

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! The impact of Christmas rituals on subjective well-being and family's emotional climate

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Abstract

This study assessed subjective well-being before and after Christmas and New Year holidays. In contradiction to lay beliefs about these holidays, stress and conflict caused by its experience was weak, while participation in rituals was high and satisfactory, and positive emotions were dominant. High frequency of participation in ritualised family celebrations increased positive well-being: satisfaction with life, perceived social well-being, and the balance of affective well-being. Satisfaction with rituals had an impact on positive affect, satisfaction with life and positive family climate, while participation frequency was more relevant for social support and lower loneliness level. Conflict experienced during Christmas increased negative affect and negative emotional family climate, while it undermined positive affect, satisfaction with life and social well-being.

Keywords: Durkheim, emotional climate, gratitude, rituals, subjective well-being.

¡Feliz Navidad y Próspero Año Nuevo! El impacto de los rituales de Navidad en el bienestar subjetivo y en el clima emocional familiar

Resumen

Esta investigación examina el bienestar subjetivo antes y después de la Navidad y del Año Nuevo. En contradicción a las creencias legas sobre estas festividades, el estrés y el conflicto relacionado con estas fiestas fueron leves, mientras que la participación en los rituales era alta y satisfactoria, y dominaban emociones positivas. La alta frecuencia de participación en las celebraciones familiares ritualizadas reforzó el bienestar positivo: satisfacción con la vida, bienestar social percibido, y la balanza de afectos. La satisfacción con los rituales tuvo impacto en el afecto positivo, la satisfacción con la vida, y el clima familiar positivo, mientras que la frecuencia de participación fue más relevante para apoyo social y la baja soledad percibida. El conflicto experimentado durante la Navidad aumentó el afecto negativo y el clima emocional familiar negativo, mientras que debilitó el afecto positivo, la satisfacción con la vida, y el bienestar social.

Palabras clave: Durkheim, clima emocional, gratitud, rituales, bienestar subjetivo.

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RITUALS AND WELL-BEING

Rituals are defined as symbolic acts and repetitive and stereotyped behaviour which take place in a given spatial and temporal framework. They are perceived as sequences of planned actions corresponding to temporal points in the social cycle or times of calendrical rituals (New Year and Christmas), transition (birth, passage from adolescence to adulthood, conferral of professional or social status, and marriage) and crisis (death, loss, challenges and collective threats). As referred to above, an example of rituals based on the calendar would be those experienced with one's relatives during Christmas and New Year (Bell, 1997). Friesen (1990) describes these family rituals as episodic activities involving most or all members of the family and having a symbolic meaning for them. They are also considered to reflect family traditions, cultural practices, and certain values (Fiese et al., 2002). Hence, the meaning of family ritual extends beyond the particular task performed in a given temporal framework (Howe, 2002). Christmas and New Year, for example, constitute transition rituals celebrated annually which mark an important moment in each family's year cycle. Family rituals strengthen a sense of history and rootedness, as well as helping to stabilize families—form a sense of tradition and transmit beliefs and values (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Shared with friends Christmas and New Year dinners and parties are also important ritual activities. Participation in regular activities with friends (Javaloy et al., 2007) and positive commemorations and glorification rituals (Collins, 2004) was found to have positive effects on individual's well-being. For instance, a survey on Spanish young adults found that frequency and satisfaction with socialization or activities with friends, partners, and relatives correlated positively with satisfaction with life (Javaloy et al., 2007). Moreover level of positive emotions is the highest with friends than with family and partners – in general and also in rituals activities (Gaucher, 2010).

The central purpose of this study is to examine in a sample of Spanish students the impact of naturally-occurring rituals on affect, life satisfaction, interpersonal well-being (perceived social support and loneliness), and family climate. This research employs a neo-Durkheimian approach, considering interaction rituals as a set of processes and effects which act as external social tools or communal forms of coping supporting the transformation of emotions, and which help to regulate personal and social affect by reinforcing emotional energy (i.e., regulation of arousal and affect balance) (Collins, 2004; Durkheim, 1912/2001; Páez, Basabe, Ubillos, & Gonzalez, 2007; Rimé, 2007). The main factors, processes, and outcomes involved are, presented schematically, as follows: a) people are assembled and affect each other through bodily co-presence b) in specific places with boundaries reinforcing a sense of participation; c) they focus their attention upon a common activity and, by communicating this focus and through increased non verbal and verbal exchanges or social sharing, d) they share emotions and a common emotional climate. Thus, by means of perceived similarity in beliefs and emotions, as well as through mutual reinforcement, empathy, and attraction, participation in rituals:

a) Provokes “collective effervescence” or reinforces emotional activation and positive affect (in fact, participation in rituals is associated with and predicts higher emotional activation and positive affect for up to three weeks; Páez et al., 2007);

