

Article

The Mediating Effect of Dispositional Gratitude on the Relationship between Religious Struggles and Self-Esteem: Preliminary Results

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Abstract: In comforting or distressing circumstances, individuals tend to have various perceptions of themselves. It seems that religious comfort and religious distress correlate differently with people's self-esteem. Since the relationship between religiosity and self-esteem is not only direct but can be mediated by other factors that are recognized as buffers against adverse situations, our main goal was to verify whether dispositional gratitude may have an indirect effect on the association between both variables. The research involved data from 254 participants aged 18 to 25 ($M = 21.24$; $SD = 2.09$) and included 192 women (76%) and 62 men (24%). To measure the title variables, we used: the Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (RCSS), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), and the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6). The results showed that people who consider religion as a source of comfort express positive attitudes toward the self and recognize others' kindness, as well. In contrast, people who consider religiosity as a cause of fear, stress, and internal strain tend to display a lower subjective sense of personal worth and lower appreciation of the positivity around them. Moreover, gratitude had a mediatory effect on the relationships between religious comfort/negative emotions toward God and self-esteem.

Keywords: religious/spiritual struggles; self-esteem; dispositional gratitude; young Catholics



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1. Introduction

Religiosity is considered to be a complex phenomenon (Krause 2012) that is related to different dimensions of life. It may provide meaning (Aghababaei and Błachnio 2014), encourage personal growth (Schaefer and Moos 2001), help in overcoming different problems (Newman and Pargament 1990), alleviate the negative effects of stressors (Branco 2001), and enhance well-being (Jackson and Bergeman 2011; Villani et al. 2019). However, religiosity does not always bring relief (Zarzycka and Puchalska-Wasył 2019). People sometimes experience a lack of positive spiritual feelings (Büssing et al. 2013), undergo religious strains (Szcześniak and Timoszyk-Tomczak 2020), struggle with a spiritual crisis (Büssing et al. 2016), or have a perception of divine disengagement (Exline et al. 2021). In comforting and distressing circumstances, individuals tend to have various ideas about the self.

Based on various studies, we can assume that the relationship between religiosity and self-esteem is not only direct, but can be mediated by other factors, which are recognized as buffers against adverse situations. Given that appreciation of the positive aspects of life and thankfulness have been found to play this role in various studies, we chose dispositional gratitude to verify whether being grateful may have an indirect effect on the association between religious strains and self-esteem among young Catholics.

1.1. Religiosity and Self-Esteem

The concept of self-esteem is omnipresent (Orth and Robins 2014). One way to conceptualize self-esteem is advanced by Rosenberg et al. (1995, p. 141) who considers self-esteem as a “positive or negative attitude toward the self”.

According to some researchers (Leary 1999; Andersen et al. 2000; Pyszczynski et al. 2004), self-esteem is as a basic human need and an essential motive for psychological functioning. Other authors maintain that self-esteem may serve as a protecting or buffering mechanism against the effects of challenging experiences (Cast and Burke 2002), emotional distress (Brown 2010), anxiety (Pyszczynski et al. 2004; Sowislo and Orth 2013), and mortality-related thoughts (Gailliot et al. 2007). The last conceptualization, widely adopted among psychologists, addresses self-esteem as an outcome of personal achievements and social approval (Leary 2003).

In the present study, we consider self-esteem according to the third perspective, this is, as an output and a possible effect of religious experience. The association between religiosity and self-esteem is somewhat ambivalent or unclear (Markstrom 1999), showing sometimes positive (Smith et al. 1979; Bahr and Martin 1983; Ciarrochi and Heaven 2012; Thompson et al. 2012; Ghorbani et al. 2013; Cheadle et al. 2018; Rooney et al. 2020; Abu-Raiya et al. 2021; Kane et al. 2021), negative (Watson et al. 1985, 1995), or even no (James et al. 2003; Ghaffari and Çiftçi 2010; Aydin et al. 2010) correlations between both phenomena.

