

Distinguishing Spirituality From Other Constructs

Commentary on Lindeman et al.

To the Editor:

In their article titled “Distinguishing Spirituality From Other Constructs” (*J Nerv Ment Dis* 200:167–173, 2012), Lindeman et al. (2012) observed that there is a need for “a parsimonious and unambiguous theoretical definition [of spirituality, red.] and an assessment method that does not represent any other construct than spirituality.” According to Lindeman et al., the main problem with current definitions of spirituality is that these are typically merged with constructs such as religiosity, paranormal beliefs, and dimensions of psychological well-being, especially positive relations with other people, purpose in life, and inner harmony. From a series of three studies, the authors conclude that religiosity and well-being are not defining attributes of spirituality, but instead, spirituality is determined by a belief in supernatural spirits. Although we commend the effort of Lindeman et al. for trying to provide more clarity about the definition of spirituality and we agree wholeheartedly with their statement that merging spirituality with well-being is problematic (Garssen et al., 2012a, 2012b), we have observed several mistakes in their reasoning.

First, the validity of the Spirituality Scale—which was constructed by the authors and used in study 1 and 2—is questionable. The authors have developed the scale to measure “subjective spirituality as purely as possible.” A description of the term *subjective spirituality* was not presented. A problem with this newly developed scale is that it may measure something quite different from subjective spirituality, namely, the preference or the dislike for the words *spiritual* and *spirituality*. In our experience, many people have an aversion to the word *spirituality*, even though they would be considered spiritual by others because they are deeply religious or experience purpose in life and connectedness with nature, other people, and the transcendent. On the other hand, people who are superficially religious or “have something with astrology” may readily describe themselves as being spiritual.

Second, some of the items of the Spirituality Scale imply a belief in supernatural spirits, namely, “I think about how my life is part of a larger spiritual force” and “Spirituality is a

connection to a greater force.” The use of these items will artificially inflate the relationship between subjective spirituality and the belief in supernatural spirits and thus increase the chance of confirmation of their first hypothesis that “the stronger subjective spirituality is, the more a person believes that mental processes can survive after death, that autonomous spirits may exist apart from biological bodies and that inanimate and lifeless objects have spirits as well.”

Third, in study 2, they tried to demonstrate that the overlap between spirituality and religiosity can be explained by the belief in supernatural spirits (their hypothesis 4). A regression analysis was used, with religiosity and belief in supernatural spirits as predictors and spirituality as the dependent variable. However, the outcome of the analysis does not necessarily support their hypothesis. Lindeman et al. found that religiosity was closely associated with subjective spirituality ($r = 0.80$). This association was stronger than that of religiosity with the belief in supernatural spirits (five measures; $r = 0.24$ – 0.66) or of spirituality with the belief in supernatural spirits ($r = 0.26$ – 0.71). Then, the authors argue that when religiosity was entered in the last step of a regression analysis, after having controlled for belief in supernatural spirits in the first step, it explained only 7% additional variance in subjective spirituality. The belief in supernatural spirits explained 66% of the variance. This would indeed support hypothesis 4. However, what would have happened if religiosity was entered first and belief in supernatural spirits was entered last? This would be the adequate test for determining whether the supernatural belief did mediate the association between religiosity and spirituality. Judging from the correlation coefficients, religiosity would explain most of the variance in subjective spirituality and belief in supernatural spirits would have a rather modest additional explanatory power.

Fourth, considering the sizable correlation between inner peace and subjective spirituality ($r = 0.59$) found in study 3, it would seem only natural to consider this experience a defining attribute of spirituality. Instead, the authors conclude that “although spiritual and religious experiences may evoke temporary balance of mind, spirituality is not related to sustainable inner harmony.” How can they know this? The authors said they included a question about frequency of prayer to explain why spiritual persons reported more inner peace. The reasoning is not spelled out but

seems to be that a high correlation between prayer and inner peace would prove its temporary character. In our view, such a conclusion is not warranted, and—if the reasoning would be correct—the authors did not even relate these questions with each other. Thus, their conclusion seems to be based on their own assumptions, not on the results of study 3.

Finally, in their comment on this finding, they state that it has never been tested before whether purpose in life should be considered an attribute of spirituality, and they conclude that the low correlations they found do not justify that purpose in life is a defining attribute of spirituality. Although a low correlation between constructs could be considered a sign that these do not define each other, we feel that it would be naive to exclude purpose in life from the definition of spirituality on the basis of a modest correlation between single-item measures of both constructs. Years of theoretical reasoning and psychometric research of multidimensional spirituality questionnaires that include this aspect in the operationalization of spirituality speak louder than one correlation coefficient.

In summary, we question the conclusions of Lindeman et al. because the validity of their Spirituality Scale is dubious and—if one would accept the validity of the scale—the findings of their three studies do not convincingly support their claims.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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