

## The Relationship of Spirituality to Cognitive and Moral Development and Purpose in Life: An Exploratory Investigation

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### **Abstract:**

In this exploratory study of 152 undergraduate students, the relationships among spirituality, cognitive and moral development, and existential sense of meaning were examined. Results suggest that no relationship exists between spirituality and cognitive development, but that spirituality is positively related to both moral development and purpose in life.

### **Article:**

As increased attention is given to spirituality in the counseling literature, and as counselors attempt to infuse techniques into their counseling work that may affect the spiritual development of their clients, we need to understand better the influence that spirituality has on the development and adjustment of the individual (Burke & Miranti, 1996). To date, however, little empirical research has focused specifically on how spirituality interrelates to psychological factors within the individual that are not directly spiritual or religious in nature. Recently, researchers in counseling have discussed spirituality by describing the phenomena conceptually using models that illustrate how spirituality relates to the overall adaptability and functionality (i.e., wellness) of the individual (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). These models discuss the interactive nature of spirituality, describing it as a core reciprocal component of the overall wellness of the individual rather than as a stand-alone or isolated dimension. In other words, spirituality is seen as closely related to, if not inseparable from, the various psychosocial and role functions of the individual. Therefore, as a component of wellness, spirituality is conceptualized as present on a personal level within each major area of one's life (i.e., intellectual, physical, emotional, social, and occupational adjustment; Chandler et al., 1992), and optimum wellness involves the interaction of a personal spiritual component within all of those areas.

Although this conceptualization is helpful in explaining the centrality of the spiritual dimension to psychosocial adjustment, these models do not explain how spirituality affects or is affected by other developmental constructs, which are considered a foundation for healthy functioning (i.e., moral development and cognitive development). If spirituality is potentially a universal experience, it seems important that we understand how it relates to factors that have been investigated and established as important developmental issues.

Also, spirituality is discussed as a process of development involving the accumulation and integration of spiritual experiences over time (Chandler et al., 1992). In this sense, spiritual development is conceptualized as a linear process. Subsequently, it is thought to be interrelated in a general way with chronological development. Therefore, to the extent that spiritual development occurs, it is at least partially dependent on the overall maturation of the individual (i.e., normal life span development). Periods of rapid change in one's orientation and focus on spiritual issues can occur, as in cases of spiritual emergence and emergency (Grof & Grof, 1989). To date, however, little is known about how spirituality influences or is influenced by general psychological maturation, which, like spirituality, forms over time in relation to normal development.

Interestingly, many definitions of spirituality have been offered in the literature that discuss similar developmental factors considered necessary for a developed sense of spirituality (Maher & Hunt, 1993). These factors are known as intrapsychic constructs, which have been investigated extensively in their own right, yet are not necessarily spiritual in nature. For example, Witmer and Sweeney (1992) suggested that both purposiveness (or meaning in life) and moral values are building blocks of a healthy spirituality. The idea that moral values are closely related to a life of integrity is by no means new. Religious writers have long suggested that it is a sense of morality that gives evidence of one's deepest held beliefs and regulates our relationships to others. This belief has more recently been supported by writers in counseling and psychology (Maslow, 1968; Young & Witmer, 1985). Similarly, a sense of purpose and meaning in life, as a component of spirituality, has been suggested by numerous other writers (Brallier, 1982; Canda, 1986; Edwards, Mead, Palmer, & Simmons, 1974; Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, & Saunders, 1988; Mosak & Dreikurs, 1967).

An additional developmental process, cognitive development, was suggested by Fowler (1981,1991) as important to spirituality. According to Fowler, cognitive development is a necessary, although not always sufficient, component of the formation of a more complex faith structure. Fowler based his assertion on his research findings, which suggested that movement through the Piagetian stages of cognitive development is related to the sophistication or complexity of one's faith structures. Faith structures, according to Fowler, result from the individual's process of "meaning making." The idea that meaning making is, to some degree, dependent on cognitive development is important in that Fowler's model assumes the interrelationship of faith development to normal human development.

