

Running head: INJUSTICE, RELIGIOSITY, AND HAPPINESS

**Religiosity Reduces the Negative Influence of Injustice on Subjective Well-being: A
Study in 121 Nations**

Abstract

Injustice has been argued to cause anger at, and disbelief in, God amongst religious people, which would make a bad situation (i.e., the injustice) even worse for them. Such arguments disagree with the general finding in happiness studies that religion helps to mitigate the negative effects of bad life circumstances on subjective well-being. We resolved this disagreement by analysing data from 121 nations. We found that the religiosity had a significant moderating effect on the relationship between injustice and happiness, such that higher levels of religiosity mitigated more of the negative effects of injustice on happiness than lower levels did.

Keywords: injustice, religiosity, subjective well-being, happiness, culture

Religiosity Reduces the Negative Influence of Injustice on Subjective Well-being: A Study in 121 Nations

Introduction

Prior studies have shown that when religiosity is joined by high levels of anger at God or questioning of God, it can exacerbate the pernicious effects of some negative life circumstances on subjective well-being (Exline et al., 2011; Pargament & Cummings, 2010; Pearce, Singer, & Prigerson, 2006). This religiosity-as-exacerbator effect has been explained with reference to the Spiritual Struggles theory of religion. This theory posits that when terrible events happen to and around religious adherents, some of the adherents will be angry at God (Divine Struggles) or question their belief in God (Intrapsychic Struggles), thereby exacerbating the negative effects of the terrible event on their mental health (Exline & Rose, 2005; Pargament & Cummings, 2010; Pargament et al., 2005).

In particular, injustice is a life circumstance that has a negative effect on subjective well-being (e.g., Dalbert, 1998; Johnson, 1990; Maes et al., 1998). It has been argued that injustice can lead to both being angry at God (Divine Struggles) (e.g., Exline & Martin 2005; Exline et al., 2011; Pargament, et al. 2005) and the questioning of one's fundamental religious beliefs (e.g., Exline, 2002; Mackie, 1955; Peterson, 2010). If injustice can cause these Spiritual Struggles amongst religious people, then religiosity might exacerbate the negative effects of injustice on subjective well-being. Thus, based on the religiosity-as-exacerbator hypothesis, it could be predicted that the negative effect of injustice on subjective well-being would be increased in nations with higher religiosity.

However, religiosity has also been found to act as a buffer on relationships between various life circumstances and subjective well-being by partially mitigating the effects of negative life circumstances on subjective well-being (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011; Inglehart,

2010; Lazarus, 1993; Ryff et al., 2004). This religiosity-as-buffer effect is often explained with reference to the Terror Management theory of religion. This theory posits that one of the benefits of religiosity is the anxiety-quelling belief that a higher power is guiding events on Earth in the right or best way; that no matter how terrible or difficult to resolve the problem is, there is a good reason for it (Hackney & Sanders, 2003). In contrast to the religiosity-as-exacerbator hypothesis, the religiosity-as-buffer hypothesis would predict that the negative effect of injustice on subjective well-being would be *reduced* in nations with higher religiosity.

In this paper, we report on a study that cross-culturally tests whether the religiosity-as-buffer hypothesis or the religiosity-as-exacerbator hypothesis best accounts for the influence that religiosity has on the negative effects of injustice on subjective well-being.

Control variables and analysis

It is possible that several other factors could interfere with the effects of religiosity on the relationship between injustice and happiness, so we control for them in our analyses.

The economic prosperity of nations was included as a control variable because the results of other studies suggests that it might independently affect our variables of interest; it correlates with subjective well-being (e.g., Helliwell, 2003), religiosity (e.g., Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2007), and injustice (e.g., Diener & Diener, 1995). Education was also included as a control variable for similar reasons; it has been found to correlate with religiosity (e.g., Meisenberg, Rindermann, Patel, & Woodley, 2012) and sometimes with subjective wellbeing (e.g., Graham & Felton, 2006; Layard, 2005), especially when the human capital aspect of education is isolated (e.g., Florida, Mellander, & Rentfrow, 2013). The final control variable to be included was social support, since it has been found to correlate with subjective well-being (e.g., Helliwell, Barrington-Leigh, Harris, & Huang,

2010) and may reduce the negative effects of injustice, since it has been found to reduce the negative effects of many other stressors (Taylor, 2011).

