

# It's a journey... Emerging adult women's experiences of spiritual identity development during postgraduate psychology studies in South Africa<sup>†</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** The spiritual identity development of six South African, emerging adult, female, postgraduate psychology students (21 to 22 years old) was explored using reflective writing exercises and individual interviews. Interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed that spiritual identity exploration occurs continuously across the lifespan, with optimal opportunities for deepened development during emerging adulthood. Development happens in context and is enhanced by the postgraduate psychology training experience, as well as exposure to spiritual and religious diversity. Reflections on challenging events result in sophisticated meaning-making processes regarding purpose in life, as well as the authoring of a spiritual life story. There is an intricate and reciprocal relationship between the development of a spiritual identity and the psychology profession – spirituality, values and worldviews can be regarded as important aspects of the therapeutic process for many individuals.

**KEYWORDS:** contextual lifespan development, exposure to spiritual and religious diversity, meaning making, psychology profession, postgraduate training experiences, reflections on challenging life events, spiritual life stories

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## Introduction

'Challenging the meaning of life is the truest expression of the state of being human' (Frankl, 1985, p. 133).

Finding meaning and purpose in life is intertwined with the human experience. When confronted with life's challenges, complex moral questions and ambiguous ethical situations, individuals draw on their spiritual worldviews and identity. Psychologists and mental health practitioners often engage in the meaning-making journeys with their clients and thus need the spiritual competence to reflect on their own value systems, navigate diverse worldviews and maintain meaning in their own lives. Spiritual identity development is therefore interconnected with postgraduate psychology students' journeys towards becoming psychologists. This article aims to unpack themes related to spiritual identity, its developmental-contextual nature (e. g. in South African emerging adult female psychology students in their early twenties) and the integration of spiritual competence in the psychology profession and curriculum.

## Spiritual identity development defined

Existential questions such as *Why am I here?*, *What is the meaning of this all?* and *How do I make sense of suffering?* reflect the human drive to move beyond the mundane to higher, more meaningful horizons (Frankl, 1985; Smith et al., 2011). As conceptually overlapping, interrelated and multidimensional

constructs, religion and spirituality are integral to the human experience, with religious and spiritual development constituting unique domains of human development (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Spirituality can be described as a grounded sense of connection and a personal relationship with the transcendent. It involves finding one's inner potential in relation to what is greater than the self, as well as contributing to the greater good and the world beyond the self. Spirituality assists individuals with existential meaning-making processes regarding their own lives, as well as in the lives of others (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2016; King & Boyatzis, 2015). Spiritual identity can thus be defined as a chosen personal and individualised identity that reflects the role of spirituality in a person's life. It encompasses values, belief systems and meaning-making processes and pertains to formulating a purpose, fidelity to an ideology and maintaining a lifestyle that is consistent with one's worldview (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Russo-Netzer & Mayselless, 2014). Many research studies have alluded to the intricate relationships between spirituality, identity and healthy development (Cisheng et al., 2017; Han et al., 2019; Schwalm et al., 2021; Shek et al., 2019).

## Meaning-making in context: Spirituality in South Africa

Meaning-making happens in context. Personal spiritual expression is embedded in social contexts and individuals' spiritual development trajectories are unique, but also related to their contexts (King & Boyatzis, 2015). Global trends and transitions in society such as consumerism, materialism,

individualism (Smith et al., 2011), climate change (Pfautsch & Gray, 2017) and large-scale public health crises (Salman et al., 2020; Shahbaz et al., 2021) will affect how emerging adults make meaning of the world and the future (Arnett & Jensen, 2015; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2016; Padilla-Walker, 2016; Smith et al., 2011).

In South African society, emerging adults are challenged to make sense of the past, integrate experiences of the present and create a new future for themselves and the country. South African emerging adults are living in a transitional period of political, economic and social change which deepens their search for meaning (Alberts & Durrheim, 2018; Brittian et al., 2013; Knoetze, 2014; Van Lill & Bakker, 2020). Furthermore, living in this rainbow nation context involves living in a multicultural and multifaith society, where diverse worldviews, beliefs, social experiences and discourses must be considered (Apostolides, 2016; Brittian et al., 2013).

Freedom of religion and belief is enshrined in the South African Constitution (1996). South Africans have always acknowledged the role that spirituality plays in various areas of life (Edward & Thwala, 2010). Although the majority of South Africans identify as Christians, society provides various opportunities for the youth to become affiliated with a variety of religious institutions, to explore different faiths and religions and to commit to what they feel comfortable with. The conception of the spiritual realm may be influenced by both Western ideas and African worldviews (Hlatshwayo et al., 2018; Molefe, 2019; Nwoye, 2015). For example, balancing the tenets of globalisation and modernism with African views regarding the harmony between the natural and supernatural world challenges South Africans to incorporate diverse experiences into their faith, lifestyle and sense of self, thus facilitating a process of deepened identity exploration (Brittian et al., 2013; Edward & Thwala, 2010; Knoetze, 2014; Hlatshwayo et al., 2018; Molefe, 2019; Nwoye, 2015).

### Emerging adult spiritual identity development in the university context

Emerging adulthood (i.e. the third decade of life) is a key period for exploring many areas of life and experimenting with various identity alternatives (Arnett, 2016a; 2016b). Internalising a self-defining life story is one of the central psychological challenges during this time (McAdams, 2013). Emerging adults give consideration to a range of ideological possibilities; they are inquisitive about the meaning of life; they explore religious, spiritual and moral perspectives; and they form more complex ideas about their beliefs and spiritual identity (Arnett & Jensen, 2015; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2016; Gutierrez & Park, 2015; Padilla-Walker, 2016).

