

Research Paper

Spirituality in Psychological Research: Conceptual Challenges, Empirical Insights, and Future Directions

Chandan Kumar^{1*}, Pratibha Singh²

ABSTRACT

Spirituality has become a key subject in psychology over the last ten years and is understood to be different from religiosity and has been conceptualized as a multidimensional meaning-seeking, meaning-connection, and meaning-transcendence search. The studies present significant correlations between spirituality and well-being, such as increased life satisfaction, resilience, and coping but the effects differ in various populations and in some cases are neutralized after controlling the baseline attributes. Recent research sheds some light on mediating processes, including compassion, forgiveness, gratitude, and meaning-making, that describe how spirituality can be related to psychological outcomes and how they fit into positive psychology themes. Applied research moves out to workplaces and therapy where spirituality brings engagement and facilitates healing, but there are dangers of instrumentalization and ethical issues. Cultural variability is another factor that makes the measurement difficult since scales that are developed in the West do not necessarily reflect collective or Indigenous manifestations of spirituality. The need to be more rigorous is reinforced by methodological issues such as self-reporting, a lack of longitudinal data, and the inadequate attention to negative aspects. This paper summarizes these conceptual issues, summarizes the empirical evidence over the last ten years and outlines the future directions. It advocates the use of an integrative methodology that integrates methodological rigor, cultural sensitivity, and practice, and places spirituality as a vibrant source of meaning-making and resilience in modern psychology.

Keywords: *Spirituality, Religiosity, Well-Being, Cultural Sensitivity*

Spirituality is a debatable yet significant variable that is being studied in psychology in the past decade. Although meaning, values, and inner life have always been the focus of psychology, spirituality puts emphasis on personal experiences of the sacred or transcendent, unlike religion, which is usually associated with institutions and doctrines. Spirituality is a personal quest of meaning, coping, and well-being and, as such, it is an appealing field to psychologists. There has been an increased interest due to a number of factors. Most individuals currently identify themselves as spiritual, without being religious, and thus psychologists have been investigating how it impacts mental health and resilience. Spiritual themes are overlapped by positive psychology, which is concerned with hope,

¹Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Jagjiwan College, VKSU, Ara, Bihar, India

²Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Mahatma Gandhi Kashi Vidyapith, Varanasi, UP, India.

*Corresponding Author

Received: October 08, 2025; Revision Received: November 10, 2025; Accepted: November 15, 2025

Spirituality in Psychological Research: Conceptual Challenges, Empirical Insights, and Future Directions

gratitude, and forgiveness. Researchers were also driven by global crises and, in particular, COVID-19 to consider spirituality as a stress coping resource and to deal with uncertainty. Spirituality is hard to measure, however. Varied tools record different things, e.g. meaning, connectedness or transcendence and results are difficult to compare. However, studies indicate the stable correlations between spirituality and well-being, healthy coping, compassion and life satisfaction. Spirituality is even tested as a predictor of well-being in some studies but the results are inconclusive. Spirituality and job satisfaction and resilience are also linked to workplace research. Overall, spirituality is not a one-dimensional concept, but rather a multidimensional one. This paper summarizes its research in the field of psychology, difficulties in defining and measuring it, and what we have learned so far. It is aimed at mapping the existing knowledge and pointing to the future directions, demonstrating how spirituality can enable people to seek sense and strength in changing times.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

