

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Preliminary study of religious, spiritual and mystical experiences. Thematic analysis of Poles adult's narratives

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The aim of this study was to examine narratives of the personal religious, spiritual and mystical experiences of adult Poles ($N = 74$) and their impact on narrative identity. The method for collecting qualitative data about individual understandings and spiritual, religious and mystical experiences was the narrative interview, developed on the basis of the Life Story Interview. During the analysis, the following key topics were identified: awareness of the presence/protection of God, a peak experience, the aware-

ness of oneness with nature and the world, and a sense of closeness/contact with a person who has died. This study provides specific information on the spiritual, religious and mystical experiences of the investigated group of Poles.

KEY WORDS

personal religious; spiritual and mystical experience; narratives

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION – A: Study design · B: Data collection · C: Statistical analysis · D: Data interpretation · E: Manuscript preparation · F: Literature search · G: Funds collection

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE – Boczkowska, M. M., & Zięba, M. (2016). Preliminary study of religious, spiritual and mystical experiences. Thematic analysis of Poles adult's narratives. *Current Issues in Personality Psychology*, 4(3), 167–176.

RECEIVED 12.04.2016 · REVIEWED 04.07.2016 · ACCEPTED 18.07.2016 · PUBLISHED 27.07.2016

BACKGROUND

Religiousness and spirituality are significant issues in the public domain in Poland. According to studies conducted by the CBOS Public Opinion Research Center (Boguszewski, 2012, 2014), Polish religiousness is undergoing a change, as it is becoming less institutionalized and more individualized. Are Poles becoming religious in a wider variety of ways? What does this individualization actually indicate, and to what religious or spiritual experiences is it related? While attempting to answer these questions, it is worth considering what religiousness, spirituality and mysticism are, and what is meant by experiencing them. These questions do not have conclusive answers. Researchers of these phenomena even claim that defining and describing religiousness, spirituality and mysticism is a particularly frustrating occupation. The difficulty lies in the interdisciplinarity of the concepts. Human religiousness and spirituality have been studied by sciences such as psychology, sociology, theology, philosophy, and even biology; however, each of these fields presents their own interpretation of the phenomena.

The first study in psychology dedicated to the subject of *human religious experience* dates back to 1901/1902 when the psychologist and philosopher William James first delivered a series of Gifford Lectures, afterwards editing them in the joint publication *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Before James's (1902/2002) seminal work, 'religious psychology', as a new field of science, was envisioned within the realm of developmental and educational psychology (Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 1991). Therefore, James's book is regarded as the starting point for religious psychology studies that focus on the nature of religious experience.

James (1902/2002) defined religion as that which a person does with their solitude, in relation to whatever they consider God. The essence of his study on religion and religiousness was to gain insight into the individual, direct experiences of humans, as related to religion. He emphasized that humans, as thinking beings, apply an intellectual framework to their ideas and impressions, including religious and mystical ones. He also regarded it as natural that in exchanging views and feelings with others, people use everyday language, as well as general phrases and categories (James, 1902/2002). Treating religious experience as a study of human nature, he applied interpretative phenomenological analyses. In his view, notions such as spirituality and religiousness can be defined only by describing 'live' subjective, direct experiences related to them. As a pragmatist and empiricist, he distinctly separated religious rituals, rites and all other institutionalized forms of religiousness from personal direct experiences related to an indi-

vidual's feelings and reflections on what is sacred. Moreover, he regarded human personal religiousness as an original form that predates institutional forms (James, 1902/2002).

James (1902/2002) underlined that religious experience has a considerable impact on the whole of human life, even defining it as a way to achieve a coherent personality structure. Nevertheless, it is hard to find a specific definition of religious experience in James's works. As he put it: "my lectures are a laborious attempt to extract from the privacies of religious experience some general facts, which can be defined in formulas upon which everyone may agree" (James, 1902/2002, p. 392).

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

As argued by Straś-Romanowska and Kapała (2010, p. 104), "the term 'experience' may be considered to have three basic meanings: 1) as the perception of sensory events and their mental processing, 2) as everything that is subject to direct consciousness, and 3) as the movement of consciousness, which results in grasping something mentally and gaining insight".