The university context provides emerging adults with a socially complex, diverse and intellectually stimulating environment that facilitates cognitive and psychosocial growth (Arnett, 2016b; Barber et al., 2013; Mitchell & Syed, 2015). Higher education shapes not only what one believes, but also how one thinks about the world (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2016; Glanzer et al., 2014). A combination of continued brain/neurological development during emerging adulthood and exposure to new ideas in a dynamic learning environment results in a move towards more sophisticated reasoning and subjective understandings of knowledge, the world and themselves (Barber et al., 2013; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2016; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). Baxter Magolda and King (2012) proposed that students move through stances of

absolute knowing, transitional knowing, independent knowing and, finally, contextual knowing where they think abstractly about the world and consider philosophical and existential questions in context. Peers, lecturers, class discussions and academic challenges contribute to the change from more concrete to more abstract ways of knowing (Barber et al., 2013; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

University life also immerses students in diverse social contexts, broader interpersonal circles and new friendships, with exposure to role models and extracurricular activities. These changing contextual circumstances facilitate psychosocial growth and the quest toward heightened self-awareness and identity exploration. All this provides fertile ground for deeper reflection on personal beliefs, careers, relationship possibilities and worldviews (Arnett, 2016a; 2016b; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2016; Mitchell & Syed, 2015).

What should be highlighted, however, is that diverse trajectories are evident during emerging adulthood and in the higher education experience (Barber et al., 2013; Mitchell & Syed, 2015). Especially in culturally pluralistic societies, emerging adult students participate in university life while contending with unique personal histories, different levels of preparedness, varied experiences of marginalisation and diverse socio-economic challenges (Barber et al., 2013; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2016; Mitchell & Syed, 2015; Van Lill & Bakker, 2020). Also regarding exposure to religious and spiritual thought in the higher education community and curriculum, Glanzer et al. (2014) argue that emerging adults are exposed to a varied landscape. University experiences are nuanced, multi-layered and unfold through divergent pathways for everyone. It is thus important that the higher education community provides emerging adult students with guidance, scaffolding and mentoring relationships during their existential search for meaning, purpose and identity.

### Spirituality and its importance in psychology

In the psychology profession, the therapeutic process is often intertwined with existential conflicts and crises, questions regarding the meaning of suffering and changes in belief systems. Many scholars have argued that the integration of religion/spirituality in the therapeutic process can improve outcomes (Hodge, 2018; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2018; Parker, 2019; Sim et al., 2021). This is especially important in providing culturally responsive psychological services when working with clients from increasingly diverse religious backgrounds (Hodge, 2018; Parker, 2019). According to Hodge (2018), spiritual competence includes: (a) an awareness of one's personal worldview (and associated values, assumptions and biases); (b) an empathic, strengths-based understanding of the client's spiritual worldview; and (c) the ability to use strategies that are appropriate, relevant and sensitive to the clients' spiritual worldviews. A spiritually competent therapist will cultivate an attitude of epistemological humility, have enhanced insight into clients' challenges (and the complex nexus between presenting problems and spirituality) and be able to negotiate potential value conflicts through sensitive communication and a trusting therapeutic relationship. In addition to this, when spirituality is used as a resource and strength, it can facilitate health and wellness, which will result in better therapeutic outcomes (Hodge, 2018).

Educational standards, professional guidelines and ethical mandates emphasise the importance of integrating aspects of diversity, such as cultural and spiritual competence, in the training of mental health care workers (Hodge, 2018; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2018). Topics related to spirituality and religion are receiving more attention in coursework and supervision (Schafer et al., 2011). However, many scholars in the field are of the opinion that religion and spirituality, as well as the diversity that exists in these domains, are not yet sufficiently addressed in mental health training programmes (Apostolides, 2016; Pearce et al., 2019). For example, Parker (2019) found that nondoctoral school psychologists acknowledged spirituality as an important element of diversity, but expressed the need for additional professional development to support religiously and spiritually diverse students. Hodge (2018) and Pearce et al. (2019) are also of the opinion that multidisciplinary educational programmes with a focus on spiritual competence are needed to equip practitioners to provide ethical and effective services to people from diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds.

From the arguments above, it is clear that the nature of the psychology profession requires spiritually competent therapists (Hodge, 2018; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2018). To prepare for the profession, postgraduate psychology students should be encouraged to continuously reflect on the various aspects of their own identities and worldviews, engage in sophisticated meaning-making processes and develop the competence to work in diverse cultural contexts, with a clear sense of their own spiritual identities. Thus, considering the importance of spiritual identity development during emerging adulthood (Arnett & Jensen, 2015; King & Boyatzis, 2015) and specifically in the journey of becoming a professional and ethical psychologist (Hodge, 2018; Manganyi, 2013; Oxhandler & Pargament, 2018; Parker, 2019; Pearce et al., 2019), the aim of this study is to explore and describe emerging adult psychology students' experiences of spiritual identity development. Furthermore, focusing on a South African sample of postgraduate psychology students (females; 21 and 22 years old) may contribute to a context-specific understanding of spiritual identity development during this developmental stage.

