



SPIRITUALTY OF CHILDREN IN FAMILIES AND THOSE IN RESIDENTIAL CARE

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Abstract/Izvleček

The aim of the study was to investigate the differences in the spirituality of children in residential care and children in families. Applying the method of pairs, children with behavioural problems who are users of residential care and children from families who are equal in terms of sociodemographic variables were selected for the sample. After applying a mixed methodology (Spiritual Sensitivity Scale and Santa Clara questionnaires, and Interpretive phenomenological analysis and thematic analysis of interviews), we obtained results indicating differences in the understanding of spirituality between these two groups. Children from residential care achieved higher results on spirituality questionnaires, and qualitative methodology determined a greater degree of compassion towards close people as well as a deeper relationship with the transcendent.

Keywords:

spirituality, method of pairs, residential care, children, mixed methodology.

Duhovnost otrok v družinah in tistih v institucionalni oskrbi

Namen raziskave je bil preučiti razlike v duhovnosti otrok, ki živijo v institucionalnem varstvu, in otrok, ki odrasčajo v družinah. Z metodo parov so bili v vzorec vključeni otroci z vedenjskimi težavami, ki so uporabniki institucionalnega varstva, ter otroci iz družin, ki so jim po sociodemografskih spremenljivkah enakovredni. Z uporabo mešane metodologije (lestvica duhovne občutljivosti in vprašalniki Santa Clara ter interpretativna fenomenološka analiza in tematska analiza intervjujev) so rezultati pokazali razlike v razumevanju duhovnosti med tema dvema skupinama. Otroci iz institucionalnega varstva so dosegli višje rezultate na vprašalnikih o duhovnosti, kvalitativna metodologija pa je pokazala večjo stopnjo sočutja do bližnjih oseb ter globlji odnos s transcendentnim.

Ključne besede:

duhovnost, metoda parov, institucionalno varstvo, otroci, mešana metodologija.

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Introduction

Religion and spirituality are complex constructs in research on children and adolescents. How do children and adolescents experience religion and spirituality? How are other dimensions of children's and adolescents' lives outlined through spirituality and religiosity? In what way does the local community, the community in which children or adolescents live, shape, or fail to shape the relationship towards religion and spirituality? Can we even measure these dimensions in children and adolescents?

These are just some of the questions that arise in recent research and textbooks in this field. This gives us justification for research and publication of works in the field of the psychology, pedagogy, and theology of understanding the religiosity and spirituality of children and adolescents. Systematic reviews of databases, such as PsychINFO, show that most dissertations and articles that have passed the modern review process (peer-reviewed) were published in the last 20 years or so. More precisely, analysis shows that 9 out of 10 publications appeared in the 21st century, i.e. in approximately the last 20 years (Boyatzis, 2024).

Spirituality and religiosity at distinct stages of life and events that mark the life of an individual, differ in their significance and influence and in some moments even become exceptional, unique and unrepeatable. How sensitive are we in various situations and stages of development to questions that touch spirituality? How and in what way do we recognize the importance of spirituality, and how can it help us in these moments?

Do we know what spirituality is? How can we measure it? In the literature, there are a number of questionnaires and scales that investigate individual dimensions of spirituality. Not a single scale measures spirituality as a unique whole, but rather as an individual part. Moreover, we even lack a single definition of spirituality. We have multiple approaches to and attempts to define within the framework of certain theories, paradigms, schools, or trends. The psychology of religiosity is a field that is presented through a methodologically dominant empirical hypothetical approach, while the history of the discipline often shows contrasting approaches (Nelson and Slife, 2024). In addition, psychology should move away from the WEIRD (Western, Education, Industrial, Rich, Democratic) approach and consider, especially for spirituality, the complexity of society, individual subcultures, ethnographic diversity and finally, the uniqueness of the individual.

