



Youths' Interpersonal Relationships: The Roles of Empathy and Spirituality

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Abstract. This study examines the impact of spirituality and empathy on interpersonal relationships among Hong Kong youth, addressing two research questions: (1) What is the relationship of spirituality and empathy with interpersonal relationships? (2) Will empathy mediate the relationship between spirituality and interpersonal relationships? A quantitative study was conducted with 203 participants aged 15–24 (mean age = 19.7; 72.4% female; 62.1% with bachelor's degrees) using validated scales (the Spirituality Scale, the Interpersonal Assessment Scale and the Empathy Scale). The results showed that spirituality is positively related to empathy ($\beta = 0.16$, $p = 0.02$) and that empathy is positively related to interpersonal relationships ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = 0.01$). However, spirituality has a direct negative relationship with interpersonal relationships ($\beta = -0.28$, $p = .02$). The direct negative effect overshadows the indirect positive effect, resulting in a negligible overall impact of spirituality on interpersonal relationships ($\beta = -.13$, $p = .05$). The findings clarify the complicated effects of spirituality on youth social well-being, while highlighting the importance of promoting empathy to enhance youth interpersonal relationships. These results inform interventions aimed at fostering healthier relationships among post-pandemic youth.

Keywords. Interpersonal relationships, Empathy, Spirituality

1 Introduction

Although the COVID-19 restrictions have passed, the negative effects of the pandemic are still evident, especially in students' social skills. Youth experiencing a prolonged lack of socialization may become unaccustomed to interacting with others face-to-face and thus unable to adapt to dealing with their emotions or communicating normally in a classroom environment. Some students in Hong Kong may refrain from speaking or participating in class discussions, potentially leading to social withdrawal and challenges in establishing a sense of security and belonging (Na, 2023). This study explores the roles of spirituality and empathy in enhancing interpersonal relationships among youth in Hong Kong. Two research questions are addressed in this study: (1) What is the relationship of spirituality and empathy with interpersonal relationships? (2) Will empathy mediate the relationship between spirituality and interpersonal relationships?

Spirituality is the belief in a higher power that emphasises a quest to explore the transcendent aspects of existence while seeking meaning, truth, and purpose in life

(Bradley, 2009). The present study adopts a broader view and conceptualises spirituality as an individual's worldview, a way of life, decisions, and behaviours that are not necessarily related to involvement in religious activities. (Braghetta et al., 2021). It is a personal sense of meaning and transcendence (Giordano et al., 2014). It is a personal endeavor to connect one's life with God or a transcendent reality, which may or may not be directed towards traditional religious deities (King et al., 2024). The significance of spirituality on individual well-being has been widely discussed in recent studies (Hadzic, 2011). It is considered one of the protective factors and coping resources (Koenig, 2009).

There is a lack of research on the relationship between spirituality and interpersonal relationships. However, relevant studies suggest these two variables may be related. Spirituality encompasses a sense of relatedness that significantly impacts interpersonal relationships (Verhagen & Schreurs, 2018). It is fundamentally a relational existence characterised by a state of intersubjectivity with others and the divine. From a Christian viewpoint, humans are created in the image of God, establishing a connection between individuals, communities, and the transcendent (Verhagen & Schreurs, 2018). Moreover, spiritual people often have positive social functions and are involved in religious congregations that promote social support, compassion, caring and love for their members (Hadzic, 2011). Therefore, this study hypothesises that spirituality is positively related to interpersonal relationships.

Empathy is the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. Empathy has two dimensions: cognitive, which refers to the adoption of another's point of view, and affective, which refers to the affective identification with another's situation (Johnstone et al., 2018). Research has found that while people want to be known by others, they also want others to keep their secrets from being revealed (Rosenblatt & Wieling, 2013). Therefore, people need to be understood, and when they can understand and feel what others are thinking, they can get closer to others. Empathy enables people to understand the emotions of others, leading to emotional resonance —the feeling of being understood —and an increased sense of connection. A study found that empathy is linked to affiliative motives, resulting in an array of warm and prosocial behaviours (Ringwald & Wright, 2021). Therefore, empathy can bring positivity to relationships and help to strengthen the bonds between people in an established group.