## Methodology

This South African study formed part of a larger research project called 'On becoming a therapist'. Authorisation to conduct this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of the Humanities of the University of the Free State (Ethical clearance number UFS-HUM-2015-82).

A qualitative research approach informed by interpretative phenomenology was followed. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is a participant-oriented, qualitative research approach where the goal is to conduct an in-depth and detailed exploration of how participants make sense of their innermost personal and social experiences. The research exercise is an interpersonal and dynamic procedure of understanding the world from the participants' perspective, while acknowledging the role of the researcher and the research relationship (Alase, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

### Research participants and sampling procedures

In accordance with the rules of the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA, 2019), students intending to become

psychologists in South Africa have to complete an undergraduate (three-year qualification), honours (fourth year of study), and applied master's degree in psychology before they can register for an internship and community service. Entry into especially the master's degree is known for its rigorous selection procedures. Thereafter, students are expected to complete the national examination of the HPCSA and then register as psychologists.

In the current study, participants were recruited from a postgraduate (honours) psychology programme at a university in central South Africa. The proposed study was announced during classes and more information was e-mailed to interested students who could then indicate their willingness to participate in the study. Non-probability, purposive sampling was used to select information-rich cases. Considering the abstract nature of the topic, it was appropriate to select participants who were diverse, introspective and critical in their thinking. Participants had to be registered as postgraduate (honours year) emerging adult psychology students. All gender and ethnic groups were invited. The final sample consisted of six females who were either 21 or 22 years old.

### Procedures of data collection

Every participant completed one reflective writing exercise and one individual interview. To provide participants with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences throughout the year of postgraduate studies, data collection was conducted towards the end of the academic term.

### Self-reflective writing exercise

Self-reflective writing exercises can be described as subjective, first-person accounts of experiences and perceptions. Reflective writing provides individuals the opportunity to own thoughts and feelings, structure perspectives and simultaneously cultivate self-awareness (Filep et al., 2017). The purpose of the self-reflective writing exercise in this study was to document and structure participants' experiences, thoughts and feelings regarding spiritual identity development. After completing the informed consent forms, the reflective writing exercise were emailed to each participant to complete in their own time and at their own pace. Broad open-ended questions regarding spiritual identity development were asked, for example: *How do you understand spiritual identity?; How do you make meaning from challenging experiences in your life?; Do you think that your spirituality has changed since starting postgraduate studies?; How do you think your spiritual identity will influence your work as a future psychologist?.* Participants were encouraged to answer the questions honestly and in their own words.

### Individual interviews

After receiving the reflective writing exercise from each participant, an in-person (face-to-face) individual interview was scheduled. Since the research topic was personal and existential in nature, it was important for the researcher to establish a rapport with participants, to be kind and to reduce tension at the onset of the interview (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Participants were encouraged to relate subjective accounts of their experiences of the world and their personal journeys of spiritual identity development. An interview guide (with open-ended questions aligned with the research focus) was utilised to provide direction, but also flexibility in conducting the semi-structured interviews. The same questions asked during

the reflective writing exercise were posed to participants, giving participants the opportunity to explain their ideas in more depth. Follow-up questions were asked and participants were probed for more specific responses regarding their personal journeys (e.g. thoughts and feelings) of spiritual identity development. For example, follow-up questions included: Can you elaborate on one recent life event that you found challenging?; How did you make meaning of this experience?; How do you think your spiritual identity changed your perspective regarding this challenging event?. In addition to this, each participant's interview was informed by the information from the participant's reflective writing exercise. Paraphrasing and reflection were used during the interviewing process to ensure that the participants had sufficient opportunity to explain themselves. All interviews were audiorecorded and transcribed verbatim (by the second author).

### **Data analysis**

The data were analysed using IPA (Alase, 2017; Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA relies on ideography, an in-depth analysis of individual cases and the examination of individual perspectives in unique contexts. The core principle behind this approach is to examine and explore every case individually before generating general statements (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). All cases were considered individually, whereafter a cross-case analysis was conducted to identify salient themes.

The process of analysis began with considering and examining each case. The verbatim transcription of the individual interviews, multiple readings of the transcripts, 'memoing' and reflections on thoughts and emotions regarding the atmosphere, setting and language use during the interviews were the first steps into the world of the participants and immersion in the data (Alase, 2017; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Next, the source material and researcher notes were transformed into themes that captured the essence of participants' experiences. While it is important to remain grounded in the detail of each participant's subjective experiences, psychological conceptualisation and interpretation were used. This was followed by finding connections between the themes and clustering such themes together based on conceptual connections. Once all the texts of individual participants had been considered and analysed, the researchers conducted a cross-case analysis. Lastly, final themes were used to write a narrative account, elaborating on each theme, using individual extracts from the interviews and the researchers' interpretative comments. To ensure trustworthiness, both authors were engaged in the analytic process. Constant interaction and reflexivity allowed a co-constructive process and the bracketing of researchers' positionality.

## **Results**

This section will start with a short introduction of each of the six participants (pseudonyms are used) and commence with a presentation of the various themes from the cross-case analyses.