Most of the published research is directed by placing the variable in the centre (variable-centred approach), which puts statistical parameters such as correlations, performance effects, differences between groups, etc. in the foreground. Such research is focused on narrower areas, constructs, and potential relationships between variables and analyses these relations in the given framework. It is a kind of quantitative paradigm that has certain values but at the same time is insufficient to yield an understanding of complex constructs at the level of the individual (Pearce et al., 2019). Therefore, the context in which a certain child or adolescent grows up is important, so that they can see the researched phenomenon. Such an approach is called the person-centred approach in the literature.

Quantitative methodology based on large samples and cross-sectional studies should be improved and overcome with qualitative methodology and longitudinal research (Boyatzis, 2024). Research into spirituality in children and adolescents should be directed towards a paradigm focused on the individual and not on the sample. So that, for example, they could investigate in an exclusively quantitative manner what the youngest canonized girl, Antonietta Meo, went through during her short life and suffering from illness. Nevertheless, a qualitative approach would also doubtlessly be needed.

A qualitative approach is especially necessary for children in difficult life circumstances, living with chronic illness, or loss of parents, or living in institutions. Research on children in palliative care in Barcelona showed the necessity of a qualitative approach. In the study, they used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA - Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis) interviews with 14 parents; from these interviews, three domains were extracted: life philosophy, relationships, and transcendence (Miquel et al., 2024). IPA has proven to be a suitable methodology in clinical, health and social psychology, and research contexts.

Qualitative research methodology can use visual representation and stories. Pictures and stories about supernatural life proved particularly useful in a sample of forty-nine children, which provided incredible qualitative insights into complex concepts such as death, dying, guilt, and forgiveness (Malcom, 2010).

Spirituality is an unavoidable topic for children when dealing with chronic conditions. Studies of spirituality among children facing life problems indicate several important dimensions that should be considered: the relationship to oneself, and to others, the relationship to the environment, and the relationship to transcendence (Fisher, 2004).

Research suggests that the SSSC provides a robust indicator of the strength of a child's spirituality, as well as a useful companion measure to other measures of mental and emotional well-being (Stoyles et al., 2012). In addition to this questionnaire, we will use a well-tested short questionnaire on the intensity of faith (Plante, 2010).

Based on the above, the aim of this paper is to investigate differences in the meaning of spirituality among children in residential care (RC) and in families, using a mixed methodology. We expect that children in RC will attach different importance to spirituality, in terms of both intensity and qualitative description, compared to their peers who live in complete families.

Methodology

The protocol for the application of the research Quality of Living Spirituality and Religiosity among Children in RC and Children in Families is used to ascertain how children at the Center for Providing Services in the Community (Official name of the residential care institution), unlike children in families, experience spirituality and religiosity in everyday life. The two groups of children are equal in terms of age, gender, and education. The procedure consists of three steps: sociodemographic questions, qualitative protocol, and application of the questionnaire. The total duration of the procedure is estimated at thirty minutes.

Sample

The sample of respondents consists of children from families and children from residential care (Center for Providing Services in the Community).

From the sociodemographic questions, the following data were collected: age, gender, class and school, place of birth and residence, number of members in the family, number of members in the community, number of brothers and sisters, and time spent in the centre/community.

Qualitative analysis

In the qualitative part of the research, we used the content framework of the interview Spiritual Quality of Life (Kamper et al., 2010). This model rests on three areas and dimensions of spirituality: relationship to the supernatural, relationship to oneself and relationship to others.

During the interview, the following questions were asked:

1. What makes you happy? What are these activities, events, or meetings?
2. What makes you unhappy--when you feel bad?
3. What helps you feel better and less depressed and unhappy?
4. Are some children closer to God, or do they seek, do they feel his closeness? Are you looking for such an experience? If so, in what way?
5. Some children and adolescents pray and meditate when they are not feeling well or when they are depressed. Do you pray too? What are you looking for in prayer? Does prayer help?
6. Do you do something for the family/community, or do you help to make the family/community better, or to make the members of the family/community feel happier? If so, what is it, what do you do for the family/community?
7. What do you like to do in your free time? How do you feel in these activities?
8. What did you do for fun this week?