The definition of spirituality in psychology is not easy since it cannot be categorized easily as intelligence or personality. Spirituality to some refers to religious faith and shared activities whereas to others it is a personal quest of meaning, transcendence or a tie to God, nature or humankind. The fact that spirituality is flexible renders it rich and therefore hard to definitively measure. Scholars tend to divide spirituality and religiosity. Religiosity is linked to rituals, doctrines and institutions whereas spirituality is a more general and deep inner sense of significance and unity. The differentiation of religiousness and spirituality by Pargament remains a defining presence in the field particularly with the increasing number of people who are neither religious nor spiritual, especially the youth. This change has made spirituality more relevant beyond organized religion into multicultural and secular context. Spirituality has been measured using a number of tools. Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS) represents the total of existential and religious well-being, whereas Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (DSES) represents daily transcendent emotions, including awe or gratitude. The broader instruments such as the Spiritual Attitude and Involvement List (SAIL) have dimensions that are connected to self, others, nature and transcendence. These tools raise the complexity of spirituality, and they also complicate the comparison of studies with varying methods. There are still controversies on whether spirituality is a constant characteristic, a condition, or a process. Both approaches influence the approaches to research- cross sectional, longitudinal, or narrative. The cultural background further complicates the situation, as a lot of the steps designed in the West focus on the individual meaning and might overlook the collective or community spirituality present in the African, Asian, or Indigenous traditions. Recent years of cross-cultural research have led to the demand of more context-specific tools. Researchers also examine the mechanisms by which spirituality influences well-being. Some interpret it as a coping mechanism, some as a source of virtues such as compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude and others as cognitive schemas that guide people in their self-perception and their perception of the world. Such mechanisms tend to intersect. Overall, it can be seen that spirituality in psychology is variously defined and measured as religious practices, or existential meaning-making, and contested as either trait, state or process. This plurality makes research more difficult, yet it is an indication of the diversity of the spiritual life. In this paper, spirituality is considered a multidimensional variable that encompasses transcendence and meaning, but is sensitive to cultural variations.

Spirituality in Psychological Research: Conceptual Challenges, Empirical Insights, and Future Directions

The past decade has seen the growth of the study of spirituality in psychology to other fields like mental health, coping, workplace well-being, and therapy. Even though methods and measures were different, there are common themes that have arisen.

1. Spirituality and Mental Health.

Research has always indicated a connection between spirituality and improved psychological well-being. Indicatively, Bozek et al. (2020) discovered that the well-being of young adults was enhanced by spirituality based on making them adopt healthy behaviors. Nevertheless, the results are not unanimous: Huijs et al. (2024) demonstrated that spirituality was initially a good predictor of well-being, although certain effects lost significance when they adjusted baseline measures, although such dimensions as trust in life were significant. This brings out the multidimensionality of spirituality.

2. Mediating Pathways

The recent studies pose the question of how spirituality works. Yildirim-Kurtuluys and others (2022) discovered that spirituality promotes compassion and life satisfaction, which subsequently lead to well-being. Other literature highlights the importance of meaning-making, forgiveness, gratitude, and hope as important mediators particularly in stressful times like the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Workplace Spirituality

This is also found in the organizational setting in terms of spirituality. Makkaoui (2024) discovered that Moroccan employees who perceived their job as spiritually meaningful stated an increase in well-being. Spirituality in the workplace is connected to meaningful work, belonging and correspondence of individual and organizational purpose. Trust and compassion promote spiritually supportive environments by leaders that increase engagement and decrease burnout.

4. Clinical Applications

Spiritual or religious therapies are becoming more of a subject of study. According to Bouwhuis-Van Keulen et al. (2023), they are as effective (or in some cases even more effective) than non-spiritual ones, particularly with spiritually oriented clients. According to Lucchetti et al. (2021), the inclusion of spirituality in holistic mental health care is also increasing, but the ethical sensitivity is essential.

5. Cultural and Contextual differences.

The impacts of spirituality differ in different cultures. The study by Counted (2018) revealed that although attachment-based spirituality usually foretells well-being, the problems like a sense of being forsaken by God might worsen distress. Peck (2025) emphasized that individuals understand spirituality both personally and culturally, implying that quantitative methods need to be used to supplement qualitative methods.

6. Mixed Findings

Not all results are positive. Other researchers (e.g., Huijs et al., 2024) have noted diluted effects following the controls, whereas other researchers could indicate that strict or antagonistic spiritual beliefs could be detrimental to well-being. Various definitions and measures complicate comparisons, which is a reminder that spirituality is a complex and contextual construct and not a universally beneficial parameter.

