
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING DURING EMERGING ADULTHOOD MEANING IN LIFE AS A MEDIATOR

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(Received 9 March 2023, revised 10 April 2023)

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether the presence of meaning in life is a mediator in the relationship between spirituality and psychological well-being, during emerging adulthood. The sample consisted of 737 students from Romanian universities. Scales measuring the presence of meaning in life, spirituality and psychological well-being were used. The results of the study indicated that the presence of meaning in life fully mediated the relationship between spirituality and psychological well-being. The findings of the study have contributed to the efforts aimed at understanding the factors associated with emerging adults' psychological well-being. The results were discussed in relation to literature from the psychological perspective, as well as the theological one. Practical implications were suggested for university counselling services.

Keywords: meaning, life, spirituality, emerging adulthood, Christianity

1. Introduction

Emerging adulthood (EA) is a developmental period between the ages of 18-29, capturing the transition to adulthood notably among university students [1]. One of the main tasks of this developmental period is *finding meaning in one's life* [2]. The answer to the question *Why am I here?* is associated with the search for meaning in life. In turn, *how* one answers has implications. Finding meaning in one's life is associated with increased well-being, during emerging adulthood as well as later in life [3, 4].

Among individuals with faith, the presence or search for the sacred is likely to facilitate finding the answer to such a question. Religious faith can answer this question clearly [4]. Even so, the psychological implications of

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religiosity/spirituality are complex [5]. The relationship between religiosity/spirituality and well-being has been investigated and it appears to be a positive one [6-9]. Hence, Pargament [5] argued that it is important to investigate factors that may mediate this relationship. Thus, we argue that the next relevant step is to investigate this relationship during this developmental period, in a sample of emerging adults from a less-researched socio-cultural context (i.e. East European).

1.1. Spirituality

The terms ‘religiosity’ and ‘spirituality’ are sometimes used interchangeably to reference one’s faith. These terms can be differentiated both in Psychology research and Christian theological writings.

In the field of Psychology, Emmons and Paloutzian [10] differentiate between religiosity and spirituality with the first commonly referring to one following distinct rituals while the latter involving more personal pursuits of the sacred that does not necessarily involve a particular religious context (e.g. church, rituals). Steger also refers to spirituality as a broad term that can include both individual transcendental experience and religious experience [11]. Also, oftentimes studies focus mainly on religiosity, and not as much on spirituality. Hence, we argue that it is important to point out the distinction between the two dimensions [12].

In Christian theology, religion and spirituality are closely related concepts but have distinct meanings. Religion generally refers to the institutionalized practices and beliefs of the Church, including its liturgy, sacraments, teachings and traditions. Religion is seen as a necessary and important aspect of the Christian faith, providing structure, guidance and a means for encountering God. Spirituality, on the other hand, refers to the personal, subjective experience of God and the pursuit of a deeper, more intimate relationship with Him. While religion provides a framework and a foundation for spiritual growth, spirituality involves a more personal and experiential dimension of the faith. It includes practices such as prayer, fasting, and contemplation, and seeks to cultivate a direct and personal experience of God’s presence [13].

Overall, while religion and spirituality are related in Christian theology, spirituality is seen as a more personal and individualized aspect of the faith, whereas religion is focused on the communal and institutional aspects of the Church. Modern theologians are often criticizing religion as something opposed to life [14] or opposed to the ecclesial event [15]. We can use these distinctions for a better understanding of the difference between religion, as a set of external practices and spirituality as the lived and meaningful content of the religion.

In the present research we have defined spirituality as “the individual’s perception of the transcendent (i.e. God, the divine) in daily life and the perception of interaction with, or involvement of, the transcendent in life” [16].

Thus, it is not tied to religious behaviours or experiences, but it does not exclude them.