It should be noted that only Abrahamic religions are monotheistic and have the particular conception that individuals should have a relationship with God, who is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, in the way that makes the presence of real-world injustice seem so troubling. On this basis, some may argue that the religiosity-as-exacerbator hypothesis would receive more support if the analysis is limited to cultures that are influenced by Abrahamic religions. Therefore, we also analysed the data while excluding non-Abrahamic nations.

Measures

Injustice. Three indicators were chosen to assess injustice, namely: national scores for group grievances (measuring discrimination as well as ethnic, communal, sectarian and religious violence)¹, state-sponsored political violence and repression², and the rule of law (capturing the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society)³. Group grievances are an important aspect of national level injustice because justice is supposed to be blind (i.e. impartial with respect to morally irrelevant factors such as ethnicity and religious affiliation). The index for state-sponsored political violence and oppression captures the abuse-of-power aspect of injustice. The index for the rule of law was also included as it provides information about how just people believe their national laws to be (confidence in the rule of law) and whether they act justly in relation to their national laws (abiding by the rule of law). A principal axis factoring (followed by Promax rotation) on these three variables yielded only one factor with an eigenvalue larger than 1. The scree plot

¹ Obtained from The Fund for Peace <http://global.fundforpeace.org/> 2012.

² The Political Terror Index, obtained from <http://www.politicalterrorindex.org/> 2011.

³ Obtained from <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp> 2011.

test also indicated a one-dimension factor structure. All three indexes loaded on this factor with factor loadings ranging from .82 to .87 (eigenvalue = 2.42, variance explained = 80.88%). These results suggest that the three indicators can be collectively used to measure injustice. To give equal presence to the constituting indexes, the individual indexes were first standardized and then summed up to form the injustice index for each nation (the rule of law was reverse-coded).

Religiosity. The national religiosity scores provided by Diener, Tay, and Myers (2011) were used to assess religiosity. This index captures the average importance of religion in individuals' daily lives for each nation based on the data provided by the Gallup World Poll from 2005 to 2009. The religiosity scores of the nations were centred to be used in the moderation analysis.

Happiness. The affect balance scores of the nations provided by Diener, Suh, Kim-Prieto, Biswas-Diener, and Tay (2010) were used to measure national happiness, based on the Gallup World Poll data. Affect balance is the difference between positive (e.g., enjoyment) and negative feelings (e.g., sadness).

Economic prosperity. To measure the economic prosperity of the nations in the study, the economy sub-index of the 2012 Legatum Prosperity Index was used. This index measures "nations' performance in four key areas: macroeconomic policies, economic satisfaction and expectations, foundations for growth, and financial sector efficiency" (Legatum Institute, 2012, p. 12). The economy index ranges from -6.78 to 3.33. This variable was grand-mean centred.

Education. The education sub-index of the 2012 Legatum Prosperity Index was used to measure the level of education of the nations in the study. This index measures "nations' performance in three areas: access to education, quality of education, and human capital"

(Legatum Institute, 2012, p. 18). The education index ranges from -5.74 to 2.86. This variable was grand-mean centred.

Social support. To assess the national level of social support, the social support index provided by Diener et al. (2010) was used. This index measures national levels of social trust and support based on the Gallup World Poll data.

The list of the nations included in the analyses and the injustice index scores produced and used in this study are presented in Table 1.

Results

The intercorrelations among the variables of the study are presented in Table 2. We used moderated regression analyses (Aiken & West, 1991) to test the hypotheses of the study, using the M&M (moderation & mediation) statistical program (Jose, 2013b). The relationship between injustice and happiness for all nations is plotted in Figure 1.

As can be seen in Table 3, in the nations for which we had data on all of the variables in this study ($N = 121$), we found that the interaction of the religiosity with injustice was a significant predictor of happiness. This shows that the relationship between injustice and happiness is moderated by national levels of religiosity. The moderating effect of the religiosity is schematically shown in Figure 2. The graph demonstrates that the negative relationship between injustice and happiness is stronger for less religious nations. The results of simple slope analysis showed that whereas for moderately and lowly religious nations, the relationship between injustice and happiness was significant ($p < .001$), the relationship for highly religious nations was not significantly different from 0 ($p = .182$).

