



Religion and gender differences in stress, happiness and life satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Although the positive association between religiosity and gender differences in stress, happiness and life satisfaction is well documented, much theoretical and empirical controversy surround the question of how religion and gender actually shape life satisfaction and effect stress and happiness. This study aims to look at religion and gender differences in stress, happiness and life satisfaction among the university students and also examined the effects of spiritual involvement and happiness on life satisfaction. One hundred and seventy eight (178) students from a public University in Malaysia participated in the study. Adapted version of *Spiritual Involvement and Beliefs Scale* (Hatch et. Al., 1998), *The Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and *The Oxford Happiness Inventory* (Argyle, 2001) were used to collect data. *t test* was use to measure the differences in stress, spiritual involvement, happiness, and life satisfaction between the male and the female students, and it was found that, there were no significant differences between male and female students in terms of stress, spiritual involvement and life satisfaction but only happiness($t = 2.59, p < .05$). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was use to measure the differences in stress, spiritual involvement, happiness, and life satisfaction by the students' religious affiliation. Regression analysis was used to examine the effect of stress, spiritual involvement and happiness on life satisfaction. The regression results showed that 30% of the variance in life satisfaction can be explained by the variable of stress, spiritual involvement and happiness. Findings of the present study can help students applying religion as a coping strategy against stress thus enhancing their life satisfaction and happiness.

ARTICLE INFO

Southeast Asia Psychology
Journal Classification Codes
2050
5110

Keywords:
happiness
spiritual involvement
life satisfaction

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1. Introduction

In the past couple of decades, a holistic approach to understand individuals has paved the way for research to explore spirituality and religion as one dimension of the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, interpersonal and psychological facets that make up a human being. Different people use many different religions and paths to find God. Past researches have shown that those who are more religious or spiritual, and use their spirituality to cope with life, experience many benefits to their health and well-being (e.g. Pargament & Park, 1997). Indeed, spiritual or religious belief has been acknowledged as an aid in dealing with many negative influences such as illness, stress and unhappiness (Harrison, Koenig, Hays, Eme-Akwari & Pargament, 2001), because of that, researchers around the world have conducted many studies on various issues relating to spiritual or religious beliefs.

A connection between spirituality, religion and mental health has been recognized in Eastern ideologies (such as Buddhism) for many centuries. Interest in the relationship between spirituality, religion and mental health is being explored in a number of ways. People from various faith communities are adding their voices to the fact that spirituality and religion can contribute to mental health and wellbeing, mental illness, and recovery. Today, studies on spirituality and its relationship with happiness and life satisfaction have become a major interest among the mental health researchers. For example, Myers and Diener (in Cohen, 2002) found that, there is an impressive connection between religion and mental health; an individual who

actively involves in and practices religion or spirituality is much often living a happier life than who are not so active.

In addition, Loewenthal (2007) also emphasized that spirituality is closely linked with positive feelings in people. In spiritual perspective, pious people are more patient and more accepting to the fact what life that has been destined to them. In other words, individuals who are knowledgeable and practice a life centered on God are happier and satisfied with their lives. This may be due to the fact that religion often teaches about moderation in all aspects of life. Aspects of this simplicity can contribute to positive feelings because individuals do not feel pressure to seek or pursue prosperity in life. Pleasure in life is not just related to the wealth or materialism, but also to perform rituals in ones spiritual journey.

Previous studies that focused on religious beliefs seem to find that religion and/or spiritual beliefs do in fact influence if not overall, some of the aspect in human lives (Post, Puchalski & Larson, 2000). For instance, Krucoff et al., (2005) also identified that prayers of others can significantly influence the course of illness. This is to show that religion/spiritual do have a place in human being as a catalyst or life savers in them, be it negative or positive.

Religion do play a role in human lives but in what extend that it influences gender on every aspect of human life, such as stress and happiness. Studies in western culture did show that there were relationships between religion and happiness as documented by Francis et al., (2000), however, in local context, not many studies have been conducted in relation to this issue.