Smith (1971) proposed that religious experience should be seen more broadly and spoke about a *religious dimension of human experience*. In his opinion, religious experience is not just one part of human life, but has a deeper, sacred dimension. Smith maintained that the religious dimension of experience constitutes any fragment of reality that the human experiences with the sacred (e.g., admiration of nature, feeling of love, great joy, a job well done).

While discussing a definition of religious experience, *religiousness* should also be defined. Since there is no single precise theory, the theory of religiousness by Gruehn (1966), which builds on James's legacy, will be used for the purpose of this paper. According to this theory, religiousness is an individual's personal and positive attitude toward religion. It is manifested in everything a person experiences, and all they do in terms of their relationship with and attitude towards God.

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

James (1902/2002) claimed that a mystical experience is a particularly distinct manifestation of religiousness that enables insight into its functioning, as if looking through a magnifying glass (Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 1991). He defined mystical states of consciousness as 'real' experiences; that is to say, they are valid topics for investigation and study, and are available to most people. He used the term *mystical states of consciousness* to include a spectrum of experiences, from non-religious to profoundly religious

ones. They include, for example, sporadic mystical experiences, *déjà vu*, experiences of nature, cosmic consciousness, chemical intoxication and cultivated mystical experiences.

Mystical experiences, however, are not treated the same by all researchers, which has resulted in a debate about definitions. Several researchers, such as James (1902/2002), regard mystical experiences as synonymous with religious experiences, while others (Holm, 1982; Hood, 1975) differentiate them as distinct experiences.

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

Spirituality and *spiritual experience* are terms that are even more difficult to present and define. Similar to the problem faced in defining a mystical experience, there is a dispute about the scope of meaning of *religiousness* and *spirituality*. Some use the terms interchangeably, whereas others claim staunchly that one may be deeply spiritual without professing any specific religion. As noted by Jarosz (2010), the concept of spirituality arose mainly from questioning the institutional dimension of religion and highlighting the uniqueness and autonomy of the substance and emotions experienced by individuals in their contact with the sacred.

In the *Handbook of Religion and Health*, Koenig, McCullough, and Larson (2001, p. 18) delivered clear-cut definitions of religion and spirituality. According to them, “*religion* is an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols designed a) to facilitate closeness to the sacred or transcendent (God, higher power or ultimate truth/reality) and b) to foster an understanding of one’s relationships with, and responsibility to, others within a community. *Spirituality* is a personal quest for reaching understandings about the ultimate questions of life and about the meaning of and relationship with the sacred or transcendent, which may or may not lead to, or arise from, the development of religious rituals and community”.

In addition, Wulff (1999) pointed out that both spirituality and religiousness comprise emotional, cognitive, behavioral, moral, interpersonal, social, creative and personality domains. In Poland, Skrzyńska (2012) reviewed and ordered ways of understanding the phenomenon of spirituality, presenting them in three main categories:

1. Spirituality as an attitude comprising cognitive, emotional and operational components (Saucier, 2000; Trzebińska, 2008).
2. Spirituality as a personality dimension. Some researchers have proposed hypotheses that treat spirituality as the sixth dimension of personality (Piedmont, 1999).
3. Spirituality as a cognitive schema. In the framework of cognitive psychology, spirituality and reli-

giousness are interpreted in a category of schema (McIntosh, 1995).

Numerous studies (Emmons, 1999; Skrzyńska, 2002) have shown that spirituality can be strongly related to religiousness, but not always. Emmons noted that spirituality involves “a search for meaning, unity, connectedness to nature, humanity, and the transcendent” (Emmons, 1999, p. 877), which may mean that spirituality has a strong subjective element (Saucier & Skrzyńska, 2006). However, religion provides a “faith community with teachings and narratives that enhance the search for the sacred and encourage morality” (Emmons, 1999, p. 877 citing Dollahite, 1998), which indicates that religion has a strong traditionalist element (citing Saucier & Skrzyńska, 2006). Pargament (1999) noted that, today, spirituality has become differentiated from religion (and religiousness, because recent definitions of religion have become more narrow and less inclusive). He noted that historically, religion was a broad-band construct, which included both individual and institutional elements, but now, it is seen as a “narrowband construct” that is understood more institutionally. Spilka and McIntosh (1996) noted that spirituality became “the favored term to describe individual experience and is identified with such things as personal transcendence, superconscious sensitivity, and meaningfulness” (citing Hill et al., 2000, p. 60). Religion, in contrast, is more often identified with “formally structured” religious institutions that are often regarded as limiting human potential (Pargament, 1997, citing Hill et al., 2000, p. 60).

