



Understandings of the word “spirituality” among a sample of university students in the UK

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Abstract

Within the social scientific study of religion, there has been a significant amount of research on spirituality, especially in the area of health and well-being. Despite this, the term spirituality remains poorly defined and understood. There have been only a small number of studies that have examined the semantics of spirituality. The aim of the present study was to examine the understandings of the word spirituality among a sample of 232 university students in the UK. Building on the work of la Cour, Ausker, and Hvidt (2012) in Denmark, respondents evaluated which out of a list of 115 words indicated spirituality. Factor analysis of the responses resulted in six different understandings of spirituality: 1. Spirituality as affective, 2. New Age, 3. religious spirituality, 4. Embodied experiences of spirituality, 5. Mysticism, 6. Spirituality as inspiration. These results indicate that among the present sample there was a divergence of common understanding of the term spirituality. Results were compared to those of la Cour et al. (2012) among Danish adults, and both similarities and difference were found. Limitations of the present study are outlined and suggestions for further research are provided.

Introduction

Little research has been undertaken into the semantics of the term “spirituality”. Keller et al. (2013) discuss that the study of contextualised spirituality within the field of religion is important, but states that equally, it is important to know what the general public consider spirituality *is* when they do not consider themselves religious. The language of spirituality in common use, however, may include religious language, and is contextual within the individual’s frame of reference (la Cour, 2012; Hedlund-de Witt, 2014), meaning that it is not possible to consider an overarching view of spirituality for all. This position is supported by Belzen (2009) who noted, “The range of phenomena in the human world called “spiritual” comprises such diverse and contrasting forms of conduct that it seems in vain to try to catch them all into one, comprising conceptualization” (p. 208).

la Cour et al. (2012), asked 514 adult Danes about their understanding of the word “spirituality”, stating “a common understanding of the word does not exist, at least in a modern secular setting” (p. 63). Their study set out to clarify the understanding of the word, by presenting the respondents with an alphabetical list of known definitions for spirituality (la Cour & Hvidt, 2010), asking the respondents to mark any of 115 possible choices with an X if the words on the list represented spirituality to them. The study participants represented two main groups - students of medicine, nursing and religion, and a group of 145 church connected respondents.

Principal Component Analysis with quatrimax rotation for the factor analysis produced six factors; “Spirituality as positive dimensions in human life and wellbeing”, “spirituality as new age ideology”, “spirituality as an integrated part of established religious life and religious traditions”, “spirituality as vague striving, opposed to religion”, “spirituality as selfishness” and “spirituality as ordinary, secular inspiration in human activities”. Significantly, however, the research notes that in modern, secular Denmark, the term “spirituality” continues to vary in its meaning between respondents. As such, la Cour et al. (2012) suggest there are too many understandings of the term to impose one meaning so that three possible actions result; either the word should not be used at all in research “at least in secular non-English language areas” (p.77); researchers must be specific in the meaning of ‘spirituality’ by framing the concept in words that signify its meaning; and finally, researchers must define the word precisely. In summary, la Cour et al. (2012) advise that for future research spirituality must be understood as “a context-bound experience of relatedness to a vertical transcendent reality” (p. 80).

Context is considered central to Keller et al. (2013) who found that there were contextual differences between the countries. Their results demonstrated that participants in the USA considered there was little difference between spirituality and religion, while German participants more obviously separated the two concepts. Despite this, the terms “religion” and “spirituality” are “rather fluid terms” (p. 87) in both countries, with differences in usage depending on the person’s view of, and the relationship between, spirituality and religion. Notably, American respondents who consider themselves ‘neither spiritual nor religious’ take a neutral position as regards spirituality, whilst German respondents in the same category rate spirituality and religion more negatively, considering these as “irrational’, ‘immature’ and highly ‘subjective’” (p. 91). The USA, whose inhabitants largely identify themselves as spiritual and religious, with only 11.9% of inhabitants declaring they are neither religious nor spiritual, compared with Germany, whose inhabitants (47.8%) are neither religious nor spiritual. These results led Keller et al. to propose a culturally based definition of spirituality, asking researchers to undertake further “semantically sensitive study of culturally situated ‘spiritualities’” (p. 71), since cultural context is important and “one’s self-identification as spiritual, religious, or neither has an impact on one’s understanding of these terms” (p. 94).