Spirituality is positively associated with empathy (Huber & MacDonald, 2012; Stewart & Lawrence, 2021). Both spirituality and empathy are related to an emotional connection with others (Johnstone et al., 2018). Most spiritual traditions have important figures who behave empathetically and connect spiritual awareness with empathy (Stewart & Lawrence, 2021). The importance of spirituality in daily life and the meaning of spirituality in facing adversity is important to cognitive and affective empathy (Stewart & Lawrence, 2021). Spiritual cognitions, as individuals think about spirituality, are related to empathy (Huber & MacDonald, 2012). Increased spirituality is associated with more altruism towards others and enhanced prosocial behaviours (Johnstone et al., 2018). Spiritual experiences are related to affective empathy. Those who have a greater emotional connection with a higher power are more likely to have a higher emotional connection with other individuals (Johnstone et al., 2018). However, the spiritual processes are not related to cognitive empathy (Johnstone et al., 2018). Individuals with higher levels of purpose and a sense of worth can explore the inner

world of others, and they have higher levels of affective empathy (Giordano et al., 2014). Moreover, those who feel more connected to others around them and the community are more able to adopt others' perspectives and exhibit more cognitive empathy (Giordano et al., 2014). Based on the results of the aforementioned studies, it is anticipated that empathy is related to interpersonal relationships and mediates the relationship between spirituality and interpersonal relationships.

2 Methods

A cross-sectional design was employed to collect data from 203 youth samples aged 14 to 23 in Hong Kong by convenient sampling on Qualtrics, comprising 56 males and 147 females. Respondents had a mean age of 19.7 years and a standard deviation of 2.56 years. Sixty-two per cent of the respondents held a Bachelor's degree. This study employed three validated psychometric scales to assess key constructs.

The Interpersonal Relationship Assessment Scale (IRAS) is used to measure the interpersonal relationship (Darrow et al., 2014). The IRAS is a 32-item measure evaluating four dimensions of interpersonal functioning: conversation skills, friendship formation, conflict management, and cross-gender interactions. Respondents rate items on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 6 ("Strongly agree"). Higher composite scores on this scale indicate lower levels of interpersonal distress. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the current sample (Cronbach's $\alpha = .868$), suggesting strong reliability for assessing relationship difficulties.

The Empathy Scale was used to measure the empathy level of the respondents (Tian & Robertson, 2019). This 10-item instrument measures both cognitive and affective components of empathy using a 5-point response format (1 = "Strongly disagree" to 5 = "Strongly agree"). Scale scores reflect individual differences in empathic capacity, with higher total scores indicating greater empathy. The scale showed acceptable reliability in the present study (Cronbach's $\alpha = .703$).

The 11-item Attitudes Related to Spirituality Scale (ARES) was adopted to measure participants' spirituality. This one-dimensional scale has proved to have excellent reliability and validity (Braghetta et al., 2021). Examples of statement items include "I believe in something sacred or transcendent" and "My spiritual beliefs and values guide my day-to-day actions". Each item of the scale is rated from 1 to 10, from totally disagree to agree totally. The higher total score of the scale implies higher levels of spirituality. The scale exhibits excellent reliability in the present study (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.943$).

3 Results

The descriptive statistics for interpersonal relationships indicate a mean score of 95.9/192. This suggests that the central tendency of the data falls within a moderate range, as the average score is notably close to the midpoint. The result reflected that the level of interpersonal relationships among the respondents is moderate. The descriptive

statistics for empathy indicate a mean score of 35.1/50, suggesting that the central tendency of the data falls within a moderate range. The mean is slightly above the midpoint, implying that the sample generally demonstrates a moderate level of empathy. The descriptive statistics for spirituality indicate a mean score of 66/110, suggesting that the central tendency of the data falls within a moderate range. The mean is close to the mid-point, suggesting that the sample demonstrates a moderate level of spirituality.