The qualitative part of the research lasted approximately 20 minutes per respondent. Questions 1 to 3 were intended to establish a relationship between the child and the researcher, as well as to provide the children with an opportunity to discuss the themes and/or relationships arising from the questions. Questions 4 and 5 were the heart of the spiritual interview, more directly asking respondents about their personal beliefs about God, a higher being, and prayer. Question 6 explored how the child's relationship with the family affected his/her spirituality. The last two questions, 7 and 8, ended the interview in a lighthearted manner.

Quantitative analysis

In the quantitative part of the research, we used the sensitivity questionnaire for spirituality (Tirri et al., 2006) and the Saint Clare faith strength questionnaire (Plante, 2010).

The analysis of the results was done using the R language and associated packages (rempsych, ggpubr). Differences between the two groups of children were analysed using the t-test for independent samples, and a preliminary check of the normality condition for the use of the t-test was made using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which was not significant ($p > 0.05$).

Results and discussion

The research was conducted using a mixed methodology, i.e. a combination of the application of a questionnaire as a quantitative measure and a qualitative part. In the following tabular representation, we see a description of the sample, where there is an equal representation of men (N=12) and women (N=12) in both groups. The age of the respondents is from 16 to 18 years old, where most of them are 16 or 17 years old, and only one is 18 years old. Children from families mostly come from families with three or four members, while children from foster homes come from families with four to seven members.

Table 1

Sociodemographic features of children from residential care and from families

	Residential care, N = 12 ¹	Family, N = 12 ¹	p-value ²
Sex			>0.9
Male	6 (50%)	6 (50%)	
Female	6 (50%)	6 (50%)	
Year			>0.9
16	5 (42%)	5 (42%)	
17	6 (50%)	6 (50%)	
18	1 (8.3%)	1 (8.3%)	
No. of family members			0.14
2	1 (9.1%)	0 (0%)	
3	1 (9.1%)	4 (36%)	
4	2 (18%)	5 (45%)	
5	2 (18%)	0 (0%)	
6	2 (18%)	2 (18%)	
7	2 (18%)	0 (0%)	
8	1 (9.1%)	0 (0%)	
Unknown	1	1	

¹n (%)

²Pearson's Chi-squared test; Fisher's exact test

The results show that there are differences between children in home placement and placement in a family. Namely, children in foster care have a significantly higher score on the SSS scale ($t=2.46$, $p=0.022$) than children in families. Although children from foster care have higher average values, there are no statistically significant differences on the Santa Clara strength of faith questionnaire ($t=1.67$, $p=0.68$). The above results should be interpreted in the context of the sample size, which in this case is small, only 12 children in each group. Thus, from the point of view of quantitative methodology, this research should be considered as a kind of trial, pilot study.

Therefore, pictorial representations in which we see individual values have greater interpretive value. In the following picture, we see the differences between the two groups of adolescents in the total number of points on the SSS questionnaire and on the Santa Clara questionnaire about the strength of faith.

