

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY, WELL-BEING AND PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT OF INDIAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Introduction

There is a continuous striving in human persons to attain well-being and holistic health. Well-being is more than just the absence of illness, unhappiness or depression. It includes outcomes such as happiness, self-esteem, satisfaction in one's life and positive mood. In this constant quest for well-being, they are supported by factors such as spirituality, perceived social support and economic status.⁶

Researchers have affirmed that holistic health involves a harmonious blending of body, mind and spirit and have shown that spirituality is one human dimension that unifies the above three facets of a person and bring about well-being.⁷ According to Koenig, «Spirituality is distinguished from all other things – humanism, values, moral and mental health – by its connection to which is sacred, the transcendent... spirituality is intimately connected to the supernatural, mystical and to organized religion, although extends beyond organized religion».⁸

Numerous research results have shown that spiritual experiences and religious practices indeed have a bearing on one's well-being and play a vital role in the formation of a well-rounded, integrated personality.⁹ Recent studies on well-being mea-

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⁶ Cfr. S. DEB - K. MCGIRR - J. SUN, *Spirituality in Indian university students and its associations with socioeconomic status, religious background, social support and mental health*, in *Journal of Religion and Health* 55 (2016/5), 1623-1641.

⁷ Cfr. M.A. BURKHARDT - M.G. NAGAI-JACOBSON, *Dealing with spiritual concerns of clients in the community*, in *Journal of Community Health Nursing* 2 (1985/4), 191-198.

⁸ H.G. KOENIG, *Religion, spirituality, and health: The research and clinical implications*, in *International Scholarly Research Network-ISRNI Psychiatry* (2012).

⁹ Cfr. D.V. DIERENDONCK - K. MOHAN, *Some thoughts on spirituality and eudaimonic well-be-*

tures have shown a close association between positive affect and spiritual experiences in spiritually oriented people, which enables them to exhibit a more positive outlook and a higher level of well-being than those who are not spiritually oriented.¹⁰

Together with the spiritual inner resources a person possesses, the support they receive from others can help individuals to relate better and resolve conflicts that may arise in their social interactions.¹¹ Spirituality and social support are mutually supportive because people become truly healthy and happy when they practice “socio-spiritual” values such as forgiveness, compassion, love and relating meaningfully with God, others and nature.¹²

There are several ways through which social relationships can influence health and well-being. According to Cohen,¹³ social support is one of the three social relationship constructs that are strongly related to health (along with social integration and negative interactions). Along with many definitions,¹⁴ social support has been rightly described as an integrated construct that portrays the physical and psychological comfort given to individuals which could produce beneficial outcomes¹⁵ and that perceived social support is a major source of subjective well-being for adolescents.¹⁶ It also «eliminates or reduces effects of stressful experiences

ing, in *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 9 (2006/3), 227-238; D.N. ELKINS, *Psychotherapy and spirituality. Toward a theory of the soul*, in *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 35 (1995) 78-98; K. MOHAN, *Spirituality and well-being. An overview*, in C. MATTHIJS (ed.), *Consciousness and Transformation*, Pondicherry Sri Aurobindo 2001, 227-253.

¹⁰ Cfr. J.E. YONKER - A.C. SCHNABELRAUCH - L.G. DEHAAN, *The relationship between spirituality and religiosity on psychological outcomes in adolescents and emerging adults: a meta-analytic review*, in *Journal of Adolescence* 35 (2012/2), 299-314; J.E. JACOBS - S. LANZA - D.W. OSGOOD - J.S. ECCLES - A. WIGFIELD, *Changes in children's self-competence and values: gender and domain differences across grades one through twelve*, in *Child Development* (2002) n. 73, 509-527; J.E. KENNEDY - H. KANTHAMANI - K. PALMER, *Psychic and spiritual experiences, health, well-being and meaning in life*, in *Journal of parapsychology* 58 (1994) 353-383.

¹¹ Cfr. L.M. RICHARDSON GIBSON - V. PARKER, *Inner resources as predictor of psychological well-being in middle-income African American breast cancer survivors*, in *Cancer Control* (2003) n. 10, 52-59; S. KING - D.N. NICOL, *Organizational enhancement through recognition of individual spirituality. Reflections on Jacques and Jung*, in *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 12 (1999) 234-242.

¹² Cfr. M. TRIPATHI - H.S. ASTHANA, *Spirituality and religiosity as coping strategies in terminal illness*, in *Indian Journal of Health and Wellbeing* (2013/4), 1180-1184.