Even though, religion/spiritual do play a role, it is hard to determine if gender also can influence significantly in regards on how it interprets the outcome. Thus, gender differences could also be a factor that needs to be taken into consideration. Studies that focused on gender differences have found several interesting findings. For instance, study such as Maselko and Kubzansky (2005) that investigated gender differences in religious practices, spiritual experiences and health; found that the diverse participation in the spiritual / religious rituals was related to the health and welfare of the individuals. Their findings suggested that individual involvement in activities or religious ritual can offer feelings of satisfaction as being close to God. In addition to that, individuals also feel that there is social integration through participation in religious/spiritual ritual and activities. Furthermore, Maselko and Kubzansky also identified that public religious activities were consistently related to health and wellness among men. Other findings related to the aspect of gender differences, indicate that, there are little differences between men and women in life satisfaction and happiness (Argyle, 1986, Diener & Diener, 1995, in Ahmed, 2006). However, when the same study was conducted in various countries such as Taiwan and Kuwait, the results were different (Ahmed, 2006). This may be due to cultural differences which might have affect on the findings. Some of the reasons behind these differences perhaps lay in the process aspect, such as factors determining the input and output, which in turn produce responses and coping, by both men and women (Matud, 2004).

Based on previous studies, the present study is interested to investigate if there are any gender differences in life satisfaction and happiness among the students of Universiti Malaysia Sabah. In defining spirituality, Myers (in Cohen, 2002) said that spirituality can be associated with satisfaction in life which can explain the feelings of pious in individuals who are closer to God as seeing the beauty of the world, and find comfort and relief in what they believe as goals in their life. Thus, in the light of above mentioned facts, the present study is a systematic effort to examine the differences in stress, happiness and life satisfaction among the students based on religion and gender. This study has also examined the influence of religious involvement and happiness in life satisfaction. The present study hypotheses are:

- i. There are gender differences in stress, happiness and life satisfaction based on religion and sex among students.
- ii. Spiritual involvement and happiness have effects on life satisfaction among students.

2. Method

Subject and Research Location

The questionnaires were completed by 178 undergraduate students of Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Malaysia with simple random sampling technique that each subject in the population has a known and equal probability

of selection. A personal profile of subject indicated that there were more female (121 or 68.0%) than male (57 or 32.0%). Their age ranges from 20 to 24 years. As for ethnicity, there were 68 (38.2%) Chinese, 45 (25.3%) Kadazan Dusun and 65 (36.5%) were from other ethnic groups. As for their religious affiliation, 53 (29.8%) were Muslims, 68 (38.2%) were Christians and 57 (32.0%) were Buddhist.

Measures

This study was based on a questionnaire responded by the sample of university students. Among the variables included in the questionnaire are socio-demographic information, Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) developed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin (1985), Oxford Happiness Questionnaire developed by Hills and Argyle (2002), Spiritual Involvement and Beliefs Scale (SIBS) developed by Hatch et al. (1998) and Student Stress Scale (SSS) developed by Homes and Rahe (1967).

Socio-demographic information included in this questionnaire was gender, age, race and religion. Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) was designed to measure global cognitive judgments of one's life. SWLS consists of 5 items. Statements representing scores ranging from 1 indicating 'strong disagreement' to 7 indicating 'strong agreement' were provided. The higher the score is on this instrument, shows the higher the global life satisfaction is obtained. An example of a statement is, "In most ways my life is close to my ideal". The authors reported that, test-retest reliability of .82, internal consistency of .87 and moderate relationships of the SWLS with other measures of subjective well-being. Internal reliability estimates in this study in respect of Malaysian samples were .77.

Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHI) (Hills & Argyle, 2002), was a 29-item happiness measure, which included positive affect, negative affect, and overall satisfaction towards life. Responses to the items were scored on a 6-point *Likert* type scale, from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (6). The higher the scores on this instrument, the higher the happiness is. Sample items include; "I am well satisfied with everything in my life" and "I feel fully mentally alert". The OHI has been shown to have adequate test-retest reliability (7-week period = .78; 5-months period = .67) and moderate to high internal consistency (typical Cronbach between .64 and .87) (see Argyle et al., 1989). Internal reliability estimates on OHI in this study was .70.

