Spiritual Struggle and Spiritual Growth of Bereft College Students in a Christian Evangelical University

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Spiritual Struggle and Spiritual Growth of Bereft College Students in a Christian Evangelical University

Melinda G. Rhoades

Andrea C. Walker

Abstract

This article examines spiritual struggle in bereft Christian evangelical students and how struggle might potentiate spiritual growth. The death loss of a close person can result in shattered assumptions about the world that trigger spiritual questions and struggle (Chen, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006; Pargament et al., 1998), and spiritual struggle can be a catalyst for growth (Lord & Gramling, 2014; Magyar-Russell et al., 2014; Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2011). To our knowledge, spiritual growth has not been measured utilizing the actual voices of those struggling with the loss, nor has it been measured in Christian evangelical populations who may find it more threatening to yield to spiritual questioning. The Spirit-centered Change Model (Buker, 2015) guides our conceptualization of spiritual growth from a Christian evangelical perspective. Utilizing a mixed methods design, bereft college students (n=161) at a Christian evangelical university answered questionnaires about religious coping, daily spiritual experiences, meaning in life, and open-ended questions about their spiritual growth and how students' beliefs about God had changed after the loss. Compared to non-bereft peers, bereft students reported higher daily spiritual experiences, but bereft students who struggled spiritually reported less meaning and daily spiritual experiences than bereft students who did not struggle. Narrative responses indicated that spiritual struggle simultaneously tended to reflect more expansive beliefs around God and a deepened spirituality, according to the Spirit-centered Change Model. Results reflect a first empirical step toward measuring spiritual growth as epistemological change.

Introduction

In 2018 there were 18.9 million college students in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2019), and 39% of college students have experienced a death loss within the past two years (Balk et al., 2010). Furthermore, 64%–87% of Americans report believing in God (Hrynowski, 2019), and college students in particular report desire for colleges to support their religious and spiritual needs (Astin et al., 2011). College students are known to struggle when they experience the death of a close person, and religion during such times can be both a source of comfort and struggle (Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2012). Collectively, these findings imply that clinicians would serve their bereft college-aged clients well by tending to their spiritual needs. Past research has measured transformational aspects of bereavement (Bray, 2013; Gerrish et al., 2009; Hai et al., 2018; Krosch & Shakespeare-Finch, 2017; Michael & Cooper, 2013; Patrick & Henrie, 2015; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Wagner et al., 2007), but research measuring spiritual growth as a separate outcome of bereavement is scarce.

A major death loss can challenge a survivor's assumptions about the world and trigger related questioning about God and spirituality (Chen, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Thanatology researchers and clinicians recommend encouraging openness and exploration of related spiritual questions but also suggest that process is more difficult with clients from cultures with stronger and more homogenous belief systems around death (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Christian evangelical religious groups may embody this type of culture, as they tend to incorporate goals regarding specific religious outcomes and value a singular form of religious expression, and students at Christian evangelical universities report significantly different religious experiences than those at secular universities (Walker et al., 2015; Walker & Rhoades, 2021). Furthermore, past research has found spiritual struggle and questioning potentially to provide an impetus for growth, especially during bereavement (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Lord & Gramling, 2014). It is possible that spiritual struggle could be a conduit for spiritual growth in Christian evangelical students when facing a close loss. The interplay of these factors fuels the current study to examine spiritual struggle, and perceptions of spiritual growth, in bereft college students at a Christian evangelical university. We begin with a review of spiritual struggle and other religious and spiritual development variables, and then describe a new theoretical lens, the Spirit-centered Change Model (Buker, 2015), which guides this study.

Religious and Spiritual Development

Religious Coping

Only a few studies have examined the relationship between bereavement and religious outcomes in college students, and most of those studies involved measures of religious coping, a concept built primarily from the work of Pargament (1998). Religious coping encompasses both positive and negative styles in response to life stressors and is frequently measured using either the RCOPE or the shorter Brief RCOPE (Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2011; Pargament et al., 2013). Positive coping involves expression of assimilated religious and spiritual constructs, and negative coping allows for expansion of those constructs through accommodation of new information gained through the experience of bereavement. We summarize related literature here, but Pargament et al. (2013) identified needs for additional research examining the ramifications of religious coping with spiritual constructs and utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Positive coping is defined as acting on a sense of connectedness to a higher power and others and is typically linked to better physical and mental health, posttraumatic growth, and improved religious and spiritual outcomes (Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2004; Pargament et al., 2011; Pargament et al., 2013). In a meta-analysis, Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) found that those who utilize positive religious coping are more likely to experience positive outcomes, including spiritual growth. Though bereaved college students report being more likely to use positive religious coping than negative religious coping (Lee et al., 2013; Pargament et al., 1998), Christian evangelical students' reports vary. A recent study with bereaved university students found that those who identified as Christian were more likely to report positive coping to be more helpful but actually utilized negative religious coping more frequently (Collison et al., 2016). Another study measuring bereaved Christian evangelical students found strong suggestions of low positive coping coupled with more struggle when students experienced close losses, though religious coping was not directly measured (Walker et al., 2012).