Drawing heavily on Fowler's stage theory of faith development, Helminiak (1987) offered a tentative statement of spiritual development, which is defined as human development understood from a particular set of concerns. Helminiak suggested that general human development and spiritual development are related processes and proposed a five-stage model of spiritual development, similar to Fowler's model, in which people move from concrete conceptualizations of spiritual ideas to highly abstract and inclusive conceptualizations.

Although morality, meaning or purpose in life, and cognitive development have all been discussed as fundamental aspects of spirituality and spiritual growth, no research has directly explored the relationship of these constructs to the theoretical construct of spirituality. Subsequently, the purpose of this study was to explore the relationships among spirituality, cognitive and moral development, and purpose in life.

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

Participants in this study were 152 undergraduate students enrolled in courses in counseling or educational psychology at a mid-sized southern university. The participants were 62 (41%) seniors, 27 (18%) juniors, 24 (16%) sophomores, and 25 (16%) freshmen, with 14 (9%) participants not specifying their undergraduate class. The majority of participants ( $n = 82$ , 54%) were traditional students (18-22 years of age), and an additional 51 (34%) participants indicated that they were between 22 and 29 years of age. The majority of participants were either Caucasian ( $n = 98$ , 64%) or African American ( $n = 42$ , 28%). Finally, with regard to sex, 61% of the participants were women ( $n = 93$ ) and 32% were men ( $n = 48$ ). Seven percent of the participants did not specify their sex ( $n = 11$ ).

Participants were asked to provide information about religious affiliation and frequency of religious activity. Results indicate that 109 (72%) participants were involved in organized religious activity at least one time per month, and 84 (55%) participants were involved in organized religious activities at least once a week. Finally, the majority of participants reported that they were Christian in orientation ( $n = 131$ , 86%).

### ***Instruments***

Data were collected from the 152 participants using four instruments: the Human Spirituality Scale (Wheat, 1991), the How Is Your Logic? (Gray, 1973b) measure of cognitive development, the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1990), and the Purpose in Life scale (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981).

Human Spirituality Scale (HSS). The HSS (Wheat, 1991) consists of 20 items that provide a global measure of spirituality. Content validity of the instrument was established by a panel of experts. Wheat (1991) found that the HSS distinguished between groups thought to differ in spirituality, supporting the construct validity of the HSS. Factor analysis has further supported the construct validity of the instrument (Wheat, 1991). Wheat (1991) reported a Cronbach's alpha of .89. For the current study, the alpha was .81.

How Is Your Logic? (HIYL). An abbreviated version of the HIYL (Gray, 1973b) was used to measure the level of operational thought, including items that measured concrete operations and formal operations skills. For this study, a 5-point scoring mechanism was used that categorized participants as functioning at primarily a preoperational level, one of two levels of concrete operations, or one of two levels of formal operational thought processes. Reported alphas on the HIYL have ranged from .73 to .86 (Gray, 1973a, 1973b). Construct validity has been established through factor analysis and expected group differences (Gray, 1973a, 1973b).

Defining Issues Test (DIT). The DIT (Rest, 1990) short form, a measure of moral development, consists of three stories involving moral dilemmas. After each moral dilemma, participants are asked to rate and rank 12 issues by importance in making a decision about what ought to be done to resolve the dilemma. The DIT's index locates the participant on a developmental continuum of moral development and contains two internal checks of participant reliability (Rest, 1990). Various studies using the DIT have had test-retest reliabilities in the high .70s or .80s, with a Cronbach's alpha index of internal consistency generally in the high .70s (Rest, 1979, 1990). Rest (1979,1990) reported that criterion group and convergent validities are acceptable.

Purpose in Life Scale (PIL). Section A (20 items) of the PIL (Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981) was used to measure the degree to which individuals perceive life as meaningful, providing a measure of the intensity of the meaning in life (Crumbaugh & Henrion, 1988). Construct and concurrent validity have been reasonably established for the PIL, as has its reliability (split-half = .92; 1-week test-retest = .83; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1981).