Scott (1997) performed a content analysis of a sample of 31 definitions of religiousness and 40 definitions of spirituality that have appeared in social scientific writings in the 20th century and found substantial differences in how both religion and spirituality are defined. That analysis points to substantial diversity in the content of the definitions of religiousness and spirituality. It may show that comprehensive theories accounting for the nature of religion or spirituality constructs are lacking in social scientific investigations (Hill et al., 2000).

With so many views and definitions of spirituality, a precise description of spiritual experience hardly seems possible. If it is so hard to define, perhaps it is easier to envision religiousness and spirituality by looking at significant studies that have explored the understanding and definition of religious, spiritual and mystical experiences. Studies in the United States and the United Kingdom on religious and spiritual experiences carried out in the secular sphere, outside of religious traditions, should be acknowledged here.

Professor Alister Hardy set up the Religious Experience Research Centre in Oxford in 1969. Along with his team, he studied religious experience by asking subjects to provide their accounts of first-hand ex-

periences. The study was conducted in the secular tradition and attempted to define the true nature and function of those experiences, assuming that they appear not only in the system of religious meanings, but also beyond it (Grzymała-Moszczyńska, 1991; Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009).

Hardy was a biologist and was interested in the relationship between the science of biology and religion. He hypothesized that religious experience evolved through the process of natural selection, because it has survival value to the individual (Hay, 2002). He claimed that spiritual awareness is universal and biologically rooted in the species. Hardy demonstrated in his research that in spite of varied religious experiences, most people in the UK, whether they belong to a religion or not, or whether they are related to a religious institution or not, maintain that they have had some sort of spiritual or religious experience and that the experience was positive (Hay, 2002). At the same time, these studies show a correlation with good education, good mental health and personal happiness (Hay, 1994, 2002).

Hardy's work was continued by David Hay, who began his studies in the late 1970s and the 1980s on a group of students studying education at the University of Nottingham. The difference between the studies was that what Hardy called religious experience was described by Hay and Heald (1987) as spiritual experience. The subjects in the research procedure of Hardy's study received general instructions regarding the experiment, and subsequently were asked to describe their first-hand experiences of that kind. The study was conducted in the secular tradition, regardless of religious ideology. The experiences enumerated by the subjects were classified in four major categories reflecting spiritual experience:

- awareness of the presence of God,
- awareness of receiving help in answer to prayer,
- awareness of a guiding presence, not necessarily God,
- a sacred presence in nature.

In 1987, Hay published *Exploring inner space* (1987), in which he proposed a hypothesis similar to Hardy's, that is, that spiritual awareness is natural for the human species and has evolved through the process of natural selection. To prove the genuineness of the finding, he highlighted similarities between various people's descriptions of spiritual experiences.

In his 2002 paper, *Spirituality of adults in Britain*, Hay presented surprising research findings concerning spiritual experiences. The results introduced new categories, such as:

- Presence of God. Interestingly, when the 1987 study was compared with the new study, there was a 41% increase in the number of polled subjects declaring this type of experience. It should also be mentioned that about 37% of the subjects stated that they felt they had received help from God as a result of pray-

ing. This showed a rise of 40% when compared with the 1987 study.

- Feeling of being in touch with someone who has died. A surprisingly large number of people (approximately 25% of the sample) felt that they had been in touch with someone who has died. This showed a rise of 38% when compared with the 1987 study.
- Feeling aware of an evil presence. This showed a rise of 100% when compared with the 1987 study.
- Feeling a sacred presence in nature. A total of 29% of the sample felt that they had had this kind of experience. This was an 81% rise compared with the 1987 study.