### **Individual participants**

Tammy, a 21-year-old white female, came from a loving, Christian home. She had one older sister and her parents were still married. During the interview process, Tammy was experienced as an open-minded, insightful and mature

individual. She gave rich answers and engaged in reflection during the interviewing process. Tammy's process of spiritual development was characterised by continued exploration of the self, from childhood, through adolescence and into emerging adulthood. She found it difficult to arrive at a conclusion regarding her spiritual identity and was still exploring various facets of her identity. Tammy was searching for answers, utilising different sources in her environment (such as her family and friends) to get answers. This search was influenced by fear, confusion and challenging life experiences. Although she was clear about certain values in the spiritual domain of her identity (such as respect and congruence), she recognised that she was still in a period of self-exploration in the hope to commit to a spiritual identity in the future.

Elsa, a 21-year-old female, stayed in a university residence for the duration of her studies. Elsa's peer group and her boyfriend were very important to her and she had a strong support structure. Elsa came across as a warm, loving and empathetic individual. She spoke fast and passionately about her religion and her relationship with God. 'To lead by example' was explained as the core of spiritual identity development in Elsa's story, as she was determined to live her spirituality through her behaviour and not through preaching. Elsa regarded her childhood as the foundation of her spirituality. Elsa's parents had an important role to play in her spiritual identity development, but their influence diminished as she differentiated from her family and had the opportunity to explore her spiritual identity privately and purposefully. Elsa did not question or challenge her spiritual identity critically. She explored this domain of her identity cautiously. She felt guided by religious values and respected the spiritual experiences of others.

Michelle, a 21-year-old female, dreamed of becoming a clinical psychologist. Michelle is an immensely private person. She was shy during the interview and seemed uncomfortable during certain stages of the interview process. The main theme that emerged from Michelle's reflection was her personal relationship with God. She experienced the strength of this connection differently at different times in her life. Through her reflections, it became apparent that religious activities were indispensable to Michelle's spirituality. Michelle was aware that her religion/spirituality influenced her experiences of being a postgraduate psychology student and that her religion/spirituality might influence her career as a psychologist. She was aware of the importance of balancing spirituality and psychology. Michelle indicated a growing interest in spiritual diversity, but little exposure to culturally diverse thought processes. Michelle hoped that she would become more knowledgeable regarding her own spirituality and the spirituality of others as she matured into adulthood.

Retha presented as a mature 22-year-old female student. She had a bursary to study psychology, but financial difficulties remained paramount in her life. Although she had difficulty expressing herself at times, she was passionate and excited about the topic of spiritual identity development and eager to engage during the interview process. The core of spiritual identity for Retha was the relationship that she had with God. She experienced God as a parental figure. Throughout her journey, she established this relationship and in her meaning-making through financial hardship. She felt the need to share her spirituality with others and prioritised the importance of

finding a community. She wanted to help individuals who were suffering like she had suffered while growing up. Although Retha acknowledged cultural diversity, it was still difficult to establish objectivity when she worked or communicated with individuals with diverse beliefs and outlooks. She portrayed a strong focus on the future.

Leana, a 22-year-old female, had an interest in childhood development and believed that it was her purpose to work with children. Although she did not mind fulfilling this purpose through diverse careers, she hoped to pursue a career as a counselling psychologist. Christianity is a moral compass in her life. Leana struggled with the concept of spiritual identity and had doubts when expressing herself. The main theme that emerged from Leana's reflections was a non-judgemental approach to everyone around her. She is a very open-minded individual, who showed great understanding and compassion towards others. What stood out in Leana's reflection was the liberal household in which she had grown up. Leana's spiritual identity and especially her values were influenced greatly by her mother. Leana's story is also a testimony of the importance of a place where adolescents can explore all spheres of their identity in safe boundaries.

Mary is a 22-year-old female, with a passion for forensic psychology and hoped to pursue a career as a clinical psychologist. Mary displayed much self-confidence regarding the topic of spirituality. She did not associate with any religious domination and openly spoke about her personal journey with the sacred. She found it easy to express herself, even though she was hesitant about her understanding of the concept of 'spiritual identity'. The main theme that emerged from Mary's reflection was to *be true to yourself*. Mary's journey of spiritual identity development was an ongoing process. She accepted that her spiritual identity was constantly changing and that she was curiously searching for truth. She acknowledged that her spirituality helped her to see herself and the world in a positive light, but that her spirituality was not her entire identity. Mary was true to herself and very honest regarding her developmental process as an emerging adult.

### **Cross-case analysis**

A cross-case analysis was conducted to determine trends across the individual cases and to identify variations in the identified themes.

#### *A unique and continuing journey*

The participants described their spiritual identity development as a process, with specific changes occurring at different times during their lives. Participants reflected on childhood as a time of life largely influenced by parents and doctrines practised in the parental household. In the absence of abstract thinking during the childhood years, participants concretely made sense of religion and did not engage in questioning: *'...didn't understand and I also didn't question it'* (Tammy). With adolescence, came increased spiritual questioning. The extent of questioning (and conflict with the beliefs of their parents) differed. While some participants overtly questioned and disagreed with their parents, most participants (especially Elsa and Retha) did not challenge their parents' beliefs and authority:

*It was difficult for me in high school because my parents are in a very conservative church – it's like the organ*

*and the people wear hats...I struggled a bit, but I couldn't do anything about it* (Elsa).

During adolescence, participants engaged in spiritual activities, but this was done without much introspection:

*...going to church for me meant nothing...pull up your conscience. Now...it's not about the conscience...it's about growing yourself and knowing who you are in the end* (Retha).

