Children's Spiritual Lives: The Development of a Children's Spirituality Measure

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Abstract: Previous researchers who have studied children's spirituality have often used narrow measures that do not account for the rich spiritual experiences of children within a multi-faith context. In the current study, we describe the initial stages of development of a children's spirituality measure, in which items were derived from children's spiritual narratives. An exploratory factor analysis of the items revealed three main factors, including Comfort (Factor 1), Omnipresence (Factor 2), and Duality (Factor 3). As rated by their parents, children from families that were more spiritual and religious had higher scores on the newly-developed measure. Limitations and future directions are discussed.

1. Introduction

Researchers exploring children's spirituality have tended to use narrow quantitative measures and questionnaires (e.g., frequency of religious service attendance) that do not account for the rich spiritual and religious experiences of children in a multi-faith context [1]. Despite increases in religious and spiritual diversity, and the interactions of faith groups in pluralistic contexts, most measures of spirituality used in North America are often derived from Christian-based ideologies [2]. This finding is especially germane to Canada, which is very heterogeneous with respect to spiritual and religious practices. In Canada, Christianity is the predominant religion with approximately 22 million adherents from various denominations. There are over one million adherents to Islam. Sikhism and Hinduism each have approximately half a million followers, whereas Judaism and Buddhism each have approximately 400,000 observers [3].

Existing measures often inadequately reflect the variety of religious and spiritual identities that are present in North American society [4]. Researchers such as Cotton, Larkin, Hoopes, Cromer, and Rosenthal [5], challenge the research community to extend its investigation beyond religious service attendance to include broader spiritual concepts, such as the personal relationship with a higher being. In response, the purpose of the current study was to develop a spirituality measure for children from diverse faith backgrounds in order to capture dimensions of children's spiritual lives common to many faith traditions.

Given that the objective of this research was to examine spirituality in the lives of children living within a pluralistic context, ubiquitous spiritual notions (e.g., relationship with a higher power, purpose and meaning in life, spirit-body dualism) [6] that transcend cultures and creeds were of particular relevance. Our intention was not to oversimplify the complexity of spirituality, but to explore spiritual experiences that appear across religious groups. In particular, children's personal relationship with

the sacred was of special importance, as it is often deemed a robust protective factor against negative psychological outcomes (e.g., [7,8]), and thus may play an important role in their lives.

1.1. Children's Spiritualty

In psychology, the conceptualization of spirituality dates back to the very beginning of the discipline with the work of William James [9]. James advanced the notion of connecting religion to the experiential dimensions of spirituality rather than the institutional aspect, observing that different religions often use similar concepts, such as *divinity* and *transcendence*. Given that the main objective of the current study is to better understand children's spiritual lives, it is germane to understand the evolution of theories concerning children's spiritual development.

James Fowler [10] developed a faith development theory based on the notion of discontinuous stages of spiritual development. This theory is presented in relation to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, and Laurence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. In each of these models, children are acknowledged as having the capacity to progress from concrete to abstract thinking as they mature. Fowler situates the stages of spiritual development within these developmental models, suggesting that, as children mature, they have an increased ability to become more aware and engaged with their spirituality.

In a move away from Fowler's spiritual developmental framework, proponents of the "spiritual child movement" ([11], p. 968) distanced themselves from traditional stage-structural cognitive-based theories. For instance, Hart [12] proposed that the stages of spiritual development are more fluid than were once understood, as children often have the ability to understand complex issues, but may struggle to express themselves. Although children are often perceived at large as egocentric or unable to take another's perspective, Hart emphasized children's seemingly innate ability to recognize complex issues, such as injustice, suffering, and compassion. Based on his anthropological studies and interviews with hundreds of individuals about their spiritual experiences, Hart argued that children often ask existential questions and have the ability for "deep metaphysical reflection" ([12], p. 9).