1.2. Meaning in life

It is argued that meaning in life is an essential component of mental processes and behaviour [11, 17]. In the research literature, many operationalizations of the concept can be found [18-23]. We adopted the definition of meaning in life according to Steger: “the extent to which people comprehend, make sense of, or see [any] significance in their lives, accompanied by the degree to which they perceive themselves to have purpose, mission, or overarching aim in life” [21, p. 682]. Meaning in life can be understood by looking at the two dimensions: (1) the presence of meaning in life and (2) the search for meaning in life. The presence of *meaning in life* (PML) represents the extent to which one perceives his or her life as meaningful and having significance [24]. One has the feeling of purpose or mission in life that transcends common concerns of day-to-day life [25]. *Search for meaning in life*, on the other hand, refers to one’s active strivings to understand the purpose and significance of one’s life [24, 26]. The former represents the concept that has been analysed concerning spirituality and well-being in the present research.

1.3. Psychological well-being

We defined well-being according to Ryff’s model, which has a eudemonic approach and focuses on psychological well-being (PWB) [27]. Increased PWB represents being “healthy, well, and fully functioning” [28, p. 19]. PWB represents the balance between too little and too much while being true to oneself and self-responsible [28]. To reach a point of increased PWB, one must be preoccupied with his or her development and self-realization [29]. This model includes six constructs that capture PWB: (1) self-acceptance, (2) positive relations with others, (3) autonomy, (4) environmental mastery, (5) purpose in life, and (6) personal growth [27].

1.4. Spirituality, meaning in life, and psychological well-being during emerging adulthood

Emerging adulthood (EA) is characterized as a period of self-focus that favours self-exploration to attain a more meaningful life [2, 30, 31]. While finding meaning in life during this developmental period has been associated with positive adjustment, the search for meaning can have the opposite effect [25, 32]. It has been argued in the literature that meaning in life could be the path through which spirituality/religiosity is positively associated with psychological well-being as well as mental health in general [11, 33-35]. Indeed, religiosity and spirituality can overlap, as Zinnbauer and Pargament [36] present

- oftentimes the search for the sacred (i.e. spirituality) takes place in the context of organized religion. Even so, in the present research, we address only the spiritual side, through daily spiritual experiences that one might have. Spirituality favours the opportunity for the exploration of meaning in one's life [12, 37]. Also, the process of meaning-making influences the way one explores the sacred. And the other way around, the sacred "shapes individuals' ideology, lifestyles, well-being and sense of meaning in life" [38, p. 15].

From a theological point of view, in Christian spirituality, the pursuit of meaning in life is closely connected to the goal of salvation, which is understood as the ultimate purpose of human existence. According to the teachings, salvation is not simply a matter of avoiding punishment or earning reward but is rather the process of becoming united with God and participating in His divine life. This process of salvation is intimately connected to the search for meaning and purpose in life. By striving to conform oneself to the image of Christ and to live a life of virtue and holiness one is able to discover and fulfil the purpose for which one was created. This purpose is understood to be not only individual but also communal, as each person is called to contribute to the growth and flourishing of the Body of Christ, the Church.

Thus, there can be various mechanisms through which one's spirituality can positively influence one's well-being. Ellison argued that "if we are spiritually healthy, we will feel generally alive, purposeful and fulfilled, but only to the extent that we are psychologically healthy as well" [39, p. 332]. Understanding how and why this happens could start with exploring potential mediators. PML is argued to be a potential mechanism through which spirituality is positively associated with PWB [4, 11, 33, 34, 36, 40].

Current research draws attention to the fact that sociocultural factors play an important role in the way youth approach religion and spirituality [41, 42]. Thus, research should be conducted on diverse cultures, besides Western ones [41, 43], to have a better understanding of how certain faiths as well as sociocultural aspects can influence emerging adults' self-development. Previous research explored some of the concepts included in the current research, but either in a less diverse sample or without relating them in the same manner [44-48]. Thus, the present research is in line with the recommendations found in the literature as far as having a more diverse, culturally representative sample to shed light on a less researched population when it comes to these variables [41, 44-48].