Sedikides and Gebauer (2021) explain these conflicting or inconsistent results referring to two different standpoints. Based on the ego-quieting approach, the authors point out that religious people tend to display lower self-esteem because they reduce excessive self-focus and transcend extreme self-interest. Other researchers (Bauer and Wayment 2008; Wayment et al. 2015) suggest that religious principles invite people to exceed egoistic aspirations of the self. Likewise, intrinsic religiosity and spiritual maturity are positively associated with self-esteem and other indicators of mental health (Sanders et al. 2015). However, according to the perspective of the self-centrality principle as universal (Sedikides and Gebauer 2021), religious people are inclined to reveal higher self-esteem in more religious cultures than in less religious countries (Gebauer et al. 2012). Moreover, various religious components or operationalizations of the construct may influence self-esteem differently (Krause 1992; Villani et al. 2019; Gábová et al. 2021).

Empirical research on religiosity and self-esteem largely confirms the theoretical insights proposed by Sedikides and Gebauer (2021) and show compatible results. For example, Szcześniak and Timoszyk-Tomczak (2020) have shown that religious comfort correlated positively with self-esteem, but the dimensions of religious/spiritual struggles, such as fear/guilt, negative emotions toward God, and negative social interactions surrounding religion, showed inverse associations. Other authors (Błazek and Besta 2012), found that religious openness, considered to be a more mature form of religiosity, has been a predictor of self-esteem. Considering the previous outcomes, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Fear/guilt, negative emotions toward God and religious community are negatively correlated with self-esteem. Religious comfort is positively associated with self-esteem.*

1.2. Religiosity and Dispositional Gratitude

Gratitude has recently raised considerable attention among psychology researchers (Jun et al. 2018; Kong et al. 2021). Gratitude has been mainly conceived as a trait (McCullough et al. 2002, 2004), a mood (McCullough et al. 2004), and an emotion (McCullough et al. 2001, 2002, 2004; Haidt 2003). In its dispositional meaning, which is also considered in the present study, being grateful refers to “a generalized tendency to recognize and respond with grateful emotion to the roles of other people’s benevolence in the positive experiences and outcomes that one obtains” (McCullough et al. 2002, p. 112).

Quantitative and qualitative studies of the antecedents and consequences of gratitude (Reckart et al. 2017) have shown that gratitude tends to be associated with personality traits

(McCullough et al. 2001; Szcześniak et al. 2020a), various dimensions of psychological well-being (Wood et al. 2009; Lin 2015a, 2015b; Voci et al. 2019), physical health (Kaczmarek et al. 2015; Krause et al. 2015; Lavelock et al. 2016; O'Connell and Killeen-Byrt 2018; Gallagher et al. 2020), quality of social relationships (Algoe et al. 2008; Layous and Lyubomirsky 2014), and religiosity (Lambert et al. 2009). With respect to the latter correlate, there is some evidence that highly religious people are inclined to be more grateful than their less religious counterparts (Kraus et al. 2015). Several researchers (Sandage et al. 2011; Tulbure 2015; Aghababaei et al. 2018) suggested that internalized religious motivations and engagement may co-occur with grateful thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. In a recent study, Büssing et al. (2021) have indicated that people who have a religious background are more grateful.

Regarding religious/spiritual struggles and gratitude, studies show that experience of negative thoughts and emotions toward the divine or religious community correlates inversely with gratitude. Szcześniak et al. (2019) have noticed that young Roman Catholics who felt fear/guilt of being unforgiven by God, perceived Him as remote or inaccessible, and had aversive emotions related to other believers, simultaneously reported a lower tendency to observe, appreciate and thank for the positive things in life. Similarly, Catholic laypersons who had the impression of their prayers going unanswered, experienced diminished gratitude/awe (Büssing et al. 2020). Based on the research discussed above, we assumed that:

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Fear/guilt, negative emotions toward God, and religious community are negatively correlated with dispositional gratitude. Religious comfort is positively associated with gratitude.*

1.3. Dispositional Gratitude and Self-Esteem

A large body of research (Rash et al. 2011; Chen and Wu 2014; Kong et al. 2015; Lin 2015a, 2015b; Zhang et al. 2017; Bernardo et al. 2018; Unanue et al. 2019; Bartlett et al. 2020) has shown that gratitude correlates with or positively predicts self-esteem. Likewise, experimental studies (Rash et al. 2011) have proved that 4 weeks of grateful contemplation increased participants' levels of self-esteem.