Pargament (2000) defined negative coping, also referred to as spiritual struggle, as tension concerning the sacred. Though it has often been found to correlate with poorer outcomes, including poorer physical health, depression, anxiety, apathy toward others, and worse spiritual outcomes (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Lee et al., 2013; Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2004; Pargament et al., 2011; Pargament et

al., 2013; Van Dyke et al., 2009), research is mixed on this front (Exline & Rose, 2013). Grieving a close loss relates to both increases and decreases in different aspects of religiosity (ter Kuile & Ehring, 2014). In some cases, negative coping correlated with positive coping, suggesting to researchers that struggle can be a catalyst for growth (Lord & Gramling, 2014; Magyar-Russell et al., 2014; Pargament et al., 1998; Pargament et al., 2011). Employing various kinds of religious and spiritual resources can lead to growth in the long term, even when there appears to be spiritual decline initially (Allmon et al., 2013). Furthermore, a meta-analysis indicated that negative coping is not correlated with declines in spiritual growth and self-esteem but, rather, may provide an impetus for growth (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005). Lord and Gramling (2014) even assert that "Not all negative religious coping strategies are truly 'negative' or maladaptive when measured in a bereaved population" (p. 164). The death of a close loved one provides an opportunity for survivors to re-examine their beliefs, and for many this leads to a more deeply meaningful religious and spiritual life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006).

For Christian evangelicals, however, the struggle may be hidden. Older Christian evangelical students grieving a close loss reported more educational and mental health problems, in comparison with their younger counterparts (Walker et al., 2012), and this may be related to the religious questions and doubts around death that are characteristic of negative coping. These same students also did not access their typical religious and familial resources for support during their spiritual struggles. In another study, Christian evangelical students reported desires for environments open to discussing difficult religious questions around death (Walker et al., 2014), although they often do not experience that. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006) suggested that the degree to which people report experiencing spiritual struggle during loss may partly relate to the degree of support or constraint encountered when attempting to self-disclose their questions. Furthermore, those who do not have available guides in their social contexts to help facilitate positive spiritual change through their struggle with bereavement would be less likely to experience spiritual growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). It is possible that the homogenous belief structure and environmental resources in place for those Christian evangelical students lead to both (a) spiritual questions when close deaths occur and (b) a poverty of reliable support students need to grapple with those difficult questions. The effect this has on Christian evangelical students' perceptions of their spiritual growth remains unknown.

Daily Spiritual Experiences

The construct of spirituality is related to but distinct from religiosity and religious coping, with its own relationship to positive outcomes, including life satisfaction (Van Dyke et al., 2009). Underwood and Teresi (2002) defined spirituality as "a person's perception of the transcendent (God, the divine) in daily life and his or her perception of personal interaction with or involvement of the transcendent in life" (p. 23). The concept of spirituality permeates the boundaries of particular religion to encounter personal experience. The Daily Spiritual Experiences Scale (DSES) was developed to measure concerns addressing questions one may have about life's ultimate meaning, and developers acknowledged their assumption that there is more to life than what is known or understood (Underwood & Teresi, 2002). The DSES has been positively correlated with spiritual growth, positive coping, and better physical and mental health (Cole et al., 2008; Currier et al., 2018; Underwood, 2011; Van Dyke et al., 2009). One study found that college students who were bereaved from a natural death loss reported more daily spiritual experiences than those who experienced a violent death loss and scored significantly higher on the DSES than college students who were not bereaved (Currier et al., 2013). This evidence suggests that the experience of bereavement leads to differences in spiritual experiences, and it is also possible that if a survivor struggles spiritually with the loss, daily spiritual experiences could change.