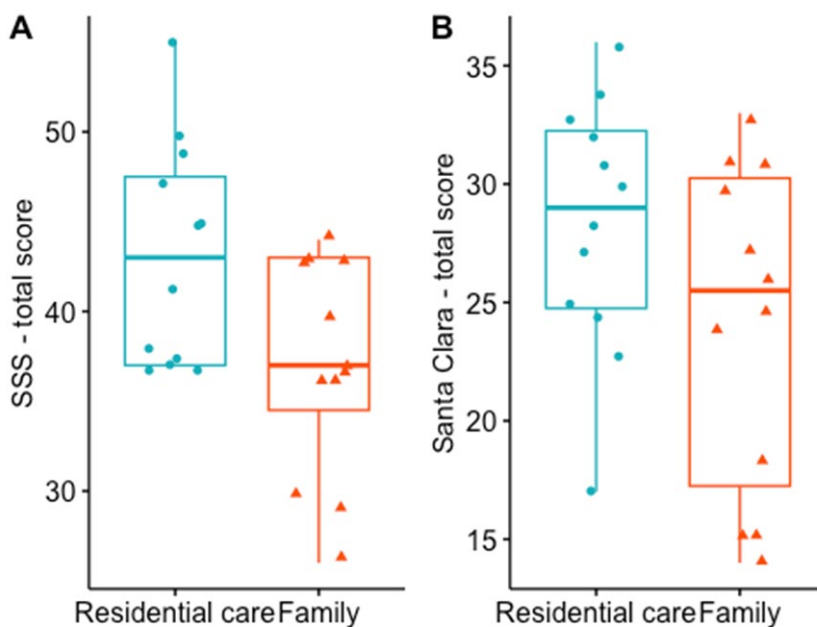


Figure 1: Spirituality sensitivity scale and Santa Clara total scores

In the qualitative part of the research, the respondents' answers to the questions asked in the interview were analysed. It was decided to approach thematic analysis

as a fundamental method of qualitative processing that enables us to show the experiences, meaning and reality of the respondents (Braun and Clarke, 2006). An important choice during thematic analysis is the demarcation of the topic, which can be achieved by inductive and deductive means. With the inductive approach, topics are derived from the data themselves (data driven), while in the deductive approach, topics are derived from theoretical ideas that the researcher explicitly and implicitly brings into the research (Joffe, 2011). Twenty interviews were analysed using an inductive approach and thus data-driven analysis.

The goal of the first cycle of coding was to identify meaningful, relevant passages of text, which were then assigned a code, which is a word or a short phrase symbolically marking the essence of the text that was analysed (Saldaña, 2016); the first iteration of data sublimation was completed, so the process of deriving themes was started. The overall goal of the thematic analysis in the following steps was to determine the patterns of topics for which it was desirable to condense and not reduce the data and ensure that these topics contained crucial information from the data that would serve to answer the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following six steps in conducting the thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), results were obtained, but when listening to the data, we realized that many transcripts were ideographically very rich and that thematic analysis was not the method for deep observation and analysis of the lived experience, reality and spiritual perception of our respondents. Following the above, we decided to approach the interpretive phenomenological analysis, which offers the possibility of primary focus on individual persons and their understanding of reality, with greater emphasis being placed on in-depth analysis and understanding of experiences (Pietkiewicz, 2014). By using both approaches, patterns or themes were obtained that represent converging phenomena common to all respondents (Thematic analysis), while on the other hand, a rich description of individual lived experience was preserved and presented, both of which were interpreted contextually. Although these two analyses were done separately, the results and presentation of the results were integrated because the goal of using these two methods was to provide the richest, truest, and highest quality presentation of the observed phenomena with analytical pluralism (Spiers and Riley, 2019).

The next section will present the questions codes, themes, representative quotations, and interpretation:

1. What makes you happy? What are these activities, events, or meetings?
“What did I hear from my uncle, I didn’t even know he existed, I was visiting homes

and stuff like that, I thought I was alone and that I had no one, and now my uncle is contacting me via social networks.” “When I don’t have many obligations, I can listen to music.” “When everything is good, at home, at school, when I’m with friends.” It is clear that these participants associate the feeling of happiness with close people, i.e. family members. Almost half of respondents from RC state that they are family members (uncle, grandmother, mother). It is interesting that two respondents state that a good relationship with the headmistress and teachers makes them happy. Common to the given answers is a close relationship with an older figure. The above answers are logical because these participants are children who come from an environment where relationships with family members are broken and discordant, so these answers can be viewed from the perspective of the compensatory model. On the other hand, their peers (paired matches) give answers related to quality spending of free time (various hobbies), everyday life without major problems, and a satisfying balance between family and student obligations and their social life.