Spirituality in Psychological Research: Conceptual Challenges, Empirical Insights, and Future Directions

In general, the studies conducted during the last decade indicate that spirituality is typically associated with improved mental health and well-being, primarily due to such aspects as compassion, meaning, and trust. Its impact extends past the sphere of personal life into the workplace and therapeutic practice, and cross-cultural research shows a varied impact as well as mixed impacts. Spirituality should rather be understood as a multidimensional construct whose effects are dependent on the context in which it is examined, the population, and the dimension under investigation.

DISCUSSION AND SYNTHESIS

The studies conducted over the past ten years indicate the shift of spirituality to the margins to mainstream psychology, but evidence is still uneven and needs to be critically reflected. A number of themes can be identified: the promise of the role of spirituality as a well-being predictor, processes through which it may be mediating, the role of cultural context, its use in practice, and lingering methodological issues.

1. Promise and Puzzle

Generally, spirituality has been associated with well-being, satisfaction of life and coping in different populations. It is reminiscent of the emphasis of positive psychology on meaning, gratitude, and forgiveness. However, such results as those of Huijs et al. (2024) indicate that its predictive strength decreases when well-being at the baseline is included. This leads to the issue whether spirituality is an individual predictor or it overlaps with other characteristics like optimism and social support.

2. Mediating Processes

The more recent literature sheds light on the mechanism of spirituality. Research (e.g., Yildirim-Kurtuluse et al., 2022) indicates that its impact on well-being is mediated by compassion, forgiveness, hope, and meaning-making. The findings inform clinical practice, but mediators in different cultures differ- compassion can be more pronounced in collectivist cultures and meaning is dominant in individualist cultures.

3. Cultural Specificity

The scales used to measure spirituality are usually Western-constructed, which expose it to the risk of losing the cultural richness. As Peck (2025) demonstrates, personal accounts of spirituality are diverse and overlooked by standardized measures. The choice is whether to balance comparability with authenticity and this may involve pluralistic approaches that involve quantitative and qualitative approaches.

4. Applied Contexts

Spirituality has come to workplaces and therapy. Makkaoui (2024) determined that workplace spirituality helps employees feel better, whereas Bouwhuis-Van Keulen et al. (2023) established that spiritually integrated therapies are effective with clients, particularly those having existential issues. However, there are still risks: spirituality can be used within the workplaces to achieve productivity, and therapists have to walk the fine line between neutrality and beliefs of the clients.

5. Methodological Issues

Self-report and cross sectional research designs are strong in research because they restrict causal assertions. The instruments are very diverse and it is hard to compare them. Negative connotations of spirituality, such as guilt, struggle or dogmatic beliefs, are not well studied,

Spirituality in Psychological Research: Conceptual Challenges, Empirical Insights, and Future Directions

which may lead to an unrealistically positive image. There is a need to have stronger longitudinal, mixed-method, and culturally sensitive research.

6. Integrative Understanding

In general, spirituality can be well understood as a context-related, multidimensional construct and it has mediators that determine outcomes and is culturally and situation-specific. Going forward, psychology needs to strike a balance between three promises, namely (1) using rigorous approaches, (2) honoring cultural and existential richness and depth and (3) without trivializing or instrumentalizing spirituality, exploring applications. This balance would further enhance the knowledge of human meaning-making during the uncertain times in psychology.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

During the last ten years, psychology has developed the field of spirituality as a significant aspect of human experience that has been constantly associated with well-being, resilience, and coping. Spirituality is no longer regarded as an ambiguous or purely philosophical notion, but has been empirically assessed using more and more complex, multidimensional scales. Although it is found that it has positive relationships with life satisfaction and less distress, these relationships are not similar; they differ in context, culture and personal interpretation. One of the significant accomplishments has been the identification of the mechanisms that describe the way in which spirituality is translated into a psychological outcome, this includes compassion, gratitude, forgiveness, and meaning-making. However, longitudinal data warns us not to generalize, as the benefits of spirituality are conditional and depend on already existing dispositions.