Meaning in Life

Meaning in life is thought to be a necessary precursor for happiness, and Steger et al. (2006) defined it as "the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and significance" (p. 81). Victor Frankl's (1963) work facilitated thinking about the importance of both having and searching for meaning as an instinctual human motivation. Both presence of and search for meaning in life have thus been important variables in the well-being literature, guiding the development of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006). Presence of meaning in life has been found among university samples to be a key mediator in the relationships between well-being and both religiosity and daily religious activity (Steger & Frazier, 2005). Krok (2015) found significant relationships between the RCOPE and the MLQ, with positive correlations between positive coping and both presence of and search for meaning. Spiritual struggle was negatively related to presence of meaning but had no significant

correlation with search for meaning (Krok, 2015). Meaning in life is considered to be a growth-related variable and may be an important outcome related to the struggles of crises (Steger et al., 2006). College students who are bereft may experience different levels of meaning, and this may be especially true if their spiritual struggles are high.

Spirit-centered Change Model

As an operationally defined term or measured construct, spiritual growth evades academic literature. Various concepts measuring religious development have been operationalized through application of human development theories (for example, see Hathcoat & Fuqua, 2013; Strieb et al., 2010), but participants who are Christian may not view them as capturing the origins of their spirituality or as indicative of what cultivates their spiritual growth. Christian evangelicals have reported different experiences of religiosity and spirituality than their non-evangelical counterparts (Walker et al., 2015). On the other hand, measures emerging from a specifically Christian worldview may not be viewed as applicable outside of Christian groups (Walker et al., 2020; Ji, 2004). This leaves spirituality researchers with a need to develop a way of measuring spiritual growth that is embedded within and emerges from a Christian worldview while also situating the experience within the larger context of what is already known about human religious and spiritual development.

Buker (2015) sought to develop a unified and comprehensive approach, emerging directly from Jesus' writings in the biblical text that inform Christian theology, and incorporating cybernetics of change (Bateson, 1979) to understanding spiritual growth as a change process. According to Buker's Spirit-centered Change Model, spiritual growth embodies an epistemological shift in assumptions about the world, the effects of which can involve a complex interplay of behaviors, cognitions, and values that can be felt individually, experienced relationally, and applied culturally. Spiritual growth as epistemological change is thus embedded in an overlay of cognitive, relational, and systemic perspectives. Buker (2003) applied the principles in the Spirit-centered Change Model to explain addiction recovery as a process of spiritual growth, but it has not yet been applied to the experience of bereavement. Full explanation of the theory is beyond our scope here, but we briefly summarize major concepts.

According to Buker's (2015) model, conventional and unchallenged cultural wisdom dictates that success and self-identity are measured by performance-

oriented definitions of achievement, affluence, appearance, and authority to varying degrees according to cultural group. These performance-based norms lead people to be characterized by behaviors such as comparison, criticism, competition, and conformity. Buker (2015) notes that there may be religious versions of conventional wisdom, which prioritize obedience to authority and view God as authoritarian. Applied to bereavement, conventional epistemology for Christian evangelicals might involve repetitive grief-related responses nested in an orientation toward (a) avoiding any ambiguity around the death, (b) concerns about appearance around one's spirituality in relation to the loss, (c) criticism of responses to losses that do not appear spiritual enough, and (d) conforming to expected death-related religious protocol without question.

In contrast to conventional wisdom, Jesus demonstrates a life of transformative wisdom guided by paradoxical values, such as affluence being defined by gratitude and generosity or achievement being characterized by pleasing God and participating in God's vision for the world (Buker, 2015). Transformative wisdom is relationship-based, challenges assumptions about appearances, and facilitates openness to view the world differently than previously assumed. Applied to bereavement, the transformative epistemology for Christian evangelicals might comprise (a) increased comfort with vulnerability and ambiguity, (b) acknowledging the mysterious and paradoxical in death, and (c) valuing a grieving person's pain over the image being projected. Individuals can progress from conventional to transformative wisdom, essentially changing their epistemology, through Buker's CPR Model (2021), a therapeutic intervention incorporating elements of "connection, perception, and redemption" (p. 1). The pathway for bereaved individuals may involve a transitional stage of uncomfortable spiritual questioning and struggle around the death of a close person. The Spirit-centered Change Model applied to bereavement appears to align well with earlier research that proposes a need for loss to challenge an individual's assumptive worldview in order to lead to post-traumatic growth (Calhoun et al., 2010).

Aim of Study

Collectively, literature points to the idea that grieving a close loss can lead to spiritual changes, and perhaps growth, and that spiritual struggle may be a factor in this. We believe Buker's (2015) model helps to explain this from a Christian evangelical perspective. Our purpose here is to address the remaining questions in literature by first measuring how college students who are bereft from a recent loss

utilize religious and spiritual resources, in comparison with college students who are not bereft. Second, we examine how bereft college students who report low vs. high spiritual struggle differ in how they utilize their religious and spiritual resources. Finally, we supplement quantitative results by exploring levels of epistemology evident in bereft students' narrative responses to questions about (a) the influence of the death loss on their beliefs about God and (b) their own spiritual growth.