b) Increases social identification and strengthens solidarity and a feeling of membership (ritual participation predicts higher perceived social support and lower loneliness; Páez et al., 2007);

c) Intensifies adherence to values and respect for and valuing of symbols, as well as increases agreement with positive social beliefs (participation in rituals intensifies post-traumatic growth, as well as adherence to values; Páez et al., 2007);

d) Reinforces positive emotional climate, through increased social support, positive affect, and positive social beliefs (De Rivera & Páez, 2007). Needless to say, distinct types of ritualized acts, such as expiation rituals (like restorative justice or Truth and Reconciliation Commission), glorification and positive rituals (e.g. secular or religious positive commemoration), or grief rituals imply a different attention focus, types of collective behaviour, and related collective emotions (negative self-consciousness like guilt and shame; joy, awe, and pride; and sadness, fear, anxiety and hope respectively). A comparison of grief rituals and positive rituals like weddings, birthday celebration and Christmas rituals confirms that the former intensify, by comparison to a normal day, negative emotions, but also that elicits to an important extent love/proximity, pride and calm. Positive Christmas rites did not induce negative emotions, and reinforce specifically joy, humour, hope, love or proximity, to a lower extent gratitude, but did not have effects on calm nor awe – probably related to more “sacred” or value loaded ritual (Páez & Bobowik, 2010). However, more importantly and as Durkheim stresses in his seminal text (1912/2001), they share features such as communal emotion, identification, and positive effects on social cohesion. Furthermore, Christmas and New Year celebrations are in fact commemorative and glorification rituals that involve long sequences of interaction in which individuals are co-present and—with a common focus of attention—develop intense exchanges and experience more positive feelings and probably arousing mainly positive emotions. Nevertheless, they are not expected to exert an influence upon negative emotions nor a strong effect on social beliefs as commemoration or grief rituals related to collective trauma, such as for example secular and religious demonstrations associated to terrorist attacks (Páez et al., 2007). For this reason, we expect that these rituals will induce mainly positive emotions but will not have a transformational effect on negative emotions. Positive effects of rituals are expected to be exemplified in the cases of Christmas and New Year rituals, which provide perfect occasions for gatherings, the typical focus of which would be family meals (Fulkerson et al., 2006). Kasser and Sheldon’s (2002) study on the impact of Christmas on well-being showed that people were reasonably satisfied with their Christmas holiday experience as a whole, with 74.8% scoring above “neutral” in terms of their satisfaction. The holiday experience involved substantially more positive than negative affect for most individuals, with 75.4% of the sample reporting positive affect higher than the “somewhat” category, and only 6.2% reporting having experienced negative affect lower than the “somewhat” category. In a similar vein, a survey of 16 European nations found that 64% of participants from the Spanish adult working population reported joy and happiness during Christmas and New Year holidays (AXA Retirement Scope, 2007). A similar survey, carried out in the US by the APA, with 786 adults aged 18 and over, observed that the majority of respondents reported positive emotions during Christmas time, including happiness (78% reported experiencing happiness “often”), love (75% “often”), and high spirits (60% “often”). In addition, and in confirmation of the centrality of social support, this survey encountered that the most important aspects of holidays concerned opportunities to connect or reconnect with friends and family (Greenberg & Berktdol, 2006; Howe, 2002). In sum, Christmas holiday experience involving interaction with the family is associated with greater overall well-being (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002).

Some evidence also supports the positive effects of family rituals on life satisfaction and family climate. Various studies reviewed by Fiese et al. (2002) suggested a relationship between meaningful and frequent family rituals and subjective well-being (SWB), satisfaction with family relationships, positive child socialization or individuals' sense of who they are. Kiser, Bennett, Heston and Paavola (2005) noted that non-clinical families scored higher on a general rituality index than clinical ones, what suggests that ritualized family activities have an impact on adolescents' adjustment and mental health status. Consequently, our first expectation was that family Christmas and New Year celebrations, and particularly the ritualized meals involved, would have similar effects – that is, improve affect balance, social well-being, and satisfaction with life, as well as elicit a positive emotional climate in the family.

On the other hand, interpersonal conflict is known to have a strong and negative effect on SWB, stronger than the effect of positive events and social support (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer & Vohs, 2001). According to lay beliefs, the Christmas festivities are commonly associated with stress caused by the family conflict, loneliness, and isolation (Hairon, 2008), and surveys partially confirm that such holidays involve conflict and negative emotions. For example, the survey of 16 European nations referred to above found that, in Spain, 20% of participants experienced loneliness and 37% stress during Christmas and New Year holidays. In the same vein, the similar APA survey showed that 20% of respondents reported stress and 7% loneliness during these times (Greenberg & Berkold, 2006). In Kasser and Sheldon's (2002) study, participants' stress level approached the midpoint of the scale, with 42.6% agreeing that the holiday was stressful. Thus, the second goal of this study was to test the negative effects of participation in family rituals, taking into account the level of conflict in a context of intensified interaction.

