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Exploring the relation between spirituality and gratitude in a Spanish sample of nursing students

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ABSTRACT



Previous findings have reported the positive benefits of spirituality and gratitude, and their links to physical and mental health. To date, little is known concerning the relationship between spirituality and gratitude and its effectiveness in the training and practice of nursing. A cross-sectional correlational study design was used to analyse the relationship between spirituality, gratitude, and a set of criteria variables in a nursing student sample. A convenience sample of $n = 187$ nursing students at the University of Alicante (Spain) who were enrolled in the teaching subject of Psychology participated in this study. Data were collected in 2022–2023 using self-report questionnaires, Spirituality (the short form of the Spanish version of the Meaning in Life Scale, MiLS-sp/sf) and the Spanish version of the Gratitude Questionnaire. Another six variables were used to assess the following aspects: self-assessments of health, quality of life (general and recent), personal happiness, religiosity, and belief in the afterlife. The data were analysed using descriptive and relational statistics. Our results indicate a modest positive relationship between the level of gratitude and spirituality. Out of the four meanings of spirituality, Peace is the construct most correlated to gratitude. These findings suggest that incorporating spirituality and gratitude into nursing education could enhance students' well-being and professional practice.

KEYWORDS

Gratitude; nurse education; nursing students; spirituality; GQ-6; MiLS-sp/sf

Introduction

Despite the exponential growth in the publication of scientific studies on predictors of psychological well-being within the field of Positive Psychology in the last decade, there is a need for research that establishes the links between constructs such as gratitude, personality variables, resilience, and practices like mindfulness and meaning making

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within this theoretical framework (Donaldson, Dollwet, and Rao 2015; Kim et al. 2018; Tweed, Mah, and Conway III 2021; van Zyl et al. 2023).

The rise in scientific production in the field of Positive Psychology, also known as the second wave or Positive Psychology 2.0 (Wong 2023), has been indirectly influenced by positive interventions conducted in various contexts such as clinical, health, and education, with different approaches including hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. According to the hedonic approach, subjective well-being is related to affective pleasure in one's life, characterized by a high level of positive affect, low level of negative affect, and high degree of satisfaction with life. On the other hand, the eudaimonic approach is often synonymous with psychological well-being, where well-being is perceived as the extent to which individuals function to develop their full potential (Thorsteinsen and Vittersø 2020).

Among the major interventions reviewed, those that involve the pursuit of eudaimonic and complex well-being, beyond hedonic or immediate well-being, stand out (Allen, Romate, and Rajkumar 2021; Pritchard et al. 2020; Ryff 2023; Salanova and Llorens 2016). Numerous empirical studies have shown aspects of well-being such as having a purpose in life, personal growth, and self-acceptance benefit individuals in overcoming adversity and promoting good health. Ryff (2023), suggests that these human strengths are also likely to play a crucial role in physicians' efforts to support recovery from mental illnesses.

Within the theoretical framework of Positive Psychology (Peterson and Seligman 2004), spirituality is defined as a transcendent strength that helps us contemplate the meaning and purpose of life, the significance of our actions, and the connections we establish with others and what we consider relevant. Moreover, in this context, the model of spirituality that we evaluate in our study is related to the manifestation of the degree of purpose, meaning, peace and benefits of spirituality that individuals perceive in their lives. Several years ago, McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002) and others found that spirituality, but not necessarily religious beliefs, improved a person's ability to experience gratitude and express a greater sense of gratitude in various areas of life.

According to various authors, gratitude is a universal strength of connection that gives meaning to life (Balthip, Suwanphahu, and McSherry 2022; Czyżowska and Gurba 2022; Guo, Luo, and Tan 2023; Rahmat et al. 2022). It involves the individual's feeling, thinking, and acting in acknowledging a favour or service received, accepting it as such, and desiring to reciprocate appropriately. Gratitude, or the capacity to be grateful, allows us to recognize positive and good aspects of the past and present, those that have benefited us in some way, and have thus given a pleasant meaning to our existence (Peterson and Seligman 2004). Previous literature reviews (Jans-Beken et al. 2020; Locklear, Sheridan, and Kong 2023; Skrzelińska and Ferreira 2020) have provided data on the positive association of gratitude with prosocial behaviours, life satisfaction, optimism, hope, vitality, subjective perception of happiness, and a lower risk of developing psychological disorders. It has also shown negative correlations with depression, anxiety, envy, and resentment towards the past.