Method

To fulfill the study's purpose, we employed a sequential explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell, 2015) utilizing data collected via electronic survey from undergraduate college students at a mid-sized Christian evangelical university located in the Southwest. We first examined the bereft students' scores on religious and spiritual variables and then students' responses to open-ended questions about how the loss affected students' beliefs about God and about their general perceptions of their spiritual growth. Although the survey utilized several questionnaires, here we present only those relevant to the current study.

Participants

Previous research suggested emotional closeness to be an important variable in grieving college students (Walker et al., 2012), so we focused our analysis on "bereft" students, defined as those who reported a recent loss of a close person. Bereft students indicated "4" or "5" on a scale of 1 to 5 when asked to describe their degree of closeness to the person. The sample included a total of 161 bereft students, though not all 161 completed every questionnaire. Students' ages ranged from 18 to 24 years, with the mean age of 20.4 years. The majority were females (n=119; 73.9%), and the number of students from each year in school increased with each year (30 [18.6%] first-year undergraduates, 38 [23.6%] sophomores, 40 [24.8%] juniors, and 53 [32.9%] seniors). Frequencies of racial/ethnic identities reported were as follows: 30 (18.6%) African American, 5 (3.1%) American Indian, 2 (1.2%) Asian American, 2 (1.2%) Mexican American, 10 (6.2%) other Hispanic, 18 (11.2%) "Other," and 94 (58.4%) White, not of Hispanic origin. In terms of denominational preference, 114 (70.8%) identified as Charismatic/Evangelical or Nondenominational, 24 (14.9%) as Pentecostal or Assembly of God, 8 (5%) as Baptist, 8 (5%) as "other" or not affiliated, 4 (2.5%) as Word of Faith, 1 (.6%) as Orthodox Catholic, 1 (.6%) as liturgical, and 1 (.6%) did not say. Though several

of these religious denominational identifications involve an emphasis on evangelism, subtle differences in beliefs regarding biblical scripture and the Holy Spirit could influence scores on the study variables and how students understand death and conceptualize God.

Sampling and Recruitment

After the university's IRB approved the study, the Registrar sent emails to all undergraduate students ages 18–24, on behalf of the researchers, explaining the purposes of the study and inviting them to participate. If students agreed to participate, they accessed a link provided in the email, which led to an electronic consent form followed by demographic questions and several questionnaires pertaining to losses experienced, religiosity, and well-being. The survey took about 45 minutes to complete. If students completed the entire survey and provided their names and contact information in a separate document, which was not connected to the survey, they received $10 vouchers in compensation for their time.

Instruments

Daily Spiritual Experiences

Underwood and Teresi (2002) developed a 16-item questionnaire to measure the frequency of daily spiritual experiences (DSE). We modified the scale slightly for our purposes in this study by incorporating a Likert-type scale so that students could indicate agreement, rather than frequency, and removing the 16th item, which required a different category of responses. The result was a 15-item questionnaire to be answered according to agreement with the statements (from 1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal). Reliability analysis indicated that removal of item 14 improved the alpha score, so we removed that item from further analysis. The resulting 14-item questionnaire yielded strong internal reliability (α = .917). Example items include, "I feel God's presence," "I feel guided by God in the midst of daily activities," and "I feel a selfless caring for others." Previous research (Underwood & Teresi, 2002) found daily spiritual experiences to correlate significantly with the SF-36 Quality of Life Scale (r = .240) and the Scheirer Optimism Scale (r = .352).

Meaning in Life

Steger et al. (2006) developed a 10-item questionnaire to measure the well-being variable of meaning in life (MIL). The questionnaire comprises subscales of presence of and search for meaning in life. Students answered questions by using a

Likert-type scale (from 1 = absolutely untrue to 7 = absolutely true) according to their agreement with the statements. Reliability analysis indicated that removal of item 9 of the presence scale improved the alpha score, so we removed that item from further analysis. Presence thus comprised four items and search comprised five items leading to alpha coefficients of α = .878 and α = .861, respectively. Example items measuring presence include "I understand my life's meaning" and "My life has a clear sense of purpose." Example items measuring search include "I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful" and "I am always looking to find my life's purpose." Previous research (Steger et al., 2006) found the presence scale to correlate significantly with the Life Regard Inventory (r = .606) and with the Purpose in Life Scale (r = .659), and the search scale to correlate with both scales inversely (r = -.179 and r = -.302, respectively).