Another crucial aspect related to family rituals is the relative importance of the frequency of participation and satisfaction with them. One study demonstrated that satisfaction with funeral rituals predicted psychosocial adjustment, suggesting that subjective satisfaction is important (Weiss & Richards, 1997). In other research it was shown that people report more positive feelings when involved in social activities than when alone, but also that extraverts benefit more from social interaction, probably because they are more at ease being with others and enjoy it more (Lucas & Diener, 2008). In addition, perceived social support exhibits stronger buffer effects with regard to stress than objective social support (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1995). Such findings suggest that people who are at ease in family rituals and feel satisfaction with them will benefit more from such activities; indeed, the positive feelings associated with rituals are seen as a central factor in explaining their benefits (Collins, 2004). Satisfaction with rituals, then, should be the main predictor of improvements in well-being in this study's context. However, a survey on young adults found that frequency of—and not satisfaction with—socialization activities, has a significant coefficient in the prediction of happiness and satisfaction with life (Javaloy et al., 2007), and research also shows the positive effect of objective, and not only subjective, social support on well-being (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1995). Thus, the third objective of this study was to compare the positive effects of frequency of participation in and satisfaction with family and holidays rituals during Christmas.

OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

The central purpose of this study is to examine the impact of naturally-occurring rituals, directly linked to family meals and holidays celebration.

First, rituals would impact affectivity, causing an increase in positive affect, as well as would cause an increase in life satisfaction. Second, rituals would affect the interpersonal aspects of psychological well-being, augmenting perceived social support

and reducing perceived loneliness, but also improving “collective emotions” or perceived family climate. In addition, we expect the negative impact of holiday-related conflict to be stronger than the positive influence of rituals on hedonic well-being, mainly in relation to negative affect. We build this hypothesis on the basis that negative events have a stronger impact on affect than positive ones (Baumeister et al., 2001), and that negative affect is more strongly associated with stress than with social activities, while social activities are related to positive affect and low loneliness, but to a lower extent to stress (Watson, 2000). Furthermore, and given previous somewhat contradictory findings, we want to verify if it is the frequency of participation in rituals or the satisfaction with them which improves SWB, considering both options to be two alternative hypotheses.

METHOD

Participants

Study participants were 141 psychology students (73.8% female) at the University of the Basque Country, who took part voluntarily and anonymously. All the students who decided to take part in the study were asked to declare their availability in four weeks after the first data collection. Mean age was 21.94 ($SD = 3.26$). Eighty percent of participants were raised in two-parent families, and 62% were single whereas the rest had a couple (one person was married), but only 7% lived together with their partner. Majority of participants evaluated the economic situation in their family as satisfactory (39% as regular, 43% as quite good, and 3% as very good).

Measures

All participants responded to the pre-evaluation scales measuring positive and negative affect, life satisfaction, perceived social support and social loneliness.

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule by Watson, Clark and Tellegen (1988)

The translation by Echevarría and Páez (1989) includes 20 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *slightly or not at all*, 5 = *a lot*), and forming two dimensions: positive affect (PA) and negative affect (NA). The positive affect subscale includes states such as “enthusiastic”, “active” or “excited”, whereas the negative affect subscale uses items such as “frightened”, “anxious” or “irritable”. Respondents are asked to indicate the degree to which they feel or have felt the emotional states expressed in each of the items during the previous month. This measure shows high reliability: Cronbach’s α for the positive affect scale is .86 at pre- and .85 at post-evaluation, while the negative affect scale has a Cronbach’s α of .90 and .88 at pre- and post-evaluation, respectively. An affect balance score was computed (PA - NA) to provide an index of hedonic well-being.

Diener’s Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS, Pavot & Diener, 1993)

This instrument consists of 5 items (e.g. “I am satisfied with my life”) rated on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *I strongly disagree*, 7 = *I strongly agree*), and is designed to measure the respondent’s general satisfaction with life by means of global cognitive judgements about one’s own life. Participants are asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with the statements in each of the items, and the scores obtained by summing up the responses for each statement are situated within a theoretical range of 5 to 49 points. Various studies have confirmed the scale’s high internal reliability ($\alpha = .87$) and moderate temporal stability (.54 for 4 years; Pavot & Diener, 1993). In the current

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study, the reliability level was also satisfactory (pre-evaluation: $\alpha = .72$; post-evaluation: $\alpha = .80$).