To date, the study of children's spiritual development continues to challenge researchers [13]. According to Hart ([12], p. 8), defining spirituality is like "trying to hold water in our hands", and so it is not surprising that trying to understand its developmental trajectory is perplexing. However, the field is moving towards clearer definitions of spirituality and conceptualizations of its development [14]. For instance, a social-ecology model has been put forward as means to better understand children's varied contexts and how these factors shape their religious and spiritual development [14]. Boyatzis [13] contends that "children are spiritual beings first and then are acculturated (or not) in a religious tradition that channels intuitive spirituality into particular expressions (rituals, creeds, etc.) that have been passed through the faith tradition" ([13], p. 153). Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of microsystems (e.g., school, religious group) and macrosystems (e.g., cultural landscape and ideology), he suggests that children's relationship with the divine emerges prior to "religious socialization" ([13], p. 153) and is subsequently shaped by the way in which it is cultivated in their environment. Through this framework, children are seen as very much capable of understanding the relation between themselves and a divine entity from a very early age [15]. In the same vein, Hart (2003) argues that spirituality is accessible throughout development, but it is often erroneously considered at the "top of the developmental ladder" ([12], p. 9) and, therefore, out of reach for children.

1.2. Measuring Spirituality

In general, researchers have developed measures mainly oriented to members of Judeo-Christian traditions [2]. Hill [16] proposes that most spirituality measures have been developed in the United States and are often deliberately, or unintentionally, rooted in Christian traditions. As summarized by Hill, experts in the area of measuring development have discussed both the strengths and limitations of developing overarching broad measures of spirituality versus more focused measures of specific

religious traditions. The main challenge, as outlined by Hill, is to then use these measures in studies with appropriate populations to achieve validity and reliability. Sustained research and longitudinal data are necessary to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of both types of spirituality measures (i.e., concepts specific to a religious group versus broad concepts that transcend religious groups).

Underwood and Teresi [17] found that when they used a spirituality measure with adult participants, the term *God* was the most easily understood across religious and spiritual groups. They suggested: "those outside the Judeo-Christian orientation, including Muslims, people from indigenous religious perspectives, and agnostics, were generally comfortable with the word, being able to translate it into their concept of the divine" ([17], p. 24). They reported that questions, in which the term God was used, were not problematic in their factor analysis, which led them to conclude that this term may be appropriate to use across religious groups. Evidently, in recent years, researchers have begun to invest in the development of spirituality measures and have discussed the nuances of item development. However, researchers have tended to place more focus on the development of these measures for adult populations (e.g., [1,18]).

1.3. Children's Spirituality Measures

Despite a recent proliferation of spirituality measures, most of these measures are oriented towards adults [19]. In the early 2000s, Fisher [20] reported finding only one measure designed specifically for children, which was in an unpublished doctoral dissertation. As a result, Fisher developed a children's spirituality measure (i.e., Feeling Good Living Life questionnaire) to provide educators with a tool to efficiently assess the role of spirituality in the lives of children in school. More recently, Fisher [21] reviewed all known spiritualty measures for children and adolescents. In his review of approximately 30 multi-item measures, he identified very few published measures that were specifically developed for school-aged children (7–11 years). The Multidimensional Life Satisfaction Scale for Children (primary school age; [22]), Feeling Good Living Life Spiritual Well Being Questionnaire (5–12 years; [20]), Spiritual and Religious Thriving in Adolescents (9–15 years; [23]), and the Benefit Finding Scale for Children (7–18 years; [24]) are all published scales that have been subjected to factor analysis with child populations.

Since Fisher's [21] review, there have been a small number of newly-developed children's spirituality measures (e.g., [25,26]). For instance, Stoyles et al. [25] developed the Children's Sensitivity Scale for Children, which is centered on children's ability to reflect about themselves and the world but does not include any questions pertaining to a child's relationship with the transcendent. Sifers et al. [26] used a diverse sample to develop and validate a Youth Spirituality Scale for children (7–14 years). The measure was piloted and showed signs of validity and reliability, but is still in the stages of requiring further validation. To date, there are no known spirituality measures that have been developed for school-aged children from a diversity of religious and spiritual backgrounds in Canada. Furthermore, no known measures use Canadian children's multi-faith spiritual narratives as the basis of measure item development.