The emerging adulthood years provided participants with the opportunity to differentiate from their family of origin, to explore her own spiritual identity and to make decisions regarding spiritual practices:

*When I was an adolescent, I did not really have that knowledge about it and I did not know how to define myself according to it ... now ... I am into it more than in the past* (Retha).

While the participants acknowledged an increase in the depth of their spirituality during the emerging adulthood years, all mentioned that they were still exploring:

*I'm not exactly sure how I feel about it...I do not know if I know my spiritual identity very well and that it is so fixed...I think it is definitely a journey* (Mary).

Elsa, Retha, Leana and Michelle believed that they had committed to their spirituality, but that it was still deepening:

*My spiritual identity was established when I was young and I therefore believe that it would be difficult to shape a new opinion regarding spirituality...The identity is still the same. I think and believe the same, but my way of doing is slightly more liberal* (Elsa).

The individualised and unique nature of each participant's spiritual identity development journey was evident.

#### *Participants established their own understanding of spirituality and spiritual identity*

These understandings were derived from various life experiences and no two participants' definitions were similar. Most of the participants acknowledged that their upbringing and their parents' beliefs formed a foundation for their first, tentative commitment to a spiritual identity and a starting point from which to navigate:

*It hasn't really changed, because when I started being in this world, knowing who I am spiritually, I have been like that even now. I am still praying, I am still seeing myself as a child of God...I am still defining myself the way I used to define myself way back, you know, when I was born again and came into this world* (Retha).

While they individualised and differentiated from their families as emerging adults, most participants were still relying on their Christian faith to make sense of their spiritual identity. They differed in the extent to which they internalised religion as part of their identities. Leana, Michelle, Elsa and Retha's definitions of spirituality and spiritual identity were influenced strongly by the Christian religion:

*In spiritual identity, it can be something that you understand in terms of how you grew up, that you grew up in this type of environment where they say they are Christians, you are also going to define yourself in that way (Retha).*

Tammy and Mary had encompassing definitions and believed that there was more to spirituality than religion:

*I'm not really a religious person, but I am more spiritual...I've always felt like...connected to something else and I've always relied on that (Mary)*

and

*Spiritual identity is whoever you see yourself as when you are connected to a higher power - whether that be the universe, nature, God or whoever/whatever else (Mary).*

All the participants established unique and personal spiritual practices. Some participants engaged in prayer and went to church, while others prioritised personal reflection and meditation.

#### *Trigger events along the way*

Participants narrated how they constructed meaning through spirituality, especially during challenging times. A variety of challenges were mentioned and included personal hardship (such as relationship struggles and financial problems) and educational difficulties (such as the strain of postgraduate education and the selection processes involved in becoming a psychologist). More generic challenges related to the discomfort experienced when situations or information contradicted their worldviews or when they were confronted with cruelty and unfairness in the world:

*If there is a god who gave us religion, how could he sit back...there is already so much suffering and terrible things in the world; how is there not anything that intervenes? (Tammy).*

Trigger events were a catalyst for increased personal reflection, spiritual questioning, re-evaluation and growth in participants' spiritual identity journeys: *'I feel like my spiritual identity is constantly growing...constantly improving with every challenge that I go through' (Mary)*. Challenges encouraged some of the participants to use spiritual/religious resources and turn to a higher power for comfort and relief:

*I find peace, I find hope...I am able to be resilient...have that self-confidence and self-esteem even when things are not working out the way that I want...In everything God is there, he is aware, that is why he will always come through, and will always help (Retha).*

These participants (and especially Retha, Elsa, Michelle and Leana) choose to see challenges as part of a greater plan that they should accept rather than question:

*This year, especially, I have tried to look at the challenges I am faced with as something that God has deliberately put into my path to make me trust Him more and rely on Him more... (Michelle).*

*...and if something bad happens to you, you wouldn't look for the fault internally and ask questions like 'Am I weak?' or 'What is wrong with me?'. I rather attribute things to the path that I have to take... (Elsa).*

Others (such as Tammy and Mary) were somewhat more self-critical and analysed their own role in adverse outcomes. They questioned their sense of self and reflected on self-improvement and growth:

*I always strive to see an opportunity to grow or learn in every challenge that I face...allowing myself to feel uncomfortable at times in order to grow. As a result, the challenging experiences in my life have all been powerful lessons that I have used to aid me in my further growth and development throughout life (Mary).*

All the participants acknowledged that relying on religion/spirituality facilitated the meaning-making process:

*I believe that you can deal better with challenges and difficult days through a strong spiritual identity...you understand that certain things are only God's plan and that there are not always logical reasons for it (Elsa).*

*I felt like with God by my side, I was able to pull through because most people couldn't...without God I wouldn't have been here (Retha).*

#### *Finding one's voice among diverse others*

Finding one's voice as a postgraduate psychology student was a personal and subjective process for each of the participants. Participants were eager to share their voices with others. They attempted this by maintaining a balance between the search for support from like-minded individuals and dealing with diversity. Finding a friendship circle and associating with others provided a safe and non-judgemental space for Elsa, Mary, Leana, and Tammy to explore their identities honestly and congruently. Others, like Retha, explored and deepened their spirituality in a faith community. All the participants acknowledged the role of significant others in their spiritual identity development: *'I would say that I find meaning in my life through people...my family...'* (Leana). In addition to parents' unquestionable influence, peers and romantic partners were also acknowledged as important role players providing a platform for discussion and deeper exploration.