Gratitude has been found to enable beneficiaries to undertake altruistic behaviors intended to reciprocate the benefactor (Yue et al. 2017; Preš et al. 2020), engage in prosocial actions toward "third" others through upstream reciprocity (Bartlett and DeSteno 2006; Chang et al. 2012; Szcześniak 2018), and nourish interpersonal relationships (Balconi and Fronda 2021). Besides having social effects, gratitude is believed to provide psychological benefits (Bono and Sender 2018), make recipients enjoy positive experiences (Grant and Gino 2010), and affect their personal confidence. These findings are in line with Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, which suggests that gratitude, like other positive emotions, may bolster a more secure identity (Park et al. 2021), and develop or strengthen lasting personal resources (Lin 2015a, 2015b; Burzynska and Stolarski 2020). Receiving something valuable or good from someone else and recognizing others' commitment to one's own benefit (Mesurado et al. 2021) may promote self-esteem. Based on the research discussed above, we assumed that:

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Dispositional gratitude is positively correlated with self-esteem.*

1.4. Dispositional Gratitude as a Mediator

The direct relationship between religiosity and self-esteem is very well documented. However, Krause (1992) has recommended moving beyond the linear association between religiosity and different dimensions of well-being to identify potential mechanisms that may bond both phenomena. As outlined earlier, religious comfort and dimensions of religious/spiritual struggle may be linked to self-esteem via dispositional gratitude since gratitude is adaptive in human functioning (Bono and Sender 2018) and makes people

feel good (Ryan 2007). The theoretical and empirical rationale behind choosing gratitude concerns its buffering and bolstering capacity of lowering anxiety and increasing people's resilience (Waters et al. 2021). Gratitude has been viewed as one of the most beneficial emotions that helps people to deal with difficult situations (Krause 2006), find meaning in life (Bono and Sender 2018), and restructure the relationship with the self (Homan and Hosack 2019).

According to the amplification theory of gratitude proposed by Watkins (2014a, 2014b), gratitude increases the good in people's lives, enhances coping abilities, and empowers them to perceive difficult events from a different perspective, to see beyond stressful events, and to act despite adversities (Fredrickson et al. 2003). Moreover, empirical evidence (Homan and Hosack 2019) has shown that grateful people are inclined to reinforce their self-worth in intrinsic domains. Therefore, it is plausible that "counting blessings", regardless of pain, tension or confusion related to religious or spiritual domains of life (Magyar-Russell 2021), may strengthen peoples' self-esteem. Drawing on the conceptual premises presented above, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis 4 (H4). *Dispositional gratitude mediates the relationship between dimensions of religious/spiritual struggle and self-esteem.*

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Procedure

Our research involved the data gained from 254 participants between 18 and 25 ($M = 21.24$; $SD = 2.09$), and included 192 women (76%) and 62 men (24%). The study was conducted with the participation of young Polish Catholics who completed the online survey. The link to the battery of questionnaires was distributed primarily through different online religious groups on Facebook, and discussion groups such as "Spirituality" or "Jesus—way of life". The respondents were asked to indicate how much they considered themselves as engaged in their faith. Almost 35% declared they were not involved at all, 29%—slightly, 27%—average, and 9%—highly. These numbers denote that the group of Catholics was very diverse. Although most participants expressed lower commitment to their religious beliefs, they were included in the analysis since they openly declared being Catholics. This choice was dictated by the fact that living out one's faith is similar to a continuum on which there can be both people who are very faithful and committed, and people who honestly confess that they have a problem with their faith. In this sense, being a "lost" or "seeking" Catholic does not mean that one is an atheist.

Another criterion of participation was the age between 18 and 25 years of age. This choice was because young people graduating from high school, starting university, and entering adulthood, which is an opportunity for many of them to gain their own experience of faith without the direct influence of parents or church community. This developmental stage of life may be time both of doubts, fears, or negative emotions towards God or Catholic institutions, and of an increase in self-esteem (Erol and Orth 2011).