¹³ Cfr. S. COHEN, *Social relationships and health*, in *American psychologist* 59 (2004/8), 676.

¹⁴ Cfr. M. BARRERA, *Distinctions between social support concepts, measures, and models*, in *American journal of community psychology* 14 (1986/4), 413-445.

¹⁵ Cfr. B.A. ISRAEL - S.J. SCHURMAN, *Social support, control and the stress process*, in K. GLANZ - F.M. LEWIS - B.K. RIMER (edd.), *Health Behaviour and Health Education*, San Francisco CA 1990, 187-215; C.K. MALECKI - M.K. DEMARAY, *What type of support do they need? Investigating student adjustment as related to emotional, appraisal, information, and instrumental support*, in *School Psychology Quarterly* 18 (2003/3), 231-252.

¹⁶ Cfr. P.S. CHU - D.A. SAUCIER - E. HAFNER, *Meta-analysis of the relationships between social support and well-being in children and adolescents*, in *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 29 (2010/6), 624-645; D. MAHANTA - M. AGGARWAL, *Effect of perceived social support on life satisfac-*

by promoting less threatening interpretations of adverse events and effective coping strategies».¹⁷

A major issue to be addressed while studying social support is culture.¹⁸ In fact, people seeking social support depend on the norms and concerns of a given culture. In a collectivistic context (such as India), when people have some personal problems, since community welfare is more important than personal welfare in the eastern culture, they tend to seek social support to a lesser extent than westerners and thus try to preserve harmony and peace.¹⁹

Our aim in this study is to explore the association between the experience of well-being, the status of spirituality and perceived social support of college students in South India.

1. Hypotheses

a) Psychological well-being of Indian college students is significantly associated with spirituality and social support.

b) Spirituality is significantly associated with social support.

c) With regard to gender, there is a significant difference between males and females in spirituality and social support but no significant differences in well-being.

d) Spirituality of Indian college students with a very low income background is significantly lower than the spirituality of those of higher income background.

2. Sample and Procedure

The sample was drawn from an Arts & Science College in a small town in Tamil Nadu, India. After obtaining written permission from the Principal of the college and informed consent from the students, the questionnaires were administered to them in groups of about 100 each. Demographic variables of age, gender, exam results, religious affiliation, family income of parents and domicile details were also collected.

954 students of the 2nd and 3rd years (women: 22.4%, 2nd year: 50.2%) belonging to 10 different Under Graduate courses completed self-report questionnaires. The response rate was 100%. Mean age was 19.48 years, SD = .94 years (range 17.34 - 26.52 years). Socio-demographic data, presented in Tab.1 indicate that the majority of the students come from the low-income group (70.1%), live with their parents (87.1%) and belong to the Hindu religion (91.2%).

tion of university students, in *European Academic Research* 1 (2013/6), 1083-1094.

¹⁷ S. COHEN, *Social relationships and health*, cit., 677.

¹⁸ Cfr. S.E. TAYLOR - D.K. SHERMAN - H.S. KIM - J. JARCHO - K. TAKAGI - M.S. DUNAGAN, *Culture and social support: Who seeks it and why?*, in *Journal of personality and social psychology* 87 (2004/3), 354.

¹⁹ Cfr. *ibid.*

3. Well-being Index - WHO 5

The 5-item World Health Organization *Well-Being Index* (WHO-5; Psychiatric Research Unit - WHO, 1998) is a global rating scale that measures perceived subjective well-being. WHO equates mental health to positive well-being, therefore WHO-5 has been developed as a short, self-administered questionnaire containing positively worded items related to positive mood, vitality and general interests. Studies have shown that emotional functioning can be measured reliably and can be used as a screener for depression.²⁰

The participants were asked to rate how well each of the 5 statements applies to them in the previous two weeks. The scores were then computed using the Likert scale from 0 (none of the time) to 5 (all the time). Thus, the raw score could be between 25 (maximal well-being) and 0 (absence of well-being).

In our sample Cronbach's alpha was .70.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Sample characteristics	
Age (years)	19.48 (SD=.94)
Gender	
Male	77.6%
Female	22.4%
Course of study	
English Literature	9.2%
Mathematics	22.4%
Physics	8.5%
Chemistry	16.9%
Computer Science	10.8%
Computer Applications	6.4%
Digital Print Media	3.4%
Business Administration	5.0%
Commerce	8.5%
B. Com -	8.8%
Year of study	
2nd	50.2%
3 rd	49.4%
Previous semester result	63.92 (SD=11.19)
Arrears	
Due to absence	7.4%

²⁰ C.W. TOPP - S.D. OSTERGARRD - S. SONDERGAARD - P. BECH, *The WHO-5 well-being index: A systematic review of the literature*, in *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 84 (2015) 167-176.

