skewness and kurtosis on items three and four of the HSD, which asked for self-rating between pairs of words (Disrespectful-Respectful and Egotistical-Not Self-centered, respectively) is also not surprising given the Christian sample. Christians are commonly known to provide inflated self-reports that accord with central identity structures in religious teachings, of which humility is central (Gebauer et al., 2017). Finally, only the GQ-6 demonstrated skewness (-1.338) and kurtosis (2.168) when taken as a complete measure. These indices indicate that this sample is particularly high in gratitude. Given that the skewness and kurtosis make theoretical sense, and the sample is large, data transformations were not warranted.

Path analyses were conducted to assess the fits of the hypothesized models to the sample data using SPSS AMOS 26. The chi-square statistic for models 1 and 2 were significant, indicating a lack of fit. However, chi-square significance is highly dependent upon sample size, with large samples regularly leading to significant chi-squares despite minimal variance (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). There is strong caution against using one fit index to determine model fit. Instead, scholars recommend that multiple indices be used together and evaluated by the researcher (Chen et al., 2008; Miles & Shevlin, 2006; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). This study utilizes multiple fit indices for each model, as displayed in Table 6. For the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) a value of .01 or below indicates an excellent (close) fit, .05 a good fit, and .08 a moderate fit, yet these values are somewhat subjective (Chen et al. 2008). The comparative fit index (CFI) measures model fit relative to other models and values above .95 often indicates good fitting models (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Finally, the incremental fit index (IFI) demonstrates a good fit when correlations approach 1 (Miles & Shevlin, 2006).

Both hypothesized models showed a relatively poor fit (model 1: RMSEA = .156, CFI = .884; model 2: RMSEA = .191, CFI = .825). Improved versions of each model were developed by adding multiple paths that made sense theoretically and statistically. Adjusted model 1 demonstrated a close fit (RMSEA = .08, CFI = .975), and included new paths between a relationship with God and well-being, and between humility and compassion. Adjusted model 2 demonstrated the closest fit (RMSEA = .78, CFI = .978), with the inclusion of paths from a relationship with God to gratitude and compassion, and a relationship with God to well-being. The final model (adjusted model 2) effectively combined both hypothesized models, and points to the contributions of each. Table 6 provides model fit statistics for each model. Table 7 provides Pearson correlations for the final model, and Figure 3 includes the final model and path coefficients. Model fit was not affected when controlling for gender ($p > .4$), reducing concern over sample gender bias. The path coefficient between relationship with God and well-being showed the greatest difference between genders (.03), and this was non-significant ($p > .8$).

Table 6.

Model Fit Indices Summary

Model	RMSEA	IFI	CFI	X^2
Model 1	.156	.885	.884	765.142 ($p < .001$)
Adjusted Model 1	.08	.975	.975	174.042 ($p < .001$)
Model 2	.191	.825	.825	1151.182 ($p < .001$)
Adjusted Model 2	.078	.978	.978	149.568 ($p < .001$)

Table 7.

Pearson Correlations for Final Model

Variables	CGS	HSD	GQ-6	SCBCS	SWEMBS	SWLS	SPANE

1 Communion with God						
2 Virtue Humility	.333					
3 Virtue Gratitude	.441	.229				
4 Virtue Compassion	.392	.406	.279			
5 Eudaimonic Well-being	.491	.324	.468	.204		
6 Hedonic Well-being	.336	.131	.435	.069	.553	
7 Affective Experience	.472	.321	.494	.19	.767	.572

Note: All correlations significant at $p < .01$

Figure 3 – Final model with path coefficients (Adjusted Model 2)
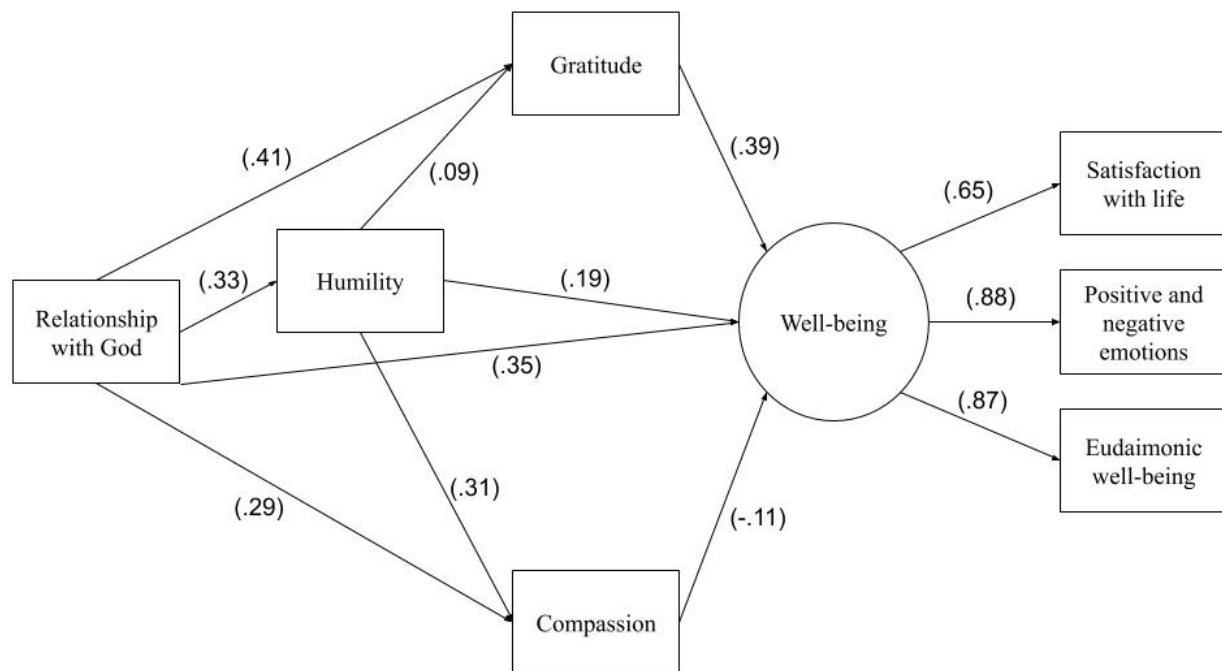

Figure 4 (below) displays the adjusted model 1. The adjustments to model 1 supported

the potential validity of model 2 and the necessary inclusion of a path from a relationship with

God to well-being. The path between humility and compassion was significant (.31, $p < .01$),

indicating the mediating role of humility between a relationship with God and compassion. The

path from a relationship with God to well-being was also significant and substantial, indicating that a significant portion of the impact of a relationship with God on well-being exists outside of the study variables (.35, $p < .01$). However, an accurate model must account for this portion.

Figure 4 – Adjusted model 1 with path coefficients
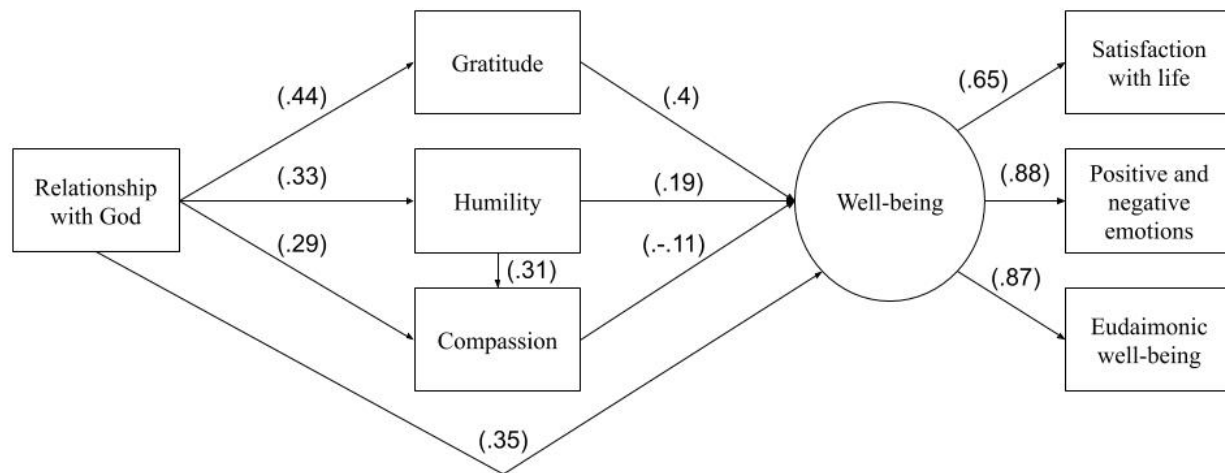
This study finds that the character virtues gratitude, humility, and compassion significantly mediate between a relationship with God and well-being, but not always in the hypothesized direction. Stated differently, a relationship with God significantly impacts the character virtues of humility, gratitude, and compassion, and in turn, these character virtues produce a significant and differing impact on well-being. Additionally, the impact of a relationship with God on humility leads to large changes in compassion and smaller changes to gratitude. Humility had little impact on well-being through compassion and gratitude, but humility did contribute to the development of these virtues. Beyond character virtues, a relationship with God has a large impact on well-being through other means.

Table 8 provides specific standardized indirect effects of the variables preceding well-being in the final model. In each model, there were significant positive pathways from a

relationship with God to well-being through gratitude and humility, affirming the study

hypothesis that gratitude and humility mediate between a relationship with God and well-being.

As a relationship with God increases one standard deviation, it impacts gratitude and humility.

The impact of a relationship with God continues to contribute a .159 standard deviation increase

in well-being due to gratitude increases, and .063 standard deviation increases in well-being due

to humility increases. A single negative path in each model exists between compassion and well-

being, and the final model shows that as compassion increases, one standard deviation well-

being decreases .11 standard deviations. Compassion primarily reduces emotional well-being (-

.1) and eudaimonic well-being (-.098). These reductions occur despite compassion increasing as

a result of a relationship with God; both mediated through humility and direct. The decrease in

well-being resulting from compassion is at odds with previous findings (Steffen & Masters,

2005). Compassion showed significantly smaller correlations with three items from the well-

being scales than gratitude and humility that may help explain its negative impact on well-being

(See Table 9.). Compassion scores were more likely to associate with the feelings of being sad

and afraid and were less aligned with the experience of dealing well with problems.

Table 8.

Specific Standardized Indirect Effects on Well-being by Mediator

Variable	Mediator	Standardized Indirect Effect
Relationship with God	Humility	.063
Relationship with God	Gratitude	.159
Relationship with God	Compassion	-.032
Humility	Gratitude	.035
Humility	Compassion	-.034

Note: All specific indirect effects are significant at $p < .01$

Table 9.