Spiritual Involvement and Beliefs Scale (SIBS) (Hatch et al., 1998), was designed to measure spiritual status and the items were sought from a number of perspectives (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism). SIBS consist of 35 items and produce four sub-scales. External/ritual (13 items that reflect belief in a greater power; an example of the item is, "Participating in spiritual activities helps me forgive people"), Internal/fluid (11 items that reflect internal beliefs and growth. An example of the item is, "Some experiences can be understood only through one's spiritual beliefs"), Existential/meditative (7 items that reflect existential issues. An example of the item is, "I can find meaning in times of hardship"), Humility/personal application (4 items that reflect humility and application of spiritual principles. An example of the item is, "When I do wrong to someone, I make an effort to apologize"). The four sub-scales provide estimations of the overall level of spiritual status or involvement experienced by the subjects. The higher the score is on this instrument, indicates the higher the spiritual involvement is. Internal reliability statistics for this instrument is satisfactory (average Cronbach = .73) (Hatch et al., 1998). Internal reliability estimates on SIBS in this study was .91.

Statistical Analysis

Raw data in this study was analyzed by using SPSS Program for windows 17.0. *t test* was used to measure the differences in stress, spiritual involvement, happiness, and life satisfaction between male and the female students. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was use to measure the differences in stress, spiritual involvement, happiness, and life satisfaction based on students' religion. Regression analysis was used to examine the effect of stress, spiritual involvement and happiness on life satisfaction.

3. Results

The Differences in Spiritual Involvement, Happiness, and Life Satisfaction by Students' Gender

The result of the *t test* showed that gender differences were found only in happiness ($t = 2.59, p < .05$) with the male students (mean = 119.80, $s.d = 17.36$) showing higher levels of happiness than the female students (mean = 112.76, $s.d = 13.07$). In respect of stress ($t = -1.58, p > .05$), spiritual involvement ($t = .44, p > .05$) and life satisfaction ($t = -.66, p > .05$) the result showed that there was no significant differences between the females and males (see Table 1).

Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviations and t Test Results of Sample on Stress, Spiritual Involvement, Life Satisfaction and Happiness by Students' Gender

Dependent variable	Independent variable	N	Mean	s.d	t
Stress	Male	57	199.83	130.88	-.158
	Female	119	239.88	168.91	
Spiritual Involvement	Male	50	159.88	23.55	.46
	Female	112	158.19	20.91	
Life Satisfaction	Male	56	23.14	5.80	-.66
	Female	118	23.74	4.89	
Happiness	Male	51	119.80	17.36	2.59*
	Female	114	112.76	13.07	

* p < .05

The Differences in Spiritual Involvement, Happiness, and Life Satisfaction by Students' Religion

One-way ANOVA for examining religion differences in the spiritual involvement ($F_{(2,159)} = 8.05, p < .05$), happiness ($F_{(2,162)} = 4.95, p < .05$), and life satisfaction ($F_{(2,171)} = 3.81, p < .05$) revealed significant findings for all the variables, except for stress ($F_{(2,171)} = 3.81, p < .05$) (see Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 2. The Results of One-Way ANOVA for Examining Religion Differences in The Spiritual Involvement, Happiness and Life Satisfaction

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Stress	Between Groups	134063.52	2	67031.762	2.73	.068
	Within Groups	4253653.07	173	24587.590		
	Total	4387716.59	175			
Spiritual Involvement	Between Groups	6964.38	2	3482.19	8.05	.000
	Within Groups	68820.98	159	432.84		
	Total	75785.36	161			
Life Satisfaction	Between Groups	199.01	2	99.50	3.81	.024
	Within Groups	4462.12	171	26.09		
	Total	4661.13	173			
Happiness	Between Groups	2078.82	2	1039.41	4.95	.008
	Within Groups	34050.58	162	210.19		
	Total	36129.39	164			

Having obtained a significant result, further post-hoc was used and the analysis showed that the Christian students had higher levels of spiritual involvement, happiness and life satisfaction than the Buddhist students. The Buddhist students also reported lower happiness levels than the Muslim students. The results showed that there were no significant differences between the Christian students and the Muslim students on any of the variables (see Table 3).