To supplement the work of la Cour et al. (2012) in Denmark, and Keller et al. (2013) in Germany and the USA, the aim of the present study was to examine the understandings of the word spirituality among a sample of university students in the UK. To assist cross cultural comparability, the present study was guided by the methodology of la Cour et al. (2012).

Method

Participants

The sample comprised of 233 students attending a university in north Wales, UK. Of these, 63 (34%) were male and 122 (66%) were female. The mean age was 40 years (range: 16-83; SD = 14.95).

Questionnaire

The original 115 words used by La Cour (2012), was developed further for future cross-cultural work by La Cour (personal communication, January 4, 2013) resulting in a list of 119 words. Specifically, from the original list of 115 words, seven words were omitted “Religious and Supernatural interest”, “Purpose in life”, “Profound person”, “Peace of mind”, “Middle ages”, “Love your neighbour”, “Experience of the Holy” and 11 new items were included (“Interest in the supernatural”, “Recovery”, “New Age Publications”, “New Age Fairs”, “Medieval”, “Mystic”, “Life content”, “Charity”, “A deeper person”, “Alternative treatments, and “Attention to the ultimate”). Subsequently, this 119 word list was reviewed by the present authors to ascertain the cultural appropriateness of these items. Four items were revised slightly for use in the UK context: “Connected in spirit(s)” replaced “Spiritual connections”, “New Age Fairs” replaced “Spiritual/New Age Fairs”, “Connected to special groups such as OBOD, Findhorn, Pagan Federation” replaced “Connected to Spiritual groups such as OBOD, Findhorn, Pagan Federation, and “The spirit” replaced “The spiritual”. Table 1 contains the 119 words used in the present study.

Respondents were asked: “Which words are for you the most important meanings of the word spirituality - X all the most important places”. Respondents were informed they could use as many Xs as they wished. The 119 words were presented in alphabetical order. Respondents also provided information on their age and sex.

Procedure

Students attending a university in north Wales, UK were sent an email containing an invitation to partake in a study of spirituality.

Results and Discussion

Ranking of spirituality items

The mean of X-marked words was 21.4 ($SD = 13.5$) with a range 0 to 71. Of the list of 119 words, the 8 most popular important meanings of the word spirituality given by the respondents were: (1) “peace” (71 endorsements; 59%); (2) “meaning in life” (68 endorsements; 57%); (3) “healing” (57 endorsements; 48%); (4) “a deeper person” (53 endorsements; 45%); (5) “wisdom” (52 endorsements; 44%); (6) “willing to develop oneself” (50 endorsements; 42%); (7) “meditation” (50 endorsements; 42%); and (8) “love” (48 endorsements; 40%). The following items received no endorsements from the sample: “cosiness”; “material goods”; “money”; and “superficial person”. These findings are largely consistent with those of la Cour et al. (2012).

Understanding of Spirituality

To investigate the factorial structure of the items a Principal Component Analysis employing varimax rotation was performed (see Table 1). In total, 6 factors were extracted. Factor one can be labelled as “spirituality as affective”, and accounted for 12% of variance. The second factor can be labelled “New Age”, and accounted for 5% of variance. The third factor can be labelled as “religious spirituality”, and accounted for 4% of variance. The fourth factor can be labelled as “embodied experiences of spirituality”, 3% of variance. The fifth factor can be labelled as “mysticism”, and accounted for 3% of variance. The sixth factor can be labelled as “spirituality as inspiration”, and accounted for 2% of variance. These factors are largely consistent with those of la Cour et al (2012).

Understanding of Spirituality and Relation to Gender and Age

To investigate how the six factors were distributed across gender and age, a score for each factor was computed. With respect to gender, an independent samples T-test was conducted, and demonstrated that males and females only differed significantly with respect to Factor 1 “spirituality as affective” (Males: $m = 3.83$, $SD = 3.78$; Females: $m = 6.59$, $SD = 5.56$; $t = -4.0$, $p < .01$). Correlation analysis demonstrated that there were no statistically significant relationships with age. The results regarding gender are consistent with la Cour et al (2012); however the absence of any relationship with age goes against the findings of la Cour et al (2012) where it was demonstrated that older age was negatively related to three factors.