2. Purpose of the research

Thus, the present research aims to take a closer look at the relationship between these concepts in the lives of emerging adults. Hence, even if in recent years EA has been more researched, not much attention has been given to the spiritual lives of EA, particularly from various denominations and an East-

European sociocultural context. Thus, our study is driven by the following hypothesis.

2.1. Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: The presence of meaning in life will be correlated positively with psychological well-being.

Hypothesis 2: Spirituality will mediate the relationship between the presence of meaning in life and psychological well-being.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A sample of Romanian students (N = 681) was recruited in this study. They were studying at universities that they were attending in major cities in Romania (Cluj-Napoca, Oradea, Craiova). The sample was comprised of approximately equal proportions of females (N = 386 female, 57%), with a $M_{age} = 21.69$ and $Sd = 2.32$. Concerning the religious confession of all participants, we encounter the following categories: Christian Orthodox (N = 407, 60%), Christian Protestant (N = 97, 14%), Christian Catholic (N = 56, 8%), Christian Reformed (N = 28, 4%) and atheist/agnostic (N = 88, 13%). The students were from Theology (N = 347, 51%) and non-theology (N = 334, 49%) faculties. The Theology degree was: Christian Orthodox (N = 202, 30%), Greek-Catholic (N = 55, 5%), and Neo-Protestant (N = 112, 17%). About the last level of education graduated by the participants, we have three categories: (1) high school (N = 497, 73%), (2) bachelor's degree (N = 132, 20%), or (2) art and craft school (N = 49, 7%). As far as the employment of the participants, they were either: (1) full-time students (N = 528, 78%), or (2) students and employees (N = 144, 21%). As far as the community origin is concerned, the participants were from: (1) towns (N = 248, 36%); (2) villages (N = 241, 35%), and (3) cities (N = 127, 19%). Finally, the socio-economic status was as follows: (1) high (N = 28, 4%); (2) above average (N = 171, 25%); (3) average (N = 415, 61%); (4) below average (N = 29, 4%) and (5) low (N = 7, 1%).

3.2. Instruments

Three instruments were used to measure the variables included in this research. We present examples of items from the instruments in Table 1. For the scales that we did not have a translation, we used the back-translation method [49]. The English version was translated into the Romanian language by a researcher, and then another one translated the Romanian version into English without knowing the original version. A third faculty member compared the

versions (i.e. Romanian and English) and corrected any incongruences that were found. No significant variation was found.

Table 1. Scales, subscales, and sample items for questionnaires.

Instrument	Subscales and sample items
Presence of meaning in life from The Meaning in Life Questionnaire [26]	<i>'I understand my life's meaning.'</i>
Daily Spiritual Experiences, from Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness and Spirituality [16, p. 15-16]	<p>Connection with the Transcendent (1 item) <i>'I feel God's presence.'</i></p> <p>Strength and Comfort (1 item) <i>'I find strength and comfort in my religion.'</i></p> <p>Perceived Love (1 item) <i>'I feel God's love for me directly or through others.'</i></p> <p>Sense of Wholeness, Internal Integration (1 item) <i>'I feel deep inner peace and harmony.'</i></p> <p>Sense of Awe (1 item) <i>'I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation.'</i></p> <p>Longing for the Transcendent (1 item) <i>'I desire to be closer to God or in union with Him.'</i></p>
The Psychological Well-Being Scale [27]	<p>Autonomy (7 items) <i>'Others can very rarely convince me to do something that I do not want to do.'</i></p> <p>Environmental Mastery (8 items) <i>'Even though my life is busy, I have the satisfaction of keeping up with everything.'</i></p> <p>Personal Growth (8 items) <i>'In my opinion, people can grow and evolve at any age.'</i></p> <p>Positive Relations with Others (7 items) <i>'Most people consider me a loving and affectionate person.'</i></p> <p>Purpose in Life (7 items) <i>'I am satisfied with what I have accomplished in life.'</i></p> <p>Self-Acceptance (7 items) <i>'Even though my past has had many ups and downs, I would not wish to change it.'</i></p>

3.2.1. Presence of Meaning in Life

The Presence of Meaning in Life (PML) was measured with the subscale from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ, [26]). The MLQ comprises 10 items, out of which 5 form the subscale presence of meaning (five items, Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$). Participants responded on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A high score represents an increased presence of meaning in one's life.