Character virtues correlations with well-being scales

Well-being Scale Item	Humility	Compassion	Gratitude
SWEMWBS 4 "I've been dealing with problems well."	.272	.075	.205
SPANE 8 "Sad"	-.348	-.059	-.183
SPANE 9 "Afraid"	-.256	-.053	-.183

The effects between the variables allow for further analysis. These effects include the standardized total effects (Table 10), direct effects (Table 11), and total indirect effects (Table 12). As a relationship with God increases, it has a large overall impact on well-being (.544). Within the construct of well-being, as a relationship with God increases emotional well-being is most impacted (.482), closely followed by eudaimonic well-being (.472), and to a lesser degree satisfaction (or hedonic well-being) (.352). These figures suggest a relationship with God may primarily increase emotional experience and a broader sense of meaning and purpose, which accords with prior findings (Keefer & Brown, 2018; Rainville & Mehegan, 2019). Importantly, the three measures of well-being selected for this study affirm that well-being is a multi-dimensional construct. Multicollinearity was not present between satisfaction, emotion, and eudaimonic well-being, and the analysis did not indicate potential correlations between them.

As noted above, each character virtue has a different impact on well-being. A discussion of compassion's negative impact occurs above in the manuscript. Gratitude, on the other hand, has the most significant benefit on overall well-being (.394). In particular, as gratitude increases, so does emotional experience (.348), closely followed by eudaimonic well-being (.341). Humility also has a substantial direct impact on well-being (.19), even though it has a small impact on gratitude. The impact of humility on well-being is almost entirely direct and not

mediated by gratitude and compassion (see Tables 11 and 12). Humility likely benefits well-being by contributing to the development or enactment of other character virtues, which subsequently impact well-being.

A detailed understanding of the impact of a relationship with God on the character virtues is given by assessing direct and indirect effects. Relationship with God directly increased gratitude (.411), compassion (.392), and humility (.333). Relationship with God also showed additional impacts on compassion (.102) and gratitude (.029), mediated through humility. Humilities role is still greater. Humility significantly facilitates the growth of compassion (.31, $p < .01$), and to a lesser degree, gratitude (.092, $p < .01$). The impact of humility on gratitude was found meaningful beyond its statistical significance. When the small but significant path between humility and gratitude was from the model, the model fit decreased, indicating the importance of this connection. Further, no model analysis suggested that pathways occur from gratitude or compassion through humility to well-being; therefore, humility proceeds as the primary character virtue. It appears that a relationship with God initiates a process of increasing character virtues and that fostering the first virtue (humility) increases subsequent virtues.

Table 10.

Standardized Total Effects

Variable	Relationship with God	Humility	Compassion	Gratitude	Well-being
Humility	.333				
Compassion	.392	.31			
Gratitude	.441	.092			
Well-being	.544	.191	-.113	.394	
Satisfaction	.352	.124	-.073	.255	.647

Emotion	.481	.169	-.1	.348	.885
Eudaimonic	.472	.165	-.098	.341	.867

Note: All total effects are significant at *p* < .01

Table 11.

Standardized Direct Effects

Variable	Relationship with God	Humility	Compassion	Gratitude	Well-being
Humility	.333				
Compassion	.289	.31			
Gratitude	.410	.092			
Well-being	.352	.19	-.113	.394	
Satisfaction					.867
Emotion					.885
Eudaimonic					.867

Note: All direct effects are significant at *p* < .01

Table 12.

Standardized Indirect Effects

Variable	Relationship with God	Humility	Compassion	Gratitude
Humility				
Compassion	.103*			
Gratitude	.031*			
Well-being	.192*	.001		
Satisfaction	.352*	.124*	-.073*	.255*
Emotion	.481*	.169*	-.1*	.348*

Eudaimonic	.472*	.165*	-.098*	.341*

Note: * = Significant at $p < .01$

In sum, adjusted model 2 (Figure 3) provides a close fit to the sample data and found the

character virtues gratitude, humility and compassion partially mediate the impact of a

relationship with God on well-being. Relationship with God also has a large impact on the

development of character virtues, gratitude, humility, and compassion. Regarding well-being,

gratitude displayed a large positive impact, humility displayed a moderate positive impact, and

compassion showed a modest negative effect. Humility acts as a master virtue mediating

between a relationship with God and the other character virtues, but this mediation significantly

differs in degree. Humility is highly influential in the development of compassion and modestly

regarding gratitude. The reverse is not true; gratitude and compassion did not mediate between a

relationship with God and humility. Relationship with God primarily increases well-being by

increasing emotional experience and eudaimonic well-being, partially mediated by gratitude,

humility, and compassion.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal that character virtues humility, gratitude, and compassion partially mediate between a relationship with God and well-being. Second, this study adds to prior evidence that humility may act as a master virtue in the development of character virtues (Lavelock et al., 2017), but with widely varying impact on different virtues. Path analyses included the variables of a relationship with God, humility, gratitude, compassion, and well-being (satisfaction with life, emotional experience, and eudaimonic well-being). The final model discerned from theoretical and statistical inquiry showed that as a relationship to God increases, so does well-being and that the character virtues of humility, gratitude, and compassion each uniquely contribute to this process. The ramifications of these findings are discussed, along with implications for counselor educators, clinicians, and researchers.

As a timely response to declining US well-being (Halliwell et al., 2019), this study confirmed the assertions that the development of character virtues and a personal Christian relationship with God are available sources of well-being (Dwiwardani et al., 2014; Greggo, 2016; Hackney & Sanders, 2003; Krause & Hayward, 2015a). This study moves beyond previous studies that have conceptualized intrinsic religiosity as religious action or involvement. This study utilized a measure of relationship with God that attends closely to the Christian experience (Knabb & Wang, 2019), and investigated multiple character virtues and their interactions simultaneously.

Production of a New Model

The study analysis found that a new adjusted model was needed to capture the complex interactions between a relationship with God, character virtues, and well-being. The original

models (Figures 1 and 2 above) demonstrated strengths and limitations. Model 1 theorized all character virtues should be considered equal factors that allow the application of benefits from a relationship with God on well-being. Treating all virtues as equal meant neglecting two meaningful connections. First, the scholarly findings that relationship with God leads to well-being through mechanisms such as meaning-making and social connection (Bopanna & Gross, 2019; Bott et al., 2015; Francis & Kaldor, 2002; Tix et al., 2013); and this connection was required to find a close fit to the data, even though this connection was not under direct investigation. Second, character virtues interrelate (Lavelock et al., 2017), which was the impetus for Model 2 that placed humility as a master virtue. Model 1's strength was the recognition that a relationship with God directly influences multiple character virtues. Model 2 recognized the interconnection of character virtues but removed the connections between a relationship with God and virtues other than humility. Model 2 also did not account for other mediators such as meaning and purpose. The final model accounts for each of these factors in one model. Namely, that multiple mediators between a relationship with God and well-being beyond the character virtues specified are pertinent, relationship with God impacts multiple character virtues directly, humility serves in a priori character virtue position with differing impacts, and character virtues inter-relate. The final model includes these parameters and provides a close fit to the sample data.

Findings confirm the need to improve the theoretical model continually. For instance, increases in relationship to God directly impacted well-being to a greater degree than through indirect effects. The significance of the direct effects means that a relationship with God impacts well-being through variables not in the model. These may include previously noted variables such as social connection, service attendance, and prayer (Bosco-Ruggiero, 2020; Ellison, 1983;

Ellison et al., 2014). Alternatively, they may include unspecified character virtues. For example, eudaimonic well-being may be generated by a pathway from character virtues through previously identified variables such as social support and religious participation. It is reasonable to consider that social connection, participation, connection, and more, are facilitated by character virtues that align with the Christian faith. The reasoning is as follows. Eudaimonic well-being rests upon the construct of meaning and purpose (Ryff, 2013), and coherence between meaning and lifestyle choices are critical to well-being (Paloutzian, 2017), it could be that character virtues not included in the present study generate social and participatory action that coheres with Christian meaning and purpose. Humility serves as an example as it generates prosocial behavior (Krause & Hayward, 2015a) and mediates some of the benefits of a relationship with God on well-being. It is reasonable to suggest that unspecified character virtues could account for a large portion of the direct effect of a relationship with God on well-being. This study issues a call that echoes Krause and Hayward (2015a), suggesting more character virtues and their interconnections need to be considered at one time to expand the present model. Nonetheless, this study offers advances to the current literature, as discussed.

The Impact of a Christian Relationship with God

In the study sample, as a relationship with God increased by one standard deviation, well-being also increased by .544 standard deviations. This finding confirms prior research that found a relationship with God increases well-being (for example, Diener et al., 2011; Ellison, 1983; Vishkin et al., 2019). However, this study utilized an emic measure (CGS) of relationship with God that more accurately measures a Christian relationship with God. The internal reliability of the CGS (= .922) and breadth of its constructs suggest a high degree of veracity. Further, its emic construction captures intrinsically motivating relationship with God by including measures

of private activity/experience with God rather than public activity (Knabb & Wang, 2019). The present findings support literature on intrinsic religiosity that suggests intrinsic religiosity creates increases in well-being that extend beyond extrinsic forms of religiosity (Ellison, 1983; Miner, 2009; You and Lim, 2019). Furthermore, the present study nuances our understanding by discerning that a relationship with God increases positive emotions to the highest degree, closely followed by benefits to eudaimonic well-being.

These findings align with contentions that a Christian relationship with God finds a central purpose in a new identity and changed affections of the heart (Greggo, 2016; Strawn 2004; Williams, 2005), and that well-being is likely to be a reciprocal benefit of these changes (Anstey, 2017; Kaczor, 2015). A Christian relationship with God did increase both emotional experience and a sense of meaning. This study finds that satisfaction increases to a lesser degree than other elements of well-being. A Christian understanding of life has contended that momentary satisfaction is of lesser importance to the Christian life (Anstey, 2017). This study may provide evidence towards the suggestion that satisfactions' lesser importance may relate to its lesser production. Perhaps a central experience of Christian well-being is not intended to be satisfaction, but it would be wrong to suggest that satisfaction does not increase or is not valuable.

This study makes clear that character virtues increase in response to a relationship with God, and that these virtues are instrumental in well-being. The benefits of character virtues on well-being have been made clear in prior secular research (Seligman, 2018). For example, it is well documented that benefits to well-being occur in response to gratitude, and attempts to cultivate the virtue of gratitude are broad (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Cunha et al., 2019). This study provides evidence for another strategy to increase character virtues: a genuine,

intrinsically motivated Christian relationship with God. It is controversial to state that Christian relationship with God may indeed serve as an effective positive psychological method for achieving a central goal of counseling given the tense history between religion and psychology (Charry & Kosits, 2017). However, this would not surprise many thinkers of old, and some recent scholars such as Charry and Kostis (2017) who stated that a Christian worldview "renders the findings of positive psychology ultimately intelligible and allows for construing oneself within a larger-than-self framework and cultivating moral self-awareness that better orients one towards the social well-being of the polis" (p. 471).