To examine if national levels of economic prosperity, education, and social support would explain the interaction between injustice and religiosity we added these variables to the equation in a separate analysis. The results are reported in Table 3. As can be seen in the

table, the interaction remained significant when controlling for these variables. Finally, we repeated the moderation analysis with the control variables excluding nations wherein the majority religion is not Abrahamic. Based on the statistics provided by the Association of Religion Data Archives⁴, 14 non-Abrahamic nations (shown in boldface in Table 1) were excluded in this subsequent analysis. As can be seen in Table 3, the interaction between injustice and religiosity remained significant.

Discussion

The correlations among the variables (see Table 2) are generally as expected. In line with previous research, injustice is negatively correlated with happiness (e.g., Dalbert, 1998; Johnson, 1990; Maes et al., 1998). The correlation between injustice and the religiosity is strong and probably represents several underlying relationships. It has been shown that people turn to religion in times of hardship (Inglehart, 2010), and injustice is a kind of hardship. Moreover, nations with weak economies tend to have higher levels of both injustice (Diener & Diener, 1995) and religiosity (Inglehart, 2010). The small negative and non-significant correlation between the religiosity and happiness should not be misinterpreted as evidence that religiosity tends to decrease happiness, since this correlation hides the fact that nations with high levels of religiosity tend to report lower levels of happiness because, as the other correlations and previous research (e.g., Inglehart, 2010) show, those nations also tend to have worse living conditions, including being poorer, less well-educated, less just, and less socially supportive (all of which are positively correlated with happiness and each other).

Our main purpose was to investigate the moderating role of religiosity in the relationship between injustice and happiness. The religiosity-as-exacerbator hypothesis presented here predicts that the negative effects of injustice on subjective well-being would

⁴ Cross-National Socio-Economic and Religion Data, 2011, Obtained from <http://www.thearda.com/>. Although data related to the United States were not available in this source, we included the United States in the analysis as a majority Christian nation.

be increased in nations with higher religiosity. The religiosity-as-buffer hypothesis, on the other hand, predicts that the negative effect of injustice on subjective well-being would be reduced in nations with higher religiosity. Our findings were consistent with the religiosity-as-buffer hypothesis and *not* the religiosity-as-exacerbator hypothesis. In general, the negative effects of injustice on subjective well-being were mitigated to a greater extent in nations with higher proportions of the population reporting that religious belief is important to them. These findings also lend support to prior research indicating that religion does not function uniformly across societies, and that its benefits for subjective well-being depend on the characteristics of the society (e.g., Diener et al., 2011).

Furthermore, religiosity's buffering effect on the relationship between inequality and happiness remained significant when the control variables (economic prosperity, education, and social support) were added to the analysis. All of the control variables were significant predictors of happiness, justifying their inclusion. Moreover, adding the control variables to the regression weakened the direct predictive power of injustice leaving it not significant. This change suggests that injustice's direct effects on happiness might be dependent on education or social and economic factors, as well as religiosity. However, the buffer effect of religiosity on the relationship between injustice and happiness was largely independent of the control variables.

Similar relationships were observed when the results from only nations with greater levels of adherence to Abrahamic religions (compared to other religions) were analysed. This analysis was undertaken to examine if support could be found for the religiosity-as-exacerbator hypotheses when non-Abrahamic nations were excluded (since only adherents to Abrahamic religions are likely to suffer from spiritual struggles because of injustice). The religiosity-as-exacerbator hypothesis was not supported by this analysis either. Indeed, the result for the interaction of injustice and religiosity was the same size and still significant,

albeit slightly less significant. The only other change in the results was that religiosity did not significantly predict happiness in this final analysis. This change is perhaps suggestive of some religions being more conducive to the experience of happiness than others.

The final result worthy of further comment is that education is positively correlated with happiness in the correlation analysis, while being a significant negative predictor of happiness in the regression analyses. This result is probably best justified by education's positive correlation with happiness being explained through the economic benefits of an educated populace (human capital), since economic prosperity was included as a variable in the regression analyses and probably stripped out the happiness-promoting aspect of education. The remaining aspects of education might then have a negative effect on happiness because an educated populace is very aware of the multitudinous problems facing them and the rest of the world's people, providing them with more sombre moments. Moreover, higher education comes with higher expectations and standards of comparison, which may cause more frustration and disappointment (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Oishi, 2012).