3.2.2. Spirituality

Spirituality was measured with a scale from the Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness and Spirituality (BMMRS, [16, p. 15-16]). The items were drawn from the NIA/Fetzer Short Form employed in the General Social Survey [16, p. 15-16]. The scale comprises six items (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.92$) adapted from the 16 items according to the long version. Participants responded on a scale from 1 (never) to 6 (more than once a day). The items aim to measure one's subjective experience rather than cognitive constructions [16, p. 15-16]. A high score means high spirituality.

3.2.3. Psychological wellbeing

Psychological Well-Being (PWB) was measured with The Psychological Well-Being Scale [27]. This instrument includes six facets of PWB: (1) Autonomy, (2) Environmental Mastery, (3) Personal Growth, (4) Positive Relations with Others, (5) Purpose in Life, and (6) Self-Acceptance. The scale has 44 items in total. The responses were made on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 6 (very strongly agree). The scale was adapted to the Romanian population [50]. The internal consistency of the scale is 0.94. By summing up the scores from each facet, the total score of PWB is obtained. A high score represents increased PWB.

3.3. Procedure

Participation was voluntary, students could choose to opt out of filling out the questionnaires at any time. No incentives were given for involvement in the study. The questionnaires were distributed on-site at the end of classes and were completed in pen and paper form. The students were informed about the purpose of the data collection and were asked to complete the consent form. The instruments were then introduced into the database.

4. Results

For the first hypothesis of the present study, we employed Spearman rank correlation since the data was not normally distributed. We used several methods to assess if the distributions of the three variables approximate the normal distribution. The Shapiro-Willik test of normality indicated that all three variables diverge from the normal distribution ($p < 0.05$). The skewness of the data was found to be - 0.65 for spirituality, - 0.3 for PML, and - 0.99 for PWB, indicating that the distribution was left-skewed. On one hand, the kurtosis of the data was found to be - 0.47 for spirituality, and - 0.5 for PML. On the other hand, the kurtosis for PWB was 1.39, indicating that the distribution was more heavy-tailed compared to the normal distribution. Thus, when analysing

skewness and kurtosis values, only PWB was out of the +/- 1.5 range [51]. The boxplots of the data indicate extreme values for PML and PWB. Visual inspection of the shape of the distributions using histograms supported the conclusion that the data violates the normality assumption.

For the second hypothesis, we conducted a regression analysis, to test the direction and magnitude of the relationships between the variables, to determine if spirituality predicts psychological well-being among the sample of Romanian emerging adults, and to show if spirituality mediates the relationship between the variables. We followed Preacher & Hayes’s [52] framework for the mediation analysis procedures (model four), as well as for estimating indirect effects. We reported the results of the Sobel procedure used to statistically investigate the effect of the proposed mediator on the predictor–outcome relationship [53]. For the same reason, we conducted and reported bootstrapping procedures. Prior to each analysis, we screened data for outlying or influential data points and examined the data for adherence to the assumptions of correlations or regressions. No outlying or influential data points were identified, and assumptions of statistical tests were met. We conducted all statistical tests at the $p < 0.05$ level. The results of the correlation, as well as the descriptive statistics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation results.

Variables	Mean	Std. dev.	n	Spirituality	Psychological wellbeing	Presence of meaning in life
Spirituality	3.67	1.06	674	-	-	-
Psychological wellbeing	4.84	0.66	558	0.22*	-	-
Presence of meaning in life	3.63	0.88	664	0.51*	0.44*	-

Note. *Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

The correlations between all study variables in question exhibit statistically significant relationships. Considering that the correlations were moderate, we argue that there is relatively minimal overlap between scales. This is of relevance because the PWB scale has a subscale of purpose in life that might overlap with PML; as the data shows, that is not the case.