This study cannot provide answers as to why each character virtue was influenced differently by a relationship with God. Results showed that gratitude increased the most, followed by humility, and finally, compassion. These findings support prior studies that have investigated a single character virtue, and its relationship to God (for example, Paine et al., 2018; Rosmarin et al., 2011; Steffen & Masters, 2005), yet goes beyond them to indicate relative differences between character virtues. This unique contribution to the literature informs what character change to expect in the US Christian population and potential bias in the development of their character virtues. It is reasonable to ask questions such as the following. How are US Christian biases shaping Christian formation? Does the privileged position of a predominantly white US sample lend this group to gratitude above humility and compassion? Perhaps compassion is less likely to be taught or considered in wealthy western churches? These questions are critical for further investigation, especially when Diener et al. (2011) found that a benign or threatening context is instrumental in the relationship between God and well-being.

Character Virtue Mediation

This study hypothesized that the benefit of relating to God occurs through character virtues onto well-being. Each character virtue partially mediated between a relationship with God and well-being, but compassion did so in a negative direction. First, Gratitude creates a substantial pathway through which relationship with God leads to well-being, and this occurred on all three measures of well-being. Emmons (2005; cited by Rosmarin et al., 2011) has contended that gratitude may be a sacred or spiritual emotion, but this is the first study to directly provide evidence of gratitude's mediation between a Christian relationship with God and well-being. This impact is not surprising, given established links between general religiosity, gratitude and well-being (for example, Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Krause et al., 2015; Rosmarin et al., 2011), and the fact that gratitude is well established in the Biblical text as a right and expected response to a relationship with God (for example, Psalm 106:1, Colossians 2:6-7, Hebrews 12:28-29).

Rosmarin et al. (2011) found religious factors accounted for nearly 50% of the variance in gratitude and suggested religious commitment "promotes gratitude by providing unique opportunities to experience this trait" (p. 384). This study suggests explicitly that a relationship with God may be the primary occasion to experience and develop gratitude. Further investigation is needed to discern whether a relationship with God may be more integral to gratitude than Christian commitment, yet this is probably true since gratitude is commonly seen as towards a benevolent giver and is highly relational (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). This study validates Rosmarin et al.'s (2011) suggestion that it is highly pertinent to consider how to integrate spirituality with gratitude interventions, particularly as Davis et al.'s (2016) meta-review found current gratitude interventions show weak evidence for their efficacy in improving gratitude or well-being levels. Perhaps an excellent opportunity for growth in gratitude is a genuine

relationship with God (a significant benevolent giver), and this may afford a more significant intervention. Finally, it is worth noting that gratitude was deliberately measured on the participant survey before relationship with God to avoid activating an elevated state of gratitude. The same was true for each virtue in this study.

In this study, humility directly mediates the benefits of a relationship with God on well-being in a small to moderate degree. Surprisingly, the impact of humility on well-being in this study is primarily direct. However, would including additional character virtues in the model account for this direct mediation? Researchers have suggested that humilities main benefit to well-being is indirect, through the development of virtues and reduced self-protection (Dwiwardani et al. 2014; Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017; Lavelock et al., 2017). It is illuminating that humility itself increases as a result of a relationship with God. Dwiwardani et al. (2014) suggest that relational security may foster humility by reducing the need for self-protection. This study may support this assertion suggesting that Christians may find security in a relationship with God that fosters humility. Additionally, humility impacts well-being through its differing influence on other character virtues.

Compassion also mediated the impact of a relationship with God on well-being, but in a minimal negative direction. Overall, compassion had a small to moderate negative impact on well-being. Compassion, like gratitude and humility, is a central character virtue in the bible, and it costs the giver (for example, Galatians 6;2, Matthew 7:12; Luke 10:30-35). A large amount of compassion research has noted the impact of feeling compassion towards another or oneself (Fulton, 2018; Sirois et al., 2015; Steffen & Masters, 2005). Previous studies show that the subjective experience of compassion leads to well-being. Steffen and Masters (2005) found that compassion mediated between intrinsic religiosity and well-being, but it was a compassionate

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attitude that accounted for this mediation, not compassionate behavior. Given the Christian emphasis on compassionate action, the findings may point to burdens associated with active compassion. If these burdens are unmanaged, they may result in burnout or compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue and burnout overlap in the literature but share the commonalities of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and limited accomplishment (Frederick et al., 2018). It is plausible that the current Christian sample benefits from compassionate attitudes and may take on the burdens of others willingly but ultimately suffer from increased compassionate action. Christians may require support and strategies to allow them to live out their regarded virtue of compassion in a manner that does not inhibit well-being or lead towards compassion fatigue.

Analysis of the individual well-being items within the study may suggest an alternative explanation. The current study was conducted approximately three months into the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, and the effects of isolation, care-taking, financial strain, and other situations may have impacted participant experience and response. Compassion scores, compared to humility and gratitude, were weakly correlated with an item that asked participants to rate how well they have been dealing with problems over the last two weeks. Participants' responses on compassion also aligned with feelings of sadness and being afraid over the past four weeks. These personal struggles may explain the negative impact of compassion on well-being, but this remains speculative. What is clear is that the relationships between a relationship with God, compassion, and well-being require clarification.

Humility as a Master Virtue

Humility has been linked with many benefits (leadership success, trust, less power-seeking, altruism) and known to influence thought, speech, and action (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017). This study supports prior findings that humility is pro-socially beneficial. This study also

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found evidence that supports, and nuances, the claim that humility functions as a master virtue. Humility significantly increases both gratitude and compassion, yet the overall effect of humility on gratitude is quite modest. Previous studies found a discrepant impact of humility on gratitude (Krause & Hayward, 2015a; Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017). While each study measured humility and gratitude differently, Krumrei-Mancuso (2017) found a significantly higher correlation between humility and gratitude. However, Krumrei-Mancuso (2017) under-sampled religious populations, while the present study and Krause and Hayward (2015a) specifically sampled Christians. A possible explanation for the differing impact of humility on gratitude emerges from the current findings. Given that a relationship with God greatly increases gratitude, it might be that Christians with this reliable source of gratitude may have their gratitude elevated beyond the majority of the impact of humility. This issue warrants further investigation, particularly the theory that humility may demonstrate a more significant impact on gratitude in the non-religious than in Christians.

This study provides new insight into the dynamics of humility as a master virtue. Lavelock et al. (2017) found that specific virtues increase through focused attention, which subsequently fosters the development of secondary virtues as a byproduct. This study provides some supports for Lavelock et al.'s (2017) contention that humility may be the primary character virtue that enacts a mechanism of increasing secondary virtues and that other character virtues do not produce humility itself. The lack of statistical evidence for pathways leading from gratitude or compassion through humility to well-being supports Lavelock et al.'s (2017) contention that humility has a priori position. Second, Lavelock et al. (2017) showed that humility training impacts virtues with strong theoretical links to humility (forgiveness, patience), and gratitude was not one of those virtues. This study showed that the impact of humility on gratitude is far

less, although still significant than on compassion. One explanation of this finding is that humility may not be a master virtue to all virtues, but may serve as a master to a limited subset of virtues. This interpretation might contend that humility acts potently on virtues primarily expressed through awareness of others and action towards them (such as forgiveness; Lavelock et al., 2017), but not other virtues that appear less immediately relational (gratitude). This conclusion is not necessarily valid given the lack of evidence that precludes humility from the master virtue position, and because humility does significantly impact gratitude. It is more accurate to suggest that humility appears to act as a master virtue to both compassion and gratitude, but to significantly different degrees. Therefore, this study provides tentative evidence that humility acts as a master virtue, but humility may have more potent impacts on virtues that are behaviorally and relationally similar in their common expression to humility.

The impact of humility on compassion was particularly large in this study and lent support to the contentions above. Given that humility includes an orientation towards the needs and well-being of others (Davis & Hook, 2014), it makes sense that humility influences the character virtue of compassion, which is marked by feelings and actions that support others. Krause and Hayward (2015a) suggest that religious persons want to help others because of the virtue change that occurs as a result of their faith. These reasons may account for both elevated compassion and its negative impact on personal well-being that occurs as religious persons turn away from their own needs or pleasure in the service of others.

The present findings relating to humility and compassion also contribute to the literature surrounding personal pride. Psychology broadly views pride as authentic or hubristic. Authentic pride emerges from genuine accomplishment and worth, and hubristic pride is akin to self-aggrandizing and selfish behavior (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Bergner (2016) suggests dynamic

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psychology and Christian theology agree that narcissism is an unnatural state of receiving too little love, and inordinate self-love turns inward to provide pleasure. Theologically, sin and division from God have alienated human connection to our true destiny and image-bearing (Bergner, 2016), leading to the contention that pride is the heart of sin against God (Lyon, 2012). Psychologically, insecurity, anxiety, and self-preoccupation lead to excessive self-oriented preoccupation (Bergner, 2016; Tracy & Robins, 2007). Resultantly, a narcissistic personality is an extreme form of pride, and a lack of other-oriented emotion forms the core of hubristic pride (Bergner, 2016).

A relationship with God and the safety it affords may result in humility that helps to mitigate pride. Humility in scripture is the opposite of pride, and develops from a relationship with God and being acted upon by Him in relationship (Genesis 17; Isaiah 23:9; Micah 6:8). Hubristic pride is anathema to scripture (James 4). However, authentic pride, rather than being anathema to biblical humility, aligns with scripture's call to test one's behaviors and be motivated by good-deeds (Galatians 6; James 2) and motivates adaptive responses to achievement and failure (Weidman et al., 2015). A relationship with God produces deep meaning that repairs the rupture between humans and God (Williams, 2005), and scripture explains that a meaningful relationship with God increases authentic pride (James 4:10).

Similarly, Seligman (2002) suggests that humility provides ego regulation against self-justification and desire, allowing for prosocial virtue expression. The facilitative paths between a relationship with God, humility, and positive virtues found in this study align with both the scriptural position and Seligman's assertions. Simply put, a relationship with God may reestablish a secure, loving, and value giving experience that facilitates a humble disposition with authentic pride, and diminishes hubristic pride.