2.2. Religious Comfort and Strain Scale

The Religious Comfort and Strain Scale (RCSS), developed by Exline et al. (2000) and adapted into Polish by Zarzycka (2014), measures the comforting experience of religion/spirituality (one subscale) and awareness of religious/spiritual strain (three subscales). Religious comfort applies to the feeling of being loved by God (Abernethy et al. 2020) and having a sense of belonging to a religious community (e.g., "Trust God to protect and care for you"). The fear/guilt subscale reflects preoccupations about one's own wrongdoings and the doubts that arise from them about God's lack of forgiveness (e.g., "Believe that God sees you as a bad person"). Negative emotions toward God refer to feelings of being abandoned and punished by God (e.g., "Feel angry at God"). Negative social interactions surrounding religion includes negative feelings associated with the family, clergy, and religious community (e.g., "Feel resentment toward others in your religious group"). The

RCSS is a 28-item scale. The participants rate each item by using multiple-choice answers on an 11-point Likert scale that ranges from 0 = *not at all* to 10 = *extremely*. In the current study, the Cronbach's alphas presented very good values: religious comfort with $\alpha = 0.97$, fear/guilt with $\alpha = 0.79$, negative emotions toward God with $\alpha = 0.84$, and negative social interactions surrounding religion with $\alpha = 0.76$.

2.3. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), authored by Rosenberg (1965) and adapted into Polish by Laguna et al. (2007), assesses people's set of thoughts and feelings about their own worth and importance. It is a 10-item scale that has 5 positively (e.g., "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself") and 5 negatively (e.g., "At times I think I am no good at all") worded statements about one's own self-esteem. Respondents rate their level of agreement by using a 4-point Likert scale (from 1 = *strongly agree* to 4 = *strongly disagree*). The total score ranges from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 40 points. The higher the final score, the higher the self-esteem. It is valuable to notice that the average value of self-esteem in the present group ($M = 2.82$; $SD = 0.57$) was at the similar level as in other studies involving young adults. For example, Błachnio et al. (2016) reported that young people ($M = 21.63$, $SD = 2.62$) had self-esteem equal to $M = 2.98$ ($SD = 0.50$). Laguna et al. (2007) found that self-esteem among students was $M = 2.94$ ($SD = 4.16$). The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients of the original English version of the questionnaire was 0.86. In the adapted Polish version, in different age groups, Cronbach's alpha oscillated between 0.81 and 0.83 (Laguna et al. 2007). In the present study, the value of α was equal to 0.86.

2.4. Gratitude Questionnaire

The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6), originated by McCullough et al. (2002) and adapted into Polish by Kossakowska and Kwiatek (2014), is a short 6-item questionnaire that measures self-report disposition to experience gratitude (e.g., "I have so much in life to be thankful for"). The respondents evaluate each statement by using multiple-choice answers on a 7-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Two items (3 and 6) are reverse scored (e.g., "When I look at the world, I don't see much to be grateful for"). The higher the final result, the higher level of dispositional gratitude. Different studies report a good coefficient alpha of 0.82 for original English version of questionnaire (McCullough et al. 2002). In the adapted Polish version, Cronbach's alpha was 0.71 (Kossakowska and Kwiatek 2014). In the present study, the value of α was equal to 0.67.

2.5. Statistical Analysis

The statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS software version 20, IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). Data normality was checked by computing the coefficients of skewness and kurtosis. Descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlations were calculated to analyze the associations between religious comfort and the three dimensions of religious/spiritual struggles, self-esteem, and dispositional gratitude.

A linear regression model was run to (1) verify the degree of multicollinearity, (2) find outliers, and (3) control for suspected confounders in the relationship between religious/spiritual struggles and self-esteem: sex, age, and faith engagement. For the first goal, we used an index of tolerance less than 0.2 and variance inflation factors (VIFs) higher than 5.0 as indicatives of high intercorrelations (Świątek et al. 2021). For the second aim, we used the value of Mahalanobis' distance not being lower than $p = 0.001$ and the value of Cook's distance not being higher than 1 (Szcześniak and Stročalska 2021). To realize the third objective, we chose the variables of sex, age, and religious engagement. In fact, previous research has consistently found that women tend to be more religious (Feltey and Poloma 1991; Collett and Lizardo 2009) and grateful (Kashdan et al. 2009; Guse et al. 2019). Simultaneously, several studies (Kling et al. 1999; Gentile et al. 2009; Bleidorn et al. 2016; Zeigler-Hill and Myers 2012) have found that men score higher than women on