Due to failure	63.8%
Income of parent (monthly)	
Rs. 5,000 – Rs. 10,000	70.1%
Rs. 10,000 – Rs. 20,000	21.9%
Rs. 20,000 – Rs. 30,000	5.5%
Rs. 30,000 – Rs. 40,000	1.0%
Rs. 40,000 and above	1.5%

Religion	
Christian	7%
Hindu	91.2%
Muslim	1.5%
Other	0.1%
Non-believer	0.2%
Residence	
Parents	87.1%
Relatives	3.8%
Friends / Rooms	3.8%
Hostel	4.9%
Other	0.3%

4. Measures

4.1. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support - MSPSS

The *Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support* (MSPSS)²¹ is a self-report questionnaire that assesses the subjective perspective of social support. It is a 12-item scale, measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from very strongly disagree (1) to very strongly agree (7). The respondents' data was computed to measure the perceived adequacy of support that the student receives from three important sources namely, *family* (items 3, 4, 8, and 11), *friends* (items 6, 7, 9, and 12) and *significant other* (items 1, 2, 5, and 10). The total scores derived from these 3 factors give us the level of perceived social support and the manner in which it helps them to manage their stress.²²

In our sample Cronbach's alpha for total perceived social support was .84. For the three different dimensions, the alpha was as follows: Family = .75; Friends = .79; Significant other = .80.

²¹ Cfr. G.D. ZIMET - N.W. DAHLEM - S.G. ZIMET - G.K. FARLEY, *The multidimensional scale of perceived social support*, in *Journal of Personality Assessment* 52 (1988) 30-41.

²² Cfr. D. MAHANTA - M. AGGARWAL, *Effect of perceived social support on life satisfaction of university students*, cit.

4.2. Spirituality Assessment Scale - SAS

The Spirituality Assessment Scale (SAS)²³ is a self-report questionnaire that assesses one’s subjective perspective of spirituality. It is a 28-item scale having four subscales and measured on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6), the total instrument having an alpha coefficient of 0.92. The data of respondents was computed to measure their perceived spirituality based on four separate dimensions of spirituality namely, Purpose or Meaning in life (items 18, 20, 22, 28), Innerness (items 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 17, 23, 24, 27), Interconnectedness (1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 19, 25, 26) and Transcendence (3, 5, 11, 13, 15, 21). The total scores derived from these four subscales give us the grade of perceived spirituality (Howden, 1993).

In our sample Cronbach’s alpha for the total perceived spirituality was .85.

5. Results and Discussion

Bivariate correlation was computed in order to test the association between the variables. T-test of independent samples was done to test gender differences. A one-way ANOVA was performed to test differences in three groups of low, medium and high income background. Analysis was performed using the statistical software SPSS, version 25, and JASP, version 0.8.5.

5.1. Association between variables

Correlation between variables being measured along with their alpha of Cronbach are reported in tab. 2.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations – Total Sample (Table 1)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Cronbach's α
1.WHO	—						0.704
2.SAS	0.279 ***	—					0.854
3.MSSP_TOT	0.282 ***	0.511 ***	—				0.838
4.MSSP_PP	0.227 ***	0.424 ***	0.821 ***	—			0.800
5.MSSP_FR	0.176 ***	0.365 ***	0.775 ***	0.468 ***	—		0.788
6.MSSP_FAM	0.255 ***	0.394 ***	0.717 ***	0.395 ***	0.316 ***	—	0.750

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

²³ Cfr. W.L. HOWDEN, *Development and psychometric characteristics of the Spirituality Assessment Scale*, Texas 1993.

Bivariate correlation results show that well-being is positively associated with spirituality $r(952) = .28, p < .001$. Prayer experiences like meditation, yoga, reflective silence, reading of Scriptures help young people to experience spiritual well-being. Studies done among college students, especially in India regarding the association between their well-being and spirituality evidence this finding.²⁴

Similar results have been found for well-being and perceived social support, $r(952) = .28, p < .001$. Well-being is positively associated with all the three specific dimensions of the Social Support scale, namely significant other (MSSP_PP), $r(952) = .23, p < .001$, friends (MSSP_FR) $r(952) = .18, p < .001$, and family (MSSP_FAM), $r(952) = .26, p < .001$. Research on adolescents in India have shown that social support received from parents, friends and significant persons enhances their well-being and satisfaction with life.²⁵

Furthermore, a medium association has been found between spirituality and social support $r(952) = .51, p < .001$. This finding is significant because, as earlier studies have shown, social support is a good predictor of growth in spirituality.²⁶

5.2. Gender differences

This study also investigated the differences between females and males in the level of the constructs involved. The Pearson correlations according to gender are presented in Tab. 3.