This study shows that humility has broad implications in the development of character virtues. The full extent to which humility serves as a master virtue, and to which specific character virtues, or collections of them, is unknown. What is known is that increased humility directly contributes to gratitude to a small degree and compassion to a large degree. It is appropriate to continue the call for evidence to support, refine, and correct the tentative but growing support for humility as a master virtue that has differing influence over other character virtues. Further, while Lavelock et al.'s (2017) study and the current findings suggest other character virtues may not stimulate humility, it is clear that a relationship with God does.

Implications for Counselor Educators, Clinicians and Researchers

This study has several practical implications for counselor educators, clinicians, and researchers. First, the considerable influence of a relationship with God on well-being is evident and deserves careful attention. Spiritual competencies that facilitate care and attention to this domain in counseling are well established (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). Educators and clinicians are aware that growth in spiritual competencies is critical to help clients foster relational maturity and security with their God, regardless of the clinician's perspective. If this occurs, character virtue gains will promote social benefits that go beyond measures of well-being. Christian counselor educators should note that a relationship with God appears critical to the development of character virtues that underpin spiritual formation. Therefore, intentionally facilitating opportunities to aid students in their relationship with God is an essential and unique element of Christian counselor education that aids the production of mature and thriving counselors.

Furthermore, this study illuminates the potential changes to well-being that arise from a relationship with God. Individual differences will occur, and yet individuals (clients, students, public) can be helped to recognize that satisfaction is not likely to grow to the same degree as felt

meaning and purpose or positive emotions. This information provides a guide for clinical or public interventions. For example, if a client's emotional experience is low, combined interventions that focus on gratitude and a relationship to God may be highly beneficial.

Growth in humility should be a central focus of Christian (and secular) counselor growth. The character virtue of humility contributes to well-being and facilitates the growth of virtues that allow for client care (compassion, patience; Lavelock et al., 2017), and personal well-being and enjoyment of life (gratitude). Humility may also promote other virtue growth that is critical to awareness of others and action on their behalf (Lavelock et al., 2017). In short, increasing evidence links humility to character virtues and experiences that are likely to mitigate compassion-fatigue or burnout, and develop personal satisfaction. The vast research on the benefits of character virtues suggests spending ample time and resources to foster humility is wise, given evidence that suggests the positive gains of humility multiply through other virtues.

Critically, for Christians, a key mechanism for growth in humility is not directly working on humility, but encouraging spiritual formation practices that will support relationship with God. Beyond positive virtue growth, a relationship with God that enhances self-esteem that allows for appropriate humility may counter the deleterious expression of hubristic pride. Counselors and educators should consider that fostering a deeper relationship with God is likely to be a powerful intervention for those struggling with anxious insecurity or love-deficits that lead to self-protective grandiosity due to the humility and meaning it provides.

The cost of compassion and empathy must not be forgotten, especially for religious groups that highly value compassion. It may be possible to overlook the cost of compassion on Christian counseling students and clinicians because it is esteemed and seen as *taking up one's cross*. However, it would be a mistake to allow moral convictions and desires to override the care

that is necessary to help Christian counselors avoid burnout or compassion fatigue (Frederick et al., 2018). These concerns can be balanced and integrated into counselor education so that counselors learn to self-assess and engage in protective action. Frederick et al. (2018) recommend spiritual revitalization that depends on connecting with an empowering relationship with God through means such as prayer.

Further, overall well-being increases as a result of a relationship with God that impacts the development of other sustaining virtues, such as gratitude. This knowledge behooves educators and clinicians to make use of the fact that virtue growth is interconnected. For example, educators may help students recognize that their relationship with God alters their humility, and also their gratitude. In short, educators should help students to form an integrated conceptualization of their relationships, values, character, faith, and work. Such a perspective will subsequently inform their clinical work and benefit others.

An additional application of this study is that the personal character virtues generated by a relationship with God align with the broad psychological understanding of character virtues that support well-being. This alignment provides an avenue for carefully articulated integration that demonstrates the entwinement of God's world and psychological knowledge. Completing this articulation may allow for increased acceptance in two forms. First, secular psychology may increasingly create space for metaphysical and spiritual inquiry and intervention. Second, suspicious Christian communities may welcome the resources and wisdom of the mental health community (Peteet, 2019). Helping to promote collaboration and tolerance between these two historically warring factions will help in the broad struggle for substantive well-being. One example of how this may occur is boldly suggesting that a Christian relationship with God constitutes an effective positive psychological (strengths-based) intervention that increases

gratitude, which is well-known to benefit well-being and social engagement (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Work is needed to refine and further these conceptualizations.

Finally, a theoretical model is shared that connects a relationship with God, humility, gratitude, compassion, and well-being. Initial validation of this model has occurred, but with limitations. The model warrants further investigation and revision, particularly regarding understanding the contribution of other character virtues and their interconnections. This model has furthered our understanding of how God impacts the lives of his followers and provides a starting point for further exploration.

Limitations

This study offers insight into the mediating role of character virtues between a relationship with God and well-being with the following limitations. The sample displays significant homogeneity regarding gender, ethnicity, and culture. Religion is intricately tied to culture, race, and ethnicity, meaning homogeneity is problematic. The mostly white American sample may limit generalizability to the US, and the female bias means results may not adequately represent the general population as women tend to score higher on character virtues such as compassion (Hwang et al., 2008). Generalization of the results should occur with significant caution. Cross-religious and cross-cultural interpretation may be spurious, and further research is required to confirm the current findings. The convenience sample precluded a random sample and may have led to participant homogeneity. Snowballing may have increased bias and sample homogeneity, potentially through participants' conscious or unconscious bias.

Response bias poses a significant threat to veracity. First, the data is entirely anonymous self-report, and participants could not be verified. Second, the Christian population is well known to respond to surveys in a self-enhancing manner (Gebauer et al., 2017). Christians may

wish to portray their faith in a favorable light or feel a pressure to perform, answering according to perceived expectations. This study occurred during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which had wide-reaching social ramifications that may also impact participant response. There is no way to determine the impact of the pandemic accurately, but this likely impacts well-being as life undergoes widespread change. Participants' potential struggles with hope, trust, or fear may also impact their relationship with God.

Measurement and statistical error may limit validity. Multiple variables in this study are complex constructs generating scholarly debate. The selected measures were brief, validated, and widely used; however, their brevity may limit their construct and content validity. They were used to avoid participant burden and non-response. Further, this study measured well-being using a dashboard method (Forgeard et al., 2011), and the selected measures may miss critical components of well-being. Finally, the quality of the theoretical model limits the utility of path analysis, and the interconnections between a relationship with God, character virtues, and well-being are complex and require further study.

Recommendations for Future Study

This study advances and brings cohesion to the literature that intersects around a relationship with God, character virtues, and well-being. However, multiple gaps remain in the literature that require investigation and clarification. The current study warrants repetition for the following reasons. First, a true random sample may reduce bias and homogeneity, which would validate or improve the current findings. Repetitions should give particular concern to sample diversity, specifically race, gender, and culture. Subsequently, analyses to analyze differences between demographic factors such as denomination, or length of time as a Christian would produce further insight. Second, conducting the study outside of the direct influence of a

pandemic that may impact participant responses is warranted. This repetition would form a limited pre-posttest on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and would offer insight into the effects of any similar mass-scale social phenomenon on matters of spirituality and well-being.

Variations of the current study should seek to clarify and improve upon the final model presented in this study. Potential changes include the following. Researchers could carefully consider additional variables and character virtues previously linked to a relationship with God and well-being. For example, participants' felt sense of meaning, as this is a well-documented mediator between a relationship with God and well-being and may clarify the path between a relationship with God and well-being. A second recommendation is to include a measure of participant self-enhancing responses, as this is a common concern in research with Christian populations. Measuring self-enhancement could validate the current theoretical model and lead to new insights into the dynamics between Christianity and well-being. A crucial question to ask is if the benefits to well-being from a Christian relationship to God are as substantial as indicated in this study?

A further adaptation would be to include alternative and more comprehensive measures of well-being to allow for validation and expansion of the current findings. The measures included in this study were brief to reduce participant burden; however, longer measures, including more items, allow for increased specificity. For example, researchers could utilize the 42-item Psychological Well-being Scale that captures six domains of well-being to consider what elements of well-being increase, and through which specific interplay of character virtues. It is theoretically possible to begin classifying which character virtues (or clusters) typically facilitate specific experiences of well-being by expanding the current study to include more character virtues and more comprehensive measures.

Additional lines of inquiry are as follows. First, research might bridge the gap between a discussion of strengths and character virtues. One option would be to utilize Peterson and Seligman's (2004) character strengths inventory as a complement to measures of character virtues. The character strengths inventory includes 24 strengths and may shed additional light on the complex relationships between character growth, relationship with God, and well-being. Second, pursuing a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between character virtues (e.g., compassion) and a relationship with God should be sought. Third, new insights into these relationships could support more complex designs that seek to integrate experimental and longitudinal designs. Such designs would enable a more thorough examination of the impact of increasing a relationship with God and associated outcomes.

Specifically, a careful program of research on humility could synthesize the work of Lavelock et al. (2017), Krause and Hayward (2015a), and the present findings. These programs would do well to utilize experimental and longitudinal designs. The master virtue hypothesis requires further investigated with experimental and longitudinal designs, and with religious and non-religious participants. Such designs should seek to discern if humility is a true master virtue or a master virtue to a specific group of character virtues. Researchers could also consider the differing impact of humility on individual or groups of similar virtues, and if the impact changes between religious and non-religious populations. Researchers of well-being would do well to recognize the promise held in the character virtue of humility.

Lastly, the relationship between compassion and well-being deserves further investigation. Researchers might consider the differential impact on well-being outcomes arising from feelings and behaviors associated with compassion. Including measures of compassion-

fatigue may help to establish whether the negative association between a relationship with God and well-being found in this study is normative, circumstantial, or erroneous.

Conclusion

This study clarifies relationships between the variables of a Christian relationship with God, character virtues humility, gratitude and compassion, and well-being. Data was collected from a large Christian sample and utilized in path analyses of two hypothesized models. One with character virtues held equal, one with humility as a master virtue. The study hypotheses were supported by a final adjusted model that showed a close fit to the data (RMSEA = .078, CFI = .978). The model showed three key findings. First, a relationship with God impacts character virtues directly and through the virtue of humility. Second, character virtues mediate between a relationship with God and well-being. Third, a relationship with God significantly promotes well-being. Discussion includes implications for counselor educators, clinicians, and researchers, with particular attention to Christian integration and counselor development.