On the whole, our analyses seem to show that belief in religion helps to deal with the negative emotional impacts of injustice, probably because more religious believers view at least some injustice as a necessary part of some complicated higher plan for the greater good, rather than as a reason to be angry at, or lose faith in, God. Naturally, this does not entail that people with strong religious beliefs endorse or ignore the injustice around them. As the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1843/1955) argued, that someone believes every detail of the universe is managed by a perfect being does not prevent them from having preferences and taking actions, such as trying to prevent injustice, for these injustice-preventing actions are also part of the perfect beings' plan.

Although these findings are promising, the study had limitations. This study was only of country-level data and should be followed up by analysis of individual-level data to more

deeply investigate the relationship between injustice and subjective well-being, and the effects of religiosity on that relationship. Furthermore, since people from different cultures can hold different beliefs about what injustice is, our results may have differed if we had used a subjective measure of injustice instead of our chosen objective measure.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1

Injustice Index Scores for Nations

Nation	Score	Nation	Score	Nation	Score	Nation	Score
Afghanistan	6.20	Ecuador	1.65	Latvia	-1.65	Rwanda	2.14
Albania	-.41	Egypt	3.39	Lebanon	1.96	Saudi Arabia	1.84
Angola	2.03	El Salvador	.78	Lithuania	-2.73	Senegal	.50
Argentina	-.05	Estonia	-2.76	Macedonia	.63	Serbia	.86
Armenia	.80	Ethiopia	2.83	Madagascar	.97	Sierra Leone	.52
Australia	-4.28	Finland	-5.74	Malawi	.56	Singapore	-4.16
Austria	-4.26	France	-2.63	Malaysia	-.26	Slovakia	-1.94
Azerbaijan	2.03	Georgia	1.39	Mali	-.43	Slovenia	-3.88
Bangladesh	3.25	Germany	-3.85	Mauritania	1.71	South Africa	.24
Belarus	1.39	Ghana	.20	Mexico	1.92	Spain	-2.28
Belgium	-3.85	Greece	-1.13	Moldova	.57	Sri Lanka	3.69
Benin	-.93	Guatemala	1.65	Montenegro	-.71	Sweden	-5.93
Bolivia	1.29	Haiti	1.45	Morocco	1.17	Switzerland	-4.62
Bosnia and Herzegovina	.43	Honduras	.76	Mozambique	.54	Tajikistan	1.72
Botswana	-2.70	Hungary	-2.83	Nepal	3.57	Tanzania	.47
Brazil	1.13	India	2.59	Netherlands	-4.21	Thailand	2.20
Bulgaria	-.91	Indonesia	1.77	New Zealand	-4.46	Togo	.93
Burkina Faso	.52	Iran	3.76	Nicaragua	.86	Trinidad and Tobago	-.56
Cambodia	2.24	Ireland	-5.44	Niger	1.42	Turkey	1.80
Cameroon	1.86	Israel	2.35	Nigeria	4.68	Uganda	2.31
Canada	-4.72	Italy	-1.36	Norway	-4.54	Ukraine	1.51
Chad	4.09	Jamaica	.44	Pakistan	5.26	United Arab Emirates	-2.26
Chile	-2.93	Japan	-3.82	Panama	-1.43	United	-3.76

						Kingdom	
Colombia	2.41	Jordan	.82	Paraguay	1.01	United States	-2.12
Costa Rica	-1.72	Kazakhstan	1.43	Peru	1.22	Uruguay	-3.83
Croatia	-1.81	Kenya	2.55	Philippines	2.86	Uzbekistan	2.81
Cyprus	-1.32	Korea, South	-3.77	Poland	-2.79	Venezuela	2.53
Czech Republic	-3.71	Kuwait	-1.66	Portugal	-3.34	Vietnam	.51
Denmark	-4.88	Kyrgyzstan	3.02	Romania	-.48	Yemen	4.81
Dominican Republic	1.70	Laos	.63	Russia	3.29	Zambia	1.17
						Zimbabwe	4.17

Note. Higher scores indicate higher injustice. Nations in bold (N = 14) were excluded in the analysis on majority Abrahamic cultures.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix Across Nations