Vaux Subjective Social Support Scale (short version) (Vaux et al., 1986; Basabe, 2004)

This scale measures perceived social support. The 3-item short version includes items with the highest loadings on the subjective social support factor (e.g. "I have strong affective bonds with my friends"). Participants respond on a 4-point Likert scale, indicating the extent to which they disagree (1) or agree (4) with the statement in each of the items. The scale obtained a Cronbach's α of .85 at pre-evaluation and .89 at post-evaluation.

UCLA Social Loneliness Scale (Expósito & Moya, 1993)

A short version of the UCLA scale in Spanish was applied. It consists of four items (e.g. "How frequently do you feel isolated from the others?") assessing individual differences in the experience of subjective social loneliness and isolation. Respondents indicate on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*always*) how frequently they feel as described in each of the items. Cronbach's α for this scale is .80 (pre-evaluation) and .73 (post-evaluation).

Participants responded to the above instruments in person at both pre- and post-evaluation; in addition, the four following measures were used at post-evaluation only.

Family emotional climate and social cohesion (Páez, Ruiz, Gailly, Kornblit & Wiesenfeld, 1996)

We assessed people's perception of their family's current emotional climate by means of a shortened, 8-item version of the Emotional Climate Scale. This scale comprises two dimensions, with negative emotional climate on the one hand and positive emotional climate and social cohesion on the other. Participants were required first to express the extent to which they perceived the current emotional climate in their family to be positive and to involve social cohesion, giving their response regarding five statements on a scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very much*. An example of these items is: "In general, I have the feeling that there is mutual trust among the people in my family." Another three items assessed the perception of negative emotional climate (e.g. "In general, I have the feeling that people in my family feel anger"). A first factor unifies negative emotions (fear, anger and sadness, $\alpha = .70$; total score was the *index of negative emotional climate*), while a second factor unifies positive emotions (joy/contentment, hope, solidarity, trust and confidence, $\alpha = .64$; total score was the *index of positive emotional climate*).

Participation and satisfaction related to Christmas-related ritualized meals

The scale consisted of five items created ad hoc and rated on a 5-point Likert scale, referring to the respondent's participation or satisfaction in meals on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, New Year's Eve, New Year's Day, and Epiphany (*El día de Reyes*, widely celebrated in Spain). Participants were asked the following in relation to each of the festive activity: "Indicate the extent to which you participated in the specific Christmas and New Year's activity, taking into account that 1 means *participated a little bit* and 4 means *participated a lot*. Regardless of the degree to which you participated, indicate your satisfaction with the activity in which you took part on the scale: 1 = *a little bit satisfied*, 4 = *very satisfied*". Participants had also an option to mark "no participation" and thus "no satisfaction". Indicator of participation and satisfaction was a summary index of the five items. Cronbach's α for this scale was, .75 and .70 for participation and satisfaction respectively.

Conflicts during the Christmas period in close relationships

This ad hoc scale measures both frequency and intensity of conflict situations experienced by participants during the Christmas period. On a 10-point Likert scale (1 = *not frequent / intense at all*, 10 = *very frequent / intense*), six items measure the frequency (3 items) and intensity (3 items) of the conflicts between a) the participant and his or her intimate partner or friends, b) the participant and his or her family, and c) between the members of his or her family. For instance, we asked the participants: "How frequent / intense were the conflicts between you and your family during December and January?". Cronbach's α for this scale was low .51 for frequency and .55 for intensity, what probably reflects different relational dynamics.

Procedure

Study required participation during the classes approximately a week prior to Christmas (pre-evaluation) and 4 weeks later (post-evaluation). All participants began by reading and signing the informed consent, and were then asked to create a secret identification code before completing the pre-evaluation questionnaire. Subsequently, all participants were told that they would be required to fill out another questionnaire after the Christmas vacation. Four weeks later they responded to the post-evaluation questionnaire, which included, as well as the measures related to frequency and satisfaction of participation in ritualized Christmas and New Year activities (from the pre-evaluation), complementary measures relating to family climate and family conflict (frequency and intensity).

RESULTS**Descriptive characteristics of participation in Christmas and New Year rituals**

Descriptive analyses showed that participation in Christmas and New Year ritualized meals was high in the sample analyzed. Ninety-nine percent took part in Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve meals, 93% in Christmas Day dinner, 83% in New Year's Day dinner, and 81% in the *Reyes* dinner at Epiphany. In general, participation in rituals was of high frequency ($M = 2.97$, $SD = .85$; scale 0-4) and satisfying ($M = 3.00$, $SD = .79$; scale 0-4), whereas both conflict with friends and relatives ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.24$; scale: 1-10) was of low frequency. With respect to belief that Christmas festivities are commonly associated with stress, only 27.1% of participants in the study reported feeling "quite" or "very" nervous, but at the same time 54.2% of them felt "quite" or "very" active.