Independent Samples T-Tests were performed and the results obtained support the idea that there are some differences in the level of spirituality. In fact, females' score of spirituality is significantly higher ($M = 133.77, S.D. = 14.26$) than that of males ($M = 128.57, S.D. = 16.52$), $t(943) = -4.134, p < .001$, although with a low effect size Cohen's $d = -0.324$. This result is very similar to that of very recent studies done in India, firstly among 300 college students (150 males and 150 females) in Rajkot and among 600 college students in Ahmedabad, wherein the spirituality level of female students was found to be higher than that of male students.²⁷

²⁴ Cfr. M.A. KHAN - M. SHIRAZI - M. AHMED, *Spirituality and life satisfaction among adolescents in India*, in *Journal of Subcontinental Researches* 3 (2011/7), 71-84; H.G. KOENIG, *Religion, spirituality, and health: The research and clinical implications*, cit.; K. MOHAN, *Spirituality and well-being. An overview*, in C. MATTHIJS (ed.), *Consciousness and Transformation*, cit.; M. TRIPATHI - H.S. ASTHANA, *Spirituality and religiosity as coping strategies in terminal illness*, cit.

²⁵ Cfr. P.S. CHU - D.A. SAUCIER - E. HAFNER, *Meta-analysis of the relationships between social support and well-being in children and adolescents*, cit.; S. DEB - K. MCGIRR - J. SUN, *Spirituality in Indian university students and its associations with socioeconomic status, religious background, social support and mental health*, cit.; D. MAHANTA - M. AGGARWAL, *Effect of perceived social support on life satisfaction of university students*, cit.

²⁶ Cfr. S. DEB - K. MCGIRR - J. SUN J., *Spirituality in Indian university students and its associations with socioeconomic status, religious background, social support and mental health*, cit.

²⁷ Cfr. T.L. ZALAWADIA, *Efficacy of gender and religious status on spiritual intelligence and psychological well-being of college students*, in *The International Journal of Indian Psychology* 4 (2017/3),

Table 3. Pearson Correlations – Males & Female

	WHO		SAS		MSSP_TOT		MSSP_PP		MSSP_FR		MSSP_FAM	
WHO	—		0.304	***	0.342	***	0.247	***	0.242	***	0.274	***
SAS	0.267	***	—		0.455	***	0.346	***	0.289	***	0.365	***
MSSP_TOT	0.259	***	0.510	***	—		0.785	***	0.742	***	0.681	***
MSSP_PP	0.211	***	0.424	***	0.825	***	—		0.348	***	0.345	***
MSSP_FR	0.154	***	0.379	***	0.788	***	0.500	***	—		0.251	***
MSSP_FAM	0.242	***	0.386	***	0.718	***	0.389	***	0.329	***	—	

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001; Males below the diagonal, Females above the diagonal.

Similar results have been found for the total score of perceived social support. Females’ score of perceived social support is significantly higher (M = 5.60, S.D. = 0.97) than males’ score (M = 5.20, S.D. = 1.11), $t(952) = -4.741$, $p < .001$, although with a low effect size Cohen’s $d = -0.368$. An earlier study done among 100 college students in Delhi, India has shown similar results; females’ total score of social support is higher than that of males and in both the studies, females’ score of support from parents is significantly higher (Cohen’s $d = -0.438$) than that of males.²⁸

Table 4. Group Descriptives

	Group	N	Mean	SD	SE
WHO	Male	740	2.50	1.03	0.038
	Female	214	2.67	1.11	0.076
SAS	Male	736	128.57	16.52	0.609
	Female	209	133.77	14.26	0.986
MSSP_TOT	Male	740	5.20	1.11	0.041
	Female	214	5.60	0.97	0.066
MSSP_PP	Male	740	5.02	1.51	0.056
	Female	214	5.67	1.41	0.096
MSSP_FR	Male	740	5.18	1.43	0.053
	Female	214	5.31	1.38	0.095
MSSP_FAM	Male	740	5.40	1.33	0.049
	Female	214	5.81	1.15	0.079

88-95; A. DESAI, *Efficacy of gender and age on spirituality and psychological well-being of adults*, in *The International journal of Indian Psychology* 3 (2016/2), 83-92.