The PROCESS Macro for SPSS v4.2 Model 4 was used to examine the relationship between the three study variables. Spirituality is the independent variable, interpersonal relationship is the dependent variable, and empathy is the mediator. The results showed that spirituality is positively related to empathy ($\beta = 0.16, p = 0.02$) and that empathy is positively related to interpersonal relationships ($\beta = 0.20, p = 0.01$). Youth with higher levels of spirituality tend to have higher levels of empathy, while those with higher levels of empathy tend to have stronger interpersonal relationships. However, spirituality has a direct negative relationship with interpersonal relationships ($\beta = -0.28, p = .02$). Specifically, youth with higher levels of spirituality tend to have weaker interpersonal relationships. In contrast, it has an indirect positive relationship with it via empathy. The direct negative effect overshadows the indirect positive effect, resulting in a negligible overall impact of spirituality on interpersonal relationships ($\beta = -.13, p = .05$).

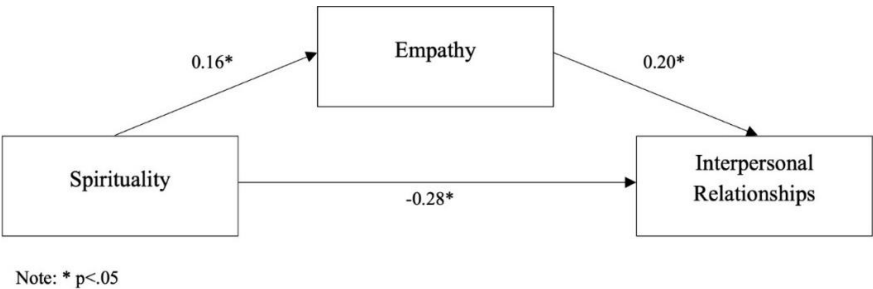


Figure 1: Results of the Mediating Relationships between Spirituality, Empathy and Interpersonal Relationships

4 Discission and Conclusion

Consistent with previous studies, this research found that spirituality is positively associated with empathy (Huber & MacDonald, 2012; Stewart & Lawrence, 2021). Individuals with higher levels of purpose and a sense of worth can explore the inner world of others, and they have higher levels of affective empathy (Giordano et al., 2014). Moreover, those who feel more connected to others around them and the community can adopt others' perspectives and exhibit more cognitive empathy. The results also suggest that spirituality may harm interpersonal relationships. Individuals with high

levels of spirituality tend to concentrate on their immediate personal needs and disconnect from the concerns of others, which undermines their social well-being (Martínez de Pisón, 2023). However, spirituality has an indirect effect on interpersonal relationships via its effect on empathy. Spirituality promotes empathy, in turn facilitating interpersonal relationships. The sense of relatedness in spiritual well-being fosters interpersonal relationships. Spiritual people often have positive social functions and are involved in religious congregations that promote social support, compassion, caring and love for their members (Hadzic, 2011). The influence of spirituality on empathy generates an indirect positive effect on interpersonal relationships that counteracts the negative direct effect. Therefore, the study revealed that the total effect of spirituality on interpersonal relationships is barely insignificant. Further studies can focus on various aspects of spirituality, which can help further studies explore the relationship between spirituality and social well-being in greater depth.

Based on the study findings, empathy training should be provided for youth to enhance their social well-being. Empathy can be cultivated through structured intervention with constant thinking and practice in understanding others' perspectives and feelings, and performing empathic behaviours toward others (Chen-Bouck et al., 2023). Pictures and video clips can be used to enhance participants' practice of both cognitive and affective components of empathy during onsite training sessions, followed by the completion of daily journal exercises on assigned topics. The effectiveness of these training interventions has been confirmed in reducing aggression and promoting prosocial skills (Palade & Pascal, 2023; Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016).

This study has a few limitations. The research exhibits a notable gender bias, with a considerably higher representation of female respondents, accounting for 72.4% of the sample size, compared to male respondents. This may reflect gendered tendencies rather than generalised behaviour. This imbalance may distort the interpretation of empathy and interpersonal relationships. Moreover, the cross-sectional design is unable to identify the causal relationship between spirituality and the other two variables. To mitigate potential gender bias, further studies should aim for a more balanced gender distribution in participant recruitment. Additionally, comparative analyses should be conducted to examine potential gender-based differences in the relationship between the variables. Such investigations could determine whether empathy training plays a significant role in enhancing interpersonal relationships. Despite its limitations, this study elucidates the direct and indirect relationships between spirituality and interpersonal relationships, confirming the importance and mediating role of empathy in fostering interpersonal relationships.

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