These results showed that a higher presence of meaning in life was associated with greater reported spirituality and psychological well-being. The correlation between spirituality and psychological well-being was significant, but low.

The study assessed the mediating role of the PML on the relationship between spirituality and PWB. The results revealed that there is a significant total effect of spirituality on PWB ($b = 0.14$, $s.e. = 0.02$, $p < 0.001$; i.e. c) (Figure 1). The effect of spirituality on the presence of meaning in life (i.e. path

a), was positive and statistically significant ($b = 0.40$, $s.e. = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$). The individuals that report higher spirituality, have an increased PML. Furthermore, the effect of PML on PWB (i.e. path b), is positive and significant ($b = 0.37$, $s.e. = 0.03$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that persons scoring higher on PML are more likely to have increased PWB than those scoring lower on the measure.

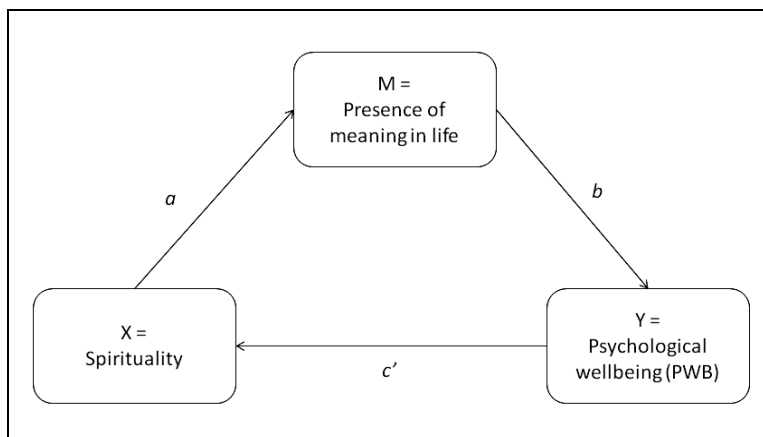


Figure 1. Mediation model.

The direct effect of spirituality on PWB when accounting for PML is not significant ($b = 0.14$, $s.e. = 0.02$, $p = 0.712$). The indirect effect is tested using non-parametric bootstrapping, with 10000 bootstrap replicates. The indirect effect (IE = 0.15) is statistically significant: CI 95% is 0.11 to 0.20, which excludes zero. The Sobel test $z = 9.05$, $s.e. = 0.02$, $p < 0.001$. The effect is larger than would be expected by chance, thus PML is a significant mediator between spirituality and PWB. The results indicate that spirituality has a potential effect on individuals’ PWB if it nurtures and facilitates the individual’s meaning in life.

Hence, PML fully mediates the relationship between spirituality and PWB. The mediation analysis summary is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Regression and model coefficients of the paths a, b and c.

Variable		Consequent			Paths	Y (PWB)		
		M (PML)				Coefficient	S.E.	p
		Coefficient	S.E.	p		Coefficient	S.E.	p
X (Spirituality)	a*	0.40	0.03	< 0.001	c	0.14	0.02	< 0.001
M (PML)					b*	0.37	0.03	< 0.001
Constant		3.54	0.1	< 0.001		4.34	0.1	< 0.001
$R^2 = 0.248$					$R^2 = 0.053$			

Note. *The paths from the mediation model

5. Discussion

Previous research has shown that there is a positive and consistent link between religiosity/spirituality and well-being [6, 7] as well as meaning in life and well-being [3, 34, 40]. Thus, we aimed to take a closer look at spirituality in particular, and its relationship with the presence of meaning in life and psychological well-being during EA. Also, the literature focuses mainly on Western cultures, especially the North American one, thus we aimed to explore the Eastern culture, with other religious faiths (e.g. Orthodox Christianity) less represented in the research literature. This objective was based on the research recommendations found in the literature [41, 44-48] that indicate a need to shed light on these concepts (i.e. emerging adulthood, spirituality, meaning in life, and psychological well-being) in a larger, more diverse sample.