Despite the scientific evidence, few studies have explored the relationship between spirituality and gratitude and their effectiveness in nursing education and practice. Some studies suggest (Fournier and Sheehan 2015; Valdez, Datu, and Chu 2022) that educational interventions that enhance gratitude promote reflective learning and foster appreciation and the ability to provide not only physical health-focused care but also person-centred biopsychosocial and spiritual care.

Aims

The overall objective of this study was to analyse the level of spiritual well-being and gratitude experienced by first-year students in the Nursing Degree programme and explore the relationship between gratitude, spiritual well-being, and some criterion variables of interest (subjective well-being and religious well-being).

Methods

Study design and participants

The present cross-sectional study included a total of 187 first-year students taking a Degree in Nursing at the University of Alicante and enrolled in the teaching subject of Psychology, in the academic year 2022–2023. The age of participants ranged between 18 and 45 years ($M = 20.98$; $SD = 7.20$). Of those who participated, 76.5% were female ($n = 143$).

Data collection

Data were collected using self-report questionnaires, the short form of the Spanish version of the Meaning in Life Scale, MiLS-sp/sf (Reig-Ferrer et al. 2012; 2015; 2019; Jim et al. 2006) and the Spanish version of the Gratitude Questionnaire (Magallares, Recio, and Sanjuán 2018).

The MiLS questionnaire has been developed and validated considering the current theoretical models involving meaning of life and existential spirituality considering several different, inter-related dimensions, each of which contribute singularly to the construct of ‘meaning’. Importantly, many existing spirituality scales tend to conflate or confuse the concepts of spirituality and religiosity. However, the MiLS aligns with the majority consensus among experts, which defines spirituality primarily as an individual’s effort to understand the meaning and purpose of their life. This definition allows for the inclusion of religious practice or belief in a higher power but does not make these aspects central to the construct. The results provide empirical support for this concept of a meaning to life, as a unifying concept that synthesizes the rich theoretical tradition of this field of study. In this study, the abbreviated version of the Meaning in Life Scale (MiLS-sp/sf) was utilized to assess participants’ spirituality levels.

This abbreviated version comprises seven items that capture various perceptions related to the meaning of life and existential spirituality, making it a suitable measure for our study’s context and aims (Table 1). The dimensions assessed by the MiLS, such as purpose, meaning, inner peace, and spiritual beliefs, are closely aligned with

Table 1. MiLS-sp/sf questionnaire items.

MiLS-sp/sf1	I feel more fulfilled and satisfied with life
MiLS-sp/sf2	My life has less meaning
MiLS-sp/sf3	I do not value my life as much as before
MiLS-sp/sf4	I have found new goals that are more worthwhile
MiLS-sp/sf5	I feel at peace with myself
MiLS-sp/sf6	I find strength and comfort in my faith or spiritual beliefs
MiLS-sp/sf7	I have a sense of balance within myself

the broader construct of spiritual well-being. While not identical, both concepts emphasize the individual's search for purpose, fulfilment, and peace, reflecting the existential nature of spirituality in our sample.

Respondents rate each item on a 7-point Likert scale. The abbreviated MiLS-sp/sf provides a concise yet reliable measure of meaning in life and existential spirituality. Although its psychometric properties may not be as comprehensively documented as those of the full-length version, previous research has demonstrated its validity and utility in capturing the core dimensions of the construct (Fernández-Pascual et al. 2020; 2024). Its inclusion in this study was deemed appropriate to balance methodological rigour with the practical consideration of minimizing participant burden (Fernández-Pascual et al. 2020).

The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) is a six item self-report questionnaire designed to assess individual differences in the propensity to experience gratitude in daily life (Table 2).

Each item is answered on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The GQ-6 has good levels of reliability and validity in Spanish sample (Magallares, Recio, and Sanjuán 2018).