Religious Coping

We measured religious coping by utilizing Pargament et al's (2000) brief RCOPE 15-item instrument. The scale comprises subscales of positive and negative religious coping, both of which are calculated by summing responses to associated items using a Likert-type scale (from 1 = not at all to 5 = a great deal), according to level of agreement with the statements. The 7-item positive religious coping (PCOPE) subscale yielded an alpha coefficient of α =.804. Reliability analysis determined that removing item 13 improved the internal reliability of the scale, so those items were removed from further analysis. The resulting 7-item negative religious coping (NCOPE) subscale yielded an alpha coefficient of α = .804. Negative coping is considered by Pargament et al. to represent "spiritual struggle," and NCOPE scores can thus be categorized into high, medium, or low levels of spiritual struggle, based on predetermined cut scores. Example PCOPE items include "Looked for a stronger connection with God" and "Focused on religion to stop worrying about my problems," and example NCOPE items include "Wondered whether God had abandoned me" and "Felt angry at God." PCOPE has been found to correlate with subjective religiousness (r = .80) and NCOPE has been found to correlate with anger coping (r = .33) and anxiety (r = .35) (Ai et al., 2010).

Beliefs about God and Spiritual Growth Questionnaire

Students provided descriptions of their beliefs about God and perceptions of spiritual growth in their answers to three open-ended questions: (a) How has your loss influenced your beliefs about God?, (b) Please describe how you have grown

spiritually since being in college, and (c) What has happened that makes it obvious to you that you have or have not grown?

Analytic Procedures

To test the first hypothesis, involving comparison of bereft vs. not bereft students on religious variable scores, we conducted *t*-tests to compare the means of the two groups on daily spiritual experiences questionnaire (DSEQ), meaning in life-presence (MIL-P), meaning in life-search (MIL-S), positive coping (PCOPE), and negative coping (NCOPE). To test the second hypothesis, we first categorized bereft students into low, medium, and high levels of spiritual struggle, according to established cut scores of the NCOPE variable (Pargament et al., 2000). Only nine students were categorized as "medium," and these were removed from this analysis. We then used *t*-tests to examine differences in DSEQ, MIL-P, MIL-S, and PCOPE when students reported having high vs. low spiritual struggle.

We then qualitatively analyzed the Beliefs about God and Spiritual Growth Questionnaire responses of bereft students reporting high and low spiritual struggle. We coded responses in terms of whether descriptions of the grief loss reflected conventional, transitional, or transformative epistemology, according to the Spirit-centered Change Model (Buker, 2015). The first author engaged in a process involving reading through the entire data set and making notes, re-reading the data and making associations within the notes, assigning general codes to descriptions of students' beliefs about God and any shifts in epistemology, and making corrections so that the themes, labeled by the codes, remained consistent throughout the data. After the codes were finalized, the second author then re-coded the responses of high scoring students independently and noted any discrepancies between her codes and those of the first author. Both authors met to discuss discrepancies, cultivate deeper understanding of how responses might be interpreted through their mutual dialogue, and eventually reach consensus. An outside researcher was then consulted to read through the data and the associated codes to confirm agreement with the finalized codebook.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive analysis determined means, standard deviations, and correlations among all study variables. PCOPE correlated with MIL-P (*r* = .203, *p*= .01) and

DSEQ (r = .445, p < .001), NCOPE correlated with MIL-P (r = -.246, p < .01) and MIL-S (r = .240, p < .01), and MIL-P and MIL-S correlated with each other (r = -.157, p = .05). PCOPE and NCOPE did not correlate (r = .07, p = .379). See Table 1 for variable means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Zero-Order Correlations, and Abbreviations of Study Variables

(N = 161)

Variable (abbreviation)	1	2	3	4	5
Positive Coping (PCOPE)	17.560 (5.984)	.070	.203*	.084	.445***
Negative Coping (NCOPE)		8.843 (3.043)	.246**	.240**	-.157
Presence of Meaning (MIL-P)			15.877 (3.728)	-.157*	.596***
Search for Meaning (MIL-S)				16.617 (5.486)	-.033
Daily Spiritual Experiences (DSEQ)					61.364 (8.255)

Note. Means are on the main-diagonal. Standard deviations are in parenthesis on the main diagonal.   * p < .01; ** p < .05; *** p < .001.

Hypothesis 1

We hypothesized that bereft students would report different levels of spiritual experiences, presence and search for meaning, and positive and negative religious coping. The comparison of the sample with the larger group of non-bereft peers (N = 654), via a series of t-tests with corrections for possible inflation of Type I error, lowering alpha level to .01, yielded that bereft students reported significantly higher DSEQ scores (t[806] = -2.889, p < .01). No significant differences were found in PCOPE (t[829] = .760, p = .210), NCOPE (t[829] = 1.604, p = .109), MIL-P (t[806] = -1.158, p = .247), or MIL-S (t[806] = .621, p = .535).