The results also surprised Hay, who stated that he had been studying spirituality for over 30 years, but that this recent research had produced the most interesting data. Interestingly, the research data presented in this paper are nearly identical to the results published by Hay in 2002, in spite of having been conducted in a different culture.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The aim of the present research was to identify the characteristic topics appearing in narratives concerning religious, spiritual and mystical experiences in a sample of adult Poles. We decided to examine what particular experiences are related to spiritual, religious and mystical domains in this culture. In accordance with James's proposals (1902/2002) for studying religious, spiritual and mystical experiences, we applied informal language, selecting narrative interviews as the data collection method, because narratives are one of the most basic forms of experiencing and interpreting reality (Bruner, 1991; Trzebiński, 2002). They have a constructivist function in that they allow people to connect and organize experiences (including spiritual ones) into a coherent whole (McAdams, 2001). Subsequently, we conducted a thematic analysis of the narratives concerning religious, spiritual and mystical experiences.

PARTICIPANTS

Seventy-four psychology students from Warsaw and Poznan participated in the study for extra credit (ECTS points). Individuals who declared that they had experienced trauma in the last five years were excluded from the study (these students participated in another procedure). The participants ranged in age from 21 to 54 years old ($M = 31.23$, $SD = 8.05$).

PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS

The study was conducted using a lateral study scheme. The method used to collect qualitative data

on individual understandings and spiritual, religious and mystical experiences was the narrative interview, developed on the basis of the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2001).

The participants talked about 12 key moments in their lives, such as a high point, a turning point and a life challenge, as well as their most important religious, spiritual or mystical experience. In addition, they were asked to reflect on the impact of this experience on their life so far. The question they were asked about their religious, spiritual or mystical experience was as follows:

Whether they are religious or not, many people report that they have had experiences in their lives where they felt a sense of the transcendent or sacred, a sense of God or some almighty or ultimate force, or a feeling of oneness with nature, the world, or the universe. Thinking back on your entire life, please identify an episode or a moment in which you felt something like this. This might be an experience that occurred within the context of your own religious tradition if you have one, or it may be a spiritual or mystical experience of any kind. Please describe this transcendent experience in detail. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you or your life?

In the research, we deliberately did not impose any definitional categories, but asked the subjects to express themselves freely about their religious and mystical experience. We wanted to examine how the subjects defined their religious, spiritual and mystical experience and to capture their first-hand descriptions of those experiences. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE INTERVIEWS

The narratives were analyzed by two independent judges who are competent in identifying categories, themes and meanings. The topics and categories were coded according to the method of the thematic analysis of narratives (Braun & Clark, 2006). Thematic analysis, like the majority of qualitative methodologies, discards the formulation of hypotheses prior to the research.

The aim of this qualitative analysis was to extract the key paradigms/topics from the data. In accordance with the 6-stage procedure of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), the first stage relied on becoming familiarized with the data by reading and re-reading the content in an active way – searching for meanings and patterns, and noting down the initial ideas. Subsequently, notes from the statements of the subjects were taken with regard to the meanings that they ascribed to their experiences. At that stage, the code key was prepared. During the next stage,

the code key was reviewed and mastered, and themes began to be formed. After the initial formation of the themes, the data were carefully examined once more in order to check whether the postulated themes were accurate and adequately formulated. In the last stage, the key themes were ordered.

RESULTS

During the analysis, the following key topics were identified: awareness of the presence/protection of God, a peak experience, awareness of oneness with nature and the world, and a feeling of closeness/contact with a person who has died. Some participants (approximately 15%) said that they had had no such experience. Below are the key themes, with examples of the narratives they represent.

THEME 1: AWARENESS OF GOD'S PRESENCE/ PROTECTION

The participants often spoke of experiencing God's presence or protection. The narratives in this theme were dominated by subjects who spoke of how they directly experienced God's support during a difficult situation:

I experienced it during that, those eight days, these are recollections in silence. Ehhh, where successive contemplations are held. It, it was an incredibly strong experience of God's presence in all my suffering. And I kind of saw I wasn't alone there. Ehh, that there is someone who was walking behind me. Someone who supported me. Where, where in moments when it seemed to me total darkness and loneliness, then I had an experience of God's presence in it.