Table 3. Mean, Standard Deviations and t Test Results of Sample on Stress, Spiritual Involvement, Life Satisfaction and Happiness by Students' Religion

Dependent variable	Independent variable	N	Mean	s.d	F
Stress	Muslim	53	247.61	155.60	2.73
	Buddhist	57	187.07	138.25	
	Christian	66	244.70	172.06	
Spiritual Involvement	Muslim	51	158.35	24.27	8.05*
	Buddhist	52	150.44 [#]	17.54	
	Christian	59	166.31 [#]	20.20	
Life Satisfaction	Muslim	53	23.66	5.70	3.81*
	Buddhist	57	22.14 [#]	4.85	
	Christian	64	24.70 [#]	4.81	
Happiness	Muslim	46	118.28	17.23	4.95*
	Buddhist	56	110.05 [#]	11.87	
	Christian	63	116.84 [#]	14.45	

* p < .05 [#] significant differences between the group.

The Effect of Spiritual Involvement and Happiness on Life Satisfaction

Multiple regression analysis was performed to analyze the relationships between dependent variable (life satisfaction) and the independent variables (stress, spiritual involvement and happiness). Stress, spiritual involvement and happiness were entered into a linear model of regression equation with life satisfaction as the dependent variable. The results of regression presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Multiple Regressions of the Relationships between Spiritual Involvement, Happiness and Life Satisfaction

Independent Variables	Life Satisfaction (Beta)
Stress	-.047
Spiritual Involvement	.154*
Happiness	.478*
Constant	-1.385
R ²	.300*
F	20.850
Sig. F	.0001

*p < .05

Regression results showed that 30% of the variance in life satisfaction can be explained by the variable of stress, spiritual involvement and happiness. The results also indicated that both independent variables; spiritual involvement (Beta = .154, p < .05) and happiness (Beta = .478, p < .05) were found to contribute significantly and positively to life satisfaction. However, the effect of stress on life satisfaction was not significant (Beta = -.047, p < .05). The results also showed that the effect of happiness was stronger than the effect of spiritual involvement on life satisfaction. These results indicated that, the students who perceived high levels of happiness and high spiritual involvement are likely to have higher life satisfaction.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study is to examine the differences between stress, happiness and life satisfaction among university students based on their religion and gender. Besides that, researchers were also interested to find out if spiritual involvement will affect the students' happiness and life satisfaction. The research findings are discussed as below.

Differences in Stress, Spiritual involvement, Happiness and Life Satisfaction, by Students' Gender

The result shows that, male and female respondents were not significantly differing in stress, spiritual involvement, and life satisfaction. However, both subjects do differ in happiness. The findings suggested that, gender did not influence stress, spiritual involvement and life satisfaction among university students. These findings can be related to the idea that gender role in today's society is not so much different in comparison. It could be explained by various other factors such as gender's role and parenting style that the individual experienced. The mature the students are, the more capable they are to resolve and deal with stress, especially those related to the university life. This may mean that, subjects in the present study have what it takes to be focused on their life, i.e. controllability, and coping abilities, especially ability to deal with stress, and one of them is spiritual beliefs/involvement. This may also suggest that praying or other types of coping abilities that resemble spiritual belief do play a role in maturing subjects in dealing with stress and life.

This study as well shows that, both female and male are significantly different in their happiness. The results were similar with research findings by Abdel-Khalek (2010). In his study, he found that, in comparison to female students, male students are enjoying life more, happier, and had higher life satisfaction. In another study by Chan et al., (2005), suggested that, there is also other factor that influences the differences between male and female aspects of happiness, which is, the lifestyle of the students itself. In addition, Chan et al., also suggested that a good social relationship also coming handy in making students' life in a university a worthwhile. This is to imply that, male subjects do get along quite easier in a new environment compared to their female counterpart.

Stress differences, Spiritual Involvement, Happiness and Life Satisfaction by Student's Religion

Based on students' religion, results showed that there were differences on the level of spiritual activities involvement, happiness and life satisfaction among Christian, Muslim and Buddhist. Although the differences between these three groups exist, there were no significant differences between Christian and Muslim after the comparison was carried out. This finding maybe due to the factors such as number of spiritual activity (such as talks about spirituality and religion) or the number of times in practicing the religion's ritual (such as Friday prayer in mosque or attending mass at church) in a week. In view of the number of spiritual activities in or out campus, most of the activities were organized by Christian youths or Muslim youths. This may suggest that Christian students and Muslim students are happier and experience life satisfaction due to their religious involvement.