2. What makes you unhappy when you feel bad? Users of the RC state that they feel bad when their relationships with loved ones are damaged. The above answers are logical, bearing in mind that their source of happiness relates to close people. Disruption of relationships is a topic that encompasses different situations such as loneliness, helplessness in the face of the problems of loved ones, and lack of acceptance by peers.

“Uhh, sooo....when...what the hell, you’re always happy and crazy, and I don’t know...and when maybe a person who is dear to me has something bad and she does something, let’s say a little serious, and I can’t do anything about it, maybe that’s why And when it’s not a good day, it’s not sunny.” “When, when, honestly, when I wasn’t accepted in a strange society and such a strange environment, when it comes I don’t know, mostly...I don’t know, (try to remember the specific situation), and mostly I’m always under something when I’m like this at home And that , but the dream is really unhappy, honestly, when I find out that I can’t call someone I can confide in, when I can’t get in touch with my brothers and someone close to me.” Differences with regard to gender when answering this question proved to be indicative. Thus, boys reported situations in which they felt unhappy with a higher level of abstraction, while girls had a harder time naming these situations, so they focused on specific situations that happened recently because of their inability to find adequate words.

Their peers (paired matches) also report damaged relationships, which can occur within the family, among peers or among friends. It is interesting that the answers to the first and second questions of the children from the Center are complementary. That is, the existence of something creates happiness for them, and the absence or impairment of the same creates unhappiness, while the aforementioned complementarity is not shown among their peers. Since spending quality free time makes them happy, it would be expected that the absence of such activities would make them unhappy. Nevertheless, analysis of the answers leads to the conclusion that it is damaged relationships that make them unhappy. Therefore, the issue arises of what really makes this group happy. One possible conclusion is that close relationships make them happy, but these young people “take them for granted.”

“When something is not right at home.” “When we argue at home.” “When they gossip or lie about me at school.”

1. What helps you feel better and less depressed and unhappy? The answers to this question fall into two categories. The first category related to conversation: conversation with educators, a sister, or a friend helps RC users to feel better. The second category was designated a meditative activity, because the answers from this category included actions that imply reflection, such as walking and thinking about a problem, standing in a room and thinking in solitude, or filling in a colouring book that has a calming effect on that person: “Or I would colour in some colouring books that would calm me down.” “I like to go for a walk with my friends, hang out with my sister and so on.”

On the other hand, their peers state that conversation is another action that helps them in moments of depression and amid feelings of unhappiness. In this case, it is about conversations with friends (peers). Also, as with children from the RC, there are meditative activities (e.g., listening to music): “I’ll go with a friend and talk about it.” “I’ll be in the room listening to music.”

4. Are some children closer to God, or do they seek, do they feel his closeness? Are you looking for such an experience? If so, in what way?

The answers to this question are undoubtedly polarized among children from the RC. It turned out that users of the RC do not seek the experience of God’s closeness at all and are instantly ready to declare this; on the other hand, a few respondents state that they do talk to God and pray, that they approach God. It is interesting that each user seeking the experience of God’s closeness approaches that meeting personally, so this category can be called Personal Relationship with God.

It is clear from individual responses that this relationship is not imposed; it is not “trained” by tradition, but it is just as deep as, if not deeper, than relationships with neighbours.

“I want to approach God because I think God is the only one who can understand me. Well, I pray regularly.” “It would be easier, it would be great... I’m seeking. I mean, it’s probably the same prayer, but I say that I don’t pray; I just talk to Him, then I come and stop and say, why does He have to do this to me, mostly lately? And I blame Him for things that are happening.”