All the participants were exposed to spiritual and religious diversity during their postgraduate studies and articulated the importance of a respectful, non-judgemental, and open-minded approach to diversity:

*It's not for me to judge...accept and make peace...learn about other religions, cultures so that we can accommodate each other in class, at school and everywhere...we mustn't take other people's sense of autonomy, or belonging, or feeling comfortable away... (Retha).*

Despite their open-mindedness, most participants felt uncomfortable engaging in critical conversations about their spirituality. They preferred to keep their spiritual views private and rather engaged in internal reflection:

*I'm not closed off about it...I celebrate the differences in people...I want to know...If there is a debate on like a touchy subject, it's not like I'll say anything, because I don't want to be involved in confrontation (Mary).*

All the participants tried to understand diverse opinions by considering context, culture and religious upbringing, as well as to find meaning in diversity by looking for similarities across differences and attempting to incorporate different views into their own:

*I have my own religion. I have my special identity. Others, as well, have their own. So respect that...you discover that you are different from me, but we are doing the same thing...things are different, people are different (Retha).*

I think it is something really powerful to be able to acknowledge that that is very different from you and that that is something you would never believe in...then just accept it and allow them to be that way, without it affecting you... (Mary).

### *Spiritual identity development as a postgraduate psychology student*

Postgraduate studies in psychology played a prominent role in all the participants' journeys of spiritual identity development:

*This year provided me challenges, new obstacles and situations...pushed me to be more reflective...to take more quiet time...really question, you know, who I am, who I want to be, how am I going to get where I want to be... (Mary).*

The three most noticeable catalysts for development during the year were 1) experiences of diversity, 2) academic challenges, and 3) selection to the applied master's programme.

As mentioned already, postgraduate studies provide participants with a context filled with diverse people, worldviews, beliefs and faiths. All the participants were cognisant of the diverse composition of the postgraduate psychology class: *'... university has been a good place to kind of realise that there are different people with different values...'* (Tammy). Still, most participants mentioned that religion and spirituality was rarely a topic of discussion in class. They articulated the importance of psychologists being aware of cultural and religious nuances, the hope to learn more about diversity before they became psychologists and an interest in learning about spirituality and different religions. However, most of them were not comfortable in disclosing their opinions in class: *'It doesn't help to attempt to convince others of your spiritual identity; live it and it will be transferred...'* (Elsa). They considered spirituality a very private topic to rather explore in personal relationships, not in class.

*When you have walked a path with someone and they initiate conversation and start asking questions and you can see that they are curious and want to know more about how you do things, then I will share...but I will never force my way onto others (Elsa).*

There was a strong consensus that out of respect for spiritual diversity participants would rather avoid the topic completely during class discussions.

The postgraduate academic year was filled with high workload and pressure, abstract academic challenges and

increased intellectual expectations: *'My spirituality has been challenged since it was an unbelievably stressful year, and the most challenging thus far – in terms of academics...'* (Leana); and *'...during the first semester when we had so little time and it felt like I lost my relationship with God and that part of my life...'* (Michelle). These challenges were often faced in a context of inadequate support and a lack of understanding from family and friends:

*When I call family members, they were not able to help and when I call my friends...they weren't there for me and I was like, you know, this is life (Retha).*

During this steep learning curve, participants struggle to maintain balance in their lives:

*This year has forced me...just question everything...you're pushed much closer to your limits...have to become more critical...reflective of who you are...I grew more in these seven months than I did in my whole undergraduate career and I can say that with confidence, because I genuinely feel that way (Mary).*

As mentioned, the selection process (for entry into the master's programme) was a signal event for all participants (all six participants applied, but only two were selected). Master's selection provoked anxiety for most of the participants and led to an increased questioning of the self:

*You know, I was forced to be super reflective and introspective and think about myself a lot more. I do that already but, you know, I had to do that even more and everything that I was saying was being questioned, so that was tough (Mary).*

Participants utilised this experience to define themselves in a way that would make the outcome of the experience less traumatic. For example, Mary used this experience as a learning curve:

*...I was criticised and obviously I was challenged a lot. I mean it was good for me, because it allowed me to really think about myself a lot more and kind of see parts of myself that might not be working so well... although it wasn't the outcome I wanted...was such a good experience (Mary).*

Leana realised that she could utilise her strengths in different careers:

*...then I just started thinking about different ways...to living the same passion for psychology...I just believed that even though I did not achieve the short-term goal that I wanted to, that there was a bigger plan... wherever I end up will be meaningful and I will find value in what I do even if it isn't exactly what I want to do (Leana).*

Michelle tried to make meaning through prayer, and Tammy tried to investigate what she could do to improve herself:

*In a sense I turned to the viewpoint that there must be some higher power or fate that might play some role in the course of events. At the same time, I know there are more things I might have done differently... (Tammy).*

Retha and Elsa were selected for the master's programme and therefore engaged in far less reflection (regarding master's selection) than the other participants did.

### *Spirituality and the psychology profession*

Spirituality and/or religion informed the development of participants' value systems which, in turn, influenced how participants interacted with the world and how they chose to portray themselves to others. Value systems were personal and individualised, but there was a certain degree of similarity between participants' values. The reciprocity between a personal value system and the values of the helping profession was clear. Leana held non-judgement, selflessness, passion, patience and compassion in high regard. Tammy aspired to congruence, respect, kindness, tolerance and love. Elsa mentioned respect, love, hope, peace and compassion. Michelle mentioned values such as hope, compassion, discipline and respect as important to her sense of self. Mary affirmed that self-acceptance, compassion, respect and unconditional love were most important, and Retha spoke about self-responsibility and resilience.