Notably, Fisher's [20] spiritual measure is the only aforementioned scale that includes items pertaining to children's relationship with the transcendent. Specifically, this measure draws on four domains entitled personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental spiritual wellbeing [20,27]. This measure has been used to examine young children's spirituality in relation to variables, such as children's happiness (e.g., [28]). More recently, Fisher [7] demonstrated that the transcendental domain on his scale had the strongest relation to overall wellbeing. He states that his research "present[s] good evidence for claiming that relating with God is the most important factor for spiritual well-being (from the four factors studied)". Similar to items captured in Fisher's [20] transcendental domain, an objective of the current study is to gain a more nuanced understanding of the qualities that comprise the relationship between children and the transcendent; thus, the Children's Spiritual Lives measure was developed.

1.4. Children's Spiritual Lives

Based on the evolving theories of children's spirituality discussed in recent literature (e.g., [12,13]), researchers should be cautious not to underestimate children's ability to engage with their spirituality; items that comprise quantitative measures should be more sensitive to children's sophisticated spiritual perspectives. Certainly, children's answers on a Likert scale will not capture the complexities and intricacies of spirituality, but can serve as a research tool to quickly gain a better understanding of children's spiritual lives. Indeed, a future objective, for which this study is a stepping-stone, is to refine and validate this measure so that it may eventually be used to better understand the relation between spirituality and psychological health in the lives of children. A quantitative measure, such as this one, can be used to quickly assess the role of spirituality in relation to psychological health in children in both clinical and research settings.

As previously mentioned, items on this newly-developed measure were derived from a qualitative study in which children's rich spiritual narratives were elicited in semi-structured interviews [29]. In this qualitative study, sixty-four children from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds were asked about their thoughts and feelings related to spiritual concepts. Semi-structured interviews were used to better understand the breadth and depth of children's spiritual perspectives; these interviews were coded into salient themes, which were subsequently used to guide item development. Thus, this newly-developed measure was derived from children's narratives and developed in the context of literature supporting the notion that children may have a more sophisticated understanding of spirituality than was once perceived.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

A total of 368 Canadian children (7–11 years, 54% female; $M = 9.2$ years, $SD = 18.44$) from diverse faith and cultural backgrounds participated in the study (see Table 1). In an effort to recruit a diverse sample, participants were recruited through community centers, local newspapers, and public places; on several occasions, a researcher went to these public places and set up a booth to advertise the study and those who were interested participated. Participants were also recruited through a research lab located in a multicultural Canadian city. At the lab, parents and children who were participating in non-related studies in the lab's waiting room were asked if they would like to hear more about an opportunity to participate in a study on children's spirituality. Those that expressed interest participated. As a result of this recruitment strategy, an accurate response rate cannot be reported. Three hundred is the recommended number of participants for conducting factor analysis [30].

Table 1. Parent-reported demographics and religious and spiritual information.

Variable	Response Choices	Frequency (%)
How Religious	Not Religious	77 (20.9)
	Somewhat Religious	190 (51.6)
	Very Religious	90 (24.5)
	Not Identified	11 (3.0)
How Spiritual	Not Spiritual	51 (13.9)
	Somewhat Spiritual	216 (58.7)
	Very Spiritual	83 (22.6)
	Not Identified	18 (4.9)
Place of Worship	Not at all	90 (24.5)
	Once a week	111 (30.2)
	Once a month	58 (15.8)
	3–4 times a year	69 (18.8)
	Once a year	35 (9.5)
	Not Identified	5 (1.4)

Table 1. *Cont.*

Variable	Response Choices	Frequency (%)
Religious Affiliation *	Catholic	138 (37.5)
	No Religion	52 (14.1)
	Muslim	48 (13.0)
	Jewish	48 (13.0)
	Hindu	23 (6.2)
	Christian (no denomination)	14 (3.8)
	Eastern Orthodox	12 (3.3)
	Protestant	11 (3.0)
	Anglican	11 (3.0)
	United	11 (3.0)
	Baptist	5 (1.4)
	Presbyterian	9 (2.4)
	Greek Orthodox	6 (1.6)
	Baha'i	4 (1.1)
	Wiccan	1 (0.3)
	Sikh	1 (0.3)
	Buddhism	1 (0.03)
	Evangelical	1 (0.03)
	Pentecostal	1 (0.03)
	Lutheran	1 (0.03)
Cultural Group **	North American	146 (39.7)
	South American	16 (4.4)
	European	245 (66.6)
	Oceanian	0 (0.0)
	African	14 (3.8)
	Asian	88 (24.0)
Languages Spoken	One	110 (29.9)
	Two	144 (39.1)
	Three or more	114 (31.0)