Some subjects spoke of how God protected them before a wrong decision or accident:

When it occurs to you, a situation, don't do it, because something bad will happen. An instinctive hunch or perhaps a prompt, let's say, of a guardian angel. It happened to me twice, not to get on, let's say. Once it was a case of not to get on the bus to Y, which had Y: which had an accident, in town. Hmm, ehh, and once it was like, you know, private situations here, so as not to get mixed up, because everything would go another way. And some such signs were somewhere from above, and I interpret it as a piece of advice from my guardian angel, who protects me. I believe. I believe in God. I believe in the force which guides us. I don't believe in the institution of church. Ehh, and it, it is so terrible, institutionalized faith. Nevertheless, I believe there's some power which guides us. And which is here and pushes us in the good direction. I'd called it thus. I don't see God as hanging on the cross and punishing for sins. I associate God with love, warmth and pure feeling of love.

God's protection as a key theme was also present in the narratives concerning an answered prayer or a sign from God while making an important decision in life. One woman said:

It may seem so trivial to some, but to me, it was very meaningful. I got to know a new person, and then I was praying a lot, to find out it was the boy, so, so that God would give me a sign that this is the boy, so he could give a sign. It may seem so trivial, and someone can say 'oh, he will call then'. But it was about a half an hour when he called and... I had it someday. I mean the whole week of doubts just about him. And then, I went to church. To the mass and at a mass... I was simply talking to God during that week, and, and I said, I don't know if it's the right person. I'm scared he'd hurt me again. And then, during that mass, his name and surname were mentioned. Really, it was so... I don't know, you know, I feel it was a sign from God... that God exists. I finally realized it back then and that he has so much power.

All of the statements categorized under this theme shared the feature of the subject perceiving God's protection/presence or guidance. The subjects relatively seldom defined the religion to which the God/higher power was related. Some made a direct statement about participating in religious practices, such as attending mass or praying. Others, on the other hand, indicated that they are not followers of any specific religion and that they reject an institutionalized image of God. Although the narratives differed in this respect, all of the statements featured a distinct common theme of an awareness of being under God's protection. Based on the research of Parment, Smith, Koenig, and Perez (1998), a conclusion may be drawn that a sense of God's protection brings about positive effects for well-being. This feeling could probably be seen as an adaptational form of religious coping, which refers to experiencing spirituality and a secure relationship with God, while also seeking spiritual support.

THEME 2: PEAK EXPERIENCE

Another important theme that emerged from the narratives was a peak experience. One subject who described a peak experience spoke about a sexual act:

I haven't been able to understand it yet. The first sex after a several year break. Hmm... it didn't end ecstatically in a traditional sense, but why? I actually had a feeling that rays of light, hmm, shot down my spine. Right. Hmm, and it was so amazing that all else ceased to matter at all. 'Cause... there is, it came here from the east that concept of a variety of chakras or something. I don't believe in it at all. It, it, it, it is beyond my, my kind of map of the world. But as a matter of fact, in those places where those chakras are placed by those people of the far east, I simply felt this... and it was

the most mystical experience I've ever had in my life. Something amazing.

Another person spoke about a peak experience, which she calls mystical, in relation to gospel music:

It is also in this music. And it helped me very, very, very much... Is it a mystical experience or not? I mean, I experienced it back then, it was a cushion of sorts, that it doesn't matter where I am, but I feel there's a place where I can just go, hmm and people have so much faith and so much that you can simply get infected with it.

A characteristic feature of the peak experience theme is reaching ecstasy, a fullness of existence or a sense of an extraordinary condition. Maslow's (1964) theory deserves a mention at this point: He defined religiousness as a mental state in which it is possible to achieve virtually any life activity as long as one reaches a high level of excellence, thereby generating a peak experience. Maslow (1964) argued that it can be expected that such a peak experience is accompanied by the mentioned ecstasy: a feeling of being in top condition, enlightenment, deep emotions, rapture, happiness and fullness of being.

THEME 3: AWARENESS OF ONENESS WITH NATURE/THE WORLD

The third key theme emerging from the narratives on spiritual, mystical and religious experiences was that of an awareness of oneness with nature/the world. One subject said:

I went to the forest... I could not [problem description] do it, but it wasn't that important, because I happen to be a part of all this... Under my feet, there are leaves which are dead and will soon turn into the ground, from which something will grow again.