All the participants regarded their spirituality as strongly embedded in their identity and realised that their value system and spirituality would consciously or unconsciously influence their future therapeutic approaches and interactions with clients: *'...good and bad situations that they tell me about will always be connected to my religion and what I think* (Michelle);

*...one's spiritual identity will always be in the background of one's everyday encounters. For me, however, I am someone who is naturally open-minded, receptive, intuitive and interested in understanding other people's subjective realities* (Mary).

Most of the participants realised that their spiritual voices will be heard in a therapeutic situation and that it would be difficult to hide their values:

*...but then the approach will sort of divert a little bit to Christianity, because it's about you are trying to be good...trying to help others, be empathetic, be compassionate...I will also dive in my values...I am not sure how to work around that* (Retha).

Participants had different opinions regarding the extent in which their spirituality would influence their therapeutic work. For example, Michelle and Elsa would try to find meaning by considering God's plan in suffering. Retha acknowledged that she would find it exceptionally difficult to differentiate her profession as a psychologist from her religious beliefs and that her most salient values would play a prominent role in assisting clients to make meaning of their experiences:

*...as a future psychologist, would be the strength I draw from God when situations of work get tough and overwhelming...with God you can be anything you want to be and with God you can just gain the strength to [pause] just fly...* (Retha).

The general consensus was that adhering to the values of respect, non-judgement and compassion would guide participants to never force their spiritual values on anyone, but rather use spirituality to positively influence the therapeutic relationship:

*...it will always be at the back of your mind...you still have your values as a Christian or whatever religion you are. You must still respect your client's religion. I won't always bring it up, but I think it will influence how you make decisions* (Michelle).

*...but I think it is really important not to force your spiritual identity onto your clients, for example, if they tell you that they are not Christians, don't even go there...* (Elsa).

These values provided participants with the comfort and self-confidence to enter the therapeutic relationship knowing that they would not harm their clients.

## Discussion

'A journey throughout life' is how the participants of this study typified the ongoing process of their spiritual identity development. The foundations for a future spiritual identity were laid during childhood (mainly through religious experiences with parents). More critical thinking and questioning followed during adolescence, with deepened exploration in the emerging adulthood years. While some participants had made strong commitments with regard to their spiritual identity early in life already, they were still in the process of reflecting on experiences, questioning their religious upbringing, exploring options and integrating these experiences with their sense of self. Various developmental theorists agree that spiritual identity development takes place across the life span, often in a non-linear pattern (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014; 2016; King & Boyatzis, 2015; Russo-Netzer & Maysseless, 2014). The combination of the dynamic higher education learning environment and the increased ability for complex thought processes and introspection prompted the emerging adult students in this study to critically reflect on their value systems and sense of self. This finding supports the ideas proposed by various theorists in the field (Arnett & Jensen, 2015; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014; 2016; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

Emerging adults author their lives by reflecting on the past, imagining the future, and constructing a coherent and meaningful self-defining life story (McAdams, 2013; McAdams & McLean, 2013). The internalisation of values and spiritual experiences into this self-story denotes spiritual identity development (King & Boyatzis, 2015; Russo-Netzer & Maysseless, 2014). In accordance with the views of Arnett and Jensen (2015) and Barry and Abo-Zena (2016), the emerging adults in the current study emphasised the importance of constructing their unique and individualised belief systems and spiritual life stories. Although there were unique variations in their lived experiences regarding religiosity and spirituality, all the participants in this study identified as spiritual people, upheld spiritual ideals, engaged in spiritual practices and derived a life purpose through enacting their spiritual identities.

In the current study, challenging life events facilitated deepened reflection and increased exploration. Gutierrez and Park (2015) who explored developing belief systems and worldviews also contended that significant life events have an impact on emerging adults' assumptions about the self, the world and others. Participants mentioned that exposure to adversity, disappointment and discomfort challenged their sense



of self, their awareness of the sacred and their spiritual growth. Barber et al. (2013) also asserted that discomfort, dissonance and challenge foster substantial identity development in the sense that people evaluate knowledge claims, refine their own beliefs and take ownership of their voice through thorough reflection and increased introspection. An example of how participants utilised autobiographical reasoning (McAdams, 2013; McAdams & McLean, 2013) to derive meaning from difficult life experiences is seen in their accounts of the master's selection process. Especially the participants who were not accepted to the programme drew insights from their experiences and constructed coherent narratives towards personal growth, purpose in life and integrated spiritual self-stories. This is in line with the premise that spirituality is related to meaning-making, values and purpose in life (Frankl, 1985; King & Boyatzis, 2015).