Cultural variability is still in the focus. Western-based research based on individualism cannot adequately encompass Indigenous or collectivist cultures in which spirituality is interwoven in community and ecology. Future research should use culturally aware tools and pluralistic research methods to prevent bias and guarantee inclusiveness. Applied research is both promising and dilemmatic. Spirituality can also improve engagement in workplaces, but there is still a risk of instrumentalization. Spirituality-informed therapy may enhance the healing process in therapy when the values of the client are in line with the approach, though must be approached ethically to avoid imposition.

In the future, 4 priorities can be singled out:

1. Longitudinal and experimental designs to achieve methodological rigor to determine causality.
2. Inquiry that is not one-sided but also encompasses the struggles and conflicts of spirituality, and not only its advantages.
3. Polished measures that are able to measure existential and transcendent dimensions in cross-cultural settings.
4. The mixed-method techniques that combine the breadth of quantitative and the depth of qualitative.

In summary, spirituality does not exist as a universal panacea but is a complex and context-specific subject making humans flourish. Cultural humility, methodological innovation and conceptual clarity can make the following decade bring us a more comprehensive picture of how spirituality can assist people to endure suffering, seek meaning and dream of wholeness.

REFERENCES

- Bouwhuis-Van Keulen, A. J., Hovens, J. E., van Schaik, D. J. F., Braam, A. W., & van den Brink, R. H. S. (2023). A multi-level meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials comparing religion- and spirituality-based therapy to non-R/S treatments. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10503307.2023.2241626>
- Božek, A., Nowak, P. F., & Blukacz, M. (2020). The relationship between spirituality, health-related behaviors, and psychological well-being in university students. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 1997. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01997>
- Counted, V. (2018). Relational spirituality and quality of life, 2007 to 2017: An integrative research review. *Health and Quality of Life Outcomes, 16*, 75. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12955-018-0895-x>
- Huijs, T., Braam, A. W., Kruijzinga, R., Jacobs, N., Reijnders, J., & Simons, M. (2024). Spirituality as a predictor of well-being, mental distress, or both: A four-week follow-up study in Dutch and Belgian adults. *Religions, 15*(2), 179. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020179>
- Lucchetti, G., Lucchetti, A. L. G., & Vallada, H. (2021). Spirituality, religiousness, and mental health: A review of the current scientific evidence. *World Journal of Clinical Cases, 9*(26), 7620–7631. <https://doi.org/10.12998/wjcc.v9.i26.7620>
- Makkaoui, M. (2024). Spirituality as a predictor of psychological well-being at work: Evidence from Moroccan employees. *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 8*(1), 24–37. https://journalhss.com/wp-content/uploads/JHSS_SPRT8.pdf
- Pargament, K. I. (2013). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred*. Guilford Press.
- Peck, C. E. (2025). Perceptions of spirituality and of God: A qualitative psychological exploration. *Qualitative Psychology, 12*(1), 44–59. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/8561>
- Underwood, L. G. (2011). The Daily Spiritual Experience Scale: Overview and results. *Religions, 2*(1), 29–50. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel2010029>
- Yıldırım-Kurtuluş, H., Meral, K., Kurtuluş, E., & Kahveci, H. (2022). Serial multiple mediation analysis of spirituality, compassion, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being in adults. *International Journal of Psychology and Educational Studies, 9*(4), 1160–1172. <https://doi.org/10.52380/ijpes.2022.9.4.870>

Acknowledgment

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Kumar, C. & Singh, P. (2025). Spirituality in Psychological Research: Conceptual Challenges, Empirical Insights, and Future Directions. *International Journal of Indian Psychology, 13*(4), 972-977. DIP:18.01.089.20251304, DOI:10.25215/1304.089