Another subject spoke about experiencing oneness with nature while doing sports:

I feel this oneness. Oneness is perhaps an overstatement, but it's like intertwined with the world then. Kind of intertwined with, I don't know, the air, a sense of air on my skin, like when you ride down quickly. A feeling of littleness, but relevance. A feeling that somewhere that space is so huge. How small I am in relation to it. Yet on the whole, it isn't a feeling of, hmm, insignificance. It's rather a feeling of being intertwined, a feeling of relevance. I mean if you can speak about it this way, I am as important as anything else. So we can say it's not important at all, but we can also say I feel so cosmic. I mean I feel then, even as I'm speaking about it now, I can generally see like I was looking at the earth, I can see such blue and green somewhere, I don't know, lands, green-yellow lands, and I look at it kind of from outside, but still. I mean I feel unity of sorts with the world.

Describing an awareness of oneness with nature/the world as a key religious, spiritual or mystical ex-

perience is in accordance with Smith's (1971) theory, which claimed that a human can experience the sacred through any element of reality. The narrative appearing under this key theme is reminiscent of the description of a specific kind of mindfulness discussed by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) in the mindfulness theory. This theory has a conscious and non-judgmental mindfulness that is focused on the present time. Researchers of mindfulness (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007) have maintained that its characteristic feature is of integrating experiences in an assimilative and non-discriminatory way; thereby a man can experience the fullness of being. Many empirical studies on mindfulness (Bishop, 2002; Davis, Fleming, Bonus, & Baker, 2007) have shown its positive impact on health and well-being (e.g., by reducing stress and tension). It can be inferred that this type of experience, related to an awareness of oneness with nature/the world, produces beneficial effects for human health.

THEME 4: FEELING OF CLOSENESS/CONTACT WITH A PERSON WHO HAS DIED

Among the subjects, there were people who, when asked about religious, spiritual and mystical experiences, spoke of a feeling/awareness of 'energy' or 'power' obtained from a familiar deceased person. One of the subjects spoke of how she felt the presence of her dead grandmother:

Three or four days after grandma's death, I felt a calm of sorts, and I thought I kind of felt her, her energy, and I don't know. She was such a nice woman, always warm-hearted and had such particular energy. And I had an impression that it was, I don't know, a kind of metaphysical experience or something, but since that moment, I've simply been peaceful, and I thought that there could be really something somewhere in another world.

Some subjects spoke about an awareness/feeling of protection or protective intervention of a familiar deceased person:

I skidded, I don't know how many times the car turned from the right to the left. And I just knew my grandmother pulled me to the side of the road, kind of took the rear of that car of mine and pulled it to the side, and at that moment, that lorry drove past. Besides, now when I leave home, and I didn't give attention to it before, there is this ring. I had received it from my grandma at my first communion. It lay for several years. I didn't bother with it at all, it is chipped here, because there was half a heart here. After her death, I felt I needed to wear it so that she could be right next to me.

For many subjects, the key theme of a spiritual experience was related to the awareness of a closeness/contact with a dead person. It could indicate a sub-

jective way of viewing a religious, spiritual or mystical experience, which includes the supreme value of man (Straś-Romanowska & Kapala, 2010).

Some participants (approximately 15%) said that they had never had such an experience. Most often, however, a declaration of a lack of a spiritual, religious or mystical experience was related to expressing an unfulfilled need for such an experience, for example, 'I'd even like to believe in some kind of supreme power'. Some statements presented uncertainty, for example, 'perhaps it makes me angry when I hear from other people about it, but I don't feel I've experienced it; I don't know if it's because I'd like to have it, or I fail to notice it, or I've had it perhaps?'

DISCUSSION

The findings obtained in the research seem interesting and even surprising for at least two reasons: the relatively high incidence rate of spiritual or religious experiences in the sample group and the high level of similarity of the thematic categories formed on the basis of the participants' statements to the categories obtained in the research conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom.