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Appendix 1

Survey Instruments and Demographics

Demographics
1. What is your age in years? _____ (typed response)
2. Do you consider yourself an active Christian?
   a. Yes
   b. No
3. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Other_____ (Please specify)
4. What is your race/ethnicity?
   a. American Indian or Alaska Native
   b. Asian
   c. Black or African American
   d. Hispanic or Latino
   e. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
   f. White
   g. Other _____ (Please specify)
5. In what country do you live?
   a. United States of America
   b. England
   c. Australia
   d. Other _____ (Please specify)
6. How many years (rounded up) have you been a Christian?
   a. 0-10
   b. 11-20
   c. 21-30
   d. 31-40
   e. 41-50
   f. 51-60
   g. 61-70
   h. 71+
7. Please select your theological tradition.
   a. Adventist
   b. Anabaptist
   c. Baptist
   d. Catholic
   e. Congregationalist
   f. Episcopalian/Anglican
   g. Lutheran
   h. Mennonite
   i. Methodist
   j. Mormon

      k. Nondenominational

      l. Orthodox

      m. Other _____

      n. Pentecostal

      o. Presbyterian

      p. Reformed

      q. Restorationist

8. How often do you attend church or other religious meetings?
   a. Never
   b. Once a year
   c. A few times a year
   d. A few times a month
   e. Once a week
   f. More than once/week

9. How often do you spend time in private religious activities, such as prayer, meditation or bible study?
   a. Rarely or never
   b. A few times a month
   c. Once a week
   d. Two or more times/week
   e. Daily
   f. More than once a day

Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale

Prompt: *Below are some statements about feelings and thoughts.*

Please circle the number that best describes your experience of each over the last 2 weeks.

Response options: 1 none of the time, 2 rarely, 3 some of the time, 4 often, 5 all of the time.

1. I've been feeling optimistic about the future

2. I've been feeling useless

3. I've been feeling relaxed

4. I've been dealing with problems well

5. I've been thinking clearly

6. I've been feeling close to other people

7. I've been able to make up my own mind about things

Satisfaction with Life Scale

Prompt: *Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the 1 - 7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responding.*

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 gotten the important things I want in life
5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing

Scale of Positive and Negative Experience

Prompt: *Please think about what you have been doing and experiencing during the past four weeks. Then report how much you experienced each of the following feelings, using the scale below. For each item, select a number from 1 to 5. 1 = Very rarely or never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Very often or always*

1. Positive
2. Negative
3. Good
4. Bad
5. Pleasant
6. Unpleasant
7. Happy
8. Sad
9. Afraid
10. Joyful
11. Angry
12. Contented

Humility Semantic Differentials

Prompt: *For the following 7 pairs, please select the number that represents your normal level between each pair of words from 1 to 7. Answer honestly and quickly without over thinking.*

1. Arrogant – Humble

2. Immodest – Modest

3. Disrespectful – Respectful

4. Egotistical – Not Self-centered

5. Conceited – Not Conceited

6. Not tolerant – Tolerant

7. Close-minded – Open-minded

The Gratitude Questionnaire

Prompt: *Using the scale provided, select a number to indicate how much you agree with each statement. 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Slightly disagree, 4 = Neutral, 5 = Slightly agree, 6 = Agree, 7 = Strongly agree*

1. I have so much in life to be thankful for

2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list

3. When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for

4. I am grateful to a wide variety of people

5. As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history

6. Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone

Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale

Prompt: *Please answer the following questions honestly and quickly using the scale provided.*
1 = Not at all true of me, to 7 = Very true of me

1. When I hear about someone (a stranger) going through a difficult time, I feel a great deal of compassion for him or her

2. I tend to feel compassion for people, even though I do not know them

3. One of the activities that provide me with the most meaning to my life is helping others in the world when they need help

4. I would rather engage in actions that help others, even though they are strangers, than engage in actions that would help me

5. I often have tender feelings toward people (strangers) when they seem to be in need

Communion with God Scale

Prompt: *Please answer the following statements in the context of how often you personally have each experience in your relationship with God. When reading each statement, please answer with the following scale. 1 = Never true for me, 2 = Rarely true for me, 3 = Sometimes true for me, 4 = Often true for me, 5 = Always true for me*

1. God draws me closer in our relationship
2. I pray to fellowship with God
3. I think deeply about God to feel close to him
4. I experience harmony with God
5. I feel a deep sense of connection with God
6. I read the Bible to communicate with God
7. Having a relationship with God brings me pleasure
8. God and I both invest in our relationship
9. I feel God valuing me
10. God directs his fatherly love to me
11. I am aware that I have a relationship with God because I am united to Christ
12. I feel God's encouragement

Appendix 2

Informed Consent and Participant Recruitment Script

Informed Consent

Project Title: Mediators between relationship with God and well-being

Introduction
The purposes of this form are to give you information that may affect your decision whether to say Yes or No to participation in this research, and to record the consent of those who say Yes.
Researchers
Principal Investigator, Paul Loosemore, LPC. Associated with Regent University.
Description of research study
The purpose of this study is to examine how character virtues humility, gratitude and compassion mediate between relationship with God and well-being. If you decide to participate, you will join a study involving responding to 63 questions on an online survey. If you say Yes, then your participation will last for approximately 10 minutes. Approximately 400 individuals are expected to participate.
Exclusionary Criteria
You must be an adult, 18 years or older to participate.
Risks and Benefits
The risks associated with participation in this study are minimal, but could include minor discomfort when answering questions about your personal experience. If based on your participation in this study, you would like to speak with an individual about a personal issue that has come to mind please call 1-8000-422-4453. The name of this service is CHILDHELP, but it is available for both adults and children. The individuals answering the phones are trained professionals who can provide you with resources available in your area. This service is available 24 hours a day.
BENEFITS: The main potential benefit of participation is beneficial self-reflection and the knowledge that you have contributed to our understanding of how God impacts lives. If you would like to learn more about the findings of this study, please contact the principal investigator at ploosemore@gmail.com after January 1st, 2021.
Costs and Payments
All participation is voluntary, and we are very appreciative of your contribution to this study.
New information
If the researchers find new information during this study that would reasonably change your decision about participating, then they will give it to you.
Confidentiality
All information obtained about you in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations and publications, but the researcher will _not_ identify you. No identifying information will be linked to your responses in this study.
Withdrawal Privilege
It is OK for you to say No. Even if you say Yes now, you are free to say No later, and walk away or withdraw from the study at any time. Your decision will not affect your relationship with

Regent University, or otherwise cause a loss of benefits to which you might otherwise be entitled.

Compensation for Illness and Injury

If you say Yes, then your consent in this document does not waive any of your legal rights. However, in the event of any harm arising from this study, neither Regent University nor the researcher are able to give you any money, insurance coverage, free medical care, or any other compensation for such injury. In the event that you suffer injury or distress as a result of participation in this research project, you may contact 1-800-422-4453 to obtain information on psychological services, or Dr. Ripley current HSRC chair at 757-352-4368 or jsells@regent.edu, at Regent University, who will be glad to review the matter with you.

Voluntary Consent

By continuing with this survey, you are saying that you have read this form or have had it read to you, that you are satisfied that you understand this form, the research study, and its risks and benefits. If you have any questions, please contact Paul Loosemore (ploosemore@gmail.com). The researchers should have answered any questions you may have had about the research. If at any time you feel pressured to participate, or if you have any questions about your rights or this form, then you should contact Dr. Ripley current HSRC chair at 757-352-4296 or jennrip@mail.regent.edu, at Regent University, who will be glad to review the matter with you. And importantly, by completing the survey, you are telling the researcher Yes, that you agree to participate in this study.

Participant Recruitment Script

"Are you a Christian? If so, your help is kindly requested—it won't take long to make a big difference! Our goal is to have 500 Christians complete a short survey that will help us understand how God changes our lives through personal character growth, and creates well-being in our lives.

This study will provide evidence to take back to the psychological community to show how God works, and may impact how well-being is understood. We hope you will join us in this important work by donating approximately 10 minutes of your time.

If you are willing to participate, please follow this link to the online survey: [link inserted].

If you know other Christians who would enjoy partnering in this mission, please feel free to forward this information to them.

Thank for your participation, (and if you have further questions, please don't hesitate to contact the researcher: ploosemore@gmail.com)

Paul Loosemore, LPC

Regent University."

Appendix 3

Abridged Manuscript

The mediating role of character virtues humility, gratitude and compassion between relationship

with God and well-being: A path analysis

Paul Loosemore

Regent University

Abstract

This study clarifies relationships between the variables of a Christian relationship with God, character virtues humility, gratitude and compassion, and well-being. Path analyses tested model fit of two hypothesized models using data from 2,594 Christian adults. One model with character virtues held equal, one with humility as a master virtue. An adjusted model supported the study hypotheses showing close fit to the data (RMSEA = .078, CFI = .978). Data showed a relationship with God impacts character virtues directly and through the virtue of humility. Second, character virtues mediate between a relationship with God and well-being. Third, a relationship with God significantly promotes well-being. Discussion includes implications for counselor educators, clinicians, and researchers, with particular attention to Christian integration.

Keywords: God, character virtues, well-being, gratitude, humility, compassion

This study investigates to what degree the character virtues of humility, gratitude, and compassion mediate between a relationship with God and well-being. These virtues have established links to a relationship with God and well-being (Jazaieri et al., 2013; Lavelock et al., 2017; Rosmarin et al., 2011), and many authors suggest a relationship with God may increase well-being by influencing one's character, engagement with the world, and sense of meaning (Greggo, 2016; Miner, 2009; Peteet, 2019; Tix et al., 2013). This is pertinent as the US, one of the most electronically connected and successful economies in the world shows declining well-being, and rates of mental illness that are concerning (Helliwell et al., 2019; Kessler et al., 2005). Human flourishing requires more than wealth, the absence of pathology, or simplistic pursuits (Myers & Sweeney, 2008). Indeed, Seligman (2011) suggests that people pursue positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment just to enjoy their benefit.

Positive psychology has identified virtues and their promotion as a central means to well-being (MacDonald, 2019). However, the impact of current interventions appears overstated (White et al., 2019). There has also been a return to spirituality and religion (Peteet, 2019; Yamanda et al., 2019), but literature has fragmented around the relationships between character virtues, religion, and mental health. Krause and Hayward (2015a) have called for studies of multiple character virtues within a theoretically warranted model to help establish the role of character virtues surrounding a relationship to God and well-being. This study responds by investigating theoretical models centered around character virtues, well-being and a relationship.

Well-being

Well-being is a broad construct with differing operationalizations. Three major approaches to measuring well-being include objective measures, subjective measures, and psychological measures (Forgeard et al., 2011). Beyond measurement, two conceptualizations of

well-being have produced different inquiries into developmental and social processes related to well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The hedonic perspective (often called subjective well-being) suggests that well-being consists of experiencing happiness, satisfaction, and pleasure (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2013). The second, eudaimonic, espouses the fulfillment of one's true nature, and finding lasting meaning are the keys to well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 2013). Ryff (2013) contends the construct of well-being must include meaning-making, and the striving to become. Research has validated both criteria, and researchers do well to integrate both into a 'dashboard' array of data on well-being (Forgeard et al., 2011).