Factor-quotient Correlations

Product Moment Correlations were calculated between each of the six factor scores. Moderate positive correlations were demonstrated between spirituality as affective and religious spirituality (see Table 2). Further, moderate positive correlations were found between the embodied experience of spirituality and the affective experience of spirituality. These findings are largely consistent with those of la Cour et al. (2012).

Conclusion

The present study examined the understandings of the word spirituality among a sample of university students in the UK. The results provide evidence that among the present UK sample there was a divergence of common understanding of the term spirituality. These findings in the UK supplement those of la Cour et al. (2012) in Denmark, and Keller et al. (2013) in Germany and the USA. Future research should seek to examine the understandings of the word spirituality among other cross-cultural samples.

Table 2 Pearson’s Correlations between the computed factor-quotients of respondents

	New Age	Relig-Spirit	Embodied	Mysticism	Spirituality as inspiration
Affective	.386**	.420**	.332**	.361**	.221**
New Age		.244**	.302**	.342**	.332**
Relig-Spirit			.167*	.268**	.066
Embodied				.149*	.158*
Mysticism					.156*

Key: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

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Table 1: Rotated Component Matrix of Meanings of “Spirituality”

Items	Component					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Wisdom	.631					
Compassion	.621					
Quality of Life	.614					
Meaning in life	.593					
Values	.589					
Peace	.581					
Love	.560					
Willing to develop oneself	.554					
Balance	.538					
Insight	.537					
Harmony	.519					
Universal consciousness	.489					
Joy	.484					
Sharing	.466					
Tranquility	.466					
Nature	.465					
Something larger than oneself	.433					
Healing	.424	.342			-.308	
Life content	.424					
The spirit	.423	.425				
Charity	.412					
Striving for the essence of existence	.410					
Serenity	.402					
Ethics	.392					
Beauty	.391					
Light	.386					
Freedom	.376			.356		
A deeper person	.366					
Energies	.336	.428				
Feminine	.334					.348
Gratitude	.332					
There is more between heaven and earth	.325					
Connected in spirit(s)	.322	.519				
Identity	.301					.364
Aura	.624					
Clairvoyance	.614					
Crystals	.600					
Guardian Angels	.332	.518				
Connected to special groups	.578					
Spiritualism	.570					
Ghosts	.569					
New Age	.559					
New Age Fairs	.543	.450				
Candle lights	.527					
New Age publications	.495	.459				
Incense	.491					
Interest in the supernatural	.476					
Astrology	.474					
Occultism	.459	.392				
Artistic	.406					
The beyond	.372					
Believer, but not religious	.330					
Guru-worship	.321					
Meditation	.316					
Reincarnation.	.302		.370			
Buddhism	.301		.375			
Personal relation to God		.551				
Prayer		.537				
The experience of the sacred		.528				
Searching for the sacred	.300	.517		.353		
Holiness		.517				
Striving for God		.509				
Catholicism		.499				
Holy Communion		.463		-.381		
Salvation		.463		-.401		
Pilgrimage		.429				
Doubt		.422				
Protestantism		.422				
Eternity		.358				
Religion		.358				
Attention to the ultimate		.347				
Daily, practiced belief		.344				
Hinduism		.343	.380			
Islam		.313				
Sex			.842			
Sport			.814			
Music			.633			
Yoga			.489			
Song			.471	-.316		
Breath			.420			
Life after death			.309			
Mysticism				.417		
Seeker				.371		
Outside the norm				.324	.307	
Outside religion				.322		
Some not concrete				.308		
Medieval				-.368	.484	
Poetry				-.538		
Atmosphere					.554	
Emotive person					.456	
Anti-intellectual person					.399	
Longing					.366	
Monasteries					.353	
Self-absorbed person					.344	
Alternative treatment					.302	