This is to indicate that, religious beliefs influence all of the factors investigated in this study. For instance, Muslim do believe that religious factors and fate controlled the above stated factors, thus, involving all aspects of their life. Nevertheless, as noted in the past studies, religion can have significant involvement in dealing with stress, happiness and life satisfaction in male and female (Peterson et al, 2005).

The influence of stress, spiritual activities and happiness on Life Satisfaction

The research findings showed that spiritual involvement and happiness will affect life satisfaction. The research hypotheses are supported by the results. Results showed that students who are actively join in spiritual involvement experience higher life satisfaction compare to students who were not active in spiritual activities. This may mean that, activities that related to spirituality help students to see their world in religious perspective and they feel happier and satisfied as discussed by Myers (in Cohen, 2002). It implies that, participating more in spiritual/religious activity do indeed influence life satisfaction. Consequently, it can be affirmed that activity such as prayers can have significant impact toward one's life and other aspect of human lives such as happiness (Francis, 2005; Francis & Evans, 1996). It shows that, support from God and friends tend to be perceived as one of the major element in assisting students in achieving happiness in their life. Hence, religious beliefs and spiritual involvement in each of the respondents own religion do play a role in affecting life satisfaction among students.

The role of culture on stress, happiness and life satisfaction

Our findings did not mention about the roles of culture. However, our research findings shown that culture does influence the way we perceive our lives. Indeed, culture plays a central role in the subjective effects of stress. As an example, the differential adaptation process employed by male and female is actually a matter of fit or congruence evaluation of the new situation with a number of core variables important to the particular culture. Thus, how a person perceives stress, happiness and life satisfaction in his or her life may dependent on a range of information that need to be evaluated. Those sequences such as culture, the person background, attitudes and norms has been taught and imbedded since their early development. In other word, there are universal stressors that common to all mankind, as well as important variations in the cultural definition of stress (Masuda & Holmes, 1967). Therefore, culture and experience provide individuals in every society with models/assumption for interpreting and responding to their total environment (Spradley & Philips, 1972).

In this present study, we found that the level of happiness and life satisfaction among female students below than the male students. This may suggest that Malaysian culture on child rearing based on gender roles affected students' cognition on happiness and life satisfaction. The notion of Malaysia culture in this sense reflects the diversity of ethnicity in Malaysia as each culture is different and has its own values and ideology (Laungani, 1992).As a result, male and female in this present study possess different attitudes, values and norms that reflect their cultural heritages (Cox, Lobel & McLoed, 1991).

Previous studies also show that, male and female are also differ in the extent to which co-operation, competition, relationships, individualism and/or gender roles in which they were assigned to (Noordin, Williams & Zimmer, 2002). So, different in conceptualization of happiness and life satisfaction among male and female students may be originated from their background and cultures (Noordin et al. 2002). The present study also concordance with other findings such as Michalos (1991) that found, level of happiness were vary among students in 39 nations which suggested differences in the perception and conceptualization of what happiness really meant.

However, in term of sex related differences; many studies have found only small differences between male and female in happiness and life satisfaction (Argyle, 1986; Abdel-Khalek, 2006). This present study clearly shows that, male do have higher level of happiness compared to their female counterpart; whereas there is no difference in term of life satisfaction. This is probably due to difference conceptualization of those two concepts on the part of male and female comprehension of the concepts. As for the others like, Aldrich & Tenenbaum (2006), had hypothesized that, parent socialize children into the specific attitudes and values endorsed by their cultural community through daily conversations; and one such value is the expression of emotion that conforms prescribed gender roles. In this cultural learning process, girls are taught not to express their happiness openly in public is an example of gender role and child rearing process that could explain sex-related differences in which happiness is rated.