both the general and specific domains of self-esteem across their life span, even though the difference is small. Interestingly, all of the above-mentioned variables also vary with respect to age. The literature has shown that young people tend to declare lower levels of religiosity (Argue et al. 1999), gratitude (Chopik et al. 2019), and self-esteem (Erol and Orth 2011).

The PROCESS macro (version 3.2) (Hayes 2013), with 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals, and a 5000 resampling analysis was adopted to compute dispositional gratitude's role in the relationship between religious comfort/negative dimensions of religious struggle and self-esteem.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary Analyses

Religious comfort, the three dimensions of religious struggle (fear/guilt, negative emotions toward God, and negative emotions toward religious community), self-esteem, and dispositional gratitude were tested for normality using skewness and kurtosis. The values of the analyzed variables were between ± 2 , indicating a near normal distribution (Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for Religious Comfort and Strain Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Gratitude Questionnaire ($N = 254$).

Scales	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Religious comfort	5.35	2.84	0.11	−1.24
Fear/guilt	3.43	1.73	0.69	0.10
Negative emotions God	2.61	1.69	1.24	0.93
Negative emotions people	4.36	1.77	0.53	−0.03
Self-Esteem	2.82	0.57	−0.18	−0.44
Dispositional Gratitude	30.75	5.38	−0.45	0.55

3.2. Correlations

The results (Table 2) indicate statistically significant positive associations between: (1) religious comfort, self-esteem, and dispositional gratitude; and (2) dispositional gratitude and self-esteem. Negative correlations were found between: (3) fear/guilt and self-esteem; (4) negative emotions toward God, self-esteem, and dispositional gratitude; and (5) negative emotions toward people/institutions related to religion and self-esteem.

Table 2. Pearson's correlation results for all measured variables.

Scales	RC	FG	NEG	NEC	SE	DG
Religious comfort (RC)	1	0.34 ***	−0.38 ***	−0.23 ***	0.21 ***	0.43 ***
Fear/guilt (FG)		1	0.21 ***	0.11 ^t	−0.24 ***	0.09
Negative emotions God (NEG)			1	0.28 ***	−0.41 ***	−0.31 ***
Negative emotions people (NEP)				1	−0.13 *	−0.09
Self-Esteem (SE)					1	0.34 ***
Dispositional Gratitude (DG)						1

Note. *** $p < 0.001$; * $p < 0.05$; ^t $0.05 < p < 0.1$.

The outcomes confirmed hypotheses H1 and H3, showing statistically significant associations between all of the dimensions of the RCSS and self-esteem (H1), and self-esteem and gratitude (H3). Moreover, hypothesis H2 was partially corroborated, since only two dimensions of the RCSS were associated with dispositional gratitude. It can be assumed that people who declare that religion is for them a source of comfort, express positive attitudes toward the self and recognize others' kindness, as well. In contrast, people who consider religiosity as a cause of internal strain tend to display a lower subjective sense of personal worth and a lower appreciation of the positive around them.

3.3. Multicollinearity and Confounding Variables

The outcomes of the multiple linear regression indicate that there was not a problem with high correlations between the independent variables and no evidence of multicollinearity. Although the Mahalanobis' distance indicated the presence of two influential cases, the problematic outliers were not removed since the correlational statistics with and without their presence were comparable. Moreover, the VIF values were between 1.01 and 3.27, and the tolerance values were between 0.80 and 0.98, showing no indices for concern. Cook's values did not surpass 1 and were in the acceptable range of between 0.000 and 0.097. The results revealed that the participants' sex, age, and their engagement in faith were not a set of confounding factors. They accounted for a small 4.2% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.042$) with the following values for sex ($\beta = 0.084$; $t = 1.499$; $p = 0.135$), age ($\beta = 0.105$; $t = 1.914$; $p = 0.057$), and faith engagement ($\beta = 0.033$; $t = 0.379$; $p = 0.705$). All of the predictors explained a further 23% of the variance.