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Happiness	1					
2. Injustice	-.36**	1				
3. Religiosity	-.13	.67**	1			
4. Economic Prosperity	.52**	-.63**	-.46**	1		
5. Education	.21*	-.65**	-.72**	.64**	1	
6. Social support	.51**	-.51**	-.52**	.59**	.68**	1

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 3

Summary of Moderated Regression Analyses with Centred Variables Predicting Happiness

predictors	<i>b</i>	β	<i>t</i>	N	R ² (adjusted)	F(<i>df</i>)
<i>All nations</i>				121	.21(.19)	10.33(3,117)**
Constant	.45	–	32.35**			
Injustice	-.02	-.45	-3.97**			
Religiosity	.15	.27	2.39*			
Injustice × Religiosity	.05	.25	2.74**			
<i>All nations with covariates^a</i>				119	.50(.47)	18.77(6,112)**
Constant	-.15	–	-1.49			
Injustice	-.009	-.18	-1.72			
Religiosity	.15	.26	2.33*			
Injustice × Religiosity	.04	.21	2.64**			
Economic prosperity	.03	.37	3.65**			
Education	-.02	-.37	-2.94**			
Social support	.72	.55	5.85**			
<i>Only Abrahamic nations with covariates^b</i>				105	.51(.48)	17.10(6,98)**
Constant	-.17	–	-1.47			
Injustice	-.01	-.20	-1.85			
Religiosity	.13	.22	1.86			
Injustice × Religiosity	.04	.19	2.32*			
Economic prosperity	.03	.37	3.41**			
Education	-.02	-.38	-2.84**			
Social support	.73	.54	5.36**			

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

^a Social support score for Morocco, and education and economy indexes for Madagascar were not available, and thus these two nations were excluded from the analysis.

^b Besides Morocco and Madagascar, 14 non-Abrahamic nations (as indicated in Table 1) were excluded from the analysis.