Their peers also report that they seek God’s proximity. It is interesting that there is less polarization of yes/no answers; they gave fewer ‘no’ answers no, while on the other hand, they did not show such a deep relationship towards God’s closeness. The above is logical, considering the development of individuals in the Center and their peers who are in functional families. Trauma, family problems, difficult childhoods and extreme situations create deep binary choices through which the individual radicalizes his beliefs and either is seriously inclined to something or gives it up completely. “Well, I pray, and I want to calm down and be happy.” “Well I did, I stop and pray and think.” “Yeah, I have to be alone and then I think.”

The difference in the use of the lexeme “to pray” between these two groups turned out to be interesting. In Croatian (as in other Slavic languages), the word “moliti” marks an action that is translated as “pray;” it is an imperfective verb, which means that it is an action of long duration. On the other hand, “pomoliti” is translated the same but has a slightly different meaning, which in this context is interesting. This is perfective verb and marks an action that is short and casual. Children from the RC used the word pray in its imperfective format, while their peers used the word pray in its perfective format. This prefixation diminishes the verb to pray (“pomoliti”): the action was performed only to a minor extent. The verb thus acquires the meaning of something short-lived and incidental, as opposed to the other word for pray (“moliti”--children in RC), which indicates a larger span of time, and the incompleteness of the action.

1. Some children and adolescents pray and meditate when they are not feeling well, or when they are depressed. Do you pray too? What are you looking for in prayer? Does prayer help? Through thematic analysis of the transcripts, the answers to this question by the children from the RC were classified into two categories and one subcategory. The first category referred to the object of the prayer and included everything that the individual wanted or requested with that prayer.

Examples of statements that support this category are as follows: “And I’m looking for what I need at that moment and I guess some advice and to be led on the right path.” “I ask that He give me only health and I ask for what I ask for the most, that my grandmother may still live.” “Just help, nothing else, if only a friend were there with me.”

The second category was created by answering the question “Does prayer help?” The answers can be divided into two subcategories. The first subcategory includes the intentional effect of prayer, while the second subcategory includes answers and codes related to the unintentional benefits of prayer. Moreover, the pattern of answers to this part of the question was observed through interpretive phenomenological analysis. Often respondents whose answers were classified in this subcategory did not have a ready answer to the question of how prayer helped them. Instead, they pondered on the spot and gave statements about the benefits, most often personal, in the realm of pleasant feelings such as “peace,” “security,” and a “warm heart.” Although this type of respondent is open to discuss the topic, the conclusion is based on the fact that a person who prays often answers readily and quickly that prayer helps him, and to the question “How?” he finds the answer more slowly and refers to “peace,” “security,” and “a warm heart.” The slow response, phrased in appropriate words, speaks of the individual’s deficit when expressing inner, intimate feelings.

These obviously do exist (because the person readily gives an affirmative answer), but taking into account personal, cultural, verbal and social competences, they are difficult to declare. Examples of statements that support this category are as follows: “It helps (how), but I don’t know, I pray, and I feel safer.” “Your heart warms... there is something... positive, you are calm after that and you know that everything will be fine.” “And I see some sense in this exactly.”

On the other hand, their peer-matches, when responding to the first part of the question (“What are you looking for in prayer?”) gave answers that could be reduced to one category, the object of prayer, which consists of three subcategories: pleasant emotions, problem solving, and maintaining existing relationships. Examples of statements for the problem-solving subcategory are as follows: “And when I have a lot of work at school.” “And when something is wrong, then I ask Him to give me peace.” “That my children are healthy and that everything is fine.”

The second part of the question yielded insight into the subjective perception of helping prayer. The answers were reduced to the category of pleasant feelings and two subcategories: the feeling of peace and that of security.

Examples of representative claims for this category are as follows: “I feel some peace and I know that everything will be fine.” “Yes, I’ll be calm and not bother anymore.”

