



Religiousness, spirituality, and coping with stress among late adolescents: A meaning-making perspective



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the associations between religiousness, spirituality (R/S), and coping among late adolescents within a meaning-making perspective. Specifically, global meaning and situational meaning were examined as potential mediators. Two hundred and twenty one Polish participants (115 women and 106 men) completed the Religious Meaning System Questionnaire, the Self-description Questionnaire of Spirituality, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire, and the Situational Meaning Scale. Results of SEM analysis showed that R/S had both direct and indirect effects on coping, suggesting that global meaning and situational meaning served as partial mediators among late adolescents. The mediating role of global meaning and situational meaning may be more fully understood within the framework of the meaning-making model. Consistent with the model, individuals with higher levels of R/S had a propensity to experience stronger global meaning in life and situational meaning, which in turn contributed to more frequent using coping styles.

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Introduction

In two recent decades, extensive research has demonstrated relationships between religiousness, spirituality, and coping with stress (Pargament, 2010; Pargament, Falb, Ano, & Wachholtz, 2013; Park, 2013a). In general, the results tend to reveal positive effects of religious and spiritual factors on coping styles and strategies. However, there are some studies which did not find significant relationships between religiousness, spirituality, and indicators of coping (Wasteson, Nordin, Hoffman, Glimelius, & Sjöden, 2002) or produced mixed evidence (Alferi, Culver, Carver, Arena, & Antoni, 1999). In addition, the underlying mechanisms of how religiousness and spirituality (R/S) are related to coping have not been well-established. The meaning-making model proposed by Park (2010, 2013b) has been a useful theoretical framework for understanding the relationships between R/S factors and coping, and their potential mediators. The purpose of this study is to investigate the associations between R/S and coping among late adolescents within a meaning-making perspective. Specifically, global meaning and situational meaning were examined as potential mediators.

Complexity of the associations between religiousness, spirituality and coping

Empirical research has demonstrated that religion is not a mere defensive mechanism, but it can affect individuals' cognitive and emotional processes underlying coping with stressful events (Pargament et al., 2013). Although there is a

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conceptual difference between religiousness and spirituality, both concepts appear to share the common feature: the search for the sacred, which represents human endeavours to achieve significant goals and ultimate concerns (Hill & Edwards, 2013; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). Religiousness and spirituality are multidimensional, complex constructs, which overlap and can be regarded as related but not identical. As a consequence, researchers have often examined them together as supplementary constructs, especially in the field of personality and mental health (Gall & Guirguis-Younger, 2013; Paloutzian & Park, 2014; Park, 2007). It allows us to investigate more deeply a wider spectrum of religious and spiritual experiences, which have undergone substantial changes and acquired new meanings in recent years.

The search for the sacred is a dynamic process that involves efforts to pursue and discover important values, purposes, and principles. R/S beliefs and behaviour play an important role in the period of late adolescence during which young people strive to achieve an integrated view of themselves, including their own pattern of beliefs, goals, and motivations (Boyd & Bee, 2012). R/S structures undergo rapid and extensive changes in young people, becoming often a vital part of their efforts to find meaning in life. The search for meaning takes place in various domains of individual and social life, and is frequently characterised by dynamic changes in cognitive and motivational processes.

In recent years, researchers have often examined R/S in relation to coping processes, incorporating religious dimensions such as service attendance, religious behaviour, and prayer as well as spiritual dimensions in the form of individual experiences, ultimate goals, and inner harmony (Gall & Guirguis-Younger, 2013; Park, 2013b). They appear to be effective in dealing with personal situations and problems. The main reason lies in the well-established observation that R/S dimensions are central to the global meaning systems of many people, because they provide individuals with an integrated set of beliefs, goals and meanings which can be used in explaining intricacies of the world and promoting positive reinterpretations of negative events through the sacred lens. This perspective is clearly visible in the concept of the religious meaning system which is understood as an idiosyncratic system of concepts related to the sacred and having references to self, other people and the world (Krok, 2009, 2014). Emphasising the fact that the search for meaning plays a vital role in human functioning, the religious meaning system encompasses two dimensions: (1) orientation that evaluates the extent to which religion can help individuals comprehend their lives and the world, and (2) meaningfulness that represents the ability of religion to enable individuals to discover purpose and meaning in their lives.

Research has shown that R/S is associated with positive outcomes in coping processes among late adolescents. Religiousness was beneficial in coping with the stress of difficult situations social-psychologically and processing difficult emotions among American adolescents (Smith, 2003), reduced the impact of life stress on adolescent substance use (Wills, Yaeger, & Sandy, 2003), and enabled young mothers to deal with daily problems (Bert, 2011). Some authors suggest that religion may play a positive role especially on a basis emotion-focused coping (Horwitz, Hill, & King, 2011). One of the potential explanations may lie in the fact that young people often derive positive emotions from private prayers and religious services. Positive reinterpretations of negative events were especially noticeable for religious and spiritual coping. Results demonstrated that religious self-directed coping was related to increased hopelessness, depression, and suicide attempts, while collaborative coping was related to increased reasons for living among African American adolescents (Molock, Puri, Matlin, & Barksdale, 2006). Spiritual coping and religious decision-making were also generally positively associated with health outcomes (Cotton, Zebracki, Rosenthal, Tsevat, & Drotar, 2006).

Yet there are also studies which do not confirm positive relations between R/S and coping. Examining the psychological effects of spirituality on managing stress by adolescents, Carlozzi et al. (2010) revealed that contrary to expectations, spirituality was significantly and positively related to anger and stress. Negative religious and spiritual coping was also associated with increased psychological distress and decreased coping abilities (Bryant-Davis & Wong, 2013). This ambiguity suggests that the character of relations between R/S and coping can depend on the way in which R/S is conceptualized and measured. The findings also imply that relationships between R/S and coping are rather indirect, and depend on the occurrence of potential mediators.

A meaning-making perspective as a mediational factor

The intricacies of the associations between R/S and coping, and their underlying mechanisms can be examined in the context of the meaning-making model, which has been successfully applied in the field of coping and health (Park, Edmondson, Hale-Smith, & Blank, 2009; Park & George, 2013). The model posits that individuals possess orienting systems which provide them with cognitive frameworks enabling them to interpret their experiences and with motivation strengthening personal resources. When encountering difficult or challenging situations, individuals appraise the situations and assign meaning to them. The model proposes two levels of meaning: global and situational (Park, 2013b). Global meaning reflects individuals' general orienting systems and perception of various situations, and consists of beliefs, goals, and subjective feelings. It is constructed early in life and modified on the basis of personal experiences. Being strongly connected to motivation global meaning can influence individuals' thoughts, actions, and emotional responses. Global meaning is often presented as meaning in life. Situational meaning relates to meaning in the context of specific environmental events. It comprises initial appraisals of the situation and the outcomes of revising global and appraised meanings. Situational meaning is generated on the onset of a potentially stressful event and influences the ways in which individuals deal with their stress.

According to the model, individuals' perception of discrepancies between their appraised meaning of a specific situation and their global meaning generates distress, which entails efforts to reduce the discrepancy and ensuing stress (Park, 2010; Park & George, 2013). Meaning making represents processes in which people engage to reduce the discrepancy between

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