

Letter to the Editor**Response to Letter from P. Salander 2006;15: 647–649**

Salander's letter to the editor is a valuable comment, because it sharpens the forming of opinions in this field. Contrary to Salander, it is our view that the lack of clearness or the lack of substance sometimes found in texts about spirituality, is not unique for this field, but a characteristic of a newly developed area of research.

We have re-arranged Salander's comments into the following six points of criticism, sometimes using our own formulation, because it was not always clear what his objections were: (1) There is no clear definition of spirituality and the concept is, therefore, open to many connotations and personal meanings. (2) Descriptions of spirituality often imply a relationship with God or 'something greater than oneself' or similar notions. After having made this statement, Salander refers to another type of description, which logically has to be a description without such notions. According to Salander, such a 'secular spirituality' (our term) refers to ordinary psychosocial issues, and should not be labelled 'spiritual'. (3) A related statement is: 'One prerequisite for these kinds of studies to be meaningful is an ontology stating that the various entities found in different (spirituality) instruments really do exist *out there*'. This rather complicated phrasing seems to mean that to deserve a special place, spirituality should refer to entities outside the person, such as God or a 'Higher Being', instead of referring to subjective experiences or 'dimensions of the mental process' in the words of Salander. (4) The findings in several studies of a relationship between spirituality and quality of life/well-being/distress are not interesting, for given in advance: '... experiencing that life is meaningful is a part of well-being. By definition they are positively related'. (5) Spirituality is an irrelevant term for the majority of secularised non-English speaking Europeans. (6) Salander wonders what the difference is between spirituality and existentialism and suggests that those who prefer the first term do so because 'they dislike existential philosophy and its denial of God'.

Ad 1. We fully agree with the first comment. As stated in a recent publication: 'The concept itself is multidimensional and defies simple clear-cut boundaries. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that spirituality as a term tends to elude tight operational definition. ... it shares some problems with latent constructs such as character, love, well-being, peace and health' [1].

Yet, there is a method that could lead to a generally accepted delineation of the area. Instead

of trying to present a comprehensive description, it is in our view more satisfying to indicate which aspects seem to belong to the area of spirituality. On the basis of interviews with laymen and discussions among experts we have distinguished aspects such as experiencing meaning in life, inner peace, experiencing connectedness with nature, wonder, appreciation of life and experiencing a relationship with a higher being. We have used such a list as a basis for the development of a questionnaire. Psychometric analysis, especially factor analysis and internal consistency analysis, have indicated that people in general consider these aspects as a cluster of related experiences, behaviours and attitudes.

Ad 2 and 3. An important principle is that psychology, including psycho-oncology, deals with experiences, behaviours and attitudes, also in the area of spirituality. It is not important from a psychological viewpoint whether God or a Higher Being exists or not. People have experiences of a relationship with God or a Higher Being and it is legitimate to study whether such subjective experiences are associated with, for instance, well-being, adaptation to a disease or coping style. It is in our view not a problem but an advantage if spirituality (in psychology) would be considered as a 'psychosocial issue'.

A second important, and generally accepted starting point is that spirituality and religiousness are overlapping but not identical concepts. Our list of spiritual aspects mainly concerns non-religious aspects, such as meaning in life, inner peace, acceptance, being aware in the present, care for others and connectedness with nature. What is the problem of labelling a cluster of such aspects as 'spirituality'?

Ad 4. It is not self-evident that aspects, such as mentioned above, are related to quality of life/well-being/distress. For meaning in life, the association with quality in life/well-being/distress may be more obvious. However, it is still not given, that experiencing meaning in life is, for instance, always associated with feelings of joy and that the lack of such experiences would inevitably lead to depression and anxiety.

Ad 5. Apparently in contrast to Sweden, spirituality is a popular term in the Netherlands, which is also a mainly secular country. We have interviewed people from a population sample, including many non-religious people. We have not met people who felt that the question whether they were 'spiritually involved', was irrelevant.

Ad 6. In our opinion, we should address experiences, behaviours and attitudes when assessing level of spiritual involvement, not philosophical or

religious convictions. A person may have concluded on the basis of philosophical reasoning that life in general is meaningless, but still experience meaning in his personal life.

There are several reasons why we prefer the term 'spiritual' above 'existential': (1) Even if 'existential' is used in the sense of an 'existential attitude or way of life', the term will always be associated with existential philosophy, which is confusing for the above-mentioned reason. (2) In spirituality research one wants to address both religious and non-religious people who feel spiritually involved. Existentialism has no or minimal interest in religiousness, and thus neglect a group of people who consider themselves as religious and spiritual. (3) There seems to be a different focus. One could say that existential psychology is especially directed at the search for meaning, which

may be initiated by a crisis. Spirituality is more directed at an attitude that may exist independent of any crisis.

Reference

1. Miller WR, Thoresen CE. Spirituality, religion, and health—an emerging research field. *Amer Psychol* 2003;**58**:24–35.

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