In the results on spiritual involvement and happiness among university students, it shows that majority of Malaysian students are still strong in their religious belief. Otherwise stated, the teaching of religions about life has great effect on their life satisfactions. This finding is concordance with Abdel-Khalek (2006) that shows self-rating of religiosity were correlated with self-rating of happiness. Hence, it is quite evident; in general, that religion is more central and plays a more important role in this society. In addition, it is also in line with numerous studies that have demonstrated people who are religiously devout and committed to their tradition tend to enjoy better life both physical and mental health (Koenig, 1997). This relationship between religious beliefs and happiness is related with the view that religion may suppress symptoms and re-socialize the individuals, encouraging more conventional and socially acceptable form of thought and behavior (Wulff, 1997) as religion teaching is to promote happiness.

Religious beliefs and teaching towards happiness in various ways, as suggested by literature such as through social integration and support as those who share similar values (Witter et al. 1985) and people are particularly likely to turn to religion when confronting bereavement and serious health disabilities (Pargament & Hahn, 1986). Hence, it is found that religiosity or religious activities are often cited as among the most significant predictors of life satisfaction (Ellison, 1991) and as a consequence to their quality of life (Swinyard et al. 2001). Therefore, one can suggests that, happiness is a pathway associated with a person's perceived

inner world as subjects in the present study turned to religious beliefs and experience in searching of divine involvement when dealing with stress and associated it to satisfaction in life.

5. Implication and limitation of the study

The present study clearly demonstrated that university students suffered much stress and trying to adjust to the stressor of being a university student. Past literature found that some students revealed that university life is very challenging, while others were more positive (Lockovic-Grgin et al. 1996). Those who are positive in their perception of university life have good self-esteem, i.e. individuals who accept themselves in a positive manner and believe that a similar viewpoint is shared by others will develop more positive evaluation of their overall life conditions. However, Heins et al. (1984) suggested that some university students cannot handle pressure while in the university. They pointed out the two areas in which stress would probably involve are academic expectation and performance, and others which associated with social factors such as developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. Studies with medical students found that in their academic area, issues such as heavy work load, examinations and meeting deadlines for assignments caused them to have more pressure (Evans & Fitzgibbon, 1992). In addition, lack of time for family and friends and financial difficulties are also associated with some of the university students that experience anxiety and stress (Vitaliano et al. 1988). Therefore, university students who are facing with a lot of such pressure need to deal with the situation positively before the worst incident could escalate and worrying them.

Our finding is not only giving us the idea of how the university students deal with their life, but, it is also gives us a picture about their mental health status while dealing with stress as university students. So, various inputs must be installed in whom the students would have better success in dealing with their university lives and stressors that associated with it. For example, a higher self-esteem would therefore appear to have an important influence on students stress levels. Zuckerman (1989) suggests that this may be because greater self-esteem reduced stress by fostering social resources and effective coping. In addition, the availability or teaching of better and effective coping styles to students in dealing with stressors while in university. Besides that, a greater locus of control would also be an appropriate factor in alleviating stressors/stress experienced by students. However, this is only can be done if an individual's ability to deal with stress can be improved. Consequently, it is important that university students should be exposed to recognized stress and management techniques which will enhance their coping abilities. Nevertheless, further investigation is needed in determining which of the techniques are likely to prove most appropriate for students pursuing different courses in dealing with stress/life at university.

In term of limitations, it should be noted that, the number of students participated in the present study were quite limited, therefore, generalizations of the results should be cautious. Apart from that, the participants were recruited opportunistically and, for that reason, they cannot be considered as representative of each of religious beliefs involved in the present study.. An additional limitation in the present study was reliance on scales that were developed based on western culture, which may perhaps hinder the actual understanding of the issues investigated in this study. Furthermore, the greatest limitation of this study is on its cross-sectional design. As a consequence for a future study, it is suggested to have balance number of subjects and the use of longitudinal design may uncover many meaningful differences as likewise stated in the present study. On top of that, it would be useful to develop scales which are more proficient at exploring local or eastern beliefs, in conjunction with the collection of other relevant demographics such as socio-economic status and personality. Equally, the present study documents evidence concerning religious beliefs and other aspect of human life such as stress, happiness and life satisfaction among university students. Certainly, much works remains to be done in this area, especially on issues which required thorough explanations such as on the roles of religion, spiritual involvement and the differences between genders.

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