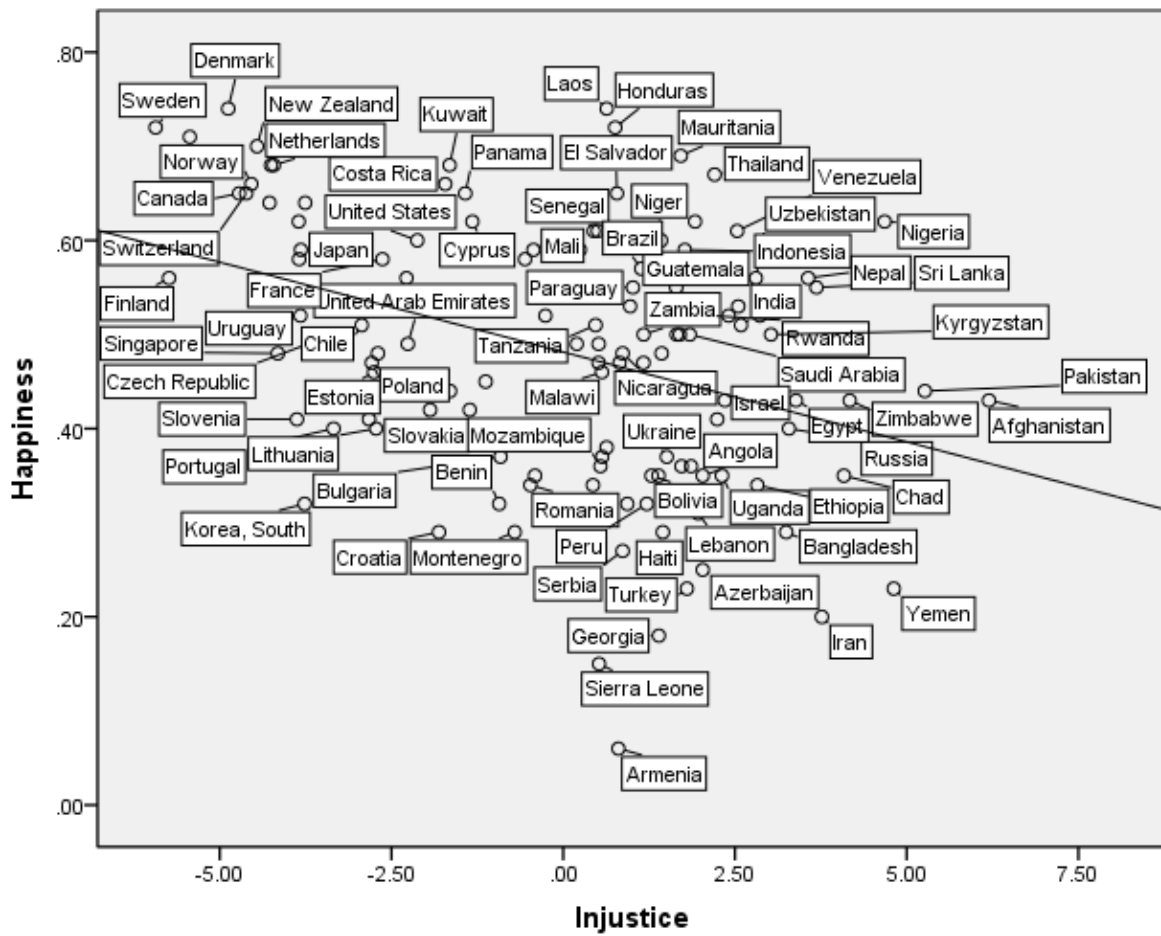


Figure 1

The Relationship between Injustice and Happiness across Nations

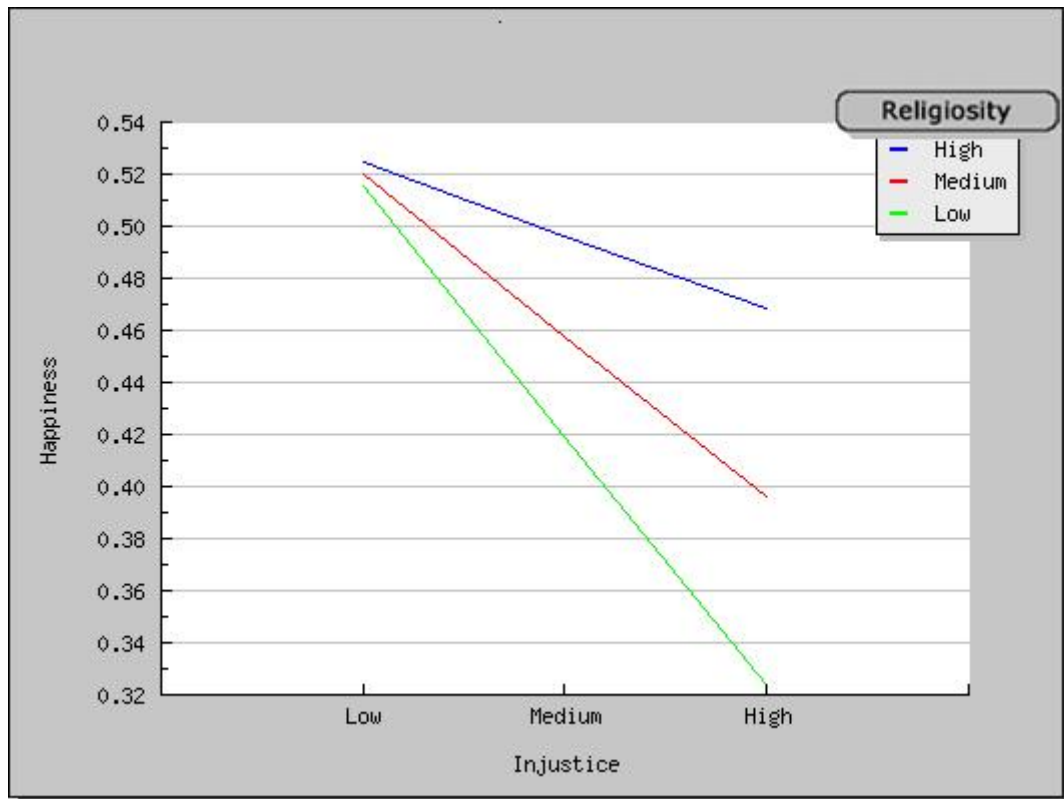


Figure 2

The Interaction of Injustice and Religiosity in Predicting the Happiness of Nations