Hypothesis 2

We hypothesized that bereft students who reported high degrees of spiritual struggle would score differently on measures of daily spiritual experiences, presence of and search for meaning, and positive and negative religious coping, and a series of t-tests with corrections for possible inflation of Type I error, lowering alpha level to .012, mostly confirmed this. Levene's test for equality of variances yielded significant

differences for DSEQ and MIL-P, so we calculated those t-tests by utilizing un-pooled variances and a correction to the degrees of freedom. Students with high spiritual struggle reported significantly lower MIL-P scores (t[88] = 3.005, p = .003), nearly significantly lower DSEQ scores (t[83] = 2.468, p = .016), and nearly significantly higher MIL-S scores (t[143] = -2.409, p = .017). There was a meaningful difference in PCOPE, with high strugglers reporting higher scores (t[147] = -1.678, p = .096).

Qualitative Analysis

Out of the 161 bereft students in the sample, 122 reporting high and low spiritual struggle provided responses to the open-ended questions that were comprehensive enough to be coded. The responses varied from extremely concise phrases to paragraphs of thick, rich detail describing their spiritual experiences. A total of 60 (49.18%) were coded as having conventional epistemology, 33 (27.05%) as having transitional epistemology, and 29 (23.77%) as having transformative epistemology. See Figure 1 for codebook frequencies.

Figure 1

Levels of Epistemological Change for Students Experiencing Low and High Spiritual Struggle

(N = 122)
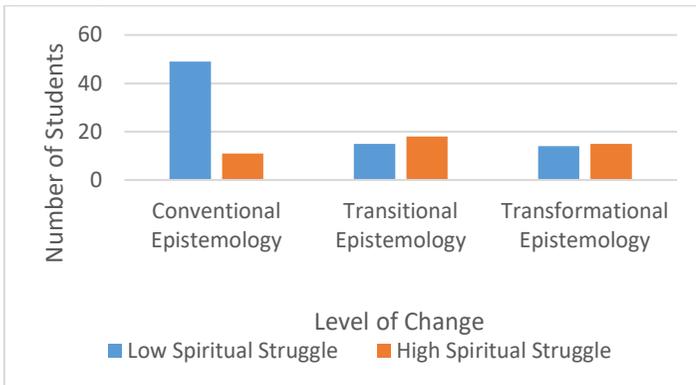
Note: Frequency of codes identified in students' narrative responses to questions about changes in their beliefs in God and descriptions of their spiritual growth.

Low Spiritual Struggle

Out of the 78 individuals classified as having low spiritual struggle, most (N = 49; 62.82%) were coded as having conventional epistemology, while transitional epistemology came in second (N = 15; 19.23%). According to Buker's (2015) model, individuals having a conventional epistemology are achievement-oriented and self-preoccupied, and students' responses reflected this. One such student, a 22-year-old female, described evidence of her spiritual growth as, "I have gone to chapel [and] I am a youth leader." A 21-year-old female participant stated, "I am more consistent in my daily walk with God through prayer and scriptures," and another student replied, "I pray more and read my Bible more" (20-year-old female). In response to the question regarding students' losses affecting their beliefs about God, one student said the following:

> (My loss) only made my love for Him stronger. I have never blamed God or been angry with Him. I believe He loves me and only wants the best for me. . . . I am more secure in my faith and practice it more often. My prayer life has increased as well as my desire to know the things of God (19-year-old female).

Those who exhibited transitional epistemology expressed doubts and questions in terms of their beliefs about God. One student said, "I am confused with certain things" (22-year-old male), while another noted, "It never influenced my beliefs in God. I will and always will believe that God has a reasoning for everything that happens, even if I don't understand his reasoning" (23-year-old female). Another student shared, "It just made me wonder why it was her time to go" (21-year-old female), and yet another replied:

> I remember that I never questioned God or His power or love, but I was strongly confused and asked myself on many occasions, "Why him?" I did not understand how God chooses who dies and who lives, and who gets a second chance at life on earth. I think I still struggle with that question today (20-year-old female).

Other respondents coded as being epistemologically transitioning displayed internal conflict due to their grief loss, or presented characteristics from both conventional and transformative epistemology, such as trust or paradox combined with self-preoccupation or criticism. For example, one 20-year-old female student said:

When I got to college my plan didn't work out and I had to trust God with everything in my life. After I let go of my plans and took in what God had planned for me I realized that his plan was definitely better.