Well-being and high versus low participation in natural rituals

To analyze the effects of participation in rituals, the participation variable was dichotomized by the observed mean and introduced as a factor in a covariance analysis. This participation variable was constructed based on four most popular activities (Christmas and New Year meals), as indicated in the method section. Sixty percent of the sample was in the low participation group in rituals whereas 40% were included in the high participation group. The analysis was controlled for the pre-evaluation score in each of the dependent variables, as well as for sex, age and single-couple status (have a couple or not), which are considered to be variables that can influence personal well-being. This between-subject (high versus low level of participation) ANCOVA was performed for the following dependent variables: negative affect, positive affect, affect balance, SWL, perceived social support, and perceived social loneliness.

As shown in Table I, statistically significant differences were found for life satisfaction, perceived social support and loneliness, as well as marginally for

negative affect. After the Christmas experience, high participators (HP) reported higher life satisfaction (estimated marginal mean: $EMM_{SWL} = 5.33$, $SE_{SWL} = .10$), perceived more social support ($EMM_{SS} = 3.41$, $SE_{SS} = .07$) and less loneliness ($EMM_L = 1.53$, $SE_L = .04$), demonstrated better affect balance ($EMM_{AB} = 1.36$, $SE_{AB} = .11$), and experienced less negative affect ($EMM_{NA} = 1.92$, $SE_{NA} = .08$) in comparison to low participators (LP; $EMM_{SWL} = 4.99$, $SE_{SWL} = .08$; $EMM_{SS} = 3.22$, $SE_{SS} = .05$; $EMM_L = 1.66$, $SE_L = .04$; $EMM_{AB} = 1.05$, $SE_{AB} = .09$; $EMM_{NA} = 2.12$, $SE_{NA} = .06$).

TABLE I

The effect of Participation in Christmas- and New Year-related Rituals – ANCOVA results, Pre-evaluation and Post-αEvaluation Means and Standard Deviations

Dependent variable	Pre-evaluation		Post-evaluation		F [#]	r squared
	Ritual Participation					
	High <i>M (SD)</i>	Low <i>M (SD)</i>	High <i>M (SD)</i>	Low <i>M (SD)</i>		
Negative Affect	2.13 (.67)	2.30(.84)	1.90(.59)	2.14(.75)	3.96*	.03
Positive Affect	3.48 (.63)	3.28(.66)	3.36(.64)	3.13 (.69)	1.40	.01
Affect Balance	1.34(1.04)	.98(1.22)	1.46(.79)	.99(1.07)	4.88*	.04
SWL	5.33 (.75)	5.03 (.81)	5.48 (.87)	5.27(.96)	7.07**	.05
Social Support	3.37(.66)	3.32(.55)	3.44(.68)	3.20(.64)	4.90*	.04
Social Loneliness	1.53 (.53)	1.67(.53)	1.49(.45)	1.69(.46)	5.48*	.04

Note. Negative Affect= PANAS scale (negative affect), Positive Affect= PANAS scale (positive affect), SWL = Diener's Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS); Social Support = Vaux Subjective Social Support Scale; Social Loneliness = Social Loneliness Scale. Results are adjusted on initial level of well-being related variable, sex, age and single/couple status.

[#] $df = 1$ for all F values. F values represent comparison high versus low group.