Note: * Approximately 10 percent of parents reported more than one religious affiliation. For example, one parent reported that their family was Catholic and Muslim; ** Approximately 60 percent of parents reported more than one affiliated cultural group. For example, one parent reported that their family was Filipino, Canadian, and Irish. Reported groups included: French, Scottish, Greek, Korean, Irish, Polish, English, Canadian, German, Dutch, Italian, Jewish, Romanian, Chinese, Mexican, Belgium, Cherokee Indian, Welsh, American, South Asian, Ukrainian, Indian, African American, Afghani, Lebanese, Swedish, Danish, Portuguese, South African, Finnish, Pakistani, Arabic, Egyptian, Persian, Czech, Spanish, French-Canadian, Filipino, and English.

2.2. Materials and Procedure

Parents signed a consent form and completed a brief demographic questionnaire with questions pertaining to their cultural background, socio-economic status, and religious affiliation. In addition, on the demographic questionnaire, parents rated the level of religiosity and spirituality in their family (i.e., very religious/spiritual, somewhat religious/spiritual, not at all religious/spiritual). Parents also reported how often they go to a place of worship (i.e., not at all, once a year, 3–4 times per year, once a month, once a week).

Children's assent was obtained before the completion of the Children's Spiritual Lives measure. Children completed the questionnaire by answering questions relating to spirituality on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The researcher read the questionnaire aloud to children who then answered the question by indicating their response on the measure. In some cases, children who could read verbalized that they wanted to complete the items independently and were permitted to do so. Consistent with Ubani and Tirri [31] and Cotton et al. [5], the term *God* was used in the measure's items, but children were encouraged to use their preferred term for a higher power. To respect certain faith orientations and traditions that do not use the word *God*, this term was presented as *G-d* on this spirituality measure. Children received a small toy for their participation.

3. Analyses and Results

3.1. Initial Item Development

In the initial stage of this measure's development, a pool of items related to children's spirituality was created. This pool consisted of 64 items that were largely based on themes that emerged in a qualitative study in which children's diverse ideas of spirituality were explored (i.e., for more detail regarding the themes in which the questions were rooted, please see [29]). Items were developed in the context of existing research and theory in the field of children's spirituality. Following item development, these items were reviewed and edited for clarity and theoretical relevance by expert researchers in developmental and educational psychology, both of whom have an expertise in children's spiritual and moral development.

3.2. Exploratory Factor Analysis

A factor analysis is typically used to examine the inter-correlations between large numbers of items and to reduce the items into smaller groups known as factors [32]. In the current factor analysis, the reported factors contain correlated variables that measure similar underlying dimensions in the data that are interpretable in a theoretical sense. Given the fact that some participants did not answer all 64 items (11% of the total number of observations), the pattern for the missing values was examined using the multiple imputation option in SPSS version 20 (Armonk, NY: IBM Corp). The results suggested that the missing values did not follow a pattern; thus, missing data fell into the Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) category. In order to address the problem of missing observations, multiple imputations were computed. The Mersenne Twister generator was used as the option that fits best to impute MCAR. This process yielded five datasets with no missing values.

Examination of these five datasets suggested that there were no differences across them; for that reason, the first imputation was used for the current factor analysis. A principal component analysis was run with Varimax extraction and Kaiser normalizations. Factor solutions were considered in the rotated matrix based on the following criteria: (a) Eigenvalues of 1.0 or greater; and (b) factor loadings greater than 0.3 [33]. The rotated solution included 12 factors. Items and loadings on three factors are presented in Table 2. Thirty-three items were eliminated, as they did not load onto these factors.

Table 2. Factor loadings for exploratory factor analysis with Varimax rotation.