²⁸ Cfr. D. MAHANTA - M. AGGARWAL, *Effect of perceived social support on life satisfaction of university students*, cit.

Table 5. Independent Samples T-Test – gender

	t	df	p	Cohen's d
WHO	-2.140	952	0.033	-0.166
SAS	-4.134	943	< .001	-0.324
MSSP_TOT	-4.741	952	< .001	-0.368
MSSP_PP	-5.648	952	< .001	-0.438
MSSP_FR	-1.165	952	0.244	-0.090
MSSP_FAM	-4.107	952	< .001	-0.319

Note. Student's t-test.

5.3. Income differences

We conducted a *one-way* ANOVA in order to find some differences in the levels of spirituality in three different groups of students belonging to three different kind of family income background (Group 1 = ≤ 5000 -10000, N = 669; Group 2 = ≤ 10000 -20000, N = 209; Group 3 = ≤ 20000 +, N = 76). Results are shown in tab. 6.

Table 6. Post Hoc Comparisons – Income

		Mean Difference	SE	t	Cohen's d	p tukey
Group 1	Group 2	-1.870	1.275	-1.466	-0.116	0.298
	Group 3	-7.452	1.970	-3.783	-0.467	< .001
Group 2	Group 3	-5.582	2.174	-2.568	-0.348	0.026

Results show a significant difference in the groups $F(2, 942) = 7.550$, $p < .001$, with a very low $\eta^2 = 0.016$ and $\omega^2 = 0.014$. Spirituality increases from Group 1 (M = 128.72, S.D. = 16.08) to Group 2 (M = 130.59, S.D. = 16.47) and Group 3 (M = 136.18, S.D. = 14.82). The Tuckey post hoc test reveals that this increment of spirituality mean score from Group 1 to Group 3 is statistically significant (7.45, $p < .001$, with a medium effect size Cohen's d = 0.467). We obtained similar increments from Group 2 to Group 3 (5.58, $p = .026$), with a medium effect size Cohen's d = 0.467) but not from Group 1 to Group 2 ($p = .298$).

While some studies show that there is no one to one correlation between spirituality and material wealth, the result from this study is coherent with some earlier studies which declared that young people belonging to very low income background have a lower level of spirituality than that of higher income background.²⁹

²⁹ Cfr. S. DEB - K. MCGIRR - J. SUN, *Spirituality in Indian university students and its associations with socioeconomic status, religious background, social support and mental health*, cit.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Educators

The first finding is that spirituality and well-being of Indian college students are significantly associated so, a spiritually sound young person will also tend to be psychologically healthy and happy. Hence, to possess an integrated personality as well as holistic spirituality, they could be encouraged to involve in spiritual activities like meditation, personal prayer, study of Scriptures and apply those values in everyday living.

Secondly, the level of spirituality of Indian female college students is found to be higher than that of males and the association between spirituality and well-being is stronger in females than in males. In India, more women than men have recourse to a spiritual way of life and also fulfil religious practices like praying daily, fasting and going to churches / temples while the men are busy doing business or working. The beneficial outcome of such a scenario is that women become the primary teachers of spirituality and religious practices to their children, as more women than men spend time with their children.

A small increase was found in the level of spirituality in students with higher income background as compared to those with very low income. We make a mention of it here because of the focus on “holistic spirituality” that was measured in this study. While faith in God might be similar in people of all income groups, the difference might be due to the need of those from low income background to work hard for food, clothing, housing and education that makes them to “practice religiosity” and not arrive at “holistic spirituality”.

Young people could be helped to understand that spirituality is more than merely seeking divine help to fulfil needs and wants but that which helps to grow in the following four dimensions; transcendence, purpose in life, innerness and interconnectedness.

This study also shows that spirituality of young people is enhanced with positive support from family, friends and significant people and thus the communitarian nature of young people’s spirituality is reaffirmed. Young people could be encouraged to join prayer groups like Jesus Youth, Couples for Christ, Praise and Worship groups and live their “communitarian spirituality” in a joyful manner and to ensure that their spirituality and well-being are well integrated, they could actively involve in volunteerism and in groups such as YMCA / YWCA, Scouts and Rovers and social justice fora.

A few limitations of the study are; sample of students is from a single college; a bigger sample of students from a cross section of the state would be beneficial. Secondly, it must be noted that Indian students might find it difficult to understand the exact meaning of the items of questionnaires.

In conclusion then, we affirm that the well-being of a young person is intrinsically related to their experience of spirituality and these two are in turn, enhanced by the social support they receive.

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