3.4. Mediation Models

Next, we performed a mediation analysis in PROCESS (Hayes 2013). As Table 3 demonstrates, dispositional gratitude acted as a mediator in the models RC—DG—SE and NEG—DG—SE. The dimensions of fear/guilt and negative emotions toward religious community were not included in the models since they did not meet the required condition of significant correlations with the independent/dependent variables. In both cases, the 95% bootstrap confidence intervals did not include zero, and the c' paths were reduced compared with the c paths after adding dispositional gratitude.

Table 3. Role of Dispositional gratitude in the relationship between Religious comfort/Negative emotions toward God and Self-Esteem ($N = 254$).

Scales	a Path	b Path	c Path	c' Path	Indirect Effect and B (SE)	95% CI LOWER UPPER
RC—DG—SE	0.80 ***	0.03 ***	0.04 ***	0.01 (ns)	0.0263 (0.0067)	0.0136; 0.0404
NEG—DG—SE	−0.98 ***	0.02 ***	−0.14 ***	−0.11 ***	−0.0247 (0.0089)	−0.0440; −0.0093

*** $p < 0.001$; ns—not significant; RC—Religious comfort; NEG—Negative emotions toward God; DG—Dispositional gratitude; SE—Self-Esteem; a path—effect of the RC/NEG on the DG; b path—effect of the DG on the SE; c path—effect of the RC/NEG on the SE; c' path—direct effect of the RC/NEG on the SE while controlling for the DG.

4. Discussion

In terms of H1, fear/guilt, and negative emotions toward God and toward religious community/institution negatively correlated with self-esteem. Religious comfort, as a positive dimension of religiosity, was positively associated with self-esteem. These outcomes confirm our hypothesis and are in line with the previous studies. For example, Reiland and Lauterbach (2008) and Ghafoor et al. (2018) have found that religiosity may act as a potential protector against human suffering. This seems to be the case especially when people have a positive conception of the divine (Schieman et al. 2017) and are religiously committed (Ellison 1993; Krause 1992, 1995; Markstrom 1999; Hill et al. 2008). In the first condition, if individuals hold beliefs that God is a loving, caring, and accepting figure, they tend to declare higher self-esteem (Benson and Spilka 1973; Greenway et al. 2003; Joshanloo and Daemi 2015; Grubbs et al. 2016) and self-worth (Francis et al. 2001). In fact, Krause (1992) has suggested that religiosity affects feelings of the internal sense of one's own value. In other words, self-esteem may be related to the nature of beliefs about God (Schieman et al. 2017). Belonging to a religious community in which people find understanding and support is not without significance for the self-esteem of its members (Smith and Crosby 2017), as well. Positive feedback from fellow believers may be positively associated with self-esteem. Moreover, Grubbs et al. (2016) have observed that experience of religious struggle, in its different forms (divine, demonic, interpersonal, moral, ultimate meaning, and doubt) is related to low self-esteem. Grubbs et al. (2016) have reported that

negative attributions of God's intent, lack of meaning found in the struggle, and decline in response to religious or spiritual strain correlated negatively with self-esteem.

With respect to H2, gratitude positively correlated with religious comfort and inversely with negative emotions toward God. However, fear/guilt and negative emotions religious community did not correlate with dispositional gratitude. The obtained outcomes partially corroborate our assumptions and several previous findings (Ng and Chan 2015; Szcześniak et al. 2019; Loi and Ng 2021). Given that gratitude is mentioned and promoted in religious texts (Ng and Chan 2015; Loi and Ng 2021), and can coexist with religious faith (Homan et al. 2014), it is understandable that the positive experience of gratitude is positively associated with the feeling of being loved by God. Moreover, based on their experimental study, Lambert et al. (2009) have concluded that people who prayed daily to God declared higher levels of gratitude than those who were not praying. Krause et al. (2015) have confirmed that having a benevolent image of God resulted in higher gratitude. In contrast, divine struggles experienced in the form of being distant from God may co-occur with lower gratitude in accordance with the principle that in times of crisis or suffering people usually experience more negative emotions. In fact, people who are dealing with religious strains usually tend to report more anger toward God (Exline and Bright 2011) and less gratitude (Szcześniak et al. 2019).