This quotation exhibits both the trust found in transformative epistemology and the self-preoccupation common in conventional epistemology.

High Spiritual Struggle

Out of the 44 individuals classified as having high spiritual struggle, most (N = 18; 40.91%) were coded as having transitional epistemology while transformative came in second (N = 15; 34.09%). High struggling students coded as having transitional epistemology identified similar themes to their low struggling counterparts. Students who were coded as having a transformative epistemology provided answers that displayed an ability to embrace paradox or were characterized by behaviors that are contrary to conventional wisdom, such as showing mercy to others. Examples of responses that show an ability to exist within paradox include a student who stated,

I questioned many things in the world, and simply did not want to accept God's love. I knew it was there, but I was not ready for it. Slowly, with a lot of time and living day by day, it got easier. I really began to seek after God and He just helped reveal His beauty throughout the moments of despair (19-year-old female).

Another student shared, "I have believed, doubted, believed again, stopped believing, and now stand in between faith and reason, having come to terms with my questions and [being] okay with not knowing immediately" (22-year-old male). An example of a response indicating a desire to show mercy to oppressed individuals and to connect with others includes this 18-year-old female student's statement, "[The loss] makes me wonder [re-think] where God stands on suicide and makes me want to spread the word of God more to people who are hurting."

Other themes that were prominent in the transformational group included desires to serve and empower others and to contribute to the world. For example, one 19-year-old female student responded: "I've learned to love people selflessly. To serve whether or not I feel like it. And often I can tell it is (becoming) first nature to me." Another student replied,

I saw that God doesn't will that these things happen, but the beauty is that no matter what it is, he works it to the good in our lives, whether it be teaching us things, or taking us in a new direction, or helping us help other people. It showed me that God is bigger than just a "plan A" God. He can work all things to our good, even when things like this happen (20-year-old female).

One final student stated, in regard to her spiritual growth, "[College] has pushed me and challenged me to build my own relationship with God so that I can be prepared to go out and make a difference" (21-year-old female).

Unexpected Findings Related to PCOPE

We noticed a pattern in the qualitative data that suggested positive coping may relate with epistemological change. Students reporting relatively low positive coping, identified by scoring more than 1 SD below the mean on the PCOPE scale, more frequently described transformative epistemology in their narrative responses (N = 24; 19.35%) than did those who reported relatively high positive coping, identified by scoring more than 1 SD above the mean on the PCOPE scale (N = 16; 12.9%). Additionally, students reporting high positive coping more frequently described conventional epistemology in their narrative responses (N = 27; 21.88%) than did students reporting low positive coping (N = 18; 14.75%).

Discussion

Results generally supported the study's hypotheses. Students experience higher levels of spirituality when bereft, but when they struggle greatly with integrating the loss, students drop on many measures of spirituality. When students report high struggles, they also describe beliefs about God and their own spiritual walk that more frequently suggest a transformative epistemology characteristic of higher-order change, according to the Spirit-centered Change Model (Buker, 2015).

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis, stating that bereft students would report different levels of spiritual experiences, presence of and search for meaning, and positive and negative coping, was only supported in the case of daily spiritual experiences. Bereft students reported more spiritual experiences, but nothing changed significantly in regard to the other variables. This suggests that when students experience a close

loss, they do not shift their learned ways of coping religiously or their established patterns of constructing meaning. Students do seem to seek out more spiritual experiences, a pattern of behavior that may provide needed comfort during grief. Theological researchers and clinicians have similarly suggested the utility of spiritual resources during loss (Chen, 1997; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Although we cannot draw conclusions about changes over time with this cross-sectional design, results suggest this might be the case.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis, stating that bereft students reporting high degrees of spiritual struggle would score differently on measures of daily spiritual experiences, presence of and search for meaning, and positive religious coping was mostly supported. High struggling students searched more for meaning, reporting less of it presently and fewer daily spiritual experiences. This finding is consistent with past research measuring the relationship of negative religious coping with poorer spiritual outcomes (Pargament et al., 2004). The finding that spiritual struggle results in higher degrees of searching for meaning is important, however, in that these bereft college students are not abandoning their spiritual resources altogether but, rather, searching more deeply to broaden their understanding of death and loss in the context of their spiritual and religious beliefs. Thanatology literature suggests that the degree to which bereft individuals can reconstruct spiritual meaning that incorporates (a) continuing bonds with the deceased, (b) belief in the person being at peace and experiencing love, and (c) assurance of a future reunion with the deceased reflects the degree to which bereft individuals are able to tolerate their spiritual questioning and struggle (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). This may also usher in opportunities for spiritual growth via epistemological change, and qualitative findings suggest just this.