Associations have been found between these constructs in previous research [4, 11, 33-35, 40] and this study confirmed some of those findings. The results revealed that there is no significant direct effect of spirituality on PWB in this sample of emerging adults. The individuals that report high spirituality, have an increased PML - a result that is in line with previous research [12, 37]. Spirituality creates a favourable space for the exploration of one's life meaning. Furthermore, the direct effect of PML on PWB is positive and significant indicating that persons scoring higher on PML are more likely to have increased PWB than those scoring lower on the measure. Krok showed that PWB is associated with an increased sense of coherence [54]. Thus, personal development and self-realization are related to an individual's sense of purpose [55].

Because of the correlations that have been found between spirituality, PML, and PWB, as well as the literature review - PML was hypothesized to be a mediator between spirituality and PWB. The results indicate that PML fully mediates the relationship. When individuals' spirituality is not related to meaning in life, it decreases their PWB. Spirituality and PML are exerting opposite effects when they are separated, they cancel each other out. Thus, we argue that spirituality can affect one's PWB if it aids and cultivates one's meaning in life. This is in line with the Christian theological perspective which states that no matter one's age, it is through the pursuit of spiritual practices (i.e. prayer, fasting, participation in the sacraments, service to others, and reading as well as reflecting on spiritual writings) that one can begin to discern and fulfil their purpose. Through prayer and other spiritual practices, one can cultivate a deeper relationship with God and gain insight into the nature of the Universe and one's place within it. This can help to provide a sense of direction and purpose, even if it is not yet fully realized or understood.

From a developmental point of view, reaching a point of doubt and exploration is a natural process [56]. More so, during this period individuals change their lives significantly (i.e. moving to a different city, going to college, increased responsibility and freedom), and consequently, they might doubt

previously held beliefs, including their faith [57-61]. Thus, doubting one's faith can be a step toward becoming an adult. According to Haney and Rollock [57], such exploration can lead to psychological vulnerability - which can have a negative impact on one's well-being. Hence, we argue that spirituality can represent a 'double edge sword'. On one hand, if it nurtures emerging adults' meaning in life, it can increase their well-being. On the other hand, if it stands on an 'unsure terrain' of faith doubt, it can decrease their well-being. Further research should further explore the latter.

Considering that religious beliefs can influence the way one interprets reality [62], and as a result how one behaves - "understanding the role of religious beliefs on well-being and functioning is critically important to understanding people and is essential for sound clinical work" [63, p. 190]. Searching for meaning in life can involve distress, which in turn might lead to decreased well-being [64]. Mental health specialists, as well as representatives from the clergy, can assist emerging adults through the process of searching and finding meaning; they can normalize the process while also paying attention to maladaptive beliefs that might emerge along the way [63].

Toussaint and colleagues argue the importance of increased sensitivity to spirituality and religiosity in the professionals' practice [65]. Professionals that work with emerging adults (e.g. counsellors, priests and psychotherapists) rarely have joint knowledge of these aspects [65]. We argue that both psychological and pastoral counselling can benefit from this research. Counsellors and therapists, as well as clergymen (e.g. spiritual fathers), can explore emerging adults' spiritual beliefs and their meaning-making process (i.e. sessions, confession). This is of importance especially during this developmental period, considering that major life decisions (i.e. career, life partners, having a child, etc.) that impact one's life are made either during or at the end of emerging adulthood [1, 2]. How emerging adults navigate this period significantly affects their well-being in both the short and long term. Specialists in these fields can better aid their clients if they have an enriched understanding of how spirituality is related to one's meaning in life, as well as well-being, from both a psychological and theological point of view.

6. Conclusions

We argue that the present research answers past research recommendations to study these variables in the Romanian sociocultural context [44-48], as well as adding to the literature that aims to support the dialogue between Psychology and Theology [66, 67] in a less represented sociocultural context (i.e. Romania, Eastern Europe). Finally, the results can benefit both fields (i.e. psychological and theological aid), because in trying to support meaning-making, spirituality can play a defining role in the lives of emerging adults.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to express their gratitude to all the participants in the study.

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