For improved interpretability, the direct scores in the questionnaires have been normalized on a scale from 0 to 10 using the Min – Max normalization method (Han, Kamber, and Pei 2012). This approach facilitates the comparison of results across the different measures, which originally had varying ranges (e.g. 4-point, 5-point). In this process, the direct score to be normalized is subtracted from the lowest possible value on the scale, divided by the difference between the highest and lowest possible values, and the resulting figure is then multiplied by 10. This method enhances the interpretability of the scales used in the study.

Another six variables were used as criteria for evaluating the student's subjective well-being (health status, general quality of life, current quality of life, and personal happiness), as well as religious well-being (level of religiosity and belief in an afterlife). To evaluate health status, we posed the question: 'In general, would you say your health is' (possible responses: excellent, very good, good, fair, poor). To evaluate general quality of life, we posed the question: 'In general, would you say your quality of life is' possible responses: very good, good, regular, bad, very bad). For the evaluation of current quality of life, we used number 9 from the COOP-WONCA questionnaire (Tudela and Reig-Ferrer 2002) 'how have things gone in the last few weeks?' (possible responses: very well: could hardly be better, good and bad parts about equal, pretty bad, very bad: could hardly be worse). Personal happiness was evaluated by presenting the question: 'in general terms, would you say you are very happy, quite happy, somewhat happy, or not at all happy?'

Table 2. GQ-6 questionnaire items.

GQ-1	I have so much in life to be thankful for
GQ-2	If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list
GQ-3	When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for
GQ-4	I am grateful to a wide variety of people
GQ-5	As I get older I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history
GQ-6	Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone

These variables for evaluating student well-being have proven their validity and relevance in the scientific literature, and these criteria have been analysed and tested by our group in previous studies (Reig-Ferrer et al. 2012, 2015, 2019; Fernández-Pascual et al. 2020). In addition, we analysed the level of student religiosity and belief in an after-life. These variables were measured using the following criterion questions: ‘Do you believe in something after death?’ and ‘How would you rate your level of religiosity?’ Responses were recorded on a Likert scale, ranging from ‘Nothing’ to ‘Certainly yes’ for the belief in an afterlife, and from ‘Very religious’ to ‘Not religious at all’ for religiosity.

Procedure

A link to an online survey was provided to students so they could access the survey using their tablets and other mobile devices or personal computers.

In the information sheet, we included the study aims, explained the voluntary nature of the participation, clarified the survey length, and that completing the questionnaire implied consent to participation. We asked students to fill out the questionnaire only once. We did not provide any incentive for the participation. This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Review Committee of the University of Alicante, Spain. (Date. September 21, 2021/UA. 2021-10-11). All of the responses were treated anonymously and confidentially and all data were stored securely.

Data analysis

The data obtained in the study were analysed using SPSS statistical software package version 28. We applied descriptive statistics to undertake the statistical analyses and assessment of the questionnaires administered.

Results

Table 3 presents the correlations between individual items and the total scores of two questionnaires, the MiLS-sp/sf and the GQ 6.

Notably, MiLS-sp/sf5, which captures the concept of inner peace, exhibits correlations with all gratitude questionnaire items except for items 3 and 6. This suggests a consistent and significant relationship between a sense of inner peace and various aspects of

Table 3. Correlations between MiLS-sp/sf and G6 questionnaire items and totals.

	GQ-1	GQ-2	GQ-3	GQ-4	GQ-5	GQ-6	GQ-Total
MiLS-sp/sf1	.07	.12	.05	.16*	.08	-.14	.09
MiLS-sp/sf2	.06	.00	.02	.14	.12	.13	.12
MiLS-sp/sf3	.11	.01	-.08	.14	.08	.17*	.11
MiLS-sp/sf4	.03	-.20	-.02	.10	.04	-.15	-.01
MiLS-sp/sf5	.17*	.19*	-.06	.38**	.23**	-.10	.20**
MiLS-sp/sf6	.11	.15*	.13	.13	.19*	-.09	.17*
MiLS-sp/sf7	.08	.16*	.02	.28**	.15	-.03	.17*
MiLS-sp/sf Total	.13	.13	.02	.28**	.19*	-.04	.18*

Note: ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

gratitude, highlighting the potential centrality of inner peace in fostering a grateful disposition.