Regarding H3, dispositional gratitude was positively correlated with self-esteem, which is in line with some theories and other previous studies. According to the sociometer approach, people with high self-esteem are aware that they are valued by others, and those who have low self-esteem doubt whether they are considered worthwhile (Anthony et al. 2007). In this regard, Leary (1999) has clarified that self-esteem is greatly influenced by circumstances that affect the degree to which individuals are respected by other people. Thus, higher self-esteem may be connected to others' approval, kindness, inclusion, understanding, or appreciation. According to McCullough et al. (2002), people who see themselves as the beneficiaries of other people's kindness and benevolence may feel more esteemed. When people perceive that someone else cares for them or supports their efforts, they may feel more self-respect (Emmons and Mishra 2011). In turn, Petrocchi and Couyoumdjian (2016) have specified that dispositional gratitude correlates negatively with feelings of inadequacy or self-repugnance and is positively associated with the ability to treat the self with kindness. Thus, lower self-esteem may stem from others' disapproval, devaluation, exclusion, abandonment, or refusal which have negative consequences for relational appraisal.

Finally, referring to H4, gratitude had a mediatory effect on the relationships between religious comfort/negative emotions toward God and self-esteem. Based on the outcomes gained in the present study, it can be implied that religiosity, considered as a source of sense and empowerment (Fiori et al. 2006; Szcześniak et al. 2020b), may be associated with people's own feelings of worthiness when they recognize others' good actions, appreciate their gifts or gestures, and respond positively to obtained benefits (Sansone and Sansone 2010). This is possible because gratitude is "intrinsically self-esteeming" (Emmons 2004, p. 5) and generally makes people feel good. A mediational role of gratitude can also be noticed in the experience of religious/spiritual struggles. In this case, despite various religious or spiritual difficulties, people may still elevate their self-esteem given that gratitude buffers against unpleasant states and external or internal adversities (Kane et al. 2021). In fact, Algoe and Zhaoyang (2016) have confirmed through experimental analyses that gratitude, besides yielding interpersonal advantages, provides intrapersonal benefits, as well. It is plausible to assume that the feeling of being respected by others, and thus experiencing gratitude, builds several psychological resources (Algoe and Zhaoyang 2016) that can be used in hard times of religious doubts or strains and boost self-esteem. Previous literature has shown that gratitude, in its role of mediator, may lead to a considerable decrease in stress (Wood et al. 2008; Cheng et al. 2015; O'Connell and Killeen-Byrt 2018), and can act as a buffer against anxiety (Rosmarin et al. 2010; Stoeckel et al. 2015), negative emotions

(Fredrickson et al. 2000), loneliness (O’Connell and Killeen-Byrt 2018), and psychological distress (Wong et al. 2017).

5. Limitations

This study is not free from some shortcomings. The first limitation relates to the mediational nature of the current study, which prevents causal inferences between the variables considered. In the future, the use of a design that allows the existence of a temporary sequence between variables would be an appropriate solution. Another limitation consists in the lack of proportion between the number of women and men in the research group, which makes it impossible to generalize the results. Almost three to one ratio of females over males observed in the current study reflects the existing tendency of female outnumbering males in willingness to participate in different data collection (Severiens and Dam 2011). In subsequent studies, it would be important to ensure a similar number of women and men.

6. Conclusions

The results obtained in the present study suggest that a positive (religious comfort) and challenging (religious struggle in the form of negative emotions toward God) experience of religiosity may not be indifferent to individuals’ attitudes toward the self through the tendency to perceive and value positive aspects of life. When people find meaning and security in religion, they may evaluate themselves more positively, seeing around them benefits deriving from others. In this sense, dispositional gratitude serves as an incentive to evaluate one’s own worth or importance. Instead, when religion begins to be a source of struggle or suffering, a perception of people’s benevolence may act as a buffer against the negative spiritual experience, and even in these circumstances people can maintain a sense of self-worth.

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