Over 85% of the research subjects, when answering a question about the presence of religious, spiritual or mystical experiences in their lives, were able to identify such an experience and describe it. It should be noted that the question about experiences of this kind was raised in the course of the research as one of several questions concerning a variety of events from the subjects' lives. In comparison to the research of Hardy and Hay, the participants in the study were not encouraged to speak about their spiritual or religious experiences, which could result in the over-representation in the sample group of more religious or spiritual people than the mean in the population. The majority of the subjects perceived the question concerning spiritual or religious experience as natural and indistinguishable from the other questions about diverse events posed in the interview. The subjects had difficulty recalling an event in their life that constituted a turning point or in which they displayed wisdom more frequently than in pointing out religious, spiritual or mystical experiences.

There was a relatively high number of people in the sample group who described some mystical, religious or spiritual experience not exactly related to religious doctrine. The sociological research (Boguszewski, 2015) indicates that the significance of religious life in Poland is diminishing. During recent years the percentage of respondents who report that they believe and comply with the church's recommendations decreased from 66% to 39%. There has been, however, a significant increase (from 32% to 52%) in the number of respondents who report believing "in their

own way". Our data as well as the data obtained from CBOS (Boguszewski, 2015) might suggest that there exists a fundamental need for spiritual experience, whose fulfillment can take various forms and is frequently unrelated to professing any religion.

The thematic analysis of the narratives concerning the religious, spiritual and mystical experiences of the participants enabled four categories to be distinguished: an awareness of God's presence/protection, a peak experience, an awareness of oneness with nature/the world and a feeling of closeness/contact with a person who has died. The above categories are similar or even identical to those presented in the studies of Hardy (1979) and Hay and Heald (1987). The consistency of the categories is even more striking in the later research by Hay (2002), which included categories such as the presence of God, feeling a sacred presence in nature, a feeling of being in touch with someone who has died, and feeling an awareness of an evil presence. Interestingly, the latter category about the presence of evil, highlighted in the data of Hay (2002), does not appear in our data. It is difficult to explain this difference, and this area requires further exploration. Moreover, the CBOS research (Boguszewski, 2015) shows that Polish society believes in fate (good or bad fortune), which is not derived from Catholicism, more than in hell. Two thirds of the respondents report such answers (66%).

This seems to imply a lack of impact of the cultural differences between Poland, the United States, and the United Kingdom in terms of the kind of religious, spiritual and mystical experiences that appear most frequently. This result is interesting, bearing in mind that in contrast to Anglo-Saxon countries, the Catholic religion is dominant in Poland; however, this should be corroborated in other studies. In looking for an explanation in his research of the recurrence of the above categories of religious experiences in diverse nationalities, Alister Hardy, also a biologist, proposed that religious experience has evolved through the process of natural selection, most likely because it has survival value to the individual. Many neurophysiologists (Newberg, d'Aquili, & Rause, 2001; Ramachandran & Blakeslee, 1999) have maintained that they were able to identify the physiological correlates of spiritual awareness in the brain. Nevertheless, this area requires further observation and research. It could also imply the necessity of interdisciplinary research involving sciences such as psychology and physiology.

The method applied has many limitations, which considerably impact the possibility for the generalization of the results obtained in the research. The first is the selection of the subjects in the sample group. The participants in the study were students of psychology, who probably do not differ much in their level of religiousness or spirituality when compared with the general population. On the other hand, they

could differ from the general population in terms of such factors as their level of insight, their capacity to reflect on their own experiences, and their motivation to seek non-material values in life. Therefore, it seems necessary to conduct the research in sample groups that would be more representative of the population at large. This study was conducted in too small a sample to be able to generalize the results to the whole population.

Another significant limitation results from the qualitative methodology applied in this research. The structured Life Story Interview, used by us and in numerous other studies, enables the procurement of narratives that characterize the typical ways of describing an experience for the individual (McAdams, 2001). A well-trained interviewer posed the question about religious, spiritual or mystical experiences to all of the participants in the research in the same non-leading manner. However, it was not the participants in the research, but competent judges, who interpreted the text of the narratives and classified them into the determined categories. This procedure is subject to error, in spite of the observation of the proper standards of assessment, including the independence of the judges in the first stage of the analysis, precise instructions and training.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The present research was supported by a grant from the National Science Center (Poland) to the second author.

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