Discussion

An important aspect of this research relates to giving a voice to a vulnerable social group: children in foster care. A person is defined by two stories: the one they tell about themselves, and the one others tell about them (Blatt, 1981). Users of residential care services in the social welfare system are stigmatised (Majdak, 2019). By placing this fact in the context of Blatt’s idea, it can be concluded that these minors have an unfavourable status as measured by the stories that are told about them. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) describe giving voice as empowering people who would otherwise remain silent or have been silenced by others to be heard. Respecting the above, one of the goals of this research was to give a voice to such people, that is, to enable them to tell their story about themselves.

In accordance with the goal of the study, which was to investigate differences in the meaning of spirituality among children in residential care and in families, using a mixed methodology, results were obtained that show this difference. Furthermore, the initial assumption was confirmed that children in residential care will attach different importance to spirituality, both in intensity and in qualitative description, compared to their peers who live in complete families.

According to previous research, which showed that a higher score on questionnaires about different dimensions of spirituality is accompanied by a higher degree of verbal and non-verbal compassion (Kardum, 2012), it is clear that a higher score on the SSS and Santa Clara questionnaires among children from foster care is accompanied by a higher degree of verbal and non-verbal compassion. Thus, from the answers to the questions “What makes you happy?” and “What makes you unhappy?” it was shown that children from residential care (whose score on the spirituality questionnaire was higher) show a higher level of compassion towards important people and are able to name and describe feelings towards them precisely and intensively. There is also a significant difference in understanding the other in the context of life relationships: me-you, you-me, me-other, other-me (Kardum, 2012). In this study, the SSS and Santa Clara questionnaires showed a difference in spirituality, and the qualitative methods of TA and IPA yielded deeper insight into the differences between the two groups. This confirmed the fact about the quantitative paradigm that has certain values but is at the same time insufficient in

understanding complex constructs at the level of the individual (Pearce et al., 2019). On the other hand, the importance of qualitative methodology (specifically IPA) in the study of spirituality (Singleton et al. (2004)) was confirmed.

Referring to an earlier study showing that children associate immediate peace and searching in silence with the knowledge of God (Kovačević et al., 2019), a connection becomes evident with findings from the qualitative part of this study, specifically with the fact that children resort to meditative activity in moments of depression. The relationship to the transcendent and the difference between these two populations should be considered in the context of theoretical and empirical research according to which relationships to God and Mary are characterised by experiences from parental relationships (Cvetek et al., 2008). In the attempt to explain the relationship to God with the parental relationship, two hypotheses are present: conformity and compensation. According to the first, the relationship to God is identical to the relationship to parents, according to the second, the relationship to God is a compensation for the parental relationship. The results of this research support the compensation hypothesis. In the context of this explanation, as well as many others, we believe that the contribution of this research lies in the careful selection of respondents. Using the method of pairs, respondents who live in residential care were selected, along with peers living in their primary families, with both being equal in terms of variables (gender, age, school, and school performance). This approach allowed us to gain insight into differences in the relationship with the transcendent between the two groups, the fundamental difference between which concerns the safe/unsafe experience from the relationship with their parents.

The SSS and Santa Clara questionnaires proved to be suitable for this study, although the differences in the results are not statistically significant (potentially because of the sample size (group $n=12$)); one of the recommendations, therefore, is to increase the sample in future research. The content framework of the interview Spiritual Quality of Life (Kamper et al., 2010), which contains the dimensions present in most research on the spirituality of children facing life problems, the relationship to themselves, to others, the relationship to the environment and the relationship to transcendence (Fisher, 2004) proved to be suitable because these provided in-depth insight into the three areas and dimensions of spirituality, while also enabling differentiation between the two groups of respondents, by whom unique and interesting statements were offered. Since the aim of this work was to use a mixed methodology to investigate differences in the meaning of spirituality among children

in foster care and those in families, and such differences were found and consistent in methodological pluralism, we believe that the SSS and Santa Clara questionnaires, the interview framework as well as the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis constitute suitable instruments and methods of data collection and processing for the study of spirituality in children in residential care and children in families.

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