Positive Psychology and Character Virtues

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a return to viewing *wellness* as central to counseling (Myers & Sweeney, 2008; Sweeney & Witmer, 1991). Positive psychology, widely popularized in 2000 by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), has led to significant interest in character virtues as a means of achieving *wellness*. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) invited psychology to share how people find well-being, yet recognized, "psychologists have scant knowledge of what makes life worth living" (p. 5). This pronouncement stimulated vast research, amongst which lies character virtue, which are attributes one learns in relationship to others and contexts, and subsequently utilize or express to thrive in life (Bellehumeur et al., 2017; Hoyos-Valdés, 2018; Lerner, 2019). Research on individual virtues and strengths has been broad, and this study investigates humility, gratitude, and compassion, due to their links to increased well-being (Demorest, 2019; McCullough et al., 2002; Van Tongeren et al., 2019).

Humility has demonstrated a relationship to life satisfaction, stress-buffering (Krause, 2016; Krause et al., 2016), and producing prosocial benefits such as trust and empathy (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017; Wang et al., 2017). Scholars have proposed humility as a central virtue

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impacting behaviors and attitudes that lead to personal flourishing (Krause et al., 2016; Van

Tongeren et al., 2019), possibly by acting as a master virtue that facilitates the development of

other virtues (Lavelock et al., 2017). Gratitude appears somewhat differently, sometimes defined

as an emotion, yet also as an attitude of benevolent acceptance rooted in indebtedness for good

gifts (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000). Grateful people often focus on blessings and enjoy prosocial

benefits, a sense of connection, improved sleep quality, and overall satisfaction in life (Cunha et

al., 2019; Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Third, compassion motivates a person to feel the

extent of another's emotions, accompanied by the desire to help (Fulton, 2018; Roberts, 2017).

Compassion has been shown to benefit relationships, reduce anxiety, regulate emotions, and

increase positive experiences (Demorest, 2019; Engen & Singer, 2015; Lord, 2017).

Christian Relationship with God

Different religions and philosophies define a relationship with god in numerous ways. A

Christian perspective on relationship with God is both a mystery and a tangible reality that

includes the offer of joining in the perichoretic life of the Trinity, of which, Jesus the creator of

humanity, is a part (Genesis 1; Volf, 1996). Christians believe the end goal of this union is

fellowship with God that provides meaning, personal formation, and redemption (Anstey, 2017;

Kaczor, 2015). Historically, many authors have used the psychological lens of attachment to

explain and measure this relationship to God (Leman et al., 2018; Miner, 2009).

Christianity often appears as anathema to psychology (Charry & Kosits, 2017; Seligman

& Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). However, scholars argue that a Christian framework provides

context for the impact of meaning-making, or character development central to positive

psychology (Charry & Kosits, 2017). Positive psychology can individualize the pursuit of well-

being, whereas relationship to God centralizes the role of relationship, and therefore, it also

centralizes prosocial character change (Anstey, 2017; Charry & Kosits, 2017; Homan & Cavanaugh, 2013; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It follows that attachment to God or relationship with Him develops character virtues.

Relationship with God and Well-being

Christian faith and ones resulting community noticeably contribute to well-being (e.g., Boppana & Gross, 2019; Bott et al., 2015; Diener et al., 2011; Francis & Kaldor, 2002; Leondari & Gialamas, 2009; Morris & McAdie, 2009; You & Lim, 2019). Mediators between Christian faith and well-being have been explored, with meaning in life, attendance at religious services, positive affect, and social support garnering much support (Bopanna & Gross, 2019; Bott et al., 2015; Francis & Kaldor, 2002; Tix et al., 2013; Vishkin et al., 2019). Specifically, relationship with God appears to be a central and influential tenet of Christian faith that generates a different experience of well-being, and many researchers have investigated the benefits of having a relationship with God (for example, Ellison, 1983; Miner, 2009; Strelan et al., 2009). Literature supports that secure attachment to God leads to well-being (Homan & Cavanaugh, 2013; Keefer & Brown, 2018; Leman et al., 2018; Stroope et al., 2013). In their meta-analysis, Stulp et al. (2019) found God representations (an aspect of relationship) were more strongly associated (medium effect sizes) with well-being than are standard measures of Christian faith that rely on involvement and belief strength (small effect sizes).

Relationship with God, Character Virtues, and Well-being

Studies and theoretical discussion have sought to discern how character virtues may either promote a relationship with God or arise from it, and subsequently influence well-being. Most of these discussions investigate one virtue at a time (Krause & Hayward, 2015a), and few have investigated multiple mediation effects or the interactions between virtues.

Relationship with God, Humility, Gratitude, Compassion, and Well-being

Lavelock et al. (2017) discuss humility as a master virtue in Christian thought, suggesting that all other virtue expressions (e.g., gratitude, compassion) may depend on humility. The master virtue mechanism would be critical as many virtues relate to well-being, and well-being shows a negative correlation to low levels of humility (Jankowski et al., 2018; Paine et al., 2018). Those without accurate self-perception or ability to manage pride may struggle to procure the benefits to well-being of relating to God that stem from humility, and arise through other virtues (Jankowski et al., 2018). Evidence also suggests that humility fosters a relationship with God and may allow the application of benefits from this relationship (Jankowski et al., 2018). Regarding gratitude, Rosmarin et al. (2011) found gratitude towards God mediated between religious commitment and well-being to a higher degree than gratitude alone. Emmons and Crumpler (2000) concur, suggesting gratitude is towards a benevolent one and changes affective experience as a result. Gratitude is also related to experiencing God and producing hope (Kraus et al., 2015). The only study investigating compassion in the context of relating to God and well-being considered if compassionate attitude and behaviors mediated between intrinsic religiosity and well-being. The study found a full mediation effect for compassion (Steffen & Masters, 2005). Self-compassion also mediates the association of attachment to God and mental health (Homan, 2014; Varghese, 2015). Fulton (2018) supports this finding by showing self-compassion facilitates other-compassion, which provides benefits to well-being. Humility, gratitude, and compassion are linked to a relationship with God and well-being conceptually.

While Krause and Hayward (2015a) call for more complex designs to assess multiple virtues, interactions, and test theoretical models (for example, Hill et al., 2019), they do not start with relationship to God. However, they provide evidence that humility, gratitude, and

compassion are related to a relationship with God and well-being. Sharma and Singh (2018) confirm a linear path from religiosity to well-being that includes gratitude, altruism, and forgiveness. No other studies link more than one character virtue considered in this study to a relationship with God and well-being.

Statement of the Problem

Collective mediation and the priority of character virtues lack investigation, despite the contributions of research surrounding the mediating role of specific character virtues between a relationship with God and well-being (Krause & Hayward, 2015a). A simultaneous investigation of multiple character virtues will add to what is currently known and help determine if humility necessarily precedes gratitude and compassion (Lavelock et al., 2017). In short, the literature on character virtue, relationship with God, and well-being are disparate.

Purpose of the study

This study had two aims: first, to provide clarity regarding the mediating role of humility, gratitude, and compassion between a relationship with God and well-being amongst a general Christian population. Second, statistically test the validity of humility as master virtue by comparing two models (Figures 1 and 2).

Methodology

The present study investigated relationships between a relationship with God (exogenous variable), and character virtues humility, gratitude and compassion, and well-being (endogenous variables). Particular attention was paid to mediation and character virtue priority. The hypothesized directions of the path coefficients in each model are indicated.

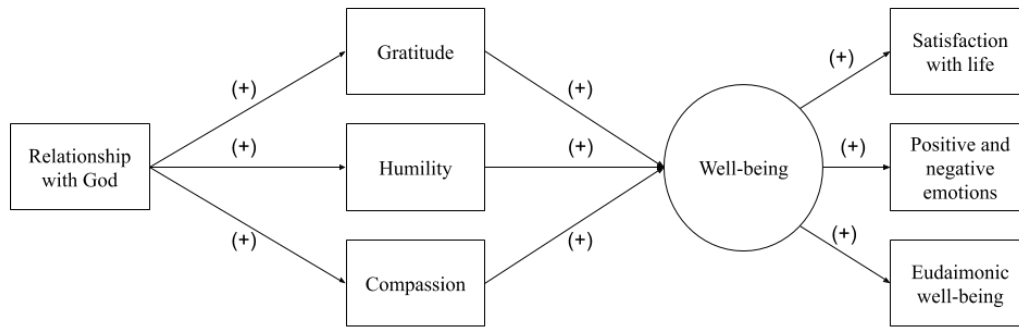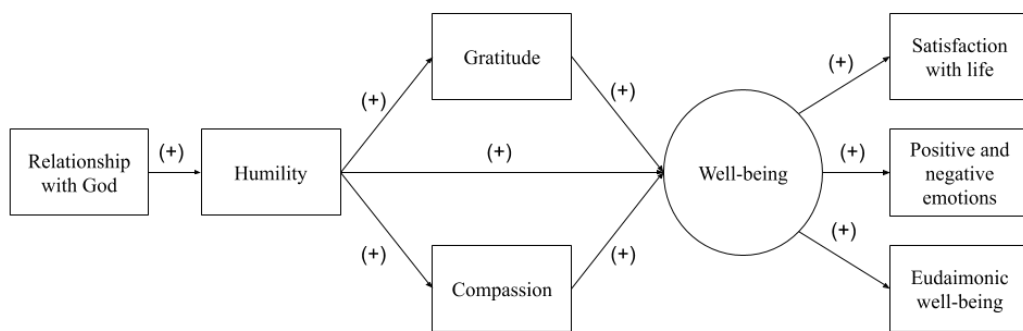*Figure 1 – Hypothesized Path Model 1 (with Equal Character Virtues)*

Figure 2 – Hypothesized Path Model 2 (with Humility as Master Virtue)

Measures Used

Communion with God Scale. The Communion with God Scale (CGS) measured participant relationship with God utilizing an emic (or "insider") construction methodology that allows the 12 items to adhere to common Christian experiences of relating to God (Knabb & Wang, 2019). The emic perspective of the CGS aligns with a central assumption of this study that a participatory relationship with God affects humans through relational, emotional, and behavioral factors (Knabb & Wang, 2019). Factor analyses confirmed a good fit between the 12 items and internal consistency reliabilities for the CGS were high (.95). The CGS has incremental validity beyond the Attachment to God Inventory (Knabb & Wang, 2019).