### ***Procedure and Data Analysis***

All instruments were in packets, and identification numbers were used to ensure anonymity of responses. The two principle researchers went into eight undergraduate classes to collect the data and obtained informed consent from all participants. Participation was voluntary, but instructors provided extra credit for individuals who chose to participate.

The coded data were analyzed using the SPSS-X (SPSS, 1990). Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for each variable. Additionally, a correlation matrix was calculated for all variables in the study. Because the measure of cognitive development (HIYL) provided ordinal-level data, a Spearman rank-order correlation was calculated between the measure of cognitive development and the other study variables. All other correlations were calculated using a Pearson product-moment correlation.

## **RESULTS**

Mean scores and standard deviations are presented in Table 1, and the correlation matrix is presented in Table 2. The strongest correlation in the model ( $r = .49, p < .01$ ) occurred between purpose in life and spirituality. The measure of spirituality also correlated significantly with moral development ( $r = .35, p < .01$ ). The relationship between spirituality and cognitive development was nonsignificant ( $r = -.04$ ).

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study provide some support for the idea that spirituality is a phenomenon that may relate to other psychological factors within the individual. Therefore, the impact of spirituality may go beyond simply providing personal support. Results suggest that spirituality may be somehow related to other important capacities of the individual that are important in the formation of a sense of meaning for one's life and, to a lesser degree, a moral structure. Because the data in this study is correlational in nature, causal relationships cannot be inferred. Nevertheless, these relationships are noteworthy and bear further examination as these

findings suggest the possibility of an important relationship between spiritual development and the development of other psychologically desirable functions. Specifically, researchers should examine further how spirituality may influence, and be influenced by, a sense of meaning in life.

**TABLE 1**  
***Mean Scores of Spirituality-Related Variables for Undergraduates***

Variable	M	SD
Purpose in life	112.38	11.56
Moral judgment	8.37	4.43
Cognitive development	3.14	.86
Spirituality	79.79	7.74

An additional noteworthy finding in the current study is the lack of a relationship between spirituality and cognitive development. This finding suggests that the inability to think in a highly analytical or abstract manner did not inhibit the individuals in this sample from developing a viable spirituality. This finding also deserves further investigation to determine the specific nature of the relationship among these variables. Additional research into this relationship may be important to counselors and other helping professionals if it is determined that spirituality is instrumental in the formation of positive adjustment abilities (i.e., morality and purpose in life) regardless of the cognitive sophistication of the individual.

**TABLE 2**  
***Correlation Matrix of Variables Associated With Spirituality***

Legend for Chart:

- A - Variable
- B - Purpose in Life
- C - Spirituality
- D - Moral Judgment
- E - Cognitive Level

A	B	C	D	E
Purpose in life	--	.49 [b]	.27 [a]	-.09
Spirituality	--	--	.35 [b]	-.04
Moral judgment	--	--	--	.19
Cognitive	--	--	--	--

Note. Spearman r was calculated between cognitive level and other study variables.  
a  $p < .05$ . b  $p < .01$ .

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

A limitation of the current study that should be noted is the restricted variance in the scores of the measure of cognitive development. This is not surprising given that the sample was made up of undergraduate students who were relatively homogeneous in terms of age and general development. Further inquiry is needed, however, to examine these relationships for a more heterogeneous population.

An additional caution is necessary with regard to the high level of reported religiosity among the current sample. Replicative efforts are needed with various groups who may contextualize spirituality in different forms (e.g., persons in 12-step programs). In addition to the measures reported here, exploratory qualitative data were collected on the participants, which involved their providing written discussions about their personal spirituality. This qualitative data suggests that the majority of the participants in this study characterized their spirituality through religious forms (i.e., spirituality and religion were discussed interchangeably). This is consistent with the demographic information, which indicated that this sample was quite religious, and specifically Christian in orientation.

## CONCLUSION

Results of this study support the idea that spirituality is available to all, regardless of cognitive developmental level. Results also support ideas presented in the literature that purpose in life (i.e., existential meaning) and morality are closely related to the existence of a personal spirituality. Future research should explore in greater detail these relationships as well as other variables that are important to healthy psychological functioning and spiritual development.

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