Participants mentioned the importance of various social agents (parents, peers, culture and religious communities) in their spiritual identity development processes. King and Boyatzis (2015) proposed the term *reciprocating spirituality* to highlight the centrality of relational processes and the bidirectional movement in these relationships during spiritual development. Participants' spiritual identities were influenced by the people in their lives and the environments to which they were exposed. As children, the participants did not have autonomy regarding which spiritual practices they wanted to pursue and were pressurised to conform to parental practices. During adolescence, participants started to explore, but did not use their autonomy optimally as they were careful to not challenge their parents. As participants entered emerging adulthood and the university environment, their contexts changed, presenting new backdrops for spiritual identity development. Parental authority decreased and participants gained the autonomy to make more independent decisions regarding identity. Important agents were peers (especially friendship circles providing safety and support), religious communities (faith-based groups providing a sense of belonging), cultural diversity and sources of information (psychology classes). Arnett and Jensen (2015) and Barry and Abo-Zena (2014; 2016) also observed a change in socialising agents during emerging adulthood. As students mature, they become more aware, consider diverse perspectives and begin to seek out communities who share their beliefs and engage in similar meaning-making processes (Arnett & Jensen, 2015; Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). This sense of belonging is a major source of support for students (Barber et al., 2013).

For all the participants, higher education in general and postgraduate psychology studies in particular provided opportunities for immense personal growth. Confirming the dimensions of emerging adulthood proposed by Arnett (2016a), most participants experienced postgraduate studies as a time of uncertainty and instability. The instability that individuals in this study faced was closely related to the career field of psychology, the anxiety-provoking nature of selection processes and the difficulty of securing a future career as a psychologist. The participants were focused on the prospect of becoming psychologists and prioritised tasks related to their personal development. Unsuccessful applicants had to renegotiate their career choices, reflect on their self-ascribed purposes in life and re-explore aspects of their identities. Still, the participants were optimistic (regardless of disappointment and negative outcomes) and stayed focused on possibilities, which is evidence

of another dimension of Arnett's (2016a) theory on emerging adulthood.

The postgraduate psychology programme exposed participants to new information and diverse academic discourses in a multicultural setting. Barber et al. (2013) pointed to the importance of encounters with diverse others and new cultures to broaden perspectives, challenge personal stereotypes and re-evaluate one's internal voice. Through this, students develop the ability to negotiate complex relationships and engage in meaningful roles and commitments. Participants in this study developed a stance towards *contextual knowing* and *commitment within relativism* (Baxter Magolda & King, 2012). A prominent finding in this study is that the multicultural nature of the South African society, the university and the postgraduate psychology class setting facilitated an openness to diverse cultural and spiritual perspectives and practices. Participants prioritised respect for diverse opinions, everyone's freedom to choose their religion and the importance of insight into differences. This echoes Barry and Abo-Zena's (2016) and Padilla-Walker's (2016) beliefs in emerging adults' ability to increased relativistic thinking, respect for diverse viewpoints and the exercise of autonomy and personal choice. However, in this study, participants expressed the desire to learn more about diverse religions and cultures. More deliberate attention to spiritual diversity in class discussion and the curriculum as well as mentorship in how to engage in these topics in a nuanced manner is needed. Intentionally designed educational experiences are important to turn student challenges into powerful developmental experiences (Barber et al., 2013). This is of particular importance in training spiritually competent practitioners (Hodge, 2018; Pearce et al. 2019).

In conclusion, for the participants in this research study, the journey of becoming a psychologist was in the foreground and their spiritual identity played a prominent role in this journey. Participants' core values (influenced by their spiritual identity) were discussed in their desire to enter a helping career. They believed that spirituality and religion are intertwined in the human experience, that their spiritual identity was ingrained in who they are and that their value systems influenced their behaviour and ultimately also their work as future psychologists. Participants were cognisant of the fact that clients will bring diverse spiritual and religious issues into therapy and that spirituality could be used to make meaning of clients' experiences. These views are consistent with the notions that spirituality is at the core of identity; it influences meaning-making and facilitates the quest for finding a purpose in life (Cisheng et al., 2017; King & Boyatzis, 2015; Russo-Netzer & Maysesless, 2014).

### Limitations of this study

The findings of this study reflect the lived experiences of a small group of individuals in a specific context and at a specific point in time. Since spiritual identity formation is embedded in a sociocultural context, the fluid nature of these findings should be acknowledged. For example, the data for this study was collected before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and thus does not include meaning-making processes during or following a pandemic. The emergence of large-scale public health crises can have life-altering consequences (Salman et al., 2020). For example, Salman et al. (2020) found that COVID-19-related challenges can have a significant adverse impact on

students' mental health, which students attempt to address through, among others, religious/spiritual coping strategies. Also Shahbaz et al. (2021) conducted a phenomenographic study to explore the psychosocial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns on university students and found that students' interrelated experiences of fear of COVID-19, concerns regarding the future (education, career and opportunities) and deliberations regarding personal freedom can be captured by the overarching theme of *hope for life while paradoxically living with fear*. Future studies should consider how a life-changing event such as a worldwide pandemic not only impacts on emerging adults' mental health, but also their meaning-making and spiritual identity.

## Conclusion

This study sheds light on the spiritual identity experiences of six emerging adult female psychology students and their developmental journeys towards becoming psychologists in the South African context. It was found that spiritual identity exploration occurs continuously across a person's lifespan, with optimal opportunities for deepened development during emerging adulthood. Development happens in context and is enhanced by the postgraduate psychology training experience, as well as exposure to spiritual and religious diversity. Reflections on challenging events result in sophisticated meaning-making processes regarding purpose in life, as well as the authoring of a spiritual life story. There is an intricate and reciprocal relationship between the development of a spiritual identity and the psychology profession – spirituality, values and worldviews can be regarded as important aspects of the therapeutic process for many individuals.

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