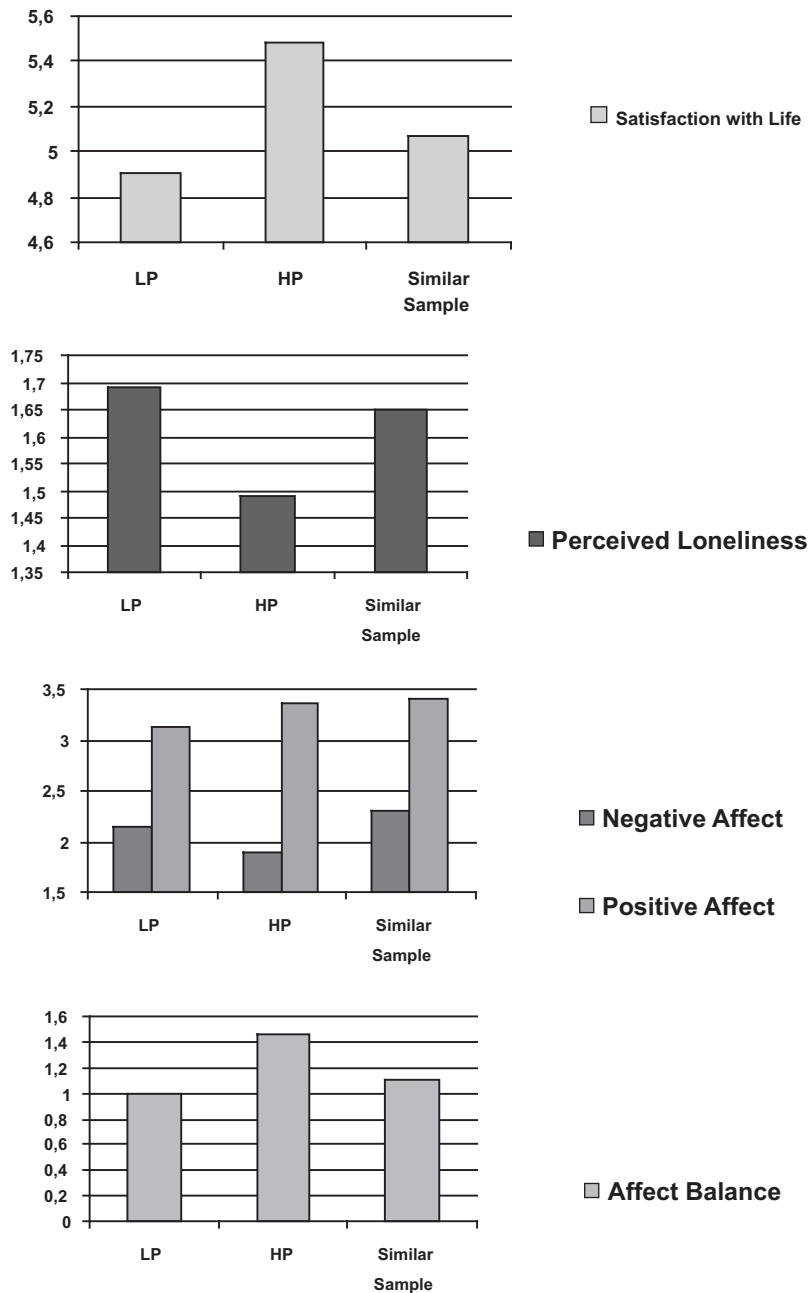
*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; & $p < .10$

We also ran a series of paired t-tests to compare means between the low-participation (LP) and high-participation (HP) groups with reference to a similar general sample of students in the Basque Country (data collected in April 2004, $N = 500$; Basabe, 2004). This general sample served as baseline control group. These data were collected at the middle of academic semester beyond the holiday season and examination periods so that this control group, at least in some extent, excludes the influence of certain exogenous variables like examination stress. Figure 1a shows the means in the high- and low-frequency groups, as well as in a similar sample of students, for life satisfaction. The t-test revealed that the HP group showed higher life satisfaction after the holidays by comparison with a similar sample of students ($M = 5.07$; $t(54) = 3.47$; $p < .001$), while there were no significant differences between the LP group and the similar sample.

As regards social support and loneliness, t-tests also showed that the HP (but not the LP) group – as shown in Figure 1b – reported significantly less loneliness than the similar sample of students ($t(54) = 3.20$; $p < .01$). For social support no significant effects were found.

Finally, we also used a t-test to analyze the mean differences in positive and negative affect (Figure 1c), as well as for affect balance (Figure 1d) in the LP and HP groups by comparison with a similar general sample of students. According to the analyses, the HP group showed significantly lower negative affect ($t(53) = -4.96$; $p < .001$), and better affect balance ($t(53) = 3.33$; $p < .01$). The LP group, on the other hand, showed significantly less positive affect ($t(83) = -3.61$; $p < .001$) but not less negative affect or better balance. Such findings are in line with the hypothesis on the positive impact of participation in natural rituals on affectivity.

FIGURE 1
Post-evaluation Means in Low- (LP) and High-Participation (HP) groups in comparison to similar sample of students



Frequency of participation in and satisfaction with rituals and conflicts as predictors of improvement in well-being

It was hypothesized that conflict and satisfaction with rituals were additional variables directly influencing SWB. Thus, post-evaluation variables were regressed on

pre-evaluation scores, participation in and satisfaction with ritualized Christmas and New Year activities, conflict, and sex, age and single/couple status.

In this step we also introduced family climate (positive and negative), as an additional dependent variable. Given the quantity of dependent variables and inter-correlations between them, suggesting existence of common variance, dependent variables (negative affect, positive affect, SWL, positive family climate, negative family climate, perceived social support, and perceived social loneliness) were factor-analyzed (PCA with Varimax rotation). All these measures are related to subjective perception of personal and collective emotions, as well as to social integration – and are not structural measures. Three factors emerged from PCA based on correlations between post-evaluations measures (Table II): the first factor, explaining 38% of variance, was made up positive affect, satisfaction with life and positive family climate; the second factor (17% of variance) included negative affect and negative family climate. Finally, social support loaded positively and loneliness negatively on the third factor (16% of variance).