Factor 1 (Comfort)	Factor Loadings
I pray to G-d or talk to G-d when I feel sad	0.84
When I want to feel better, I talk or pray to G-d	0.81
I ask G-d for help	0.76
When I pray to G-d or talk to G-d I feel better about things	0.76
G-d helps me by making me feel strong	0.75
G-d helps me by making me think of new ideas	0.74
I pray to G-d or talk to G-d when I feel sad or worried about something	0.73
G-d helps me by giving me advice	0.72
I pray to G-d because I want to thank G-d for all of the good things in my life	0.71
When I think about G-d, I feel happy	0.71
G-d can make people feel better	0.69
I pray to G-d or talk to G-d when someone is sick or when someone dies	0.69
G-d keeps people company when they feel sad and lonely	0.63
G-d listens to my thoughts and wishes	0.68
I make wishes to G-d and the wishes come true	0.58
% Variance	220.70
Eigenvalues	140.52
Cronbach's Alpha	0.96
Skewness	0.78
Kurtosis	−0.04

Table 2. *Cont.*

Factor 2 (Omnipresence)	Factor Loadings
G-d always knows how I feel, even without talking	0.45
G-d is everywhere in the world and watches over everybody	0.50
G-d created all the people in the world and knows all of them	0.46
I think G-d listens to everyone	0.50
It is impossible for G-d to watch over everybody (reversed item)	0.63
There are too many in the world for G-d to know all of them (reversed item)	0.62
There are too many people in the world for G-d to listen to (reversed item)	0.68
G-d will never know what I am thinking to myself (reversed item)	0.57
% Variance	80.66
Eigenvalues	50.54
Cronbach's Alpha	0.91
Skewness	0.79
Kurtosis	−0.05
Factor 3 (Duality)	
Every person has a body and something inside them, like a soul or spirit	0.78
People do not have a soul or a spirit (reversed item)	0.66
Everyone has a body, but having a soul or a spirit is fake (reversed item)	0.66
I think that people have something like a soul or a spirit that lives inside them	0.64
% Variance	50.62
Eigenvalues	30.60
Cronbach's Alpha	0.81
Skewness	1.06
Kurtosis	1.24

3.3. Description of Factors

Although 12 factors emerged, three factors that showed the strongest factor loadings and that could be interpreted in a theoretical sense were chosen. Factor 1 (i.e., Comfort) includes 15 items that focus on God as a key source of support and comfort. Items range from seeking help or new ideas from God to talking or praying to God to feel happy or comforted. Factor 2 (i.e., Omnipresence) includes eight items that concern the ubiquity of God. These items are centered on themes of God being able to hear and see everyone as an omnipresent being and creator of the world. Factor 3 (i.e., Duality) includes four items and encompasses the notion of dualism, that is, having a soul or a spirit apart from the body (see Table 2). A fourth factor was initially included on the measure (i.e., four items), but was later eliminated, as it was not interpretable in a theoretical sense.

3.4. ANOVAS and Post-Hoc Analyses

There were significant differences between parents' reports of their families' religiosity (not religious, somewhat religious, very religious) and children's scores on Factor 1 (Comfort) $F = (2,356)$, 71.86, $p < 0.001$, Factor 2 (Omnipresence) $F = (2,356)$, 53.97, $p < 0.001$, and Factor 3 (Duality) $F = (2,356)$, 20.04, $p < 0.001$. Post hoc analyses revealed that there were significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between all three levels of religiosity on all factors. In sum, the more religious parents rated their families, the higher their children's scores on the factors. There was one exception; there was no significant difference between very religious and somewhat religious groups and children's scores on Factor 3 (see Table 3).

Table 3. Means and standard deviations by group (parent reported levels of religiosity and spirituality) on children's factor composite scores.