Humility Semantic Differentials. Humility was measured using Rowatt et al.'s (2006) Humility Semantic Differentials (HSD); initially used to validate the Humility Implicit Association Test. The HSD uses seven pairs of words, and participants rate themselves on a

seven-point scale placed between each pair of words (for example, "humble/arrogant" and "modest/immodest"). The HDS demonstrates good convergent and divergent validity (Rowatt et al., 2006), and McElroy-Heltzel et al. (2019) suggest the HDS suffices "as a brief measure of humility" (p. 397) given its pattern of correlations and items that assess openness, global humility, modesty, and other-orientedness.

The Gratitude Questionnaire. The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) created by McCullough and Emmons (2002) was used to measure gratitude. The authors conducted four studies with 1,622 total participants to develop and asses the instrument (McCullough & Emmons, 2002). Study 1 found internal consistency was .82, and structural equation modeling indicated a one-factor model. Convergent and divergent validity has been established with McCullough and Emmons (2002) concluding, "The GQ-6 has excellent psychometric properties, including a robust one-factor structure and high internal consistency, especially in light of its brevity" (p. 124).

The Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale. Hwang et al. (2008) developed The Santa Clara Brief Compassion Scale (SCBCS) from Sprecher and Fehr's valid and reliable 21-item Compassionate Love Scale. Plante and Mejia (2016) confirmed high internal consistency (Cronbach's alphas from .89 to .9) and split-half reliability (Guttman coefficients from .84-.85) among 6,763 students. Plante and Mejia (2016) also established convergent and divergent validity, and confirmed a one-factor instrument suggesting "the compassion scale is both a reliable and valid instrument" (p. 514).

The Satisfaction with Life Scale. Diener et al. (1985) developed the SWLS and showed high internal consistency (.87) and temporal reliability (.82) amongst undergraduate students and elderly adults. In a comprehensive review of SWLS studies, Pavot and Diener (2008) conclude

the SWLS has "proven to be a reliable and valid measure of the life satisfaction component of [subjective well-being]" (p. 148).

The Scale of Positive and Negative Experience. Diener et al. (2010) constructed the twelve-item SPANE to assess subjective feelings of well-being and ill-being. Initially validated with 689 participants, the SPANE showed Cronbach alpha of .89 and temporal stability of .68 on the combined scales (Diener et al., 2010). The SPANE correlated positively with previous instruments measuring feelings; a correlation of .76 with the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), .58 with the Subjective Happiness Scale, and .57 with Fordyce's single-item measure of happiness (Diener et al., 2010). Jovanović (2015) found the SPANE subscales showed incremental validity beyond the PANAS subscales for predicting well-being.

Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale. The seven-item SWEMWBS was developed to enhance the psychometric properties of the original Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS), which sought to capture positive mental health (Tennant et al., 2007). Stewart-Brown et al. (2009) conducted a Rasch Measurement Model resulting in the seven-item SWEMWBS with internal consistency of .845 (Stewart-Brown et al., 2009). Stewart-Brown et al. (2009) suggest the final SWEMWBS items measure psychological and eudaimonic well-being rather than a more holistic sense of well-being.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection utilized a web-based survey including the measures above, demographic questions, and informed consent. Distribution utilized a local radio station, a midwestern seminary, and two local churches. A total of 2,594 participants were used in the analyses.

Population and Sampling

Participants were asked to respond if they considered themselves Christian and aged 18 or above. In the sample females significantly outnumbered males (18.7% male, n = 484; 81% female, n = 2101; .3% other or unknown, n = 9). The participants reported themselves to be 18-40 years old (n = 423, 16.4%), 41-60 years old (n = 1,248, 48.1%), and 61+ years old (n = 651, 25.2%), and 272 (10.5%) did not answer this question. A large majority reported their ethnicity as White (n = 2432, 93.8%), followed by African American (n = 72, 2.8%), Hispanic (n = 32, 1.2%), Mixed (n = 27, 1%), Asian (n = 14, .5%), and others/non-specified (n = 17, .6%). Participants primarily lived in the United States, n = 2546, 98.1%. Other locations included Columbia, UAE, United Kingdom, Australia, Asia and unspecified; n = 48, 1.7%. Participant Christian denomination was distributed across 14 groups, led by nondenominational (35%), Baptist (18%), and Catholic (13%). Each other denomination contained less than 10%.

Statistical Analysis

Path analyses were conducted on the two proposed models to examine the causal effects of the variables and to discern which model best fit with the data. The utility and conclusions of path analysis are dependent on the theoretical strength of the models tested because path analysis is confirmatory, analyzing previously specified relationships (Byrne, 2000; Streiner, 2005). Model fits can be compared statistically and model confirmation and subsequent suggestion of causality is a product of statistically estimating the direct and indirect causal effects between the variables (Karadag, 2012; Streiner, 2005). In the present study no item was missing data for more than .5% (n = 13) of cases, leading to total missing cases across all scales at a minimal .94%. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) utilizes a maximum likelihood (ML) procedure to estimate missing data that is highly recommended and subsequently utilized in this study (Byrne, 2000).

Results

Preliminary analysis determined internal consistency for each measure was sufficient, suggesting the instruments are acting reliably (.719-.96). Specifically, Cronbach's alpha for the CGS was .922, which is very similar to the .95 found by Knabb and Wang (2019). This study provides further support for the reliability of the new CGS measure. Exploratory factor analyses further confirmed that the original instruments performed adequately for this study in their original form and the results appear in Table 4. Means and standard deviations within this study were comparable to prior studies.

Table 4.

Factor Analysis Results for Instruments

Instrument	Chi-square (Bartlett's)	Sig. (p)	Eigen Value 1	% of Variance	Eigen Value 2	% of Variance
SWEMWBS	4713	< .001	3.298	47%		
SWLS	6360	< .001	3.302	66.04%		
SPANE	19766	< .001	6.88	57.4%	1.11	9.3%
HSD	5626	< .001	3.363	48.05%	1.007	14.38%
GQ-6	3443	< .001	2.65	44.23%	1.043	17.4%
SCBCS	8420	< .001	3.439	68.77%		
CGS	17729	< .001	6.67	55.85%		

Note: Only Eigen values of 1 or more considered as factors

Both hypothesized models showed a relatively poor fit (model 1: RMSEA = .156, CFI = .884; model 2: RMSEA = .191, CFI = .825). Improved versions of each model were developed by adding multiple paths that made theoretical sense and were statistically suggested by SPSS AMOS. Adjusted model 1 demonstrated a close fit (RMSEA = .08, CFI = .975), but he final model (adjusted model 2) effectively combined both hypothesized models and demonstrated the closest fit (RMSEA = .78, CFI = .978). Table 5 provides model fit statistics for each model.

Table 6 provides Pearson correlations for the final model, and Figure 3 includes the final model

and path coefficients. Model fit was not affected when controlling for gender ($p > .4$)

Table 5.

Model Fit Indices Summary

Model	RMSEA	IFI	CFI	X^2
Model 1	.156	.885	.884	765.142 ($p < .001$)
Adjusted Model 1	.08	.975	.975	174.042 ($p < .001$)
Model 2	.191	.825	.825	1151.182 ($p < .001$)
Adjusted Model 2	.078	.978	.978	149.568 ($p < .001$)

Table 6.

Pearson Correlations for Final Model

Variables	CGS	HSD	GQ-6	SCBCS	SWEMBS	SWLS	SPANE
1 Communion with God							
2 Virtue Humility	.333						
3 Virtue Gratitude	.441	.229					
4 Virtue Compassion	.392	.406	.279				
5 Eudaimonic Well-being	.491	.324	.468	.204			
6 Hedonic Well-being	.336	.131	.435	.069	.553		
7 Affective Experience	.472	.321	.494	.19	.767	.572	

Note: All correlations significant at $p < .01$

Figure 3 – Final model with path coefficients (Adjusted Model 2)

Standardized indirect effects showed significant partial mediation of a relationship with God on well-being by humility (.063), gratitude (.159), and compassion (-.032), affirming the study hypothesis. Alternatively stated, as a relationship with God increases one standard deviation, it contributes a .159 standard deviation increase in well-being due to gratitude, and .063 standard deviation increases in well-being due to humility. A single negative path exists in the model between compassion and well-being, meaning as relationship with God increases one standard deviation well-being decreases .11 standard deviations due to compassion. Compassion primarily reduces emotional well-being (-.1) and eudaimonic well-being (-.098). These reductions occur despite compassion increasing as a result of a relationship with God; both mediated through humility and direct. The decrease in well-being resulting from compassion is at odds with previous findings (Steffen & Masters, 2005). Compassion showed significantly smaller correlations with three well-being items than gratitude and humility that may explain its negative impact on well-being. These correlations suggest compassion was more closely linked to feelings of being sad and afraid, and less able to deal with problems. Gratitude, on the other

hand, has the most significant benefit on overall well-being (.394), in particular on emotional experience (.348), closely followed by eudaimonic well-being (.341). Humility also has a substantial direct impact on well-being (.19). The impact of humility on well-being is almost entirely direct and not mediated by gratitude or compassion. Humility likely benefits well-being by contributing to the development or enactment of other character virtues.

As a relationship with God increases, it has a large overall impact on well-being (.544), and emotional well-being is most impacted (.482), closely followed by eudaimonic well-being (.472), and to a lesser degree satisfaction (.352). These findings suggest a relationship with God may primarily increase emotional experience and a broader sense of meaning and purpose, which accords with prior findings (Keefer & Brown, 2018; Rainville & Mehegan, 2019). Importantly, the three measures of well-being affirm that well-being is a multi-dimensional construct and multicollinearity was not present.

Relationship with God directly increased gratitude (.411), compassion (.392), and humility (.333). Relationship with God also showed additional impacts on compassion (.102) and gratitude (.029), mediated through humility. Furthermore, humility significantly facilitates the growth of compassion (.31, $p < .01$), and to a lesser degree, gratitude (.092, $p < .01$). When the small but significant path between humility and gratitude was from the model, the model fit decreased, indicating the importance of this connection. Further, no model analysis suggested that pathways occur from gratitude or compassion through humility to well-being; therefore, humility proceeds as the primary character virtue. It appears that a relationship with God initiates a process of increasing character virtues and that fostering the first virtue (humility) increases subsequent virtues.

In sum, adjusted model 2 (Figure 3) provides a close fit to the sample data and found the character virtues gratitude, humility and compassion partially mediate the impact of a relationship with God on well-being. Humility acts as a master virtue mediating between a relationship with God and the other character virtues, but this mediation significantly differs in degree. Humility is highly influential in the development of compassion and modestly regarding gratitude. The reverse is not true; gratitude and compassion did not mediate between a relationship with God and humility.