TABLE II
Exploratory Factor Analysis (Varimax) including post evaluation well-being measures

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Negative Affect		.76	
Positive Affect	.87		
SWL	.80		
Positive Family Climate	.49	-.50	
Negative Family Climate		.84	
Social Support			.91
Social Loneliness			-.81

Based on the factor analysis results, three variables were calculated by summing variables. Positive affect, satisfaction with life, and positive emotional climate were added into a positive well-being score. Positive emotional climate has a similar weight in the second factor. Nevertheless, following the bi-dimensional model of positive and negative affect (Watson, 2000), it was more pertinent to include positive collective emotions in the first factor. In the same vein, a negative emotional well-being score was constructed by adding negative affect and negative family climate. The social support and loneliness scales were integrated by reversing the loneliness score and summing it with the social support score – higher scores indicate low loneliness and high social support. Pre-evaluation scores of factor variables were used as baseline predictors in the regression. However, due to the fact that the data on family emotional climate were not collected in the pre-evaluation, a factor analysis was not possible.

Using the backward elimination method (variables which do not explain variance are eliminated at each step), three multiple regression models were tested (tables display only significant or marginally significant variables). Through the first regression analysis with positive well-being (Table III) there emerged a model in which satisfaction with rituals and low conflict during holidays predicted higher positive well-being, controlling for the pre-evaluation baseline in positive affect and satisfaction with life. However, frequency of participation in rituals did not have an impact on participants' positive well-being.

In the second model, negative affect and negative family climate were influenced by the conflict variable: the more conflict experienced, the higher the score in post-evaluation negative well-being, controlling for the baseline level in negative affect

TABLE III
Multiple Regression results – Positive Well-Being

Dependent Variables	B	SE B	p	R ²
<u>Model 5</u>				.61***
Satisfaction with Rituals	.10	.21	< .001	
Conflict Frequency	-.30	-.20	< .001	
Pre-evaluation SWL	.94	.41	< .001	
Pre-evaluation Positive Affect	.10	.35	< .001	

Note. Positive Well-Being: SWL, Positive Affect, Positive Family Climate; N = 137.

(Table IV). For satisfaction with rituals there was a marginal effect: the more the satisfaction, the less the negative affect and negative family climate perceived.

TABLE IV
Multiple Regression results – Negative Well-Being

Dependent Variables	B	SE B	p	R ²
<u>Model 5</u>				.72***
Satisfaction with Rituals	-.04	-.13	.068	
Conflict Frequency	.20	.21	< .001	
Pre-evaluation Negative Affect	1.17	.78	< .001	

Note. Negative Well-Being: Negative Affect, Negative Family Climate; N = 136.

Finally, high frequency of participation in rituals (but not satisfaction) and lower conflict predicted higher social support and lower loneliness four weeks after Christmas, controlling for the baseline level in these well-being indicators and sex (Table V).

TABLE V
Multiple Regression results – Social Support and Loneliness

Dependent Variables	B	SE B	p	R ²
<u>Model 2</u>				.54***
Participation in Rituals	.01	.12	.045	
Conflict Frequency	-.06	-.17	.007	
Pre-evaluation Social Support	.38	.50	< .001	
Pre-evaluation Loneliness	-.26	-.30	< .001	
Sex	-.10	-.06	.098	

Note. N = 137.

In sum, this study provided partial support for a neo-Durkheimian model of the impact of participation in natural rituals on SWB. High participants experienced greater well-being than low participants and than the general sample of students used as control group – in spite of the fact that the follow-up was taken immediately before the examination period. Satisfaction with rituals predicted improvement in positive well-being. Furthermore, frequency of celebrating Christmas and New Year with family and friends increases social support and reduces loneliness.

On the other hand, the conflict experienced during these holiday periods has a strong impact on well-being in general: it intensifies negative well-being while reducing positive aspects of well-being and interpersonal feelings (perceived social support and loneliness).

DISCUSSION

This research aimed to demonstrate the impact of naturally-occurring rituals on well-being. First, and contrary to lay beliefs, holidays did not imply conflict and negative emotions. In general, conflict within the family and circle of friends, caused by the Christmas experience, and negative emotions were of rather low frequency. Only a minority of people felt nervous.

Second, it was found that people participated frequently in Christmas-family related rituals experience. Only around 18% did not participate in family rituals such as New Year's Day dinner or Epiphany dinner, because they were involved in some activities with friends or working.