Factors	Level of Religiosity/Spirituality	*M* (*SD*)
Factor 1 (Comfort)	Not Religious	42.79 (14.65)
	Somewhat Religious	57.96 (11.91)
	Very Religious	63.76 (7.56)
	Not Spiritual	42.33 (14.48)
	Somewhat Spiritual	55.97 (13.18)
	Very Spiritual	63.15 (8.69)
Factor 2 (Omnipresence)	Not Religious	24.99 (8.54)
	Somewhat Religious	32.56 (6.46)
	Very Religious	35.15 (4.78)
	Not Spiritual	24.55 (8.93)
	Somewhat Spiritual	31.75 (7.08)
	Very Spiritual	34.80 (5.30)
Factor 3 (Duality)	Not Religious	15.01 (3.68)
	Somewhat Religious	16.95 (2.79)
	Very Religious	17.79 (2.33)
	Not Spiritual	14.65 (3.85)
	Somewhat Spiritual	16.77 (2.79)
	Very Spiritual	17.88 (2.50)

There were significant differences between parents' reports of their families' spirituality (not spiritual, somewhat spiritual, very spiritual) and children's scores on Factor 1 (Comfort) $F = (2,350)$, 43.01, $p < 0.001$, Factor 2 (Omnipresence) $F = (2,350)$, 33.73, $p < 0.001$, and Factor 3 (Duality) $F = (2,350)$, 19.20, $p < 0.001$. Post-hoc analyses revealed that there were significant differences ($p < 0.05$) between all three levels of spirituality on all factors (see Table 3). In sum, the more spiritual parents rated their families, the higher their children's scores on the factors.

4. Discussion

The Children's Spiritual Lives measure was developed specifically for Canadian school-aged children and grounded in their narratives. An exploratory factor analysis revealed items that clustered together to create three interpretable factors (i.e., Comfort, Omnipresence, Duality). As expected, children of parents who rated their families as very religious or very spiritual had higher scores on the Children's Spiritual Lives measure. This is consistent with Boyatzis' [13] conceptualization of spiritual development. Although spirituality may be deeply intrinsic, it is fostered and channeled by one's environment. Thus, it can be conjectured that children who have more opportunities to interact in highly religious and spiritual contexts, may have a spiritual life that is being more intentionally nurtured and supported.

Indeed, these emergent factors suggest that children have the ability to think about abstract spiritual concepts in a very personal manner, such as seeking comfort from a higher power. Children were also able to engage with concepts of the divine being omnipresent. That is, they perceived the transcendent as having supernatural qualities that go beyond time and space. They were also able to respond to items on the measure, which were related to the idea of having a body that is separate from a spirit or a soul. This suggests that children have some degree of understanding concepts related to duality and may draw distinctions between human and divine properties. Consistent with the underpinnings of the spiritual child movement [11] children may be more inclined to connect with their spirituality than was once thought and, thus, their ability for spiritual engagement should not be overlooked. This measure makes a valuable contribution by offering a more elaborate and nuanced depiction of the relationship between children and the transcendent through its identification of three common factors. These factors give insight into the ways children view and relate to the transcendent.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

This newly-developed measure has not yet been validated by a confirmatory factor analysis; thus, continued exploration of the scale's strengths and weaknesses is warranted to ensure that it is appropriate to use with children from diverse faith and cultural backgrounds living in a pluralistic society. As recommended by Hill [16], this measure should be further validated with a population similar to the one for which it was developed. The diversity in this sample is reflective of the religious landscape found in Canada [3]. Nonetheless, it should be noted that a large percentage of the sample, albeit from various denominations, is Christian. Continued efforts should continue to be made to recruit a diverse sample to better understand how these factors are perceived across cultures and creeds. In future iterations of this measure's development, participant response rates will also be collected to better understand the sample; this was a limitation of the current study.

In future research concerning this measure's development and refinement, items will be reviewed by expert researchers and clinicians in the field of children's spirituality and spiritual development. Focus groups and interviews with children considered to be "spiritual exemplars" [34] from diverse traditions could also provide deeper insight into the applicability of these items across religious and spiritual groups. Alternate styles of response-choices will also be considered. For instance, allowing the opportunity for children to add qualitative comments after responding to a Likert question may yield richer responses (e.g., mixed methods design) and a deeper understanding of children's spiritual perspectives. Once the scale has reliable and valid psychometrics, convergent validity with existing measures, such as the transcendental subscale of the Feeling Good Living Life questionnaire [20] and the religious well-being subscale on the Spiritual Well Being Scale [35], should be explored. Taken together, the present study provides an examination of the initial stage of measure development in a sample of diverse school age Canadian children.

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