Discussion

The results reveal that Character virtues humility, gratitude, and compassion partially mediate between a relationship with God and well-being. Second, this study adds to prior evidence that humility may act as a master virtue in the development of character virtues (Lavelock et al., 2017), but with widely varying impact on different virtues. The final model showed that as a relationship to God increases, so does well-being and that the character virtues of humility, gratitude, and compassion each uniquely contribute to this process. An adjusted model was needed to capture the complex interactions between a relationship with God, character virtues, and well-being. Further research should continue to refine the model by explaining the direct effects from relationship with God to well-being, which likely includes previously noted variables (e.g. social connection), and unspecified character virtues.

The Impact of a Christian Relationship with God

This Finding confirm prior research that found a relationship with God increases well-being (for example, Diener et al., 2011; Ellison, 1983; Vishkin et al., 2019). However, this study utilized an emic measure (CGS) of relationship with God that more accurately measures a Christian relationship with God, that is most likely intrinsically motivated. This supports, and

may lend additional explanation, to prior literature that suggests intrinsic religiosity generates well-being (Ellison, 1983; Miner, 2009; You and Lim, 2019). Furthermore, the present study demonstrates which elements of well-being are most impacted by a relationship with God, namely emotions and eudaimonic well-being. These findings align with other contentions that a Christian relationship with God finds a central purpose in a new identity and changed affections of the heart (Greggo, 2016; Strawn 2004; Williams, 2005), and that well-being is likely to be a reciprocal benefit of these changes (Anstey, 2017; Kaczor, 2015).

This study makes clear that character virtues increase in response to a relationship with God, and that these virtues are instrumental in well-being, concurring with prior secular research (Seligman, 2018). This study provides evidence for a powerful strategy to increase character virtues: a genuine, intrinsically motivated Christian relationship with God. It is controversial to state that Christian relationship with God may indeed serve as an effective positive psychological method for achieving well-being given the tense history between religion and psychology (Charry & Kosits, 2017). However, this would not surprise many thinkers of old.

Each virtue was influenced differently by a relationship with God. Gratitude increased the most, followed by humility, and finally, compassion. These findings support prior studies (for example, Paine et al., 2018; Rosmarin et al., 2011; Steffen & Masters, 2005), yet go beyond them to indicate relative differences between character virtues. This unique contribution informs what character change to expect in the US Christian population and the potential bias in the development of their character virtues. It is reasonable to ask questions such as: Are US Christian biases shaping Christian formation, and does the privileged position of a predominantly white US sample lend this group to gratitude above humility and compassion?

Character Virtue Mediation

Each character virtue partially mediated between a relationship with God and well-being, but compassion did so in a negative direction. First, Gratitude creates a substantial pathway through which relationship with God leads to well-being across measures of well-being. This impact is not surprising, given established links between general religiosity, gratitude and well-being (for example, Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Krause et al., 2015; Rosmarin et al., 2011), and the fact that gratitude is well established in the Biblical text as a right and expected response to a relationship with God (for example, Psalm 106:1, Colossians 2:6-7, Hebrews 12:28-29). This study validates Rosmarin et al.'s (2011) suggestion that it is highly pertinent to consider how to integrate spirituality with gratitude interventions.

In this study, humility directly mediates the benefits of a relationship with God on well-being in a small to moderate degree. The impact of humility on well-being is primarily direct. However, would including additional character virtues in the model account for this direct mediation? Researchers have suggested that humilities main benefit to well-being is indirect, through the development of virtues and reduced self-protection (Dwiwardani et al. 2014; Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017; Lavelock et al., 2017).

Compassion mediated the impact of a relationship with God on well-being in a minimal negative direction. Steffen and Masters (2005) found that compassion mediated between intrinsic religiosity and well-being, but it was a compassionate attitude that accounted for this mediation, not compassionate behavior. Given the Christian emphasis on compassionate action, the findings may point to burdens associated with active compassion in the current sample. Alternatively, given that current study was conducted approximately three months into the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the effects of isolation, care-taking, financial strain, and more may have impacted participant experience and response. This may account for the weak correlations with items that

asked participants to rate how well they have been dealing with problems over the last two weeks, and high correlations with sadness and fear.

Humility as a Master Virtue

Humility has been linked with many benefits (leadership success, trust, less power-seeking, altruism), influencing thought, speech, and action (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017). This study agrees that humility is pro-socially beneficial, yet nuances the claim that humility functions as a master virtue. Humility significantly increases both gratitude and compassion, yet the overall effect of humility on gratitude is quite modest. Previous studies found a discrepant impact of humility on gratitude (Krause & Hayward, 2015a; Krumrei-Mancuso, 2017). While each study measured humility and gratitude differently, Krumrei-Mancuso (2017) found a significantly higher correlation between humility and gratitude. However, Krumrei-Mancuso (2017) under-sampled religious populations, while the present study and Krause and Hayward (2015a) specifically sampled Christians. Given that a relationship with God greatly increases gratitude, it might be that Christians with this reliable source of gratitude may have their gratitude elevated beyond the majority of the impact of humility. This issue warrants further investigation, particularly the theory that humility may demonstrate a more significant impact on gratitude in the non-religious than in Christians.

Second, Lavelock et al. (2017) found that specific virtues increase through focused attention, which subsequently fosters the development of secondary virtues as a byproduct. This study provides some supports for Lavelock et al.'s (2017) contention that humility may be the primary character virtue that enacts a mechanism of increasing secondary virtues and that other character virtues do not produce humility itself. First there was no statistical evidence for pathways leading from gratitude or compassion through humility to well-being. Second,

Lavelock et al. (2017) showed that humility training impacts virtues with strong theoretical links to humility (forgiveness, patience), and gratitude was not one of those virtues. This study showed that the impact of humility on gratitude is far less than on compassion. One explanation is that humility may not be a master virtue to all virtues, but may serve as a master to a limited subset of virtues. This interpretation contends that humility acts potently on virtues primarily expressed through awareness of others and action towards them (such as forgiveness; Lavelock et al., 2017), but not other virtues that appear less immediately relational (gratitude). This conclusion is not necessarily valid given the lack of evidence that precludes humility from the master virtue position, and because humility does significantly impact gratitude. It is more accurate to suggest that humility appears to act as a master virtue to both compassion and gratitude, but to significantly different degrees. Therefore, this study provides tentative evidence that humility acts as a master virtue, but humility may have more potent impacts on virtues that are behaviorally and relationally similar in their common expression to humility.

Implications for Counselor Educators, Clinicians and Researchers

This study has several practical implications for counselor educators, clinicians, and researchers. First, given the influence of a relationship with God on well-being, spiritual competencies that facilitate care and attention to this domain in counseling are critical (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). Fostering growth in spiritual competencies is critical to help clients foster relational maturity and security with their God, regardless of the clinician's perspective. If this occurs, character virtue gains will promote social benefits that go beyond measures of well-being. Furthermore, this study illuminates the potential changes to well-being that arise from a relationship with God. Individual differences will occur, and yet individuals (clients, students,

public) can be aware that satisfaction is not likely to grow to the same degree as felt meaning and purpose or positive emotions. This information provides a guide for clinical intervention.

Growth in humility should be a central focus of Christian (and secular) counselor growth as it contributes to well-being and other virtues. Humility may also promote virtue growth that is critical to awareness of others and action on their behalf (Lavelock et al., 2017). In short, increasing evidence links humility to character virtues and experiences that are likely to mitigate compassion-fatigue or burnout, and develop personal satisfaction. Spending ample time and resources to foster humility appears prudent wise given the broad potential gains. Critically, for Christians, a key mechanism to grow humility is not directly working on humility, but encouraging spiritual formation practices that support relationship with God. Counselors and educators should consider ways to formalize this process with their programs.

The cost of compassion and empathy must not be forgotten, especially for religious groups that highly value compassion. It is possible to overlook the cost of compassion on Christian clinicians because it is seen as *taking up one's cross*. However, it would be a mistake to allow moral convictions and desires to override the care that is necessary to help Christian counselors avoid burnout or compassion fatigue (Frederick et al., 2018). Frederick et al. (2018) recommend spiritual revitalization that depends on connecting with an empowering relationship with God through means such as prayer.

An additional application of this study is that the personal character virtues generated by a relationship with God align with the broad psychological understanding of character virtues that support well-being. This alignment provides an avenue for carefully articulated integration that demonstrates the entwinement of God's world and psychological knowledge.

Limitations

The sample displays significant homogeneity regarding gender, ethnicity, and culture, which may be a result of the sampling method. The mostly white, female, American sample may limit generalizability within the US, and women tend to score higher on character virtues such as compassion (Hwang et al., 2008). Cross-religious and cross-cultural interpretation may be spurious, and further research is required to confirm the current findings.

Response bias poses a significant threat to veracity as data was anonymous self-report, and participants could not be verified. Second, the Christian population is well known to respond to surveys in a self-enhancing manner (Gebauer et al., 2017). Christians may wish to portray their faith in a favorable light or feel a pressure to perform, answering according to perceived expectations. This study occurred during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which had wide-reaching social ramifications that may also impact participant response. For example, participants' struggles with hope, trust, or fear may impact their relationship with God. Measurement and statistical error may limit validity given the complexity of character virtues and limited measures of well-being.

Recommendations for Future Study

The current study warrants repetition multiple reasons. First, a true random sample may reduce bias and homogeneity. Repetitions should give particular concern to sample diversity, specifically race, gender, and culture, and demographic differences. Second, conducting the study outside of the direct influence of a pandemic that may impact participant responses. This repetition would form a limited pre-posttest on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and would offer insight into the effects of any similar mass-scale social phenomenon.

Variations of the current study should seek to clarify and improve upon the final model presented in this study by assessing additional character virtues and previously noted mediators

between relationship with God and well-being. Measuring Christian self-enhancement could validate the current theoretical model and lead to new insights into the dynamics between Christianity and well-being. Further adaptation would be to include alternative and more comprehensive measures of well-being to allow for validation and expansion of the current findings or bridge the gap between character virtues and strengths.

Careful programs of research on humility and compassion are warranted. Humility research could synthesize the work of Lavelock et al. (2017), Krause and Hayward (2015a), and the present findings, and utilize experimental and longitudinal designs. The master virtue hypothesis requires further investigation with religious and non-religious participants. Such designs should seek to discern if humility is a true master virtue or a master virtue to a specific group of character virtues. Compassion research might consider the differential impact on well-being outcomes arising from feelings and behaviors associated with compassion.

This study has offered insight into the benefits of a relationship with God, and its impact on character virtues and well-being. These variables interrelate and insights provide practical utility to counselor educators, clinicians and researchers.

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