Third, participation in rituals implies better affect balance in general, as well as more satisfaction with life and social interactions. Specifically, those students who participated more in Christmas and New Year rituals showed higher levels of well-being by comparison with a similar group. Specifically, they showed greater life satisfaction, lower loneliness, lower negative affect, and better affect balance, whereas those who participated less in these rituals experienced less positive affect in comparison to a similar sample of students. High level of participation, in comparison to low-level participators, improves affect balance, mainly by decreasing negative affect and loneliness, and maintaining high satisfaction with life and social support by comparison to low participators, even if the low participation in rituals show an increase in satisfaction with life. Our findings are consistent with Kasser and Sheldon's (2002) results demonstrating that people who were engaged in activities with and spent time with their families reported greater overall well-being.

Moreover, participation in and satisfaction related to rituals show specific influence on different aspects of personal well-being. Satisfaction with rituals has an impact on positive well-being: positive affect, satisfaction with life and positive emotional climate, suggesting that a degree of positive emotional involvement in rituals is a necessary condition to reinforce "collective emotions" – as Durkheim suggests – as well as personal well-being. Following the same logic, a trend result suggests that lack of satisfaction may increase negative aspects of well-being.

Also, participation in naturally-occurring rituals was shown to increase social support and reduce feelings of loneliness experienced by young people, giving support to the idea that frequent participation in rituals has a positive impact on social aspects of well-being, related to perceptions of social cohesion and integration, in line with Durkheim's (1912/2001) argument. Research has shown that rituals enable people to come together, as well as building a sense of unity and connectedness (Fulkerson et al., 2006; Howe, 2002), what suggests that regular experience of stable roles is sufficient to reinforce social integration, and that high levels of subjective satisfaction are not necessary. This result is in line with findings regarding main effects of structural measures of social support on health (Uchino, 2004).

Furthermore, and also as predicted, perceived conflict was found to increase negative well-being, including negative affect and negative emotional climate within the family, as well as reducing positive affect, satisfaction with life, positive family climate and perceived social well-being. Such findings are in line with the hypothesis on the supposed general strong effects of negative events on both negative and positive affect (Baumeister et al., 2001).

Globally results confirmed the neo-Durkheimian hypotheses of positive effects of rituals on subjective well-being – positive feelings and solidarity in Durkheim's terms (Collins, 2004). Overall, participation in natural family rituals has a positive impact on well-being, particularly improving social well-being, while satisfaction with rituals was associated with positive affect, life satisfaction, and positive family climate.

Conflict in this holiday increased negative affect and negative family climate; while at the same time undermining positive aspects of well-being.

Finally, central to Durkheim's model is the idea that social rituals entail collective psychosocial consequences because of the particular emotional dynamic they generate. Through emotion elicitation, through reciprocal emotional stimulation, and through the building up of mutual empathy, social rituals bring participants to a stage of emotional fusion or communion. Feelings such as "we are one" are at the heart of any improvement in feelings of group belonging and social integration. According to Durkheim, emotions literally constitute the action lever engendering the psychosocial process. In this sense, the degree of emotional involvement of participants within the Christmas rituals is hypothesized to be *the* critical variable in the change from before to after the ritual, together with increases in perceived similarity with others, both conducive to increase in social cohesion. In the present study, results for measures of satisfaction, a distal index of emotional processes, were supportive of the role of positive emotions induced by rituals, mainly in relation to emotional climate. In any case, a new study including direct measures of positive feelings during Christmas meals and perceived similarity with members of the family confirms these ideas. The level of participation and satisfaction with Christmas rituals reinforce the feelings of positive emotions during the activity, $r(44) = .38, p < .01$ and $r(44) = .56, p < .01$ respectively, particularly joy, humour, and love. Both participation and satisfaction increase perceived similarity with members of the family, $r(44) = .35$ and $r(44) = .48$ respectively, both $p < .01$. Congruent with Durkheim assertion on the importance of emotion for identification, similarity and emotionality correlated, $r(44) = .27, p < .05$. Finally level of participation and satisfaction decrease indirectly negative emotions, because rituals correlate negatively but not significantly with negative emotions, but ritual related positive emotions correlates negatively with negative emotions, $r(44) = -.33, P < .01$ (Páez & Bobowik, 2010).

In sum, this study has made a contribution to positive psychology and research linked to ritualized actions. However, it is not devoid of its limitations. The main questions might concern the small sample size and its characteristics (young and "healthy" students – a limitation for external validity), the use of ad hoc self-report measures for the rituals (and the fact that measurement only took place twice), the use of retrospective reports of participation in rituals, and the lack of measures of emotional activation, perception of similarity, identification and empathy during the Christmas rituals. With a larger sample, more complex analysis could be applied to confirm the effects for positive and negative affectivity, but still controlling for the same variables as in the case of other well-being indicators, that is, within more restrictive models using confirmatory path analysis or structural equations, as we did in the case of protestations rituals for Madrid terrorist attack.

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