Furthermore, MiLS-sp/sf6, specifically addressing spiritual well-being, demonstrates positive correlations with gratitude items. For instance, MiLS-sp/sf6 shows positive correlations with GQ2 ($r = .15$), GQ4 ($r = .28$), and GQ5 ($r = .19$), indicating that this dimension of spiritual well-being is associated with feelings of gratitude related to acknowledging others' accomplishments and positive aspects of life.

On the other hand, MiLS-sp/sf7, focusing on equilibrium within oneself, similarly displays positive correlations with GQ2 ($r = .16$), GQ4 ($r = .28$), and GQ5 ($r = .19$), reinforcing the idea that this aspect of spiritual well-being contributes to gratitude towards others and positive life events.

Finally, the total score of the Gratitude questionnaire demonstrates a positive correlation with MiLS-sp/sf total ($r = .19$), suggesting a modest but discernible association between overall gratitude and the broader construct of meaning in life.

Means, standard deviations, standardized scores and correlations between MiLS-sp/sf, GQ scores and all other variables are presented in Table 4.

Normalized scores allow for a straightforward and convenient interpretation of the resulting means. Thus, on a scale of 0–10, the student sample achieves an average score of 6.3 on the spirituality questionnaire and 7.9 on the gratitude questionnaire. These scores reveal that, on average, the students in the sample exhibit a moderate level of spirituality and a higher level of gratitude. The data suggests that spirituality is a prominent aspect of their well-being, while gratitude plays an even more substantial role in their lives.

Significant correlations with the spirituality scale were observed. Notably, health status, general quality of life, current quality of life, and personal happiness all displayed meaningful positive associations with spirituality. However, it is worth noting that belief in an afterlife did not significantly correlate with spirituality, and the level of religiosity exhibited a somewhat weaker positive connection.

Spanish GQ scores were positively correlated with several well-being indicators, namely health status, general quality of life, and personal happiness. Conversely, the level of religiosity and belief in the afterlife showed a weak association with gratitude.

These results highlight the complex interplay between various aspects of well-being and spirituality and emphasize the role of health, quality of life, and personal happiness in shaping individuals' experiences of gratitude.

Table 4. Means, standardized scores and correlation coefficients of total GQ-6 and total MiLS-sp/sf with the variables of the study.

	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Standardized Score (0–10)	<i>r</i> (GQ-6)	<i>r</i> (MiLS-sp/sf)
MiLS-sp/sf	29.14 (6.06)	6.3	.19*	–
GQ-6	34.46 (4.50)	7.9	–	.19*
Subjective well-being and religious well-being variables	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Min-Max	<i>r</i> (GQ-6)	<i>r</i> (MiLS-sp/sf)
Health status	3.78 (0.85)	1–5	.19*	.24**
General quality of life	4.27 (0.58)	1–5	.22**	.35**
Current quality of life	3.57 (0.68)	1–5	.13	.60**
Personal happiness	3.02 (0.51)	1–4	.20**	.52**
Level of religiosity	1.74 (0.81)	1–4	.01	.19*
Belief in an afterlife	2.09 (0.92)	1–4	.10	.15

Note: ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Moreover, gender was found to be independent of both spirituality and gratitude, indicating that these factors are not significantly influenced by gender. Additionally, age demonstrated a notable negative correlation of ($r = -.27$; $p .01$) with gratitude, suggesting that as students' age increases, their gratitude tends to decrease.

Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the relationship between spirituality, gratitude, and various criteria variables among nursing students. The findings provide valuable insights into the connections between these constructs and shed light on their significance in the context of nursing education and practice.

The results of this study revealed a modest positive and significant relationship between the level of gratitude and spirituality among nursing students. Specifically, our findings confirm that this relationship is particularly strong in the dimension of inner peace, which is central to both the meaning of life and spiritual well-being. These findings align with previous research that has highlighted the interplay between gratitude and spiritual well-being (Bali et al. 2022; Olson, Knepple Carney, and Hicks Patrick 2019). The positive association suggests that individuals who have a higher level of spirituality are more likely to experience and express gratitude in their lives. This connection is important, as cultivating gratitude has been linked to various psychological and emotional benefits, including increased life satisfaction, improved mental health, and reduced risk of developing psychological disorders (Boggiss et al. 2020; Jans-Beken et al. 2020).