Qualitative Analysis

Students' narrative descriptions of belief in God and their spiritual growth often described leaning on current religious and spiritual resources for support, and for most students that was enough. For those moving away from conventional epistemologies, spiritual struggle was common. Students who more often questioned the loss reported more nuanced and complex understanding of God, and this seemed to deepen their spirituality and expand their growth. Narrative descriptions of those who reported higher levels of spiritual struggle included more change talk, such as "I

began to see the world differently . . ." or "My view of God expanded," and the changes seemed to be perceived as positive. The finding that positive coping more often was low for those who reflected transformational epistemology in their narrative responses and high for those reflecting conventional epistemology, suggests that students' typical religious resources oftentimes do not facilitate spiritual growth. Students seem to welcome opportunities to expand their thinking, however. Past research has also found that students prefer environments open to discussing death and asking difficult religious questions (Walker et al., 2014).

Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

Findings of the current study represent the only empirical data of which we are aware that originates from students' own voices explaining their perceptions of their own spiritual growth as an outcome of bereavement. Furthermore, the study adds to the spiritual development literature by contributing the particular perspective of Christian evangelical students, as they are known to report different religious and spiritual experiences than non-evangelical students (Walker et al., 2015). Whereas past studies have focused on measures of religiosity that specifically emerged from a Christian perspective and may not extend beyond protestant Christian groups (Ji, 2004; Walker et al., 2020), or on measures of religiosity that do not acknowledge conceptual origins that are meaningful to Christian evangelical groups (for instance, see Hathcoat & Fuqua, 2013; Streib et al., 2010), this study is guided by a theoretical model that holds promise to unite the teachings of Jesus, held dear to Christian evangelicals, with the larger human development literature regarding cognitive therapy, relational dynamics, and the cybernetics of change.

Findings of the current study also affirm that Buker's Spirit-centered Change Model (2015) provides the structure effectively to identify epistemological shifts, related to spiritual struggle, emerging from students' experiences with bereavement. Students describing these epistemological changes also perceived that they had grown spiritually, but future research should explore religious and spiritual variables across time. Fundamental shifts from conventional elements of comparing, competing, criticizing, and controlling outcomes to appreciating, accepting, and affirming others is not unique to Christian perspectives but also aligns with other religious and philosophical orientations, for instance mindfulness approaches (Birnie et al., 2010; Borders et al., 2010). The Spirit-centered Change Model thus holds merit for possibly explaining spiritual growth in other populations and religious groups, and future research should examine this.

Findings further suggest that the difficulty associated with sometimes tragic and devastating grief losses of a close loved one may, paradoxically, serve to usher in the opportunity for second order epistemological change leading to spiritual growth. Open questioning may be more difficult for Christian evangelical religious groups, as the belief system around death tends to be more homogenous. For this reason, it may be advantageous to incorporate Buker's CPR model (2021) into approaches to counseling bereft clients, especially when Christian evangelical, but possibly with other groups. The spiritual struggle involved in grappling with a death loss is not unique to grief but may also occur during overwhelming events such as developmental trauma, natural disasters, and war-related combat. Future research should consider application of the model in various situational contexts that potentiate epistemological shifts that lead to spiritual growth. Development of a specific instrument to measure spiritual growth as an epistemological shift would assist in facilitating these lines of inquiry.

Limitations

The cross-sectional design of the study limited any conclusions about trends from being made. As with all empirical studies, results should not be generalized beyond the groups represented in the sample. Additionally, we relied on self-report measures such as the RCOPE, DSE, and MiLQ, as well as open-ended answers for the subjects' experiences of spiritual growth. These open-ended responses varied greatly, some rich with detail and others only a few words in length. The ex post facto survey design of this study not only prevented follow-up questions from being asked to the students' open-ended responses but also prevented causal conclusions from being drawn.

Conclusions

Utilizing the Spirit-centered Change Model (Buker, 2015), the current study represents a first step toward conceptualizing spiritual growth as epistemological change. Findings expand literature related to spiritual growth, religious development, and college student bereavement. For bereft evangelical Christian college students, experiencing a close death loss can trigger greater reliance on spiritual resources, and sometimes spiritual struggle can result. Spiritual struggle involves questioning of prior religious beliefs held close, and the resulting tension facilitates expansion of those beliefs toward a more relationship-based set of

epistemological assumptions. Students who described this process also reported benefiting in terms of their spiritual growth.

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