Furthermore, the analysis of the four meanings of spirituality revealed that the construct most strongly correlated with gratitude was inner peace. This finding suggests that experiencing a sense of peace in one's spiritual life may enhance one's capacity to appreciate and express gratitude. It implies that finding inner tranquillity and harmony through spiritual practices or beliefs can foster a grateful outlook on life (Green, Noor, and Ahmed 2020; Liang et al. 2020).

Consistent with existing literature, our findings suggest that both gratitude and spirituality are positively associated with subjective well-being variables (McGuire et al. 2020; Villani et al. 2019; Yoo 2020). The correlations observed in our study highlight the meaningful connections between gratitude, spirituality, and indicators of subjective well-being, including perceived health, personal happiness, and quality of life, independent of gender. Our results revealed a modest positive and significant relationship between spirituality and general quality of life, as well as a weaker correlation between gratitude and general quality of life. This aligns with previous research that highlights the interplay between spiritual well-being and quality of life (Counted, Possamai, and Meade 2018). In contrast, our analysis of current quality of life showed a significant positive correlation with spirituality, while the relationship with gratitude was weak and not statistically significant. This indicates that, while nursing students may report a generally high quality of life, their current quality of life is more closely linked to their levels of spirituality. The significant correlation suggests that those who find deeper meaning and inner peace in their spiritual lives are more likely to feel content and fulfilled in their present circumstances. These differences between general and current quality of life underscore the importance of context in interpreting well-being measures. This distinction could be

explored in future studies to better understand the temporal dimensions of subjective well-being and its relationship to spirituality and gratitude.

Additionally, our study indicates that gratitude appears to be independent of variables related to religious well-being. The independence of gratitude from religious variables, particularly dispositional gratitude, is underscored by recent research conducted by Jans-Beken and Wong (2021). Through the development and validation of the Existential Gratitude Scale (EGS), their findings emphasize that dispositional gratitude can be understood separately from religious beliefs or practices.

In contrast, spirituality shows a distinct pattern, being positively associated only with the level of religiosity, irrespective of belief in an afterlife. This nuanced differentiation underscores the unique roles that gratitude and spirituality play in individuals' well-being, suggesting that while gratitude operates independently of religious factors, spirituality is closely tied to one's level of religiosity rather than the specific belief in an afterlife.

The results of this study contribute to the limited body of research exploring the relationship between spirituality and gratitude specifically in the nursing field. While previous studies have examined the impact of gratitude interventions on nursing students' learning and reflective abilities (Fournier and Sheehan 2015), few have directly explored the connection between spirituality, gratitude, and the practice of nursing (Yun and Jun 2019). Understanding these relationships can have implications for nursing education, as interventions that promote gratitude and spiritual well-being may enhance the delivery of person-centred care that encompasses the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual dimensions of patients' well-being (Fournier and Sheehan 2015).

Limitations of the study

Finally, it is important to acknowledge some limitations of this study. First, the research utilized a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables. Future longitudinal studies could provide a deeper understanding of the temporal dynamics between spirituality, gratitude, and personal satisfaction among nursing students. Second, the study relied on self-report questionnaires, which are subject to social desirability biases and may not capture the full complexity of individuals' experiences. Including qualitative methods could provide a richer exploration of the subjective meanings and experiences associated with spirituality and gratitude in the nursing student population.

Conclusion

This study provides insights into the spiritual well-being and gratitude levels among first-year Nursing Degree students and their interrelationship with criterion variables (health status, quality of life, personal happiness, religiosity and belief in an afterlife). It is evident that nursing students exhibit a moderate level of spirituality and a notably higher level of gratitude, highlighting their sensitivity to spiritual issues. Despite modest correlations, particularly between gratitude and dimensions of spiritual well-being, these results emphasize the significance of both constructs in nursing education and practice. The association between gratitude and spirituality suggests potential interventions to enhance psychological well-being among nursing students. Further longitudinal